

NEWSIN brief

Fedor reaches ISS

AFP, Moscow
The unmanned Soyuz MS-14 spacecraft carrying Russia's first humanoid robot to be sent into orbit successfully docked at the International Space Station yesterday, following a failed attempt over the weekend, Moscow's space agency said. The lifelike robot called Fedor copies human movements and can help astronauts carry out tasks remotely. Fedor is due to stay on the ISS until September 7, learning to assist astronauts there.

US, Taliban push for deal at Doha talks

AFP, Doha
US and Taliban negotiators held talks in Doha on Monday as potentially decisive dialogue to enable Washington to drawdown its deployment to Afghanistan stretched into the night. Dialogue was expected to resume for the fifth day yesterday to finalise key points. The four pillars of any deal are expected to be foreign troop withdrawal, a ceasefire, counter-terror guarantees, and intra-Afghan dialogue.

Australian arrested in China for 'espionage'

AFP, Sydney
An Australian pro-democracy academic held for seven months in China has been formally arrested for spying, Foreign Minister Marise Payne said yesterday as she demanded Beijing uphold "basic standards" of justice. Chinese-born Yang Hengjun -- a former official turned author -- had been detained after returning to China from the United States in January. Now in his 50s, he had used popular blog and social media posts to criticise Beijing's authoritarian government. He has a following of more than 125,000 on Twitter alone.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan sit inside an air plane as they visit the MAKS-2019 International Aviation and Space Salon opening day in Zhukovsky outside Moscow, yesterday. Erdogan was in Russia yesterday to talk about Syria and other issues.

PHOTO: AFP

HK can handle crisis itself: Lam

Vows to build platform for dialogue; China slams G7

REUTERS, Hong Kong
Violence in Hong Kong's anti-government protests is becoming more serious but the government is confident it can handle the crisis itself, the embattled leader of the former British colony said yesterday.
Carrie Lam was speaking in public for the first time since demonstrations escalated on Sunday, when police fired water cannon and volleys of tear gas in running battles with protesters who threw bricks and petrol bombs.
The Chinese-ruled city is grappling with its biggest political crisis since its handover to Beijing in 1997 and Communist Party authorities have sent a clear warning that forceful intervention is possible to quell the violence.
Hong Kong's Beijing-backed leader said she would not give up on building a platform for dialogue, although the time was not right to set up an independent inquiry into the crisis, one of the cornerstone demands of protesters.
More demonstrations are planned over coming days and weeks, posing a direct challenge to authorities in Beijing, who are eager to quell the unrest ahead of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China on Oct 1.
Beijing warned again yesterday against foreign governments interfering in the Hong Kong protests, after the G7 called for violence to be avoided.
Foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said Beijing was "strongly dissatisfied and resolutely opposed" to the G7 "making thoughtless remarks and gesticulating" about Hong Kong matters.

British opposition parties unite to force Brexit delay

REUTERS, London/Brussels
Opposition parties said they would try to pass a law which would force Prime Minister Boris Johnson to seek a delay to Britain's departure from the European Union and prevent a potentially chaotic no-deal exit at the end of October.
UK is heading towards a constitutional crisis at home and a showdown with the EU as Johnson has pledged to leave the bloc in 66 days without a deal unless Brussels agrees to renegotiate the Brexit divorce.
Parliament returns from its summer break next week and is preparing for a battle with Johnson, who has vowed to take Britain out of the European Union at the end of October with or without an exit agreement.
Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn hosted talks with opposition parties yesterday where they agreed that passing a law to force the government to seek a delay to Britain's EU departure would probably have the most support.
"We are going to come together and do

the right thing by our country," said Anna Soubry, leader of The Independent Group for Change party. "We are up against a prime minister who has no mandate for this and I think he has no regard for parliament."
The opposition parties are seeking to repeat what they did earlier this year when lawmakers seized control of the parliamentary agenda to pass a law forcing Johnson's predecessor Theresa May to seek an extension to Britain's EU membership.
They also managed to change legislation to require parliament to be sitting for several days in September and October, making it harder for Johnson to shut down parliament to pursue a no-deal.
Britain is on course for a no-deal exit on Oct 31 unless parliament can stop it or a new deal is reached with the EU.
Votes in parliament have shown there is majority support for measures to block or hinder a no-deal exit. But any majority would be unstable, made up of lawmakers from different parties that are ideologically opposed, except when it comes to stopping a disorderly Brexit.



