

# NEWS IN brief

## Two air strikes kill 14 Afghan civilians

Two air strikes have killed 14 civilians in Afghanistan in recent days, the United Nations said yesterday, as the US intensifies its air war across the country. According to the UN Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), five women and seven children were among the 14 civilians killed in Helmand province in the south on May 20, and Kunar province in the east on May 22. "Civilian casualty toll from airstrikes in Afghanistan continues to rise," UNAMA said on Twitter. "Parties must respect international obligations to protect civilians from harm."

## Israel cuts Gaza fishing limit after fire balloons

Israel reduced the offshore fishing limits it imposes for vessels operating out of Gaza from yesterday after Palestinians floated balloons fitted with incendiaries over the border, officials said. The cut came just two days after Israel restored the limits to those set in April ahead of an Israeli general election. Palestinians in Gaza have frequently floated balloons fitted with firebombs over the border to damage Israeli property.

## Algeria, Argentina free of deadly malaria: UN

Algeria - the nation where malaria was discovered - is officially free of malaria, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Wednesday, making it the third African country to eliminate one of the world's leading killer diseases. With no recorded cases of malaria in three consecutive years, Argentina was also declared malaria-free - the second country in the Americas after Paraguay in 45 years to wipe out the disease, which kills more than 400,000 people a year.



An injured police officer leaves the area with the help of his colleagues after clashes with protesters in Jakarta, Indonesia early yesterday. At least seven people were killed after two nights of rioting in the capital as police clashed with protesters opposed to the re-election of President Joko Widodo.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

# Five things to watch

Voting got under way yesterday in Britain and the Netherlands in the ninth European Parliamentary election, which will continue for three more days in the 26 other EU members. Here are five things to watch out for:

**POPULIST HIGH TIDE?**  
A very loose coalition of populist and eurosceptic forces hope to make inroads into the parliament and threaten the mainstream consensus in support of closer EU integration.

Brussels officials fear they could win 200 of the 751 seats, buoyed by strong showings by Matteo Salvini's Italian far-right League and Marine Le Pen's National Rally from France.

But observers doubt the populists' ability to form an effective coalition, and the mainstream centrist blocs could welcome liberal and Green members into a broader alliance to contain the threat.

**TURNOUT DOOMED TO FALL?**  
In the first election to the European Parliament in 1979, 61 percent of eligible voters in what were then nine member states took part.

Since then the number of members has swollen to 28, but turnout has fallen very five years, to just over 42 percent in the last election in 2014.

Mainstream national leaders like France's President Emmanuel Macron and Dutch premier Mark Rutte have urged voters to turn out to resist the advance of eurosceptic forces.

But another low turnout would be seen by many as further evidence that the concerns of Brussels are increasingly divorced from the popular mood.

**LAST CHANCE FOR LEAD CANDIDATES?**  
Europe's national leaders are extremely sceptical of ceding authority to the European Parliament to choose a candidate for Brussels' top job, president of the European Commission.



But if, for example, the centre-right EPP bloc were to emerge with strong support, it would strengthen its case for its lead candidate, Bavarian conservative Manfred Weber.

Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel has vowed to champion her ally next week when the leaders meet to discuss names for Europe's main posts.

But a low turnout and an unclear result in the case would strengthen the hands of leaders like Macron and Rutte who oppose the entire "spitzenkandidat" process.

**BRITAIN'S LAST HURRAH?**  
Since the last European election, British voters have decided to quit the Union altogether, and this week's election might be the last for UK parties.

Brexit Day itself has been postponed, triggering a crisis for Prime Minister Theresa May's government, and Nigel Farage's Brexit Party is expected to do well.

British media report that May will step down as leader of the Conservative Party today, opening space for a more eurosceptic premier to take charge before the October 31 deadline. Polls predict the Green bloc in the 751-seat EU parliament will remain at around 50 members, but may become more powerful as a kingmaker if the two main centrist parties fall short of a majority.

SOURCE: AFP

# Brexit gambit backfires

### May hangs on amid calls to quit; govt postpones crucial Brexit vote

REUTERS, London

Prime Minister Theresa May was clinging to power yesterday after her final Brexit gambit backfired, overshadowing a European election that has shown a United Kingdom still riven over its divorce from the EU. May's departure will deepen the Brexit crisis as a new leader is likely to want a more decisive split, raising the chances of a confrontation with the European Union and an election that could usher in a socialist government.

