

NEWS IN brief

47 suspected militants, 5 troops killed in Sinai
AFP, Cairo
Egypt's army yesterday said 47 militants and five of its troops were killed as part of its military offensive in the restive Sinai Peninsula, where it is fighting the Islamic State group. The army did not specify when the deaths and arrests took place, saying only that they happened as part of "recent efforts" against jihadists.

\$100m cybercrime gang busted: Europol
AFP, The Hague
US and European police yesterday said they have smashed a huge international cybercrime network that used Russian malware to steal 100 million dollars from tens of thousands of victims worldwide. Prosecutions have been launched in Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and the United States over the scam, while five Russians charged in the US remain on the run, the EU police agency Europol said. The network used GozNym malware across six countries, including Germany and Bulgaria, it added.

Australian former PM Bob Hawke dies at 89
AFP, Sydney
Australia's longest-serving Labor prime minister Bob Hawke died Thursday aged 89. The son of a preacher, Hawke led his country during the 1980s, a period during which he seduced the nation with his everyman appeal while beginning deregulation of the economy, including floating the dollar. Never voted out by the public, which forgave him his faults, he won four elections on the run beginning in 1983, and only left office following a party room coup.



Members of a rescue team carry out a victim from a collapsed building in Shanghai, yesterday. At least seven people were killed yesterday when the roof of a Shanghai commercial building caved in upon construction workers who were renovating it, the city government said. 21 people had been pulled out of the debris and rushed to hospital.

SUDAN POLITICAL CHAOS

Military suspend talks for 72 hours
Forces clear protesters with gunfire

REUTERS, Khartoum
At least nine people were wounded on Wednesday when Sudanese forces used live ammunition to clear demonstrators from central Khartoum, a protest group said, and talks on forming a body to lead Sudan to democracy have been suspended for 72 hours. The violence has cast a shadow on talks that had appeared on course to reach a deal on forming a joint military-civilian body to run the country for a three-year transition period until presidential elections. Both sides traded accusations on who was responsible for the violence. "We hold the military council responsible for attacking civilians," said Amjad Farid, a spokesman for the Sudanese Professionals' Association (SPA), which spearheaded months of protests that led to the military's removal of President Omar al-Bashir last month. "They are using the same methods as the previous regime in dealing with rebels," he told Reuters. But the head of Sudan's Transitional Military Council (TMC), Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, accused the demonstrators of breaking an understanding on de-escalation while talks were under way and said protesters were disrupting life in the capital by blocking roads outside a protest zone agreed upon with the military. He said the TMC, which took over after overthrowing and jailing Bashir last month, had decided to remove all barricades put up by demonstrators beyond the area where the protesters had been camping since April 6 outside the Defence Ministry.

Iran showing 'maximum restraint'

Says FM, accuses US of 'unacceptable' escalation in tensions as pressure grows at home

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Iran yesterday accused the United States of an "unacceptable" escalation of tensions and said Tehran was showing "maximum restraint" despite Washington's withdrawal from a nuclear deal with world powers. Tensions were already high after President Donald Trump walked away from the accord a year ago, but they have ratcheted up recently with the US deploying an aircraft carrier group and B-52 bombers to the Gulf over alleged threats from Iran. "The escalation by the United States is unacceptable," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in Tokyo, where he is holding talks with Japanese officials. "We exercise maximum restraint... in spite of the fact that the United States withdrew from JCPOA last May," Zarif said earlier, referring to the agreement on Tehran's nuclear program known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. He added that Tehran remains "committed" to the deal, and said continuing assessments showed Iran was in compliance with the multilateral agreement. Later, Zarif told reporters there was "no possibility" of negotiations with the

Iran to increase uranium, heavy water production: official
Teheran refutes Trump's claim that Iran 'will want to talk soon'
Hardliners target Iran's president as US pressure grows



United States to reduce spiralling tensions, describing US pressure as an "act of suicide". Meanwhile, Behrouz Kamalvandi, spokesman for Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation, yesterday said Tehran is preparing to increase enriched uranium and heavy water production as part of its decision to stop some commitments made under the nuclear deal. "The process of increasing the 'capacity and production pace' of enriched uranium and heavy water has started since the day the president (Hassan Rouhani) ordered it," Behrouz told the semi-official ISNA news agency.

