

NEWS IN brief

51 injured as quake rocks Philippines

AFP, Manila
Fifty-one people were injured and several homes, churches and other buildings damaged yesterday when an earthquake sent terrified residents of the southern Philippines fleeing their homes before dawn, police said. The 5.8-magnitude shallow quake struck the northeast coast of Mindanao island at 4:42am, with the Philippine seismology office recording seven less intense aftershocks.

US soldier killed in Afghanistan: Nato

AFP, Kabul
A US service member was killed in action in Afghanistan yesterday, Nato said, the latest international casualty that comes as the US tries to forge a peace deal with the Taliban. It is the 10th member of the US military to be killed this year, compared to 12 in all of 2018. Nato did not provide any additional details about what happened, and no insurgent group immediately claimed responsibility.

Storm Barry takes aim at Louisiana

AFP, Port Sulphur
Millions of residents in Louisiana on Saturday braced for Tropical Storm Barry, which is threatening the southern US state and its largest city New Orleans with potentially disastrous rainfall and flooding. Authorities ramped up evacuations, airlines cancelled flights and flood gates slammed shut as the National Hurricane Center (NHC) forecast the strengthening storm would reach hurricane status Saturday and roar ashore along the state's central coast. By early morning the storm was packing winds of 100 kilometers per hour, just shy of hurricane strength, and around 120 miles southwest of New Orleans, according to the NHC.



Members of the Syrian Civil Defence (White Helmets) and civilians gather following a reported regime airstrike on the village of Kafriya, in Syria's Idlib province, yesterday. Inset, A Syrian boy lies in a hospital after being injured during the strikes. Fourteen civilians, including six children and infants, were killed yesterday in air strikes in northwest Syria, targeted for months now by deadly regime and Russian bombardment, a monitor said.

PHOTO: AFP



Afghan hotel attack kills 3

Attackers entered a hotel in western Afghanistan yesterday and killed at least three security forces in an ongoing incident, an official told AFP. The attack was underway in Qala-e-Naw, the capital of Badghis province, having started around 12:40 pm when a group of men, some wearing suicide vests, entered the hotel. He added that children had been evacuated from nearby schools, and that explosions could be heard in the city. Haroon Amir, a witness, said the attackers first hit a police checkpoint and then entered the hotel. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, which comes amid daily carnage in Afghanistan despite a US-led push for a deal to try to end the war.

Turkey ignores US warnings over Russian S-400 missiles

Turkey ignored US warnings as it continued yesterday to take delivery of Russia's S-400 missile defence system near Ankara, a defence ministry statement indicated. "Delivery of S-400 Long Range Air and Missile Defence Systems resumed today," the statement said. "The fourth Russian plane carrying S-400 parts landed at Murted Airport outside Ankara," it added. The US fears that if Ankara integrates the S-400 into its defences, data about the US-built F-35 fighter jet could leak back to the Russians, and Washington has threatened to deny Turkey access to the stealth aircraft. The western defence alliance NATO, of which Turkey is a member, is also "concerned about the potential consequences" of the S-400 purchase, an official told AFP. "President Erdogan was given a very clear choice. Unfortunately, he has clearly made the wrong one," said Eliot Engel and Michael McCaul, the top Democrat and Republican respectively on the House Foreign Affairs Committee.



Indonesia leader and runner-up seek post-election peace

The winner and runner-up in Indonesia's presidential election which sparked deadly riots in the capital called for reconciliation yesterday, in their first meeting since the vote. It comes two weeks after defeated Prabowo Subianto lost a court challenge to overturn President Joko Widodo's victory in the April election. Yesterday, the former general and the country's re-elected leader rode the newly-inaugurated mass rapid transit (MRT) system together in Jakarta. "Some people asked why Prabowo has not congratulated Jokowi, well I do have manners and I wanted to congratulate him in person," Subianto said, standing next to the president. "Being a president is about serving people, the problems he will have to face are enormous and I am ready to help," he added. Widodo said he initiated a meeting with his two-time presidential challenger on an MRT train because he knew Subianto had never used the new system.

