

NEWSIN brief

Tainted alcohol kills 19 in Costa Rica

AFP, San José

Alcohol tainted with potentially toxic levels of methanol has killed 19 people in Costa Rica, where authorities issued an alert against drinking some half-dozen brands. The doctored alcohol contained between 30 to 50 percent methanol, according to Donald Corella, head of emergency services at Calderon Guardia Hospital in San Jose, who was quoted in the daily La Nación.

Female suicide bomber kills 8 in Pakistan

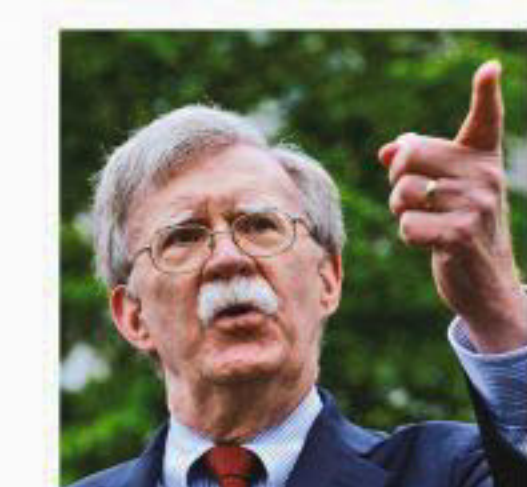
REUTERS, Dera Ismail Khan

A female suicide bomber in northwestern Pakistan killed at least eight people and wounded 26 more in an attack outside a local civilian hospital yesterday, local officials said. The attack in Dera Ismail Khan early yesterday was claimed by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, often known as the Pakistani Taliban, which is separate from the insurgent movement across the border in Afghanistan. Local officials said the attack happened after two police were killed at a roadside checkpoint outside the city.

2 killed in clash with 'terrorists' in Iran

AFP, Tehran

A member of Iran's Revolutionary Guard and a Basij militia fighter have been killed in a clash with a "terrorist group" in the country's southeast, state media reported yesterday. The firefight took place late Saturday in Saravan county of Sistan-Baluchistan province, which straddles the border with Pakistan, said the official IRNA news agency. Sistan-Baluchistan has long been a flashpoint, where Pakistan-based Baluchi separatists and jihadists carry out cross-border raids.



Bolton to visit S Korea, Japan

THE KOREAN HERALD/ANN

US national security adviser John Bolton will visit South Korea this week after a stop in Japan to discuss the two US allies' deepening row following Tokyo's decision to curb the trade of materials crucial for the production of memory chips to Seoul.

National Security Council spokesman Garrett Marquis wrote on Twitter that Bolton departed Saturday for Japan and Korea to "continue conversations with critical allies and friends," without elaborating on details. Bolton will make a two-day trip to Korea on Tuesday and Wednesday, an South Korean official said yesterday. US President Donald Trump offered Friday to help ease tensions between the two East Asian countries.

During his visit, Bolton will meet his counterpart Chung Eui-yong, director of national security at Cheong Wa Dae, as well as Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa and Defense Minister Jeong Kyung-doo. Along with the US' mediator role in settling discord between its key allies in the region, the US adviser will discuss issues regarding denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and a permanent peace regime in the region.

He is also expected to request Korean officials to send troops to protect the Strait of Hormuz, strategically vital waters off Iran amid heightened tensions between Washington and Tehran.

UK faces more Brexit turbulence

Finance minister Hammond says he would quit if Johnson becomes PM

AFP, London

British finance minister Philip Hammond yesterday said he would make a point of resigning before Boris Johnson became prime minister, saying he could never agree to his Brexit strategy.

Johnson is expected to take office on Wednesday, vowing to deliver Brexit on October 31 come what may, in the face of intense opposition in parliament.

A resignation by Hammond, who has become an increasingly fierce critic of Johnson's approach, would show the depth of opposition Johnson may find himself up against as PM, observers said.

Former London mayor Johnson is the runaway favourite to win the governing Conservative Party's leadership contest tomorrow (Tuesday) and then replace Prime Minister Theresa May when she quits the premiership the next day.

Observers say Hammond would never have expected to remain as Chancellor of the Exchequer under Johnson anyway.

But the fact that the second most senior figure in the government is pre-empting his removal in any cabinet reshuffle by the incoming prime minister is seen as significant.

"I'm sure I'm not going to be sacked because I'm going to resign before we get to that point," Hammond told BBC television.

"I understand that his conditions for serving in his government would include accepting a no-deal exit on the 31st of October.

"That is not something that I could ever sign up to."