In such a fluid situation, Britain faces an array of options including an orderly exit with a deal, a no-deal exit, an election or a second referendum that could ultimately reverse the 2016 decision to leave the EU.

May, who won the top job in the turmoil that followed the 2016 referendum on EU membership, has repeatedly failed to get parliament's approval for her divorce deal, which she pitched as a way to heal Britain's Brexit divisions.

Her last gambit, offering a possible second referendum and closer trading arrangements with the EU, triggered a revolt by some Brexit-

supporting ministers and triggered the resignation of her parliamentary business manager.

Yesterday, with Britons voting in a European election in which pre-poll surveys suggested May's Conservatives would be thrashed by Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, May was digging in.

The government said it would publish legislation to enact May's EU deal, originally due today, early

a deal is by ratifying the Withdrawal Agreement.

The mass-circulation Sun newspaper's front page was headlined "May set to go after Brexit fiasco", while the Times led with "May prepares to quit after cabinet mutiny". Foreign minister Jeremy Hunt said May would still be prime minister when US President Donald Trump arrives for a state visit on June 3.

Meanwhile, the government yesterday postponed a crucial Brexit vote scheduled for the first week of June, following an outcry from hardline Brexiters over concessions made by May.



EU supporters fear Brexit will undermine Britain's economy - fifth-largest in the world - as well as London's position as one of the world's top two financial capitals.

The chairman of the powerful Conservative 1922 Committee, which can make or break prime ministers, told lawmakers that May would meet him today to discuss her leadership. The Times said she would then name a date for her departure and remain prime minister while her successor was elected.

next month, and her spokesman said she would be listening to colleagues' concerns.

Asked if she was planning to rewrite the legislation, he said: "She is focused on delivering Brexit ..."

"The prime minister wants to ensure that the UK leaves the EU with a deal, and the only way to leave with

## Pakistan says wants peace with India

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan has signalled a willingness to open peace talks with India after an election fought in the shadow of renewed confrontation between the nuclear-armed enemies.

However in a possible warning to India, Pakistan also announced that it has conducted a training launch of a Shaheen II, surface-to-surface ballistic missile, which it said is capable of delivering conventional and nuclear weapons at a range of up to 1,500 miles.

"Shaheen II is a highly capable missile which fully meets Pakistan's strategic needs towards maintenance of deterrence stability in the region," Pakistan's military said in a statement yesterday that made no direct mention of its neighbour.



## Nato warns Russia of responses to cyberattack

The head of Nato told Russia and other potential foes yesterday that the Western military alliance was ready to use all means at its disposal to respond to cyberattacks. Jens Stoltenberg's warning came with the bloc's members on alert for interference in European Parliament elections that kicked off in Britain and the Netherlands yesterday. Western allies accuse Russia of trying to sway the outcome of the 2016 US presidential vote and using cyber technology to cripple the infrastructure of rival Ukraine - charges Moscow flatly denies. "For deterrence to have full effect, potential attackers must know we are not limited to respond in cyber space when we are attacked in cyber space," Stoltenberg said.

## Boeing hasn't submitted 737 MAX fix: US regulator

The US's aviation regulator has still not received Boeing's proposed fix for its 737 MAX aircraft, which have been grounded globally following two deadly crashes, the agency's chief said on Wednesday. Boeing has said it will patch the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS) stall prevention system, which has been blamed for the two crashes in Indonesia and Ethiopia that killed a total of 346 people and caused the best-selling planes to be taken out of service. Boeing said last week that it had finished making changes requested by the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), but the agency's interim chief Dan Elwell told reporters the agency hadn't yet seen the fixes.



## 'Traffic jam' on Everest as two more climbers die

A huge queue of climbers has formed near the summit of Mount Everest as expedition organisers yesterday reported two more deaths on the world's highest mountain. More than 200 climbers were taking advantage of clear weather on Wednesday to attempt to summit from both Nepal and China, but teams had to line up for hours to reach the top - risking frostbite and altitude sickness. An American and Indian climber are the latest fatalities, their expedition organisers said, on one of the busiest-ever days on the 8,848-metre (29,029-foot) peak. Donald Lynn Cash, 55, collapsed at the summit on Wednesday as he was taking photographs.

SOURCE: AFP



Smoke plumes rise following reported Syrian government forces' bombardment on the town of Khan Sheikhun in the southern countryside of the rebel-held Idlib province in Syria yesterday. At least five civilians were killed as troops and militia battled jihadists on the ground, a monitor said.

