

NEWSIN brief

Six civilians killed in northwest Syria

AFP, Beirut

Regime and Russian fire has killed at least six civilians in northwestern Syria's Idlib province, a war monitor said yesterday, two weeks after Moscow declared a ceasefire in the jihadist-dominated region. On Friday, regime rocket fire on the towns of Maaret Al-Numan and Kafranbel in southern Idlib province killed five civilians including a child, a report said. A sixth civilian was killed in a Russian air strike in the rural west of the province, it added.

Snowden says would like French asylum

AFP, Paris

Whistleblower Edward Snowden, living in Russia since leaking a trove of classified documents showing the scope of post-9/11 US government surveillance, wants to claim asylum in France, according to an interview published yesterday. Recalling he had already applied for French asylum in 2013 under former president Francois Hollande, Snowden told France Inter radio he hoped President Emmanuel Macron would grant him that right.

Militant attacks kill 4 soldiers in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Four Pakistani soldiers were killed in two different militant attacks in northwestern tribal regions near the Afghan border, the military said yesterday. The incidents happened late Friday night in North Waziristan and Dir, where several military operations have been launched in recent years against homegrown and foreign militants. Separately, it said three soldiers guarding a fence on the border with Afghanistan were killed and another was injured "when terrorists from across the border opened fire on them in Dir town".



DEEPENING POLARISATION IN HONG KONG

An anti-government protester (centre L) fights with a pro-China supporter (centre R) inside a shopping mall in the Kowloon Bay district; a pro-China demonstrator confronts her rivals at the shopping mall; anti-China protesters gesture to rivals; police intervene during the fights; and cops detain a man after the clashes.

PHOTO: AFP



WEST BANK ANNEXATION PLAN

OIC to hold extraordinary meet today

REUTERS, Ankara

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) will hold an extraordinary meeting today to discuss Israel's announcement of its intention to annex areas of the West Bank, the Turkish foreign ministry said on Saturday.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Tuesday he would annex the Jordan Valley, a large swathe of the occupied West Bank that Israel captured in 1967 and which Palestinians want as part of a future state.

Middle Eastern nations and European powers have expressed alarm at the plan, which Netanyahu said he would implement if he wins a closely contested election next week.

Around 65,000 Palestinians and 11,000 Israeli settlers live in the Jordan Valley and northern Dead Sea area. The main Palestinian city is Jericho, with around 28 villages and smaller Bedouin communities.

Rivals fight on street, mall

AFP, Hong Kong

Fights erupted in Hong Kong yesterday with political rivals trading blows in a mall and Beijing supporters using Chinese flags to assault opponents on a street, deepening the city's polarisation after months of pro-democracy protests.

The once-stable international hub has been convulsed by weeks of huge, sometimes violent rallies calling for greater democratic freedoms and police accountability.

The movement is the biggest challenge to China's rule since the city was handed back by Britain in 1997 and shows no sign of ending, with city leaders and Beijing taking a hard line.

Fights have begun breaking out with increased frequency after pro-democracy supporters began holding impromptu singalongs of a popular protest anthem -- and as pro-Beijing supporters have held rival gatherings to sing China's national anthem.

In the district of Fortress Hill yesterday, a group of men, many waving Chinese flags and wearing blue t-shirts declaring "I love HK

police", attacked people perceived to be pro-democracy protesters.

Multiple videos posted online showed the group of men assaulting largely younger victims with flag poles -- and with punches and kicks -- as terrified onlookers ran away.

Fights later broke out between pro-China and pro-democracy supporters in Amoy Plaza, a shopping centre on the other side of the harbour.

Police break up scattered clashes between rival camps

Prominent activist Wong seeks Trump, US congress support

An AFP photographer at the scene said some two hundred people had gathered to wave Chinese flags and sing the national anthem. Violence erupted after pro-democracy supporters arrived on the scene with several people on both sides visibly bloodied and bruised.

Police with shields and helmets later rushed into the mall, ending the fights. Some young pro-democracy

supporters were seen being detained outside and inside the mall by police.

The South China Morning Post said fights also broke out between ideological rivals in a subway station.

Democracy protesters have accused police of taking sides, clamping down harder on their camp than violent government supporters -- accusations the force has strongly denied.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong on Friday urged US President Donald Trump to include a "human rights clause" in any trade agreement with China, and sought Washington's backing for the city's democracy movement.