The nuclear deal set a limit on the number of uranium-enriching centrifuges, and restricted its right to enrich uranium to no higher than 3.67 percent, well below weapons-grade levels of around 90 percent. Zarif's comments came after the US on Wednesday ordered non-emergency staff evacuated from its Baghdad embassy due to an "imminent" threat from Iranian-linked Iraqi militias. The move added to growing fears that the long-time rivals could be on course for conflict despite both sides stressing they have no desire for war. Trump, however, predicted Iran would

"soon" want to negotiate and denied there was any discord in the White House over moves that critics say could lead to war in the Middle East. "I'm sure that Iran will want to talk soon," the president tweeted. He also blasted media reports of White House turmoil, saying "there is no infighting whatsoever. Different opinions are expressed and I make a final and decisive decision." Zarif dismissed that assertion late yesterday, telling reporters: "I don't know why President Trump is confident, but it's totally wrong." Growing US pressure on Iran has weakened pragmatic President Hassan Rouhani and made his hardline rivals more assertive at home and abroad, recent developments show. Despite international scepticism, the US government has been pointing to increasing threats from Iran, a long-time enemy and also a rival of US allies Israel and Saudi Arabia. Senior State Department officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the threat came from Iraqi militia "commanded and controlled" by Tehran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.



NY Mayor de Blasio joins 2020 US race

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New York Mayor Bill de Blasio yesterday said he will seek the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, despite a panning by US media and polls which suggest he faces a tough fight. De Blasio becomes the 23rd prospective Democratic challenger to President Donald Trump. "Donald Trump must be stopped. I am Bill de Blasio and I am running for president because it's time we put the working people first," he said in a video announcing his candidacy. "I'm a New Yorker, I've known Trump's a bully for a long time. ... And I know how to take him on," he added. De Blasio, 58, who first ran as an unapologetic leftist in 2013, said the country's money is "in the wrong hands" and added that he knows how to challenge Trump on climate change, an issue on which the president has demonstrated skepticism. As the Democratic mayor of the nation's largest city for the past five years, he coasted to re-election in 2013. An eye-popping 76 percent of New York City voters said de Blasio should not enter the 2020 presidential race, compared with just 18 percent who said he should, according to a Quinnipiac University poll from early April. Since Trump came to power, de Blasio has denounced the Republican president's hardening of immigration policy and has championed the fight against climate change.

Merkel rules out future political office anywhere

Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday ruled out taking on any political office in Brussels or elsewhere after her planned departure as Germany's leader in 2021. The chancellor had sparked speculation that she may be eyeing a job in the European Union when she told the Sueddeutsche Zeitung in an interview on Wednesday that with many people feeling concerned about the continent, she feels "even more duty bound to join others in making sure that Europe has a future". But Merkel, 64 who has been German chancellor since 2005, stamped out the rumour firmly yesterday. "I am not available for any further political post, no matter where it is -- not in Europe either," after leaving Germany's top post in 2021, she told a joint press conference with Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

US F-35 suffers millions in damage from bird strike

A US F-35 stealth bomber suffered millions of dollars in damage after being hit by a bird during take-off from an air base in Japan, the US Marine Corps said in a statement Wednesday. "On May 7, 2019 an F-35B with Marine Aircraft Group 12, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing aborted take-off due to a bird strike at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni and safely taxied off the runway," the statement said. A damage assessment report has not yet been completed but the Marine Corps classified the incident as category "A", meaning the damage bill is expected to exceed \$2 million. The F-35 program was launched in the 1990s and has cost almost \$400 billion, making it the most expensive weapons system ever developed by the Pentagon.



