

NEWS IN brief

Kabul wedding blast toll hits 80

AFP, Kabul

The death toll from an Islamic State attack on a Kabul wedding at the weekend has reached at least 80, an official said yesterday, as the Afghan capital still reels from the deadliest blast in more than a year. A suicide bomber targeted a packed Afghan wedding hall in west Kabul Saturday as celebrations were in full swing. Authorities said the initial death toll was at least 63, with more than 180 people wounded.

Saudi eases travel curbs on women

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia on Tuesday began implementing a landmark reform allowing women over the age of 21 to receive passports and travel abroad without permission from a male "guardian", authorities said. The reform, announced earlier this month, weakens the restrictive guardianship system that has long been a symbol of repression against women. In other changes unveiled earlier this month, Saudi women were also granted the right to officially register childbirth, marriage or divorce and to be recognised as a guardian to children who are minors -- same as men.

Australia to join US in Gulf mission

AFP, Sydney

Australia will join the US-led mission to protect shipping through the Strait of Hormuz amid heightened tensions with Iran, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced yesterday. Morrison said Australia would send a "modest" contribution -- including a frigate, a P8 maritime surveillance aircraft and support staff -- to the mission, which will also involve British and Bahraini forces.



Members of the Syrian Civil Defence, also known as the "White Helmets", carry away in a blanket the body of a victim following a reported air strike on a makeshift clinic in the area of Tallmannis in Syria's northern Idlib province, yesterday. Syria government and Russian forces stepped up heavy bombardment on the rebel-held northwest since late April, killing more than 880 civilians.

PHOTO: AFP

G7 should be G8
Trump backs Russia's return in the club of world powers

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump expressed support Tuesday for Russia's return to the G8, saying it would be "much more appropriate" for Moscow to be in the club of world powers. "I could certainly" support that, he told reporters at the White House, just days before a G7 summit -- minus Russia -- in Biarritz, France.

"It's much more appropriate to have Russia in. It should be the G8, because a lot of the things we talk about have to do with Russia," he said.

Russia was kicked out of the old G8 format after the 2014 invasion and annexation of Crimea, in Ukraine. Putin has also been accused of orchestrating murders of opponents in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, as well as attempting to manipulate the 2016 US election that saw Trump win a surprise victory.

But Trump said the reason Russia was kicked out was because his predecessor Barack Obama was "outsmarted" by Putin. "I guess President Obama, because Putin outsmarted him, President Obama thought it wasn't a good thing to have Russia in. So he wanted Russia out," Trump said.

"So I could certainly see it being the G8 again and if someone would make that motion, I would be disposed to think about it very favorably," he said.

G7 consists of Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States. At the G7 in Quebec last year, Trump exploded proceedings and left in a fury, engaging in personal insults over trade with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and refusing to sign the collective final statement. The French hosts hope they can better manage Trump this time. In particular, a French diplomat told reporters, the traditional importance of the final communique will be de-emphasized.

Trump scraps visit after Danes say Greenland not for sale

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump Tuesday postponed a planned visit to Denmark after Danish officials insisted its autonomous territory of Greenland was not for sale.

Trump's decision confirms just how interested he was in purchasing Greenland, an idea initially dismissed as a joke by some, but which the White House later insisted had a serious purpose because of its strategic location.

"Based on Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's comments, that she would have no interest in discussing the purchase of Greenland, I will be postponing our meeting scheduled in two weeks for another time," Trump tweeted.

During a Sunday visit to Greenland -- the largest island on Earth -- Frederiksen called Trump's idea "absurd."

"The Prime Minister was able to save a great deal of expense and effort for both the United States and Denmark by being so direct," Trump tweeted.

"I thank her for that and look forward to

rescheduling sometime in the future!"

The president's latest Greenland comments sparked a strong reaction from both sides of the political aisle in Denmark.

"Reality transcends imagination... this man is unpredictable," said Morten Ostergaard of the Social Liberal Party, which is part of the ruling coalition.

"For no reason Trump assumes that (an autonomous) part of our country is for sale. Then insultingly cancels visit that everybody was preparing for," tweeted Rasmus Jarlov, a member of the opposition Conservative Party.

