

# NEWSIN brief

## Attack on Thai army base kills 4

AFP, Pattani

Four people were killed in a late-night attack by Muslim insurgents on a military outpost in Thailand's violence-ravaged south, authorities said yesterday, as dramatic footage emerged showing security forces diving for cover from a hail of gunfire and a grenade blast. Rebels seeking autonomy for the culturally distinct region have been fighting the Buddhist-majority Thai state, which colonised the area over a century ago.

## 11 killed, 42 missing in China landslide

AFP, Beijing

Eleven people have died and 42 are missing after heavy rains triggered a landslide in China's southwestern Guizhou province, the government said yesterday. Rescuers have freed 11 survivors after a mudslide buried 21 houses in a village in Shuicheng county Tuesday night, the Ministry of Emergency Management said in a statement on the Twitter-like Weibo platform.

## Navalny arrested in Russia ahead of protest

AFP, Moscow

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny said he was arrested yesterday, in an apparent move by the authorities to prevent a major protest rally this week. In a video on his Instagram account, the anti-corruption campaigner said he was detained as he was leaving his Moscow home to go jogging and buy flowers for his wife on her birthday. The opposition says it was the largest protest since 2012 when tens of thousands rallied against election fraud during parliamentary polls.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II welcomes newly elected leader of the Conservative party, Boris Johnson during an audience in Buckingham Palace, London yesterday, where she invited him to become prime minister of United Kingdom and form a new government.

PHOTO: AFP

### WAR CRIMES CASES

## Sri Lanka blocks UN meeting with judges

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's parliament has blocked a visiting UN human rights expert from meeting with judges hearing war crimes cases, citing fears of foreign interference in the judicial system. Clement Voule, an envoy of the United Nations Human Rights Council, travelled to the South Asian nation to discuss civil rights protections in Sri Lanka. But opposition leader Mahinda Rajapakse told parliament on Tuesday that Voule's plans to meet with senior judges overseeing cases concerning military excesses during the former strongman's tenure amounted to foreign interference. Yesterday parliament speaker Karu Jayasuriya said he had "intervened and stopped the meeting". "I thank the opposition for bringing this to my notice, I have taken timely action," Jayasuriya added. Sri Lanka faced international censure for its human rights record under Rajapakse, who was toppled in January 2015 elections. Forces under his command were accused of killing up to 40,000 Tamil civilians in the final months of the island's 37-year war against Tamil separatists that ended in May 2009. Rajapakse's administration resisted global pressure to examine allegations of major human rights violations during his tenure. His successor President Maithripala Sirisena came to power on a pledge to investigate wartime atrocities, but has refused calls for an international probe. UN expert Voule has so far met Chief Justice Jayantha Jayasuriya in the presence of foreign ministry officials. He is due to leave Sri Lanka on Friday.

## China warns of war over Taiwan

Eyes high-tech army, says US undermines global stability

AGENCIES

China yesterday warned that it was ready for war if there was any move toward Taiwan's independence, accusing the United States of undermining global stability and denouncing its arms sales to the self-ruled island. The Pentagon said this month the US State Department had approved sales of weapons requested by Taiwan, including tanks and Stinger missiles estimated to be worth \$2.2 billion. China responded by saying it would impose sanctions on US firms involved in any deals. Defence ministry spokesman Wu Qian told a news briefing on a defence white paper, the first like it in several years to outline the military's strategic concerns, that China would



make its greatest effort for peaceful reunification with Taiwan. "However, we must firmly point out that seeking Taiwan independence is a dead end," Reuters said quoting Wu. "If there are people who dare to try to split Taiwan from the country, China's military will be ready to go to war to firmly safeguard national sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity," he said. The United States is the main arms supplier to Taiwan, which China deems a wayward province. Beijing has never renounced the use of force

to bring the island under its control. The United States has no formal ties with democratic Taiwan, but is bound by law to help provide it with the means to defend itself. In Beijing, asked how China's military would handle escalating protest violence in Hong Kong's widening crisis over a controversial extradition bill, Wu referred only to the territory's garrison law, which he said "already has a clear stipulation". That law states that the Hong Kong government can request the People's Liberation Army (PLA) garrison's assistance to maintain

public order. China outlined plans to build a modern, high-tech army in a national defence plan published yesterday. The first comprehensive white paper since 2012 offers insight into the world's largest army as it scrambles to catch up to America's formidable firepower as tensions deepen between the two powers. The plan calls for more cutting-edge technology in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) arsenal, admitting it "still lags far behind the world's leading militaries". Meanwhile, four Chinese nationals have been indicted for financial dealings with North Korean companies sanctioned for involvement in the production of weapons of mass destruction, the US Justice Department said Tuesday. Ma Xiaohong, the head of Dandong Hongxiang Industrial Development Co. Ltd (DHID) and three top executives of the Chinese company were indicted by a federal grand jury in New Jersey, the department said in a statement.



## Pakistan PM to meet Taliban in peace push

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan said Tuesday he would meet with the Taliban after returning to his country, as part of efforts to end 18 years of war in Afghanistan. Khan spoke in Washington on his first official trip to the United States. He said he had also spoken with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, and now, when he goes back, "I will meet the Taliban and I will try my best to get them to talk to the Afghan government." Speaking at the US Institute for Peace, a bipartisan federal body, Khan said he had been contacted by the Islamist extremist Afghan Taliban "a few months back", after his election win in July 2018, but did not take a meeting at that time because Kabul was not in favor of it.