Yemenis carry a body that was recovered in the rubble of a destroyed building following reported Saudi-led coalition air strikes in the Yemeni capital Sana, yesterday.

Trump to visit South Korea for talks on North's nukes

AFP, Washington
President Donald Trump will visit South Korea in June to meet with his counterpart Moon Jae-in over their efforts to persuade North Korea to scrap its nuclear weapons arsenal, the White House said Wednesday. It will be the second meeting between the pair since the collapse of a summit between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Hanoi in February after they failed to reach a deal on denuclearisation. The South Korean president brokered the talks process between Trump and Kim, which led to their first landmark summit in Singapore last June. The Hanoi summit between Trump and Kim broke up after the pair failed to agree on what Pyongyang would be willing to give up in exchange for relief from sanctions imposed over its nuclear and missile programmes. The White House said Trump's trip to South Korea would combine with his visit to nearby Japan, where he will attend a G20 summit in Osaka on June 28-29.

SAUDI OIL PIPELINE ATTACK

Riyadh accuses Iran, warplanes pound Yemen rebels; 6 killed

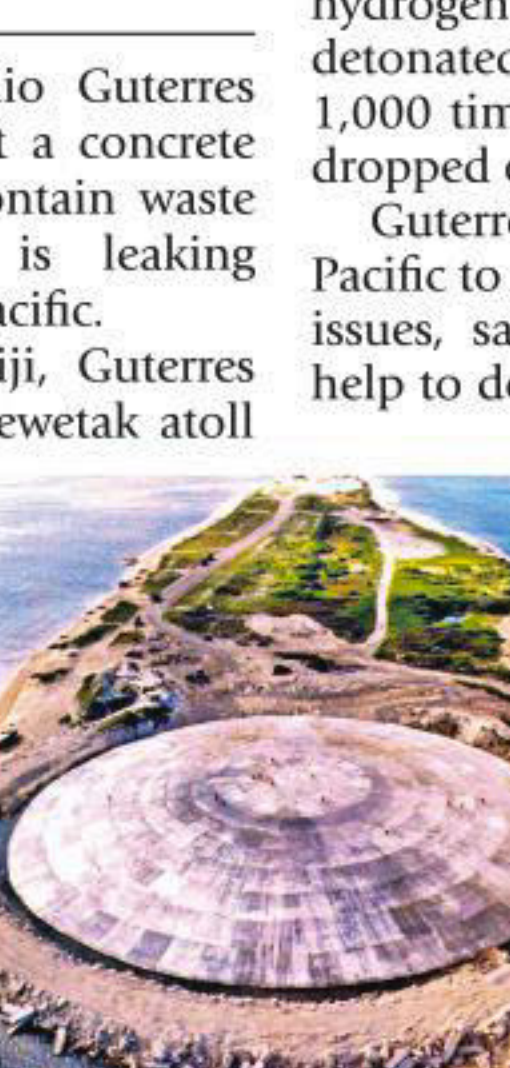
AFP, SANA
Saudi-led coalition warplanes bombed Yemeni rebel targets including in the capital yesterday following insurgent drone strikes on a key oil pipeline that Riyadh said were ordered by its arch-rival Tehran. The new bombardment came after the UN envoy, who has been spearheading efforts to end more than four years of conflict in the Arab world's poorest country, warned it still faced the threat of plunging into all-out war. The Saudi deputy defence minister warned that Tuesday's attack by Yemeni rebels on a major pipeline in the kingdom was "tightening the noose" around peace efforts. Khalid bin Salman charged the pipeline attack was carried out on Iranian orders. "The attack by the Iranian-backed Huthi militias against the two Aramco pumping stations proves that these militias are merely a tool that Iran's regime uses to implement its expansionist agenda in the region," the prince said on Twitter. The Saudi-led coalition said it had hit "a number of legitimate military targets" that the rebels used to store munitions.