The postal ballot of 160,000 grassroots party members is expected to return Johnson, 55, as the new Conservative leader over his contender, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt.

Any remaining ballots must be delivered by Monday at 5:00pm (1600 GMT). Bookmakers give Hunt around a one-in-15 chance of victory.

The centre-right Conservatives command a

razor-thin majority in parliament's lower House of Commons and Johnson's opponents -- both within and outside the party -- are keen to scupper his leadership.

Johnson has vowed to take Britain out of the European Union on October 31, with or without a divorce deal.

Opponents of Brexit, and especially of a no-deal departure, are plotting moves against Johnson.

Some Conservatives, Hammond included, have hinted they are prepared to bring down their own government rather than accept leaving the EU without an agreement.

"I cannot accept the idea of leaving with no deal on October 31," Hammond said.

Justice Secretary David Gauke also yesterday said he would quit the government if Johnson became prime minister.

The Sunday Times newspaper reported that up to six europhile Conservative MPs were considering defecting to the centrist, pro-EU Liberal Democrats should Johnson win -- leaving him without a Commons majority.

Pro-EU protesters rallied in central London on Saturday in anticipation of Johnson taking office, in a "No to Boris, yes to Europe" demonstration.

9,000-year-old city remains unearthed

CNN ONLINE

A huge Stone Age settlement unearthed outside Jerusalem may have been home to 3,000 people, the Neolithic equivalent of a large city, according to details released by the Israel Antiquities Authority on Tuesday.

Believed to have been inhabited 9,000 years ago, the site has yielded thousands of tools and ornaments, including arrowheads, figurines and jewelry. The findings also provide evidence of sophisticated urban planning and farming, which may force experts to rethink the region's early history, said archeologists involved in the excavation.

The discovery was made near the Israeli town of Motza, about three miles west of Jerusalem. Although the area has long been of archeological interest, excavation director Jacob Vardi said the sheer scale of the site -- which measures between 30 and 40 hectares -- only emerged in 2015 during surveys for a proposed highway.

Archeologists have since found a large collection of buildings just below the ground's surface. As well as private homes, the excavation revealed the remnants of public facilities and spaces used for rituals and burials.

The structures suggest that plaster was widely used, while alleyways between buildings point to a comparatively advanced urban planning, Vardi said.

Large-scale settlements from this period -- and earlier -- are known to have existed in the wider region. Archeological finds at Tell es-Sultan, the ancient city of Jericho, date back to between 10,000 B.C. and 8,000 B.C.



Protesters march against a controversial extradition bill in Hong Kong, yesterday. Masked protesters threw eggs at China's office in Hong Kong yesterday following another massive rally, focusing anger towards the embodiment of Beijing's rule with no end in sight to the turmoil engulfing the finance hub.

PHOTO: AFP

No intention to establish military base in Lanka: US

REUTERS, Colombo

The United States wants a special forces cooperation agreement with Sri Lanka to sidestep bureaucracy and has no intention of setting up a military base in the country, the American ambassador to the island nation said in a television interview.

The comments represent the latest attempt by ambassador Alaina B Teplitz to assuage concerns over US involvement in the Indian Ocean island after plans to sign a Status of Forces Agreement (SoFA) by the two countries was heavily criticised by local media and some political analysts who see it as a threat to Sri Lanka's sovereignty.

Also called the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), it will establish the framework for US military personnel visiting Sri Lanka at the invitation of the government and is still being negotiated by both nations, Teplitz said. "The visiting forces agreement is an update to an existing agreement and it is designed to address a number of red tape issues," Teplitz told state-run TV channel Rupavahini in an interview late on Saturday.

Giving the example of the 2017 floods in Sri Lanka, Teplitz said the government had sought help from the United States and it brought in relief supplies but the aeroplanes transporting them required clearance from the government.

The agreement lays down rules for the benefit of both countries - "meaning no base, no permanent presence of US troops", said Teplitz, adding that Sri Lanka retains the right to approve or deny all entry of people, vessels and aircraft.

BJP 'high on power'

Says Mamata, accuses India's ruling party of political horse trading

AGENCIES

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee yesterday slammed BJP and said she would not allow "communalism and hooliganism in the state".

Mamata, also the TMC chief, attacked BJP for vandalising a Vidyasagar statue in May and said she will launch a state-wide protest against the saffron party.

"BJP is high on power. Wake up people and counter BJP. Bengal has seen golden days under TMC," she said while addressing the Martyrs' Day rally in Kolkata.

Taking her request further, Mamata urged paper ballots to return and for people to shun EVMs, adding, "2019 election is not a history but a mystery".

