

'Extreme drought' in
North Korea: KCNA

AFP, Seoul

Sanction-hit North Korea's average rain and snowfall this year fell to the lowest level in 37 years, Pyongyang's state media said yesterday. The isolated, impoverished nation has long struggled to feed itself and suffers chronic food shortages. Last month, the WFP and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation said in a joint report that North Korea's crop output last year hit the lowest level since 2008, and that an estimated 10 million people -- 40 percent of the entire population -- are in urgent need of food.

Trump Jr agrees to
testify in Senate

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump's son Donald Jr has agreed to testify before the Senate Intelligence Committee investigating Russian election meddling, US media reported Tuesday. The agreement resolved a looming fight between the Congress and the White House after Donald Jr was subpoenaed by the Republican-led committee last week.

China blocks all language
editions of Wikipedia

AFP, Beijing

Beijing has broadened its block of online encyclopedia Wikipedia to include all language editions, reported internet censorship research group OONI. It said China started blocking all language editions of Wikipedia last month. Previously, most editions of Wikipedia -- besides the Chinese language version, which was reportedly blocked in 2015 -- were available, OONI said in their report. China's online censorship apparatus -- dubbed the "Great Firewall" -- blocks a large number of foreign sites in the country, such as Google, Facebook and The New York Times.

There won't be any war

Says Khamenei; US orders non-emergency embassy staff to leave Baghdad, Arbil; Washington, coalition allies appear divided on Iran threat

AGENCIES

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei tried to play down war fear amid escalating tensions as US yesterday ordered all non-emergency staff to leave its embassy in Baghdad and consulate in Arbil.

Washington has ramped up pressure on Tehran in recent days, accusing Iran of planning "imminent" attacks in the region, and bolstering the American military presence in the Gulf.

In a speech to state officials, Khamenei on Tuesday said the showdown between the Islamic republic and the United States was a test of resolve rather than a military encounter.

"This face-off is not military because there is not going to be any war. Neither we nor them (the US) seek war. They know it will not be in their interest," he said, quoted on the Khamenei.ir website.

"The definite decision of the Iranian nation is to resist against America," Khamenei said, adding that "in this showdown America will be forced to retreat... because our resolve is stronger."

"Negotiating with the present American government is doubly



PHOTO: AFP

Russian leader Putin meets with US Secretary of State Pompeo in Sochi on Tuesday.

poisonous... they are not decent humans, they don't stand by anything," he said referring to the US decision to withdraw from the landmark 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and major world powers.

Meanwhile, coalition forces in Iraq and Syria sent conflicting signals Tuesday over Iran's alleged threat, with a British general appearing to take issue with Washington's alarms over an imminent danger posed by Tehran to the US and its allies.

Major General Chris Ghika, a British

spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve, the coalition fighting the Islamic State group, said that they did not sense any intensified threat from Iran in the region, even though the US military was boosting its forces in the Gulf.

"There has been no increased threat from Iranian-backed forces in Iraq and Syria," Ghika told reporters via teleconference at the Pentagon.

That brought a sharp retort from the US Central Command, which in the past nine days has accelerated the deployment of an aircraft carrier task

force to the Gulf, adding to it B-52 bombers, a Patriot missile battery and an amphibious assault ship, in the face of the alleged Iranian threat.

The mixed signals underscored questions about the US ramping up its forces in the Gulf without having explained the intelligence behind the move.

On May 5, White House National Security Advisor John Bolton announced that the Pentagon was sending the USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group and a bomber task force to the region "in response to a number of troubling and escalatory indications and warnings" related to Iran.

Iran has denied planning anything and US allies have warned of the danger of escalation, saying it heightens the chance that an accident could set off a major conflict.

Tensions have sharply escalated between arch-rivals Washington and Tehran since US President Donald Trump withdrew last May from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Since pulling out of the deal, the Trump administration has ramped up menacing rhetoric against Iran while tightening economic sanctions on the country.