The 22-year-old called on American politicians to pass a bill expressing support for the pro-democracy campaign during a speaking engagement in New York, a few hours after arriving in the United States.

Wong arrived in the US after visiting Germany as he seeks global support for Hong Kong's widening pro-democracy protests that have crippled parts of the Asian financial hub in recent months, including its airport.

Britain may need a second Brexit referendum: Cameron

REUTERS, London

Former British prime minister David Cameron, who took the decision in 2016 to hold a referendum on the country's membership of the European Union, said another vote may be needed to resolve the Brexit impasse.

In an interview with the Times published on Friday ahead of the launch of his memoirs, entitled "For the Record", Cameron said a no-deal Brexit would be "a bad outcome" which should not be pursued and said a second referendum remained an option.

"I don't think you can rule it out because we're stuck," said Cameron, who served as Conservative prime minister from 2010 to 2016 and campaigned in the referendum for Britain to remain in the EU.

"I'm not saying one will happen or should happen. I'm just saying that you can't rule things out right now because you've got to find some way of unblocking the blockage," said Cameron, in his first

interview since he resigned the day after Britons voted in the referendum by 52% to 48% to leave the EU.

Cameron said he worried "desperately" about what is going to happen next, but defended holding the referendum in 2016 as necessary to achieve a renegotiation of Britain's relationship with the EU.

Johnson says Britain must now leave the EU on Oct 31 whether or not he reaches an exit deal. But parliament passed a law last week over his objections ordering him to seek an extension if he fails to reach an agreement with the bloc.

In his interview, Cameron was critical of Johnson's decision to expel 21 Conservative lawmakers from the party for voting against the government as well as his move to shut down, or prorogue, parliament until mid-October. The decision to suspend parliament is now being challenged in the British courts.

"I didn't support either of those things," Cameron said.



Taliban delegation in Russia for talks

AFP, Moscow

A Taliban delegation held talks with Russian officials in Moscow after US negotiations with the Afghan insurgents collapsed, the Russian foreign ministry said yesterday.

"The Russian president's special representative for Afghanistan ... , Zamir Kabulov, hosted a Taliban delegation in Moscow," a ministry spokesman said, quoted by RIA Novosti state-funded news agency.

"The Russian side stressed the need to relaunch negotiations between the United States and the Taliban movement," the spokesman said.

"For their part, the Taliban confirmed their willingness to pursue dialogue with Washington," he added.

Until a week ago expectation had steadily mounted of a US-Taliban deal that would see the US drawdown of troop levels in Afghanistan and the Taliban offer security guarantees to keep extremist groups out.

But last Saturday, Trump revealed he had cancelled an unprecedented meeting between the Taliban and himself in the United States and declared the talks with the militants "dead".

With more than 13,000 US troops still in Afghanistan, Trump has been eager to end America's longest war, launched 18 years ago after the September 11 attacks.

But fears are now growing of increased violence with presidential elections set for September 28 in Afghanistan. The vote, the fourth since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, has already been delayed twice this year.



Swedish environment activist Greta Thunberg speaks at a climate protest outside the White House in Washington, DC, on Friday. Thunberg, 16, has spurred teenagers and students around the world to strike from school every Friday under the rallying cry "Fridays for future" to call on adults to act now to save the planet.

PHOTO: AFP

Tiananmen Square 'Tank Man' photographer dies

The photographer who snapped the defining image of China's Tiananmen Square crackdown -- a solitary man defiantly blocking the path of a column of tanks -- has died in Indonesia, according to US officials. American authorities confirmed the death of 64-year-old Charlie Cole in Bali, where the Texan had been a long-time resident. Cole won the 1990 World Press Photo award for his picture of a man in a white shirt, carrying a shopping bag in each hand, striding out into the road the day after troops killed hundreds of pro-democracy protesters in the heart of Beijing. The man, whose identity remains unknown, stopped in front of a column of tanks and armoured vehicles, later climbing onto the vehicle to engage in a conversation with one of the tank crew as gunshots cracked in the air. "Tank Man" has become one of the defining images of the 20th century.

