

NEWSIN brief

Trump names new acting intel chief

REUTERS, Washington

President Donald Trump said on Thursday that Joseph Maguire, the current chief of the National Counterterrorism Center, will become the acting director of national intelligence. Trump's announcement on Twitter came after the deputy director of national intelligence, Sue Gordon, resigned. She said in a note to Trump that stepping down was not her "preference," but added, "You should have your team." Trump said Maguire will take over the acting post on August 15, when Dan Coats steps down.

Kyrgyz court holds ex-president after raid

AFP, Bishkek

A court in Kyrgyzstan has ordered the country's former president to be held in pre-trial detention after he was seized from his compound in raids that left one person dead and plunged the country in crisis. The Central Asian state, which has seen two revolutions in less than two decades, is caught in a standoff between ex-leader Almazbek Atambayev and his protegee-turned-foe President Sooronbai Jeenbekov. A court in Bishkek late Thursday ordered the 62-year-old Atambayev held behind bars until August 26, a court spokesman said.

Super Typhoon barrels towards China

AFP, Beijing

China issued a red alert for incoming Super Typhoon Lekima which is expected to batter eastern Zhejiang province early today with high winds and torrential rainfall. The ninth typhoon of the year is projected to move northwest up China's coast today with the China Meteorological Administration (CMA) focusing its attention on Shanghai and Zhejiang, Fujian, Jiangsu and Shandong provinces.



An Israeli soldier hurls a sound grenade towards Palestinian demonstrators during a protest against the nearby Jewish settlement of Qadomem, in the village of Kofr Qadom in the Israeli-occupied West Bank yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Economic downturn to hit Hong Kong like 'tsunami'

Warns city's embattled leader, rules out any concession

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong's leader Carrie Lam yesterday warned that two months of pro-democracy demonstrations were causing economic chaos in the city but ruled out making concessions to "silence the violent protesters."

The embattled leader abruptly announced a press conference after meeting business leaders as demonstrators rallied at the airport, with the protest movement entering its third month.

Lam, whose support for a bill to allow extradition to mainland China sparked the crisis, warned that the economic impact of the unrest threatened to be worse than the 2003 SARS outbreak in the financial hub.

"The downturn this time came very quickly. Someone described it as coming like a tsunami," Lam said.

"Compared to the economic downturn caused by SARS that we handled previously, which caused an economic storm, the situation this time is more severe."

"In other words, the economic recovery will take a very long time," she added.

While Lam is a figure of hatred for many pro-democracy

activists, her comments echo worried statements from the private sector and the tourism industry in particular.

Hong Kong carrier Cathay Pacific has warned bookings are down, travel agencies have reported drops of up to 50 percent in group tour bookings and the tourism board reported double-digit declines in visitor arrivals in the second half of July.

Protesters have continued to stage almost daily rallies despite increasingly violent confrontations with police that have prompted several countries to issue Hong Kong travel warnings for their citizens.

Yesterday, thousands of pro-democracy protesters staged a sit-in at the airport to bring their message

to arriving visitors.

Lam has suspended the bill that sparked the crisis, but has not yet responded to protester calls to withdraw it altogether, and she has brushed aside demands for an enquiry into police brutality.

She ruled out meeting the demands of protesters, which also include a call for the direct election of the city's chief executive, currently chosen by Beijing.



It's up to EU to avoid no-deal Brexit: UK FM

Presses the bloc to amend terms of the deal

REUTERS, Mexico City

Britain's foreign minister on Thursday pressed the European Union to amend the terms of Britain's EU withdrawal agreement, saying Brussels would have to take responsibility for a no-deal Brexit if it does not compromise.

In an interview with Reuters during a visit to Mexico City, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said the British government wanted to leave the European Union with a deal, but would do so without one if EU negotiators did not alter their stance.

"If the position from the EU is that the withdrawal agreement can't be changed - whether it's add-ons or subtractions - full stop, which is their position today, then let's face it, they will be taking the decision to see the UK leave on no-deal terms, and that's a responsibility they will have to bear," Raab said.