Alabama Senate passes near-total abortion ban

Alabama sent the most restrictive abortion bill in the country to the governor's desk Tuesday night, with the state's Senate passing legislation that could punish doctors who perform abortions with 99 years in jail. The state's Republican backers have pushed the legislation, which amounts to a near-total ban on abortion in the state, forward with the express goal of overturning Roe v. Wade, the Supreme Court case legalizing abortion. Alabama lawmakers join legislators in several other states in putting forth legislation to restrict abortion, such as Georgia's recent fetal heartbeat bill. The law only allows exceptions "to avoid a serious health risk to the unborn child's mother," for ectopic pregnancy and if the "unborn child has a lethal anomaly." Democrats re-introduced an amendment to exempt rape and incest victims, but the motion failed on an 11-21 vote.

Malaysian teen took own life after Instagram poll

A Malaysian teenager who posted an Instagram poll asking if she should live or die took her own life after a majority of respondents voted for the latter, sparking calls for an investigation. The unidentified 16-year-old from Kuching in eastern Sarawak state died after posting the poll Monday on the Facebook-owned picture-sharing platform. "Really Important, Help Me Choose D/L," she wrote, according to a report on the news portal Astro Awani, with the letters "D" and "L" apparently referring to "die" or "live" respectively. Sixty-nine percent of votes cast were in favour of her ending her life, local media quoted police as saying. Lawmaker Ramkarpal Singh called for a probe into the circumstances of her death. Youth and Sports Minister Syed Saddiq tweeted that he was "genuinely worried" about the state of mental health of young people in Malaysia. "It's a national issue which must be taken seriously. A national discussion must take place," he said.

Sudan parties agree on 3-yr transition period

Sudanese army rulers and protest leaders yesterday agreed on a three-year transition period for transferring power to a full civilian administration. The protest movement is demanding a civilian-led transition following 30 years of iron-fisted rule by now deposed president Omar al-Bashir, but the generals who toppled him have been holding onto a leadership role. Talks between the two sides resumed earlier in the week but were marred by violence when an army major and five protesters were killed by unidentified gunmen at a long-running sit-in outside military headquarters in Khartoum. The two sides announced early yesterday after nearly 12 hours of negotiations that they had reached an agreement on the transition period. A final agreement on the sharing of power, including the forming of the next ruling body -- the sovereign council -- will be signed with the protest movement, the Alliance for Freedom and Change, within a day, a military source said.

SOURCE: AFP

No civilization is superior

Says Chinese President Xi as US trade war heats up

CNN ONLINE

Chinese President Xi Jinping has urged countries not to "close their doors and hide behind them" in his first major public speech since US President Donald Trump raised tariffs on \$200 billion of Chinese goods amid an escalating trade war.

Opening the Conference on Asian Civilizations Dialogue in Beijing yesterday, Xi said there was no need for "civilizations to clash with each other."

"No civilization is superior over others. The thought that one's own race and civilization are superior and the inclination to remold or replace other civilizations are just stupid," he said, adding to do so would invite "catastrophic consequences."

China retaliated to Trump's latest round of increases on Monday, raising tariffs on roughly \$60 billion of US exports. One editorial in state media said "for us, this is a real 'people's war.'"

Trade is just one of several fronts on which the US and China have clashed

in recent months. Xi's speech touched on a topic thrown into a spotlight by top US State Department official Kiron Skinner in late April, when she controversially said that China was Washington's first "great power competitor that is not Caucasian."

"When we think about the Soviet Union and that competition, in a



way it was a fight within the western family ... That's not really possible with China. This is a fight with a really different civilization and a different ideology," Skinner said.

Speaking at yesterday's conference, which featured representatives from 47 countries, Xi praised the achievements of China and other Asian nations over

the centuries and said all civilizations needed to learn from each other.

As recently as late April, the US and China appeared to be close to ending the year-long trade war.

But there has been little progress on trade talks since a Chinese delegation left Washington on Friday, sources close to the situation said.

Both countries have blamed each other for the breakdown in negotiations, with Trump saying on Tuesday that Beijing "broke" the deal.

Nevertheless, Trump appeared to play down the split between the two countries, describing it as a "little squabble."

There are still hopes for a deal, with a US trade delegation expected to head to Beijing in the coming weeks.

Xi and Trump are also expected to meet in Japan during the G20 in June.

Chinese state media has been on the offensive since the recent breakdown of talks, publishing fiercely nationalistic opinion pieces and articles proclaiming China's resilience.