Zimbabwe bids farewell to Mugabe with state funeral

Zimbabwe gave former leader Robert Mugabe a state funeral yesterday with African leaders paying tribute to a man they lauded as a liberation hero but whose 37-year rule was defined by repression and economic turmoil. Mugabe died in Singapore last week aged 95. Former and current African leaders and officials from Cuba, Russia and China all praised Mugabe as a pan-African hero for his past as a colonial-era guerrilla leader. Mugabe's final burial at a national monument will only happen after a new mausoleum is built in about 30 days.

Actress Huffman gets 2 weeks jail in US college scandal



Actress Felicity Huffman was given two weeks jail time Friday for paying bribes to help her daughter gain admission to a prestigious American university, the first high-profile figure to be sentenced in a cheating scandal that rocked America. "Desperate Housewives" actress looked ashen-faced as she left the federal courthouse in Boston, Massachusetts, clutching the hand of her husband, actor William H Macy. Huffman, 56, was the first parent to be sentenced among 50 people indicted in an elaborate and wide-ranging scam to help children of the elite secure places in top US colleges. The Oscar nominee pleaded guilty in May during a tearful court appearance to paying \$15,000 to boost her daughter's SAT college entrance exam score.

SOURCE: AFP

'Nuclear Titanic' arrives in Arctic

AFP, Moscow

Russia's world first floating nuclear power station yesterday completed a 5,000-kilometre (3,100-mile) Arctic transfer to the country's far east, the Rosatom nuclear agency said.

"The Akademik Lomonosov floating nuclear plant arrived ... at Pevek, in the autonomous district of Chukotka," where it is to start operating by year end once connected to the local electricity grid, Rosatom said.

What will be the world's northernmost nuclear power plant left Murmansk in Russia's far north on August 23 after being loaded with combustible nuclear fuel.

The 21-ton, 144-metre (470 feet) long and 30-metre wide platform, which is designed to meet the energy needs of remote communities, was towed into Pevek by a clutch of vessels.

The station houses two 35-megawatt reactors, more in line with the power of nuclear-powered ice breakers than typical new generation nuclear plants boasting nearer 1,000 MW capacity.

The Akademik Lomonosov is to provide energy for around 100,000 people and also power oil platforms as Russia develops extraction of natural resources in a mineral-rich area whose eastern tip is a few dozen kilometres from



Alaska.

"It is perhaps a small step towards sustainable development in the Arctic -- but it's a giant step towards decarbonisation of remote, off-grid zones and a turning point in the global development of small modular nuclear plants," Rosatom head Alexei Likhachev said in a statement.

Environmental groups led by Greenpeace Russia have, however, long criticised the project warning it will have "serious consequences" for a fragile ecosystem in case of storms or accidents.

Greenpeace has warned of the risk of a "nuclear Titanic" and "Chernobyl on ice" and environmental fears were heightened following an August explosion at a nuclear research facility in Russia's far north which saw local radiation levels briefly spike.

The nuclear industry generally has been looking to reinvent itself in a depressed market, notably by producing small-scale, modular reactors with attractive price tags to win over potential new clients.

The industry has been cheered by strong demand notably for nuclear-powered submarines as well as ice-breakers and aircraft carriers, increasingly destined for isolated and infrastructure-poor regions.

Trump confirms death of Hamza bin Laden

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump yesterday confirmed that Hamza bin Laden, the son and designated heir of Al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden, was killed in a counter-terrorism operation along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

US media reported in late July and early August, citing intelligence officials, that the younger Bin Laden had been killed sometime in the last two years in an operation that involved the United States.

"Hamza bin Laden, the high-ranking al-Qaeda member and son of Osama bin Laden, was killed in a United States counterterrorism operation in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region," Trump said in a brief statement issued by the White House.

"The loss of Hamza bin Laden not only deprives Al-Qaeda of important leadership skills and the symbolic connection to his father, but undermines important operational activities of the group."

The statement did not specify the timing of the operation.

The 15th of Osama bin Laden's 20 children and a son of his third wife, Hamza, thought to be about 30 years old, was "emerging as a leader in the Al-Qaeda franchise," the State Department said in announcing a \$1 million bounty on his head in February 2019 -- perhaps after his actual demise.

Sometimes dubbed the "crown prince of jihad," he had put out audio and video messages calling for attacks on the United States and other countries, especially to avenge his father's killing by US forces in Pakistan in May 2011, the department said.

Documents seized in the raid on his father's house in Abbottabad, Pakistan suggested Hamza was being groomed as heir to the Al-Qaeda leadership.