Lift sanctions for talks

Says Rouhani after Trump says US is open for talks

REUTERS, Dubai
Iran will not talk to the United States until all sanctions imposed on Tehran are lifted, President Hassan Rouhani said yesterday, a day after President Donald Trump said he would meet his Iranian counterpart to try to end a nuclear standoff.
Trump said on Monday he would meet Iran's president under the right circumstances to end a confrontation that began when Washington pulled out of Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal with six powers and reimposed sanctions on the country. Trump also said talks were under way to see how countries could open credit lines to keep Iran's economy afloat.
Rouhani said Iran was always ready to hold talks. "But first the US should act by lifting all illegal, unjust and unfair sanctions imposed on Iran," he said in a speech broadcast live on state TV.
Speaking at a G7 summit in the French resort of Biarritz, Trump ruled out lifting economic sanctions to compensate for losses suffered by Iran.
"Washington has the key for positive change ... So take the first step ... Without this step, this lock will not be unlocked," Rouhani said.
European parties to the deal have struggled to calm the deepening confrontation between Iran and the United States since Trump pulled Washington out last year.
French President Emmanuel Macron has led efforts to

defuse tensions and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif flew in to the Biarritz G7 meeting unexpectedly on Sunday for side talks with French officials.
Since ditching the deal last year, Trump has pursued a policy of "maximum pressure" to try to force Iran into broader talks to restrict its ballistic missile program and end its support for proxy forces around the Middle East.
"Iran does not seek tension with the world. We want security in the Middle East. We want better and friendly ties with other countries," said Rouhani.
Iran, which has slowly been breaching the nuclear deal in retaliation for US sanctions, has threatened further violations in early September unless it receives sanctions relief.
"We will continue to scale back our commitments under the 2015 deal if our interests are not guaranteed," said Rouhani.
The 2015 deal between Iran and six world powers, reached under former US President Barack Obama, aimed to curb Iran's disputed uranium enrichment program in exchange for the lifting of many international sanctions on Tehran.
Iran has ruled out talks with US over its military capabilities, particularly its ballistic missile program that it says is defensive. It denies the missiles are capable of being tipped with nuclear warheads and says its nuclear program is peaceful. Trump and Rouhani are both due to attend the United Nations General Assembly in September.