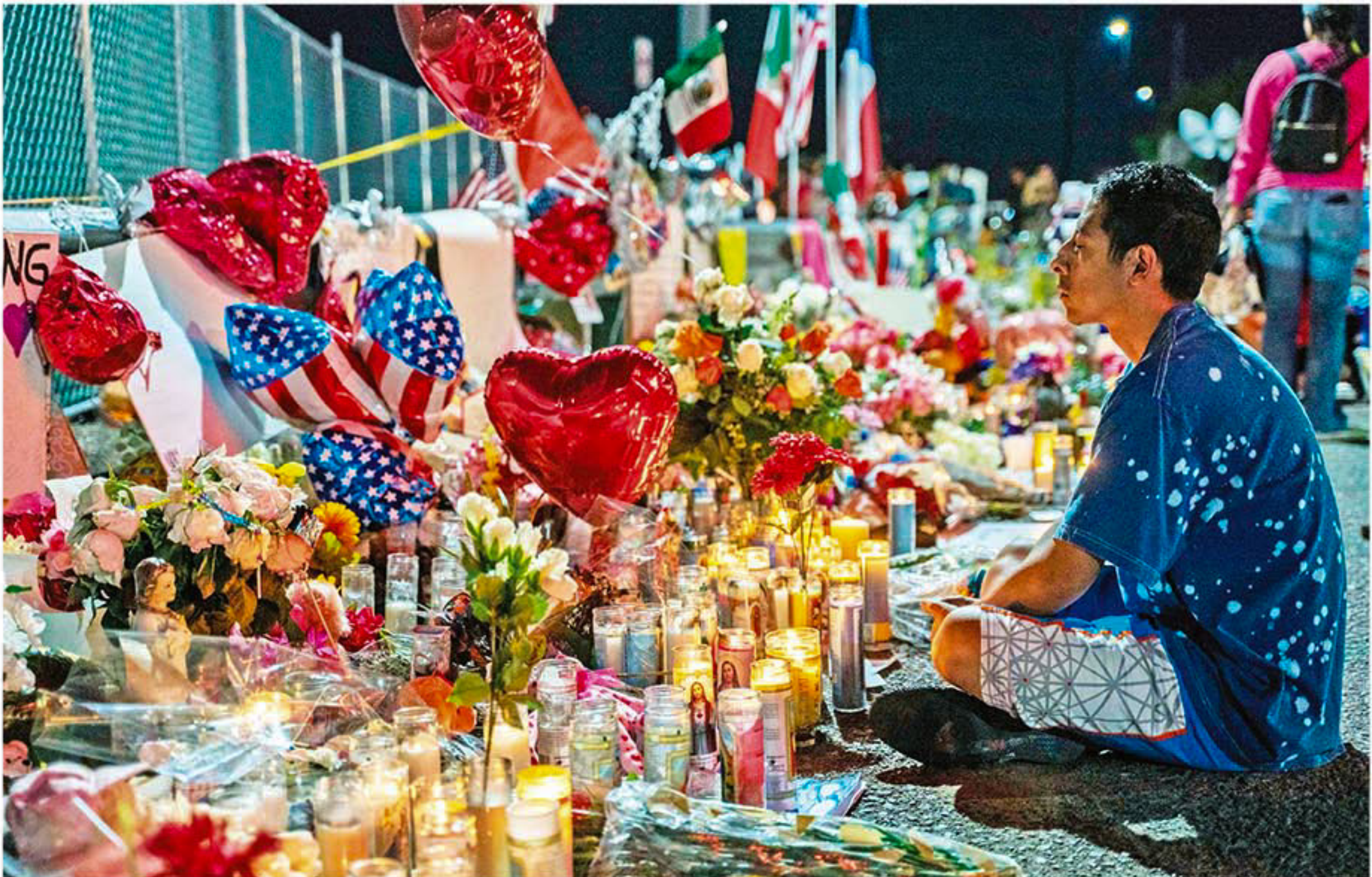
The European Union has said the

withdrawal agreement negotiated by the previous British administration will not be re-opened, but the new government under Prime Minister Boris Johnson wants a contentious so-called Irish "backstop" scrapped.