"Are parts of the US for sale? Alaska? Please show more respect."

Denmark colonized the 772,000 square-mile (two-million square-kilometer) island in the 18th century. It is home to around 57,000 people, most of the indigenous Inuit community.

Greenland's ministry of foreign affairs insisted Friday the island was ready to talk business, but was not for sale.



PLANNED SALE OF 66 US F-16 FIGHTER JETS TO TAIWAN

China threatens sanctions

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday blasted a huge planned US arms shipment to self-ruled Taiwan and threatened to sanction firms involved in the sale of F-16 fighter jets.

The US State Department on Tuesday approved the transfer of 66 Lockheed Martin-built F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan in a US\$8 billion deal, following another huge military hardware sale agreed just last month.

The deals come as ties between Washington and Beijing are already strained by a punitive multi-billion dollar trade war.

"China will take all necessary measures to safeguard our interests including imposing sanctions on the US companies participating in this arms sale to Taiwan," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told a news briefing.

The sale "is a serious interference in our internal affairs and undermines our sovereignty and security interests", he said. China views Taiwan as part of its territory and has vowed to one day seize it, by force if necessary.

It bristles at any countries that might lend Taiwan diplomatic support or legitimacy.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement Tuesday that President Donald Trump had approved the proposed sale after Congress was notified last week.

The F-16s "are deeply consistent with the arrangements,



the historical relationship between the United States and China", Pompeo said.

China said it had lodged diplomatic protests against the deal and yesterday urged the US to "cancel this arms sale plan at once, stop selling arms to Taiwan and cut its military contact with Taiwan".

Taiwan's plan to upgrade its air defences comes amid increasing Chinese military incursions into its air space and a spokesman for the president said the jets would "substantially enhance our air defence capabilities".

Taiwan currently has a fleet of old-model F-16s purchased in 1992, which have undergone several crucial upgrades.

Manufacturer Lockheed Martin says the newest version, known as the F-16 Block 70/72, includes many avionics, weapons and radar technologies not in existence when earlier models were created.

It is structurally stronger, the company says, so that it "can fly and fight to 2070 and beyond".

The approval of the sale comes as Washington and Beijing face off in tough trade negotiations that economists say are hurting both of the superpowers, as well as dragging down the global economy.

In a statement, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, which oversees US foreign military sales, said Taiwan's purchase of the F-16s "will not alter the basic military balance in the region".

Sudan swears in ruling council

AFP, Khartoum

Sudan took further steps in its transition towards civilian rule yesterday with the swearing in of a new sovereign council, to be followed by the appointment of a prime minister.

The body replaces the Transitional Military Council (TMC) that took charge after months of deadly street protests brought down longtime ruler Omar al-Bashir in April.

As a result of Wednesday's move, it was the first time that Sudan was not under full military rule since Bashir's coup d'etat in 1989.

The first steps of the transition after the mass celebrations that marked the August 17 adoption of a transitional constitution proved difficult however.

The names of the joint civilian-military sovereign council's 11 members were eventually announced late Tuesday after differences within the opposition camp held up the process for two days.

General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who already headed the TMC, was sworn in as the chairman of the new sovereign council in the morning.

He will be Sudan's head of state for the first 21 months of the 39-month transition period, until a civilian takes over for the remainder.

The council's 10 other members were sworn shortly afterwards and Abdalla Hamdok, who was chosen by the opposition last week to be prime minister, was to be formally appointed later Wednesday.



Protesters hold posters as they take part in a silent rally at Yuen Long MTR station in Hong Kong, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Record number of fires ravage Brazil rainforest in 2019

Nearly 73,000 incidents recorded; deforestation blamed

AFP, Sao Paulo

The number of forest fires in Brazil surged in the first eight months of 2019, official data show, as President Jair Bolsonaro faces growing criticism over rampant destruction of the Amazon.

Nearly 73,000 fires were recorded between January and August, compared with 39,759 in all of 2018, the embattled National Institute for Space Research (INPE) said late Monday.

That is the highest number of forest fires for any year since 2013 and follows two years of declines.

"What we are seeing is a consequence of the increase in deforestation seen in recent figures," said Ricardo Mello of WWF's Amazon Program.