## Hafiz Saeed remanded for 14 days

A court in Pakistan on Wednesday remanded to custody Hafiz Saeed, accused of masterminding a four-day attack on India's financial capital in 2008, after a hearing following his arrest last week on terrorism financing charges, his lawyer said. Saeed's arrest came just ahead of a visit to Washington by Prime Minister Imran Khan and was widely seen as a move by the Islamabad government to smoothe the way before a meeting with US President Donald Trump. The United States has offered a reward of \$10 million for information leading to the conviction of Saeed, who has been arrested and released several times over the past decade.

## Esper new Pentagon chief



Former soldier Mark Esper was sworn in as US secretary of defense Tuesday after earning Senate confirmation, filling America's longest-ever Pentagon leadership vacuum as Washington faces mounting tensions with Iran and struggles to end the long-running Afghanistan war. President Donald Trump's second Defense Department chief takes over nearly seven months after the shock departure of Jim Mattis, the deeply respected career US Marine who broke with Trump over policy on the Middle East and Afghanistan. Esper sailed through the confirmation process at lightning speed. He earned broad bipartisan support and was confirmed by a vote of 90 to 8.

SOURCE: AFP



A fish-skeleton lies on a dry part of the bed of the River Loire at Montjean-sur-Loire, western France yesterday, as drought conditions prevail over much of western Europe. A new heatwave blasted into northern Europe that could set records in several countries, including France.

PHOTO: AFP

## China-Russia joint exercise sends a message to US

AFP, Beijing

An unprecedented joint China-Russia bomber patrol over disputed territory off the coast of South Korea and Japan was a "massive development" in their bid to challenge US influence in the region, analysts said yesterday. The joint patrol caused outcry from Washington's two main allies in the region after both Tokyo and Seoul claimed a Russian plane violated their airspace. Seoul said a Russian warplane twice entered South Korean airspace near the disputed Dokdo islets - which Tokyo also claims and calls Takeshima -- and that it fired warning shots in return. Japan also said it scrambled fighter jets in response. "It's a big deal because it displays confidence that the air forces of the two nations can coordinate a patrol of this nature in ways that the region will almost certainly find destabilising," said Lyle Morris, senior policy analyst at RAND Corporation. China and Russia have increasingly close ties and have conducted a number of joint military exercises, but this bears extra political significance for taking place over disputed islands which are a source of simmering diplomatic friction between Japan and South Korea. Ahn Chan-il, a researcher in Seoul, told AFP the violation of the disputed airspace was "deliberate". "China and Russia are seeking to counterbalance Washington when it comes to North Korea's nuclear issues," he told AFP. "(They) are causing trouble in order to gain dominance in the region by provoking Washington's two key allies." Both Moscow and Beijing have denied the exercise targeted other countries or violated disputed airspace, but the move was a bold one, say analysts, which targeted the region's two main US allies at the same time.

## 'No,' Trump wasn't exonerated

Says Robert Mueller; refuses to say if the president committed a crime

AFP, Washington

Robert Mueller yesterday said he did not exonerate Donald Trump in his two-year Russian meddling investigation but also told lawmakers he will not say if the president committed a crime, as he launched into a marathon day of congressional testimony. Three months after releasing the final report on his probe into the 2016 election, much of the American public remains unclear about the former special counsel's findings on whether Trump criminally obstructed justice and whether his campaign colluded with Russians. With Trump declaring he was "exonerated" in the probe and Democrats saying the report supplied ample evidence for impeachment, the notoriously taciturn Mueller answered questions for the first time in front of two separate, Democrat-run committees in the House of Representatives. "Based on Justice Department policy and principles of fairness, we decided we would not make a determination as to whether the

president committed a crime. That was our decision then and it remains our decision today," Mueller said in his opening remarks. But when asked at the start of the hearing before the House Judiciary Committee if his report completely cleared the president of wrongdoing, Mueller said "no." "The president was not exculpated for the acts he allegedly committed," Mueller said, adding that it was "true" that Trump could be prosecuted for obstruction of justice after he leaves office. Trump insisted this week he would not watch the nationally-televised testimony but half an hour before it was to start, he let loose with an angry

Twitter tirade, complaining among other things about the fact Mueller will testify with a top aide sitting next to him. "This was specifically NOT agreed to, and I would NEVER have agreed to it. The Greatest Witch Hunt in U.S. history, by far!" Trump wrote in one of a half dozen tweets. Mueller's report documents extensive contacts between the Trump campaign and Russians, including attempts to cooperate or collude, neither of which is a specific crime. Mueller ruled in the end that there was not enough evidence to recommend charges of criminal conspiracy, the main legal charge he could make use of. The former FBI director also laid out in detail 10 instances when Trump allegedly tried to obstruct the investigation. But he said he was prevented from recommending charges against Trump because Justice Department rules prohibited him from lodging criminal charges against a sitting president. He reiterated that position yesterday.

## Israel fires missiles into south Syria

Regime strikes kill 7 civilians

AFP, Beirut

An Israeli missile attack targeted Syrian military positions held by the government and its allies early yesterday, Syria's state news agency said. The missiles were fired into the south of the country close to the Golan Heights, an area occupied and annexed by Israel. "The Israeli enemy launched an aggression after midnight against the Tall al-Hara area," the SANA news agency said yesterday, adding that there were reports of damage to property. Israel has carried out hundreds of air strikes in Syria since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, targeting forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and the regime's allies Iran and Hezbollah. Meanwhile, regime bombardment on northwestern Syria killed at least seven civilians including children on Tuesday, a monitor said, a day after dozens were killed in raids targeting the opposition bastion. Three children were among seven civilians killed in Tuesday's air strikes and artillery fire in Aleppo and Idlib provinces, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. It came a day after regime and Russian air strikes killed 50 people in northwestern Syria. The Syrian regime and its Russian ally have stepped up their deadly bombardment of the Idlib region and adjacent areas in Aleppo and Hama provinces since late April.