

NEWSIN
brief

Israeli warplanes
hit 3 Gaza targets

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli warplanes struck at least three targets in the Gaza Strip early yesterday but caused no apparent casualties, a Palestinian security source said. The strikes, which came after Palestinians fired a rocket from the territory at southern Israel late Friday, hit a Hamas observation post in Beit Hanoun, in the northern Gaza Strip, an unidentified target near Gaza City and open ground near Deir El Balah in the central part of the territory, the source said.

Muslim insurgents
meet Thai govt

REUTERS, Bangkok

The main group fighting an insurgency in Thailand's largely Muslim south said it had held its first meeting with officials from the new Thai government and had set out demands as a condition for any formal peace talks. The insurgency in the Malay-speaking region of the predominantly Buddhist country has killed some 7,000 people over the past 15 years and has flared on and off for decades.

Flights affected as
rain batters Kolkata

NDTV ONLINE

Flights were affected and waterlogging led to traffic jams in several parts of Kolkata this morning as heavy rains battered the city for a second consecutive day. Air traffic was affected for a few hours at the Kolkata airport due to low visibility, said an official. The weather office has predicted an intense spell of rain for the next four hours in the state capital and several other districts of Bengal amid a cyclonic circulation developing over Bangladesh.



US cuts \$440m
financial aid to
Pakistan

Says report

NDTV ONLINE

The United States slashed the aid to Pakistan by nearly \$440 million, bringing down its commitment to just \$4.1 billion. The aid was disbursed under Pakistan Enhanced Partnership Agreement (PEPA) 2010, reported Express Tribune. The US apprised Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan about its decision to cut aid three weeks before his planned visit to Washington. Notably, the PEPA was signed in September 2010 to make operational the Kerry Lugar Berman (KLB) Act that was passed by the US Congress in October 2009 to disburse \$7.5 billion to Pakistan over a period of 5 years.

Last year in September, the United States' military cancelled the financial aid worth \$300 million to Pakistan due to the growing concerns regarding Islamabad's failure to tackle terrorism.

In January that year, Pentagon had cut \$1 billion worth financial aid to Pakistan for its failure to crack down on the Haqqani terror outfit.

During his meeting with Pak PM Imran Khan, last month, US President Donald Trump strongly criticised Islamabad for its behaviour.

"We were paying \$1.3 billion to Pakistan as aid, for many years. The problem was...Pakistan was not doing anything for us. They were really subversive. They were going against us. I ended that about a year and a half ago, the \$1.3 billion (aid)," Trump said.



A Syrian carries the body of a child at the site of a reported regime air strike on the village of Deir Sharqi on the eastern outskirts of Maaret al-Numan in Syria's northern province of Idlib, yesterday. Regime air strikes killed one woman and six of her children in northwest Syria, a war monitor said.

PHOTO:
AFP

OFFENSIVE ON REBEL-HELD NORTHWEST

Civilian death toll
mounts in Syria

REUTERS, Beirut

Air strikes have killed more than two dozen civilians including 11 children in rebel-held northwestern Syria in the last two days in an escalation of a Russian-backed offensive, a war monitor and local activists said yesterday.

An air strike in the village of Deir killed seven people, mostly children, yesterday morning, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. On Friday, air strikes in the village of al-Has killed 13 people. The dead included a pregnant woman and her unborn baby, local activists and the Observatory said.

They had been seeking shelter after fleeing another area. Rami Abdulrahman, director of the Observatory said the government's aim appeared to be force civilians to flee from areas that had been relatively unscathed in a military escalation that began in late April.

"They are bombing the towns and their outskirts to push people to flee," he said.

Ahmad al-Dbis, safety and security manager for the US-based Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM), which supports medical facilities in the northwest, said the bombardment had widened into populated areas where there were no military positions.

Dbis said the number of civilians killed by government or Russian forces stood at more than 730 since late April. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has said more than 500 civilians have died in hostilities.

Russia and Syria have said their forces are not targeting civilians and are instead aimed at militants including the Nusra Front, a jihadist group known today as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Sudanese celebrate
transition to civilian rule

AFP, Khartoum

Rapturous crowds filled the streets of Khartoum yesterday as Sudan's generals and protest leaders signed a historic deal paving the way to civilian rule.

Thousands of cheering people gathered around the Friendship Hall next to the Nile, where the documents that will govern Sudan's 39-month transition were signed.

"This is the biggest celebration I have ever seen in my country. We have a new Sudan," said Saba Mohammed, a veiled 37-year woman, waving a small plastic flag.

