

NEWS IN brief

UN raises \$331m aid appeal for Zimbabwe

AFP, Harare

The UN food agency on Tuesday launched a \$331-million appeal for aid donations to feed millions of people in crisis-hit Zimbabwe, which is reeling from a drought and the high cost of food. Around five million people, or a third of the 16 million Zimbabweans, are in need of aid and at least half of them are on the cusp of "starvation", according to the World Food Programme (WFP). Speaking at the launch of the appeal, WFP executive director David Beasley said 2.5 million Zimbabweans were "in crisis emergency mode... marching towards starvation".

US warns off Venezuela allies China and Russia

AFP, Lima

Washington warned China and Russia to avoid doing business with the Venezuelan regime of Nicolas Maduro, as delegates from some 60 countries discussed ways of ending the crisis in the South American nation. The admonition Tuesday came a day after President Donald Trump ordered a freeze on all Venezuelan government assets in the United States and barred transactions with its authorities. But Russia's foreign ministry said there was "no legal basis" to freeze Venezuelan assets.

Violent blast rocks Danish tax office

AFP, Stockholm

Danish police said yesterday foul play was involved in a powerful explosion that rocked the national tax agency in Copenhagen, causing severe damage to the building's exterior but no serious injuries. The cause of the blast, which occurred Tuesday around 10:00 pm at the agency's headquarters in Osterbro, was not immediately known. Investigators were treating the incident as a criminal act.



Afghan security forces investigate the site where a Taliban car bomb detonated at the entrance of a police station in Kabul yesterday. Inset, a man carries an injured woman to a hospital after the blast. At least 14 people were killed and 145 wounded in the blast, sending a massive plume of smoke over the Afghan capital and shattering windows far from the blast site.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



IS resurging in Syria as US pulls troops
Says defense dept watchdog

AFP, Washington

The Islamic State (IS) jihadist group was "resurging" in Syria while the United States withdrew troops, and has solidified its insurgent capabilities in neighboring Iraq, a Defense Department watchdog said Tuesday.

The jihadists -- who suffered major territorial losses at the hands of Iraqi and Syrian forces backed by a US-led international air campaign -- are exploiting weaknesses in local forces to make gains, the report from the Office of Inspector General said. "Despite losing its territorial 'caliphate,' the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) solidified its insurgent capabilities in Iraq and was resurging in Syria this quarter," according to the report, which uses an alternate name for the jihadist group.

IS has been able to "regroup and sustain operations" in the two countries partially because local forces "remain unable to sustain long-term operations, conduct multiple operations simultaneously, or hold territory that they have cleared," the report said.

The group's Syria resurgence came as Washington "completed a partial withdrawal" from the country, a move made despite commanders saying that the local US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) "needed more training and equipping for counterinsurgency operations."

N Korea's Kim sends missile warning to US, South Korea

Trump says US in talks with Seoul to hike payment for troops

AFP, Seoul

North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un says the country's latest missile launches were a warning to Washington and Seoul over their joint war games, state news agency KCNA reported yesterday, as tensions rise on the Korean peninsula.

The latest launch by the nuclear-armed North came after the South Korean and US militaries began mainly computer-simulated joint exercises on Monday to test Seoul's ability to take operational control in wartime.

Those drills are taking place despite Pyongyang's warnings that the exercises would jeopardise nuclear negotiations between the United States and North Korea.

KCNA said Kim had watched the launches early Tuesday, which verified the "war capacity" of the "new-type tactical guided missiles".

With the launches carried out satisfactorily, "Kim Jong Un noted that the said military action would be an occasion to send an adequate warning to the joint military drill now underway by the US and South Korean authorities," KCNA said.

Pyeongyang on Tuesday fired two projectiles that

"are assumed to be short-range ballistic missiles" into the sea, the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff said earlier.

The latest weapons tests were the fourth pair of projectiles fired in less than two weeks, and the North has threatened more.

US President Donald Trump said yesterday his administration is in talks with South Korea to pay "substantially more" for protection against North Korea, with tensions rising on the Korean peninsula.

"Over the past many decades, the U.S. has been paid very little by South Korea, but last year, at the request of President Trump, South Korea paid \$990,000,000," Trump posted on Twitter.

Trump last week downplayed the North's launches, saying Kim would not want to "disappoint" him.

Trump and Kim held a historic summit in Singapore last year, where the North made a vague pledge on denuclearisation.

A second summit in Hanoi this February broke up amid disagreements over sanctions relief and what Pyongyang might be willing to give up in return.