SOURCE: AFP

Mueller's testimony on Russia probe postponed

REUTERS, Washington
Special Counsel Robert Mueller's appearance in Congress next week to testify on the Russia election meddling probe and allegations of obstruction by President Trump has been postponed, the House Judiciary Committee announced Friday. Mueller was originally scheduled to appear before the committee on July 17. Committee chairmen Jerry Nadler and Adam Schiff released a statement saying the planned sessions would take place on July 24 for an "extended period of time." Completed in March after a more than two-year investigation into Russian election meddling in the 2016 presidential election, the Mueller report documents numerous instances of attempted collusion between Trump's campaign and Russia, but found no grounds for criminal conspiracy charges. The report also listed ten occasions when Trump allegedly attempted to obstruct the investigation. But Mueller refrained from recommending criminal charges against the president, saying he had no power to do so.

At least 40 people killed

AGENCIES
Floods and landslides triggered by torrential monsoon rains have killed at least 40 people across South Asia in the last two days, officials said yesterday. The monsoon, which lasts from June to September, causes widespread death and destruction across South Asia each year. In Nepal, at least 30 people have died in floods and landslides after heavy rains hit the country's eastern region and the southern plains. Bishwaraj Pokharel, spokesperson for Nepal Police, added that another 11 people were injured and 15 others reported missing. Officials said the Kosi River in eastern Nepal, which flows into the eastern Indian state of Bihar, had risen above the danger mark. The Kosi has been a serious concern for both India and Nepal since it broke its banks in 2008 and changed course, submerging swathes of land and affecting more than two million people in Bihar. About 500 people died in that disaster. Thirty of the 56 sluice gates at a barrage along the Kosi at the Indo-Nepal border have been opened, and rescue teams deployed to evacuate villagers, officials said.

The weather office urged residents to remain alert, saying heavy rains were expected to continue through the weekend.

Three of the victims were killed when a wall collapsed in the capital Kathmandu.

"Our first priority is life saving rescue and all our resources have been deployed," Home Ministry official Umakanta Adhikari told AFP.

Police used boats to bring people to safety as rivers swelled, inundating their settlements, while parents were seen wading across chest-high waters carrying children on their shoulders.

In neighbouring India 11 deaths have been recorded in the northeastern states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, officials said Friday.

Monsoon floods have inundated 21 districts in Assam, affecting thousands, officials said.

In Bangladesh aid groups were providing rations to Rohingya refugees in the southeast of the country with the UN World Food Programme saying Friday that 3 people including a child had died.

Last year, more than 1,200 people were killed across South Asia in monsoon storms with India's Kerala suffering its worst floods in nearly 100 years.

FLOODS IN SOUTH ASIA



CHRISTCHURCH MOSQUE MASSACRE

New Zealanders give up weapons

AFP, Christchurch
Dozens of New Zealanders handed in their firearms yesterday as a gun buyback scheme went into operation aimed at ridding the country of semi-automatic weapons in the wake of the Christchurch mosque attacks. The first of more than 250 collections to be held nationwide was in Christchurch, where 51 Muslim worshippers were gunned down while at prayer less than four months ago. The government, with support from opposition parties, immediately rushed through legislation to tighten New Zealand's gun laws. Police Minister Stuart Nash said the objective was to "remove the most dangerous weapons from circulation". With armed police monitoring the handover, 169 firearms owners handed in 224 weapons and 217 parts and accessories. They were then crushed in hydraulic presses. More than \$290,300 was paid out in compensation. Licenced firearms owners have six months to surrender weapons that have now been deemed illegal under the scheme, with an amnesty ensuring they will not face prosecution during that period. After the amnesty expires, possession of a prohibited firearms will be punishable by up to five years in jail.



A man passes in front of the rubbles of the popular Medina hotel of Kismayo yesterday, a day after at least 26 people, including several foreigners, were killed and 56 injured in a suicide bomb and gun attack claimed by Al-Shabaab militants.