PHOTO: AFP

# Illegal ozone-depleting gases traced to China: study

AFP, Paris

Industries in northeastern China have spewed large quantities of an ozone-depleting gas into the atmosphere in violation of an international treaty, scientists said Wednesday.

Since 2013, annual emissions from northeastern China of the banned chemical CFC-11 have increased by about 7,000 tonnes, they reported in the peer-reviewed journal Nature.

"CFCs are the main culprit in depletion of the stratospheric ozone layer, which protects us from the Sun's ultra-violet radiation," said lead author Matt Rigby, an atmospheric chemist at the University of Bristol.

Chlorofluorocarbon-11 was widely used in the 1970s and 1980s as a refrigerant and to make foam insulation.

The 1987 Montreal Protocol banned CFCs and other industrial aerosols that chemically dissolve protective ozone 10-to-40 kilometres (6-25 miles) above Earth's surface, especially over Antarctica

and Australia. Following the ban's entry into force, global concentrations of CFC-11 declined steadily until about 2012.

But last year startled scientists discovered that the pace of that slowdown dropped by half from 2013 to 2017. Because the chemical does not occur in Nature, the change could only have been produced by new emissions.

Evidence pointed to East Asia, but could not nail down the exact origin.

"Our monitoring stations were set up in remote locations far from potential sources," explained co-author Ron Prinn, a professor at MIT.

Reports last year from the Environmental Investigation Agency fingered Chinese foam factories in the coastal province of Shandong and the inland province of Hebei, which surrounds Beijing.

Suspensions were strengthened when authorities subsequently shut down some of these facilities without explanation.



## SPYING ON FASTING MUSLIMS

# Malaysian officials go undercover

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian officials are disguising themselves as cooks and waiters to catch Muslims who don't fast during Ramadan, with a rights group yesterday blasting the "disgraceful act of spying". Thirty-two enforcement officers from a local council in the Muslim-majority country are going undercover at food outlets as part of the scheme, the New Straits Times newspaper reported.

Muslims are required to fast from dawn until dusk during Islam's holiest month, unless there are special circumstances such as illness.

While Muslims in multi-ethnic Malaysia have traditionally followed a tolerant form of Islam, critics say conservative attitudes have been gaining ground in recent years.

The team in Segamat district, in southern Johor state, will be monitoring 185 outlets, with two of the officers selected as they are good at making popular dishes such as spicy fried noodles.

"We have specially selected enforcement officers who are dark skinned for the undercover job," Mohamad Masni Wakiman, president of the Segamat Municipal Council, was cited as saying by the paper.

"They sound convincing when they speak in Indonesian and Pakistani lingo, so that customers will believe they are really hired to cook and serve meals, and take menu orders." Many staff at food outlets in Malaysia are migrant workers.

If Muslims are seen ordering food during the daytime, the officers will secretly take pictures of them and contact the local religious affairs department for further action, Masni said.

## China rebukes US

### US, Japan, S Korea, Australia hold first naval drills in Western Pacific

AFP, Beijing

China said yesterday it had lodged a protest with Washington after two US warships sailed through the Taiwan Strait amid rising tensions between the two powers.

The US Navy said the USS Preble, a destroyer, and USNS Walter S. Diehl, a supply ship, conducted a routine transit "in accordance with international law" on Wednesday.

"The ships' transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific," the navy said.

"The US Navy will continue to fly, sail and operate anywhere international law allows." US warships periodically conduct "freedom of navigation" exercises in the narrow waterway separating the Chinese mainland and Taiwan, triggering angry responses from Beijing every time.

Beijing views any ships passing through the strait as essentially breaching its sovereignty, while the US and many other

## WARSHIP SAIL-BY

nations view the route as international waters open to all. "We have lodged solemn representations with the US," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang said at a regular press briefing.

The sail-by comes on top of tensions between the United States and China over trade and US efforts to thwart Chinese telecom giant Huawei over security concerns.

The transit also comes as the US, Japan, South Korea and Australia kicked off operation "Pacific Vanguard" near Guam, bringing together more than 3,000 sailors from the four countries.

Drills will focus on "live fire exercises, defensive counter-air operations, anti-submarine warfare, and replenishment at sea," the US 7th Fleet said. In April, Beijing said its navy warned off a French warship that had entered the Taiwan Strait and lodged an official complaint with Paris.

China sees Taiwan as part of its territory to be reunified, despite the two sides being ruled separately since the end of a civil war on the mainland in 1949.