Situation tense in Lanka

Over 100 arrested as new curfews imposed, more cops deployed in violence-prone areas

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's police arrested over 100 suspects and re-imposed night curfews in violence-prone areas yesterday after anti-Muslim riots left one man dead and caused extensive damage to homes, businesses and mosques.

Police spokesman Ruwan Gunasekera said 78 people arrested in the worst-affected North-Western Province (NWP) were remanded in custody yesterday, while the rest were detained after a manhunt in other areas.

Some 5,500 additional police were deployed in NWP to contain the violence that claimed the life of a Muslim man on Monday. Scores of private homes, Muslim-owned shops and businesses were destroyed, while several mosques were also vandalised.

Muslims in Sri Lanka have been bracing for revenge attacks since three churches and three luxury hotels were bombed by local Islamist extremists on April 21, killing 258 people.

Gunasekera said a night curfew was being re-imposed in NWP, just north of the capital,

as well as the adjoining Gampaha district, which shares a border with Colombo, as a measure to "maintain peace".

However, a top police source said there will be no curfews elsewhere in the country. The entire country was under night curfews for two straight days after the violence escalated.

The night curfew on Tuesday ensured there was no repeat of Monday's violence against Muslims, who make up some 10 percent of Sri Lanka's population of 21 million.

"The situation is now totally under control," said military spokesman Sumith Atapattu.

"There were no incidents of violence overnight and we are arresting groups of people responsible for taking part in mob attacks."

Official sources said police deployed special teams to review CCTV camera footage to identify the perpetrators and carry out more arrests.

More police and army units were seen deployed in the troubled areas as the authorities lifted the nationwide curfew yesterday morning.

ANTI-MUSLIM RIOTS



UK PM eyes final Brexit battle in June

AFP, London

Theresa May has set the stage for a fourth showdown with parliament over her EU withdrawal deal next month, which could also be her last act as Britain's prime minister.

After talks with opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn on Tuesday evening, May announced that MPs would vote on legislation to implement the Brexit deal in the week starting June 3.

But Labour warned it had not yet agreed to support the bill, while May's Northern Irish allies said that unless the EU agreement changed, they would not back it.

May struck a deal on Britain's exit terms with the European Union in November, but it has been rejected by the House of Commons three times.

Setting a date for the next parliament vote without an agreement with Labour is a gamble -- if she loses, May cannot hold another in the current parliamentary session.

Talks were continue yesterday among officials, and Labour warned that without a cross-party agreement, it would not back the bill in June.

Brexit delays have caused huge anger among her Conservative MPs as well as voters, and the party is braced for an electoral drubbing at European polls next week.

May is also under intense pressure to fulfil her promise to MPs to deliver Brexit and then stand aside for a new leader.

Today, she will meet senior Conservatives who have demanded a detailed timetable for her departure.



A Sri Lankan soldier walks past a damaged shop after a mob attack in Minuwangoda, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

AFTERMATH OF THE NZ MOSQUE MASSACRE

Facebook to tighten access to livestreaming feature

AFP, Paris

Facebook announced yesterday it would tighten access to its livestreaming feature as New Zealand's premier Jacinda Ardern and French leader Emmanuel Macron prepared to launch the global "Christchurch Call" initiative to tackle the spread of extremism online.

Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg has been under intense pressure since March when a white supremacist gunman used Facebook Live to stream his rampage at two mosques in the New Zealand city of Christchurch, which left 51 people dead.

The California-based platform said it would ban Facebook Live users who shared extremist content and seek to reinforce its own internal controls to stop the spread of offensive videos.

"Following the horrific recent terrorist attacks in New Zealand, we've been reviewing what more we can do to limit our services from being used to cause harm

or spread hate," Facebook vice-president of integrity Guy Rosen said in a statement.

Ardern and Macron will later issue the Christchurch Call to fight the spread of hateful and terror-related content along with leaders from Britain, Canada, Norway, Jordan and Senegal, who will also be in Paris.

The largely symbolic initiative is intended



to keep up the pressure on social media companies who face growing calls from politicians across the world to stop their platforms being abused.

"It's an action plan, it's the start of something," Ardern told CNN in an interview yesterday.

First-time offenders will be suspended from using Live for set periods of time, Facebook said in a statement.

Many countries have already tightened legislation to introduce penalties for companies that fail to take down offensive content once it is flagged by authorities.