PHOTO: AFP

PROTEST IN HONG KONG AGAINST MAINLAND CHINESE TRADERS

Protesters, police clash again

REUTERS, Hong Kong
Hong Kong protesters clashed with police yesterday in a town near the boundary with mainland China where thousands rallied against the presence of Chinese traders, seizing on another grievance following major unrest over an extradition bill. The demonstration in the Hong Kong territorial town of Sheung Shui, not far from the Chinese city of Shenzhen, began peacefully but devolved into skirmishes and shouting. Protesters threw umbrellas and hardhats at police, who retaliated by swinging batons and firing pepper spray. Later in the day Hong Kong police urged protesters to refrain from violence and leave the area. The protest was the latest in a series that have roiled the former British colony for more than a month, giving rise to its worst political crisis since its 1997 handover to China. Sometimes violent street protests have drawn in millions of people, with hundreds even storming the legislature on July 1 to oppose a now-suspended extradition bill that would have allowed criminal suspects in Hong Kong to be sent to China to face trial in courts under ruling Communist Party control. Critics see the bill as a threat to Hong Kong's rule of law. Chief Executive Carrie Lam this week said the bill was "dead" after having suspended it last month, but opponents vow to settle for nothing short of its formal withdrawal. Protesters against the bill had largely taken place in Hong Kong's main business district, but demonstrators have recently begun to look elsewhere to widen support by taking up narrower, more domestic issues. In Sheung Shui, protesters rallied to oppose small-time Chinese traders who make short trips into the territory to buy goods that they then haul back to China to sell. The demonstrators chanted demands in Mandarin, China's official language, for the Chinese traders to go home. Many street-level shops were shuttered during the march. The traders have long been a source of anger among those in Hong Kong who say they have fuelled inflation, driven up property prices, dodged taxes and diluted Sheung Shui's identity.



LEAKED MEMOS OF UK'S US AMBASSADOR

Police warning to media stirs anger, condemnation

REUTERS, London
Senior British politicians, including both contenders to be the next prime minister, joined journalists yesterday in criticising police for warning media not to publish leaked government documents, saying it was a "dangerous road to tread". Last week, a Sunday newspaper published leaked memos from Britain's Washington ambassador Kim Darroch that provoked a serious diplomatic spat with US President Donald Trump and ultimately led to the envoy announcing his resignation. The memo revealed Darroch called the Trump administration "inept", prompting the president to label him "very stupid" and "wacky". Britain's most senior counter-terrorism officer, Neil Basu, said on Friday police would investigate who was responsible but also warned journalists and publishers they too could be in breach of the law if further documents were leaked. His comments provoked anger and criticism from journalists, editors and politicians who said it risked infringing the freedom of the press. "The state threatening media freedom is a dangerous road to tread," Health Minister Matt Hancock said on Twitter. George Osborne, editor of the London Evening Standard and a former finance minister, described the remarks as a "very stupid and ill-advised statement from a junior officer who doesn't appear to understand much about press freedom". Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt and his predecessor Boris Johnson said the leaker should be found but the press should not be targeted.

XINJIANG POLICY

KSA, Pakistan among 37 states backing China at UN

REUTERS, Geneva
Saudi Arabia, Russia and 35 other states have written to the United Nations supporting China's policies in its western region of Xinjiang, according to a copy of the letter seen by Reuters on Friday, in contrast to strong Western criticism. China has been accused of detaining a million Muslims and persecuting ethnic Uighurs in Xinjiang, and 22 ambassadors signed a letter to the UN Human Rights Council this week criticising its policies. But the letter supporting China commended what it called China's remarkable achievements in the field of human rights. "Faced with the grave challenge of terrorism and extremism, China has undertaken a series of counter-terrorism and deradicalization measures in Xinjiang, including setting up vocational education and training centers," the letter said. The letter said security had returned to Xinjiang and the fundamental human rights of people of all ethnic groups there had been safeguarded. It added there had been no terrorist attack there for three years and people enjoyed a stronger sense of happiness, fulfillment and security. As well as Saudi Arabia and Russia, the letter was signed by ambassadors from many African countries, North Korea, Venezuela, Cuba, Belarus, Myanmar, the Philippines, Syria, Pakistan, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Beijing has denied any human rights violations in the region.