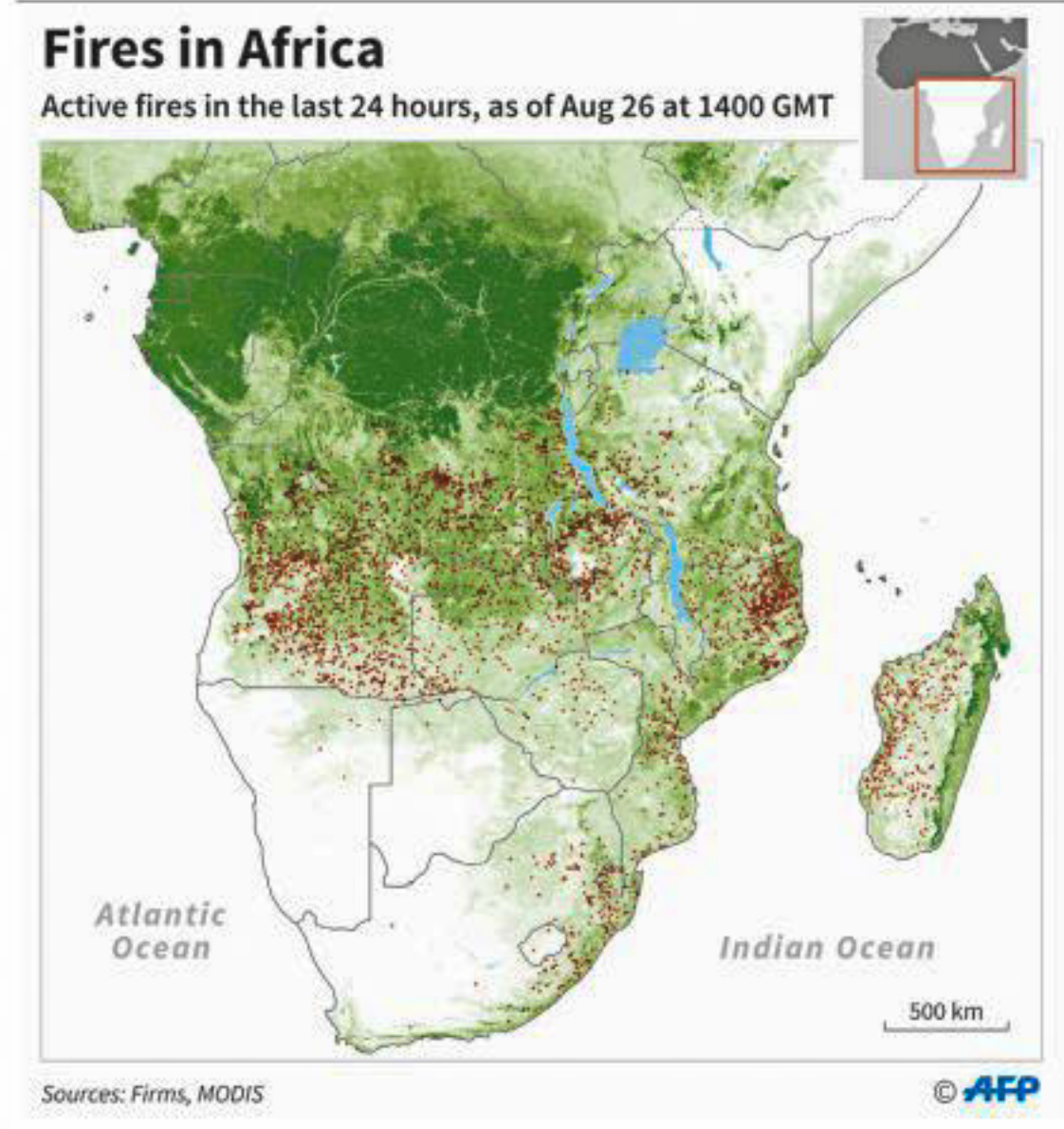
The sinking cities

Indonesia has said the country would be relocating its capital city, in part because it's sinking into the Java Sea. Jakarta is one of the fastest sinking cities in the world, according to the World Economic Forum, due to rising sea levels and the over-extraction of groundwater. But it isn't the only city in trouble. Here's a look at some others that are also at risk:
Houston: The US city has been sinking for decades and, like Jakarta, the over-extraction of groundwater is partly to blame. The Houston Chronicle reported that parts of Harris County, which contains Houston, have sunk between 10 and 12 feet since the 1920s, according to data from the US Geological Survey. Areas have continued to fall as much as 2 inches per year, an amount that can quickly add up.
Lagos: The city of Lagos sits on the coast of Nigeria, constructed partly on the mainland, partly on some nearby islands. Its geography makes Lagos especially prone to flooding, and the coastline has already been eroding. As sea levels rise due to global warming, the city is increasingly at risk. One study from 2012 revealed that, because Nigeria's coastline is so low, a sea level rise of just 1 to 3 meters "will have a catastrophic effect on the human activities in these regions."
Beijing: A study from 2016 showed that Beijing is sinking by as much as 4 inches in some areas per year. Researchers said the cause of the sinking was depleting groundwater, similar to the situation in Jakarta and Houston. Beijing, which is not a coastal city, relies heavily on groundwater as its main source of water. T

'Second green lung' on fire too

Raging African forest fires in spotlight after global outcry over Amazon

AFP, KINSHASA
In Nasa satellite images, forest fires in central Africa appear to burn alarmingly like a red chain from Gabon to Angola similar to the blazes in Brazil's Amazon that sparked global outcry.
At the G7 summit this week, French President Emmanuel Macron tweeted about the central Africa fires and said nations were examining a similar initiative to the one proposed to combat Brazil's blazes.
Macron's concern may be legitimate, but experts say central Africa's rainforest fires are often more seasonal and linked to traditional seasonal farming methods.
No doubt the region is key for the climate: The Congo Basin forest is commonly referred to as the "second green lung" of the planet after the Amazon.
The forests cover an area of 3.3 million square kilometres in several countries, including about a third in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the rest in Gabon, Congo, Cameroon and Central Africa.
Just like the Amazon, the forests of the Congo Basin absorb tens of thousands tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO2) in trees and peat marshes - seen by experts as a key way to combat climate change. They are also sanctuaries for endangered species.
But most of the fires shown on the Nasa maps of Africa are outside sensitive rainforest areas, analysts say, and drawing comparisons to the Amazon is also complex.



Angola's government urged caution, saying swift comparisons to the Amazon may lead to "misinformation of more reckless minds".
The fires were usual at the end of the dry season, the Angolan ministry of environment said.

Less publicised than the Amazon, the Congo Basin forests still face dangers.
"The forest burns in Africa but not for the same causes," said Tosi Mpanu Mpanu, an ambassador and climate negotiator for the DR Congo.
"In the Amazon, the forest burns mainly because of drought and climate change, but in central Africa, it is mainly due to agricultural techniques."
Many farmers use slash-and-burn farming to clear forest. In DR Congo, only nine percent of the population has access to electricity and many people use wood for cooking and energy.
DR Congo President Felix Tshisekedi has warned the rainforests are threatened if the country does not improve its hydro-electric capacity.
Deforestation is also a risk in Gabon and parts of the DR Congo, as well as damage from mining and oil projects.
Some countries are now implementing stricter environmental policies. Gabon, for example, has declared 13 national parks that make up 11 percent of its national territory.
DR Congo has declared a moratorium on new industrial logging licences but that has not stopped artisanal cutting, which industrial loggers can exploit.
"We need to protect the forests that are still largely intact and stop degradation," said Greenpeace's Verbelen. "The forests that are still intact remain an important buffer for future climate change."