The chief minister accused the saffron party of luring TMC MLAs with money and other perks.

"Central agencies are threatening our leaders and elected representatives over chit fund scams, asking them to get in

touch with the BJP or face prison," she said.

"The BJP is offering ₹2 crore and a petrol pump to our MLAs to switch over... Just like in Karnataka, the BJP is indulging in horse trading everywhere," she alleged.

Mamata said the BJP government at the Centre would not last for "more than two years", considering the way it is functioning, reported The Indian Express.

Mamata was expected to launch the poll campaign for the state elections, which are likely to be held in 2021, reported NDTV online.

Last year, at the Martyrs' Day rally, Mamata had set ambitious targets for the Lok Sabha elections - setting her sight on Delhi and calling for a clean sweep of all the 42 parliamentary seats in the state. A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since then.

In the national elections, the Trinamool Congress, which won 22 seats, lost 12 seats while the BJP gained 16 seats compared to the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

6 killed over witchcraft allegations in India

Four members of a family including two women were killed by fellow villagers in central India's tribal heartland over allegations of witchcraft, authorities said yesterday. Four elders of a tribal family, all aged in their 60s according to local media reports, were attacked by around a dozen stick-wielding villagers outside their home late Saturday. Experts say belief in witchcraft and the occult remains widespread in impoverished rural communities across India, especially in isolated tribal communities. More than 2,000 people -- many of them women -- were killed in India on suspicion of witchcraft between 2000 and 2012, according to the National Crime Records Bureau.

New Zealanders hand over 10,000-plus weapons

New Zealanders have handed over more than 10,000 guns, weapons parts and accessories in the first week of a buy-back scheme prompted by the country's worst peacetime mass shooting, police figures released on Sunday show. A gun reform law passed in April banned most semi-automatic firearms, parts that convert firearms into semi-automatics, magazines over a certain capacity and some shotguns. Owners have until Dec 20 to hand in their weapons and the government has set aside NZ\$208 million (\$140.63 million) to compensate them for up to 95% of the original cost. The buy-back comes four months after a lone gunman with semi-automatic weapons attacked Muslims attending Friday prayers in Christchurch on New Zealand's South Island, killing 51 people. More than 2,000 people have surrendered 3,275 firearms, 7,827 parts and accessories and in return authorities have paid them slightly more than NZ\$6 million (\$4.06 million) since the buy-back began last Saturday, a police spokesperson told Reuters by telephone yesterday.

Japan's Abe claims victory in upper house election



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday claimed victory for his ruling coalition in the upper house election, vowing to keep alive plans to amend the nation's pacifist constitution. With the results, the 64-year-old Abe, who is on course to become Japan's longest-serving prime minister, aims to shore up his mandate ahead of a crucial consumption tax hike later this year, along with trade negotiations with Washington. "The ruling parties were given a majority... as people decided to urge us to firmly push for policies under the stable political base," Abe told public broadcaster NHK. "I want to meet their expectations soundly," he said at the headquarters of his Liberal Democratic Party. Abe's LDP and its coalition partner Komeito are forecast to take between 67 and 77 of the 124 seats.

SOURCE: AFP

An entire nation got hacked

Records of more than 5m Bulgarians got stolen by hackers from tax revenue office

CNN ONLINE

Asen Genov is pretty furious. His personal data was made public this week after records of more than 5 million Bulgarians got stolen by hackers from the country's tax revenue office.

In a country of just 7 million people, the scale of the hack means that just about every working adult has been affected.

"We should all be angry. ... The information is now freely available to anyone. Many, many people in Bulgaria already have this file, and I believe that it's not only in Bulgaria," said Genov, a blogger and political analyst. He knows his data was compromised because, though he's not an IT expert, he managed to find the stolen files online.

The attack is extraordinary, but it is not unique. Government databases are honey pots for hackers. They contain a huge wealth of information that can be "useful"

for years to come, experts say.

"You can make (your password) longer and more sophisticated, but the information the government holds are things that are not going to change," said Guy Bunker, an information security expert and the chief technology officer at Clearswift, a cybersecurity company.

"Your date of birth is not going to change, you're not going to move house tomorrow," he said. "A lot of the information that was taken was valid yesterday, is valid today, and will probably be valid for a large number of people in five, 10, 20 years' time."

Data breaches used to be spearheaded by highly skilled hackers. But it increasingly doesn't take a sophisticated and carefully planned operation to break into IT systems. Hacking tools and malware that are available on the dark web make it possible for amateur hackers to cause enormous damage.



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