REMOVAL OF KASHMIR'S SPECIAL STATUS

Ladakh enclave jubilant, but China angered

REUTERS, Mumbai

The Buddhist enclave of Ladakh cheered India's move to hive it off from Jammu and Kashmir state, a change that could spur tourism and help New Delhi counter China's influence in the contested western Himalayas.

Beijing, though, criticised the announcement, made on Monday by the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi as part of a wider policy shift that also ended Jammu and Kashmir's right to set its own laws. In a statement on Tuesday, China said the decision was unacceptable and undermined its territorial sovereignty.

Ladakh is an arid, mountainous area of around 59,146 square kilometers (22,836 square miles), much of it uninhabitable, that only has 274,000 residents. The rest of Jammu and Kashmir is roughly 163,090 square kilometers (62,969 square miles) with a population of some 12.2 million.

China and India still claim vast swathes of each other's territory along their 3,500

km (2,173 mile) Himalayan border.

"The fact that India took this move ... can be seen as one way that India is trying to counter growing Chinese influence in the region," said Sameer Patil, a Mumbai-based fellow in international security studies at the Gateway House think-tank.

In a statement, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said China contests the inclusion of what it regards as its territory on the Indian side of the western section of the China-India border.

By announcing it would turn Ladakh into its own administrative district, the Indian government fulfilled a decades-long demand from political leaders there. Ladakh locals were tired of being hurt or ignored because of the many years of turmoil in the Kashmir Valley resulting from separatist militant activity and the Indian military's moves to crush them.

"We are very happy that we are separated from Kashmir. Now we can be the owners of our own destiny," Tsering Samphel, a veteran politician from the Congress party in Ladakh, said on Tuesday.

VISITS TO MASSACRE SITES

Trump faces cold shoulder, protests

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump was flying to the sites of mass shootings in Ohio and Texas yesterday, but the divisive Republican risks meeting protests by Americans who blame him for stoking the violence.

Trump has been walking a difficult line since the massacres of 31 people over the weekend -- 22 at a Walmart frequented by large numbers of Hispanic people in El Paso, Texas, and nine killed by a second gunman in Dayton, Ohio.

The visits "will be about honoring victims, comforting communities, and thanking first responders & medical professionals for their heroic actions," White House Press Secretary Stephanie Grisham tweeted.



Lawyers and members of the election committee's legal sector hold a silent march against what they claim is political persecution by the Secretary for Justice, while demanding an independent inquiry into the anti-extradition law crisis, in Hong Kong yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Silk Road sweeteners

China woos Myanmar's ruling NLD with junkets

REUTERS, Yangon

The National League for Democracy was forged in an uprising against one-party rule. Its activists spent years in jail under Myanmar's military junta. But since taking power three years ago, the party led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has found an unlikely ally -- the Chinese Communist Party.

The friendship has blossomed in high-level exchanges between Suu Kyi and Chinese leaders, but also in interactions between party members on visits that mix tours of container terminals or education projects with boozy dinners and shopping trips.

The trips are part of a push to make Myanmar a vital stop on Chinese President Xi Jinping's flagship Belt and Road Initiative, offering to build deep-sea ports, hydropower dams and economic zones in a country desperate for investment.

Reuters interviewed more than 20 party members and lawmakers who have visited China on expenses-paid trips, through which Beijing hopes to overcome historic distrust and fears among many in Myanmar of becoming indebted to their much larger neighbour.

The invites have flowed since Myanmar's relations with Western countries soured following their sharp criticism of

a 2017 army crackdown in its northwestern Rakhine state from which 700,000 Rohingya Muslims fled to Bangladesh. NLD stalwarts such as Aung Shin, a former political prisoner, have welcomed China's hospitality.

"They want to show that they are not like before, so they invited us and showed us," said Aung Shin, who has been on at least 10 junkets to China since 2013.

Despite such perks, NLD leader Sandar Min says the party's members are not unduly influenced by the visits, which they say are useful learning experiences.

The visit would not prevent her from voicing her concerns over the New Yangon City project, she said.

Another controversial Chinese project in Myanmar is the \$3.6 billion Myitsone dam in conflict-torn northern state of Kachin, which was suspended in 2011 amid concerns it would be environmentally damaging and mainly benefit China.

In October 2018, Aung Shin, the party newspaperman, led a nine-strong Myanmar delegation that visited at least five dams on China's Yellow River.

Three other participants said they were under the impression the trip was paid for by the State Power International Corporation (SPIC), the giant state-owned enterprise behind the hydropower project.





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