Forest fires tend to intensify during the

dry season, which usually ends in late October or early November, as land is cleared to make way for crops or grazing.

The INPE figures show fires have been concentrated in states occupying the Amazon. Thick smoke has blanketed several cities in recent days and even caused a commercial flight to be diverted.

The data comes as Bolsonaro faces growing criticism over his anti-environment rhetoric, which activists blame for emboldening loggers, miners and farmers in the Amazon. Norway on Thursday joined Germany in halting Amazon protection subsidies, accusing Brazil of turning its back on the fight against deforestation.

The governors of nine states spanning the Amazon also published a statement on Sunday saying they would negotiate directly with the Amazon Fund contributors.



Indonesia deploys more troops after Papua unrest

AFP, Manokwari

Indonesia's Papua was hit by fresh unrest yesterday as more than 1,000 security personnel were sent to the restive region after violent protests that saw buildings torched and street battles between police and demonstrators.

Jakarta has called for calm in its easternmost territory -- where an insurgency against Indonesian rule has simmered for decades -- following riots triggered by the detention of dozens of Papuan students in Java at the weekend.

Yesterday, about 1,000 people protested in the streets of Timika city, where an AFP reporter saw demonstrators throw rocks at the local parliament building and try to tear down its fence.

The crowd, which also reportedly pelted shops and homes with rocks, dispersed as riot police fired warning shots.

Indonesian media reported police arrested 45 people, including some they accused of masterminding the protests and damaging buildings. Hundreds also marched through the streets of Sorong city, and hoisted the banned Papuan flag in the town of Fakfak on the western end of the island, which is divided between Indonesia and the nation of Papua New Guinea.

Police fired tear gas to disperse crowds in Fakfak after they set fire to a market and destroyed ATMs and shops, local media reported.

Several cities in resource-rich Papua were brought to a standstill this week, including Manokwari where businesses and the local parliament building were set ablaze by angry demonstrators.

Authorities are hunting for more than 250 inmates who had escaped from a prison in Sorong that was torched during the riots.

Everest region bans single-use plastic

Single-use plastics have been banned in the Everest region to reduce the vast amounts of waste left by trekkers and mountaineers, Nepali authorities said. In addition to seeing a record number of climbers this year, a government-led cleaning initiative on Everest -- the world's highest mountain -- also collected over 10 tonnes of trash. The new ban in Khumbu Pasang Lhamu rural municipality, home to Mount Everest and several other snow-capped mountains, covers all plastic of less than 30 microns in thickness as well as drinks in plastic bottles, and will be effective from January. The local body will work with trekking companies, airlines and the Nepal Mountaineering Association to enforce the ban, though no penalty has yet been decided for violation.

Australia's Cardinal Pell loses child sex abuse appeal

Disgraced Cardinal George Pell lost his appeal against child sex abuse convictions yesterday, prompting relief from victims who fought to bring one of the Catholic Church's most powerful men to justice. A former Vatican treasurer, Pell had been trying to overturn the verdicts and six-year sentence for sexually assaulting two 13-year-old choirboys at a Melbourne cathedral in the 1990s. Following the ruling, Pell's lawyer said they were mulling second and final appeal. During Pell's trial, the Vatican gradually removed him from top Church bodies with little explanation. Shortly after his conviction, Pell was removed from the so-called C9 Council of Cardinals that are effectively the Pope's cabinet and inner circle of advisers. The Vatican later dropped him as the church's finance chief and launched its own probe in February.

2,359 tigers killed and trafficked since 2000



More than 2,300 endangered tigers have been killed and illegally trafficked since the turn of the century, according to a report published Tuesday. With an average of more than 120 illegally trafficked tigers seized each year -- which amounts to over two each week -- since year 2000, conservation group Traffic warned there was little sign of respite for the species. In 1900, more than 100,000 tigers were estimated to roam the planet. But that fell to a record low of 3,200 in 2010. Since then, population numbers have inched upwards, but there are still estimated to be fewer than 3,900 tigers left in the wild. It found that an estimated total of 2,359 individual tigers were seized from 2000 to 2018 across 32 countries and territories.

SOURCE: AFP