A provision put forward by Brussels, the backstop aims to keep the border between the Republic of Ireland and British-ruled Northern Ireland open, and would oblige Britain to obey some EU rules if no alternative arrangement can be agreed.

Raab said "the backstop, certainly in its current form, is undemocratic and it's something that will have to be removed."

The obvious alternative, Raab said, was to move towards an "operational backstop" that ensured that "any checks that are done wouldn't be at the border" but could be managed with "technology and goodwill and operational cooperation."



Abel Valenzuela, local of El Paso, meditates in front of the makeshift memorial for shooting victims at the Cielo Vista Mall Walmart in El Paso, Texas on Thursday night. The El Paso community is still reeling from the trauma of the mass shooting which left 22 dead and dozens injured.

PHOTO: AFP

'MIXED SIGNALS' TO IRAN

Trump lashes out at French president

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump on Thursday accused his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron of getting in the way of US policy and sending "mixed signals" to Iran.

"Iran is in serious financial trouble. They want desperately to talk to the U.S., but are given mixed signals from all of those purporting to represent us, including President Macron of France," Trump tweeted.

Trump has imposed crippling sanctions on Iran and sought to sink an international deal for managing the country's contested nuclear industry, but several major allies and other partners, including France, have resisted the US attempt to isolate the Iranians.

That division over how to handle Iran appears to be frustrating Trump, who is now left with few options other than to keep adding US pressure on Tehran -- so far with little tangible benefit.

Trump lashed out at Macron, saying "I know Emmanuel means well, as do all others, but nobody speaks for the United States but the United States itself. No one is authorized in any way, shape, or form, to represent us!"

As the US-Iranian standoff deepens, tensions are soaring in the strategic region, with drones downed, tankers seized by Tehran and mysterious attacks on ships in Gulf waters.

Washington and its Gulf allies have accused the Islamic republic of the attacks on ships, which Tehran denies.

In response, the US has been seeking to form a coalition whose mission-- dubbed Operation Sentinel -- it says is to guarantee freedom of navigation in the Gulf.

POWER STRUGGLE IN ITALY

Pope warns against rise of nationalism

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis yesterday warned against European nationalism, raising the "frightening" spectre of Hitler in comments published a day after Italy's far-right interior minister bid to strengthen his hold on government.

Matteo Salvini, whose rallying cry is "Italians first", pulled his support from the coalition government Thursday and called for snap elections.

He tried to create a "sovereignist" front to challenge the powers of European Union authorities ahead of EU elections earlier this year.

The pope warned in an interview published yesterday in newspaper La Stampa that "sovereignism reveals an attitude toward isolation".

He compared the current rise of nationalism in Europe to the 1930s when the dictator Adolf Hitler came to power in Nazi Germany.

"I am concerned because we hear

speeches that resemble those of Hitler in 1934. 'Us first, We... We...' These are frightening thoughts," the pope was quoted as saying.

The 82-year-old pope lived through years of right-wing dictatorship in his native Argentina.

Ahead of the EU elections in May, Salvini reached out in his bid for a "sovereignist" alliance to France's far-right party leader Marine Le Pen and Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

Far-right parties performed strongly in those polls.

"Sovereignty must be defended, but relations with other countries, with the European community must also be protected and promoted," the pope said.

He did not mention Salvini or any other specific cases in Europe.

"Sovereignism is an exaggeration that always ends badly: it leads to war".

Salvini called on Thursday for a snap election in Italy, after falling out with the populist M5S party, his partners in the current coalition government.



Pelosi slams US treatment of migrants

REUTERS, Guatemala City

House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi criticised US treatment of migrants during a visit to Guatemala, and raised doubts about whether the Central American country could cope with a migration deal agreed with the Trump administration.

Pelosi, a Democrat, was visiting Central America on Thursday with a bipartisan congressional delegation just as the region was coming under pressure from US President Donald Trump to do more to stop migrants reaching the United States.

Under the threat of economic sanctions, Guatemala late last month struck a deal with Trump to make the country a so-called "safe third country." The accord will require migrants to seek asylum in Guatemala rather than in



the United States.