BOLIVIA'S AMAZON FIRES

More than 9,500 sqkm destroyed

AFP, La Paz
Like his far-right rival President Jair Bolsonaro in neighboring Brazil, Bolivia's leftist leader Evo Morales is facing mounting fury from environmental groups over voracious wildfires in his own country.
While the Amazon blazes in Brazil have attracted worldwide attention, the blazes in Bolivia's forest and grassland have raged largely unchecked over the past month, devastating more than 9,500 square kilometres.
Morales, under fire for policies his critics say favor greater deforestation, suspended his re-election campaign Sunday to direct the government's response to the disaster, which now threatens the world's largest wetlands.
Bolivia is one of nine South American countries to share the Amazon rainforest.
Environmental groups blame the disaster on government land-clearing policies designed to expand the country's agricultural footprint.
"We are talking about a state policy that has been agreed

with the businessmen of eastern Bolivia to expand the area for intensive agriculture, GM soybeans, cane plantation and grazing land for livestock," said Leonardo Tamburini, head of the Center for Legal Studies and Social Research (CEJIS), a Bolivian NGO.
Environmentalists are outraged by a decree last month allowing farmers and ranchers to increase the area of forested land they can clear by controlled burning from five to 20 hectares, a policy they say has fueled the fires.
Farmers in eastern Bolivia traditionally raze grassland to improve the soil, but this year's burning season has seen a massive increase in the number of uncontrolled fires.
Tamburini said the Morales government has gone against its principles of being a protector of the Amazon, yielding instead to agribusiness interests.
Authorities say many of the 8,000 fires have been extinguished and presently there are about 1,500 fires raging.



DETENTION OF MIGRANT KIDS

20 US states sue Trump admin

AFP, Washington
A coalition of 20 US states announced on Monday they will sue Donald Trump's administration over its recent decision to remove legal limits on how long migrant children can be detained.
"With this rule, the Trump administration is paving the way for ICE to imprison innocent children for indefinite periods of time," Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey said in a statement.
The Department of Homeland Security last week said it was terminating the 1997 Flores Settlement Agreement, a legal ruling that said the government could hold migrant children in detention for no more than 20 days.
A new policy, to be implemented in less than 60 days, will allow children and their families to be detained for an unlimited time.
Human rights groups have also criticised the Trump administration's new rule and vowed to oppose it in court.

Northwest Syria clashes kill 51 fighters: report

Clashes between anti-government fighters and regime forces killed 51 combatants on both sides in northwestern Syria yesterday, a war monitor said. Hardline rebels and jihadists attacked loyalist positions in the south of Idlib, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. The attack was led by the al-Qaeda-linked Hurras al-Deen group and another jihadist faction Ansar al-Deen. The fighting has killed 23 regime forces and 20 opponents, including 13 jihadists, the Observatory said. In the southeast of the bastion, eight rebels were killed. Regime forces recaptured Khan Sheikhun last week. The town lies on a key highway running through Idlib province, and fully recapturing the artery would allow the government to reconnect Damascus to second city Aleppo.

J&J ordered to pay \$572m for aiding US opioid crisis

An Oklahoma judge on Monday ordered Johnson & Johnson to pay \$572.1 million to the state for its part in fueling an opioid epidemic by deceptively marketing addictive painkillers, a sum that was substantially less than investors had expected. The state's attorney general had filed the lawsuit, seeking \$1.7 billion to address the impact of the drug crisis on Oklahoma. It had been considered a bellwether for other litigation nationwide over the opioid epidemic. J&J said it would appeal the decision. Opioids were involved in almost 400,000 overdose deaths from 1999 to 2017, according to data. Roughly 2,500 lawsuits have been brought seeking to hold drugmakers responsible for opioid abuse nationwide.

Italy's 5-Star, opposition, clash over cabinet roles

Talks between Italy's ruling 5-Star Movement and the opposition Democratic Party (PD) to form a new coalition government are at risk of failure over who should become the next interior minister, a PD spokesman said yesterday. The anti-establishment 5-Star party and centre-left PD, traditional political enemies, are trying to forge a government after 5-Star's 14-month-old coalition with the right-wing League party broke down this month after months of fighting. The two parties are due to report back to President Sergio Mattarella today. If they have not sealed a deal by then, Mattarella will name a caretaker government and call early elections.
SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