The rebels' Al-Masirahn television said the coalition carried out at least 19 strikes, 11 of them in the capital. A strike on one Sanaa neighbourhood killed at least six people and wounded 10, Dr Mokhtar Mohammed of the capital's Republic Hospital said. An AFP correspondent saw one residential building that had been reduced to rubble by an air strike. Residents were using their bare hands in a desperate search for survivors. The raids began around 8 am (0500 GMT) while many Yemenis were asleep awaiting the end at sunset of the daytime fast observed by Muslims during the holy month of Ramadan, a witness told AFP. The rebels said their attack on the Saudi pipeline was a response to "crimes" committed by Riyadh during its bloody air war in Yemen, that has been criticised repeatedly by the United Nations and human rights groups. More than four years of conflict have triggered what the UN describes as the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with 24.1 million -- more than two-thirds of the population -- in need of aid.

The island nation was ground zero for 67 American nuclear weapons tests from 1946-58 at Bikini and Enewetak atolls, when it was under US administration. The tests included the 1954 "Bravo" hydrogen bomb, the most powerful ever detonated by the United States, about 1,000 times bigger than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Guterres, who is touring the South Pacific to raise awareness of climate change issues, said Pacific islanders still needed help to deal with the fallout of the nuclear testing. The "coffin" is a concrete dome, built in the late 1970s on Runit island, part of Enewetak atoll, as a dumping ground for waste from the nuclear tests. Radioactive soil and ash from the explosions was tipped into a crater and capped with a concrete dome 45 centimetres (18 inches) thick. However, it was only envisaged as a temporary fix and the bottom of the crater was never lined leading to fears the waste is leaching into the Pacific. Cracks have also developed in the concrete after decades of exposure and there are concerns it could break apart if hit by a tropical cyclone.

Nuke 'coffin' leaking in Pacific

Says UN chief as he visits Pacific Island Nations
AFP, Suva
UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres yesterday raised concerns that a concrete dome built last century to contain waste from atomic bomb tests is leaking radioactive material into the Pacific. Speaking to students in Fiji, Guterres described the structure on Enewetak atoll in the Marshall Islands as "a kind of coffin" and said it was a legacy of Cold War-era nuclear tests in the Pacific. "The Pacific was victimised in the past as we all know," he said, referring to nuclear explosions carried out by the United States and France in the region. In the Marshalls, numerous islanders were forcibly evacuated from ancestral lands and resettled, while thousands more were exposed to radioactive fallout. The island nation was ground zero for 67 American nuclear weapons tests from 1946-58 at Bikini and Enewetak atolls, when it was under US administration. The tests included the 1954 "Bravo" hydrogen bomb, the most powerful ever detonated by the United States, about 1,000 times bigger than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Guterres, who is touring the South Pacific to raise awareness of climate change issues, said Pacific islanders still needed help to deal with the fallout of the nuclear testing. The "coffin" is a concrete dome, built in the late 1970s on Runit island, part of Enewetak atoll, as a dumping ground for waste from the nuclear tests. Radioactive soil and ash from the explosions was tipped into a crater and capped with a concrete dome 45 centimetres (18 inches) thick. However, it was only envisaged as a temporary fix and the bottom of the crater was never lined leading to fears the waste is leaching into the Pacific. Cracks have also developed in the concrete after decades of exposure and there are concerns it could break apart if hit by a tropical cyclone.



First black African woman makes Everest summit

A South African business executive reached the top of Mount Everest yesterday in what is believed to be the first summit of the world's highest mountain by a black African woman. Saray Khumalo, 47, reached the top of the 8,848-metre (29,029-foot) mountain after three previous bids were thwarted by bad weather, injury and tragedy. Nepal's Tourism Department confirmed that Khumalo had made the summit but had no record on whether she was the first black African woman. Meanwhile, two Indian climbers have died and a Chilean is missing on Mount Kanchenjunga, the world's third-highest mountain, expedition organisers said yesterday.

SOURCE: AFP