Critics question whether Guatemala, which suffers from high levels of poverty and violence, has the resources to handle a potential surge in asylum applications.

Asked whether Guatemala would be able to handle the agreement, Pelosi told a news conference she wanted to know more about what the safe third country deal entailed, and described it as a "very difficult challenge."

Pelosi and the congressional delegation will also travel to El Salvador and Honduras, after which they are scheduled to visit US detention centers in McAllen, Texas.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Marine heatwaves kill coral instantly

AFP, Sydney

Marine heatwaves are killing coral reefs far more quickly than previously believed, according to a new study released yesterday.

Scientists have known that rising sea temperatures blamed on global warming can severely damage reefs through a process of "bleaching," where the high temperatures kill the colourful algae covering and nourishing coral.

Repeated "bleaching events", such as ones which hit Australia's Great Barrier Reef in 2016 and 2017, can eventually kill the coral in a process which takes months or years.

If sea temperatures ease, bleached corals are able to regenerate.

But the new study found that severe marine heatwaves can actually degrade the skeletal structure of the coral, potentially killing the organisms in a matter of days or weeks.

"The severity of these heatwave events is beyond the bleaching process, it's actually a point where the coral animal itself is dying," said Tracy Ainsworth, a co-author of the study from the University of New South Wales.

The study, which also involved researchers from the University of Newcastle in Britain and Australia's James Cook University used CT scans of coral reefs to monitor the impact of extreme temperatures.

Moscow says US backed opposition protests

Summons representative of US embassy

AFP, Moscow

Moscow yesterday summoned a representative of the US embassy over what it said were calls to take part in opposition protests, despite US warnings to stay away from the rallies.

The US and Europe have criticised Russia's crackdown on a series of protests for fair local elections. The rallies have seen thousands arrested and police hitting demonstrators with batons.

Last week the US embassy issued a "demonstration alert" on its website ahead of a protest today, giving the time and location of the march along with warnings to "avoid the area" and "avoid demonstrations".

But the Russian foreign ministry said in a statement yesterday that it considered the posting of a map showing the location of a Moscow rally a "call to participate... which is an attempt to intervene in the affairs of our country".

It added that it had summoned a US

diplomat over the issue.

Moscow earlier criticised the German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle for what it said were calls to take part in the rally.

The crackdown on the protests is the largest since demonstrations against Vladimir Putin's 2012 return to the Kremlin that Moscow also said were encouraged by the US.

Over the past few weeks, thousands of Russians have taken part in protests against the exclusion of popular opposition politicians from Moscow's parliament elections in September.

The authorities have pushed back, opening a probe into "mass unrest" and making nearly 2,400 arrests at two recent unauthorised rallies.

A further, authorised protest is planned for today.

Meanwhile, Russia on Thursday froze the assets of an anti-corruption group that major opposition figure Alexei Navalny set up to expose the questionable wealth of top government officials, his spokeswoman said.

Man stabs 4 people at Japanese hospital

REUTERS, Tokyo

A knife-wielding man stabbed three nurses and a policeman at a hospital in western Japan yesterday, police said, the latest stabbing incident in the country.

The nurses were stabbed in the chest and abdomen but their wounds were not life threatening, police said, adding that a policeman was also wounded in his left arm.

Police arrested a 45-year-old male patient who had stabbed one nurse and ran away. The two other nurses and policeman were wounded as they tried to apprehend the man, police said.

Violent crime is rare in Japan where most incidents involve knives or swords due to the country's strict gun laws.

In May, a knife-wielding man slashed at a group of schoolgirls at a bus stop, killing one girl and wounding 16 others in an incident that shocked the nation.

The mass stabbing in the town of Kawasaki, south of the Japanese capital, was a rare attack in a country with one of the lowest rates of violent crime in the developed world, and there was no immediate detail on the suspect's motive.

Local media reported that the suspected attacker, a man in his 50s, had also died of his wounds after turning the knife on himself. Emergency services said at least 16 others had been injured in the attack.