Minutes earlier, the deal was signed by Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, deputy chief of the military council, and Ahmed al-Rabie, representing the Alliance for Freedom and Change protest umbrella.

Heads of state, prime ministers and dignitaries from several countries -- including Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Egypt's premier Mustafa Madbuli -- attended the ceremony.

The constitutional declaration formalises the creation of a transition administration that will be guided by an

11-member sovereign council, comprised of six civilians and five military figures.

The agreement brought an end to nearly eight months of upheaval that saw masses mobilise against president Omar al-Bashir, who was ousted in April after 30 years in power.

Thousands of people had arrived on trains from Sudan's provinces to take part in the celebrations, which will include a huge gathering in Khartoum's main gardens.

"We hope Sudan can move forward now, we want to be proud of our country," said Saida Khalifa as she got off the train after an all-night ride from Atbara, the town where the protests started in December last year.

"The guns must go silent now and we must pull the country out of this mess to gain peace and freedom," she said.

The composition of the civilian-majority transition ruling council is to be announced today.

That follows the naming on Thursday of former senior UN official Abdalla Hamdok, a veteran economist, as transitional prime minister.



White House signals progress
on peace deal with Taliban

AFP, Washington

The White House signaled progress Friday in preparations for a peace deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan, saying that discussions between President Donald Trump and top advisors went "very well."

Trump met at his Bedminster, New Jersey golf course with national security advisors including Defense Secretary Mark Esper, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, the White House said.

Also present were national security point man John Bolton and the US special envoy for the talks with the Taliban, Zalmay Khalilzad.

"Discussions centered around our ongoing negotiations and eventual peace and reconciliation agreement with the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan. The meeting went very well, and negotiations are proceeding," deputy press secretary Hogan Gidley said in a statement.

Trump added on Twitter: "Just completed a very good meeting on Afghanistan. Many on the opposite side of this 19 year war, and us, are looking to make a deal -- if

possible!"

Expectations are rising for a deal in which the United States would start withdrawing its 14,000 soldiers from Afghanistan after a two-decade war that has turned into a stalemate.

Washington is keen to end its involvement in Afghanistan, where it has spent more than \$1 trillion and Trump has said since the start of his presidency that he wants troops out.

In return, the Taliban would commit to various security guarantees, including that the Islamist hardliners who long harbored al-Qaeda would not allow Afghanistan to become a jihadist safe haven.

A US-Taliban agreement would not in itself bring Afghanistan's war to an end, as the insurgents would still need to make a deal with the US-backed Kabul government.

Even as the United States and Taliban claim progress in talks, little has changed for Afghans on the ground. A UN tally found last year was the deadliest on record, with at least 3,804 civilian deaths caused by the war -- including 927 children.



Houthi drone attacks
Saudi Arabia oilfield

Causes 'limited' gas fire

REUTERS, Dubai

A drone attack launched by Yemen's Houthi group on an oil field in eastern Saudi Arabia yesterday caused a "limited" fire at a gas plant but had no impact on oil production, state-run oil company Saudi Aramco said.

A Houthi military spokesman said earlier that the group had targeted the Shaybah oil field with 10 drones, in what he said was the "biggest attack in the depths" of the kingdom, the world's top oil exporter, by the Iran-aligned group.

But a Saudi industry source told Reuters the attack most probably involved only three drones and caused no casualties. Shayba is more than 1,000 km away from Houthi-controlled territory in northwestern Yemen.

The field is located near the border with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia's main partner in the Sunni Arab coalition which has been battling the Houthis since 2015 in order to restore Yemen's ousted pro-Saudi government.

That government was driven from the capital Sanaa by the Houthis in late 2014. The war has been in military stalemate for years.

The Houthis have stepped up cross-border missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia in recent months.

Riyadh has accused Tehran of supplying the Houthis with the missiles and drones used in attacks on Saudi cities, a charge both Iran and the group reject. The Houthis say they manufacture their own weapons and are fighting a corrupt system.

US's N Korea
envoy to visit
Japan, South

REUTERS, Washington

The US special envoy for North Korea will travel to Japan and South Korea next week to coordinate efforts to secure the denuclearization of North Korea, the State Department said on Friday.

Stephen Biegun will be in Japan from Monday to Tuesday and in Seoul from Tuesday to Thursday, a State Department statement said.

News of Biegun's trip came after US President Donald Trump said last Saturday that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un had told him he was ready to resume stalled denuclearization talks with the United States and would stop recent missile testing as soon as US-South Korea military exercises that have been held this month end.

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