

Assad again used chem weapons

Accuses Pompeo, vows action

AFP, New York

The United States vowed a response Thursday as it said it had confirmed another chemical weapons attack by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces, although there were no fatalities.

The Assad regime used chlorine on May 19 in Latakia province during its ferocious offensive to take back the last major rebel stronghold in nearby Idlib, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

"The United States will not allow these attacks to go unchallenged nor will we tolerate those who choose to conceal these atrocities," Pompeo told reporters in New York, where he was taking part in the UN General Assembly.

"The United States will continue to pressure the insidious Assad regime to end the violence directed at Syrian civilians and participate in the UN-led political process," he said.

He later took part in a meeting on Syria with his counterparts from France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, who said in a joint statement: "The use of any chemical weapons in Syria shall not be tolerated."

Four people were injured in the attack and, while there were no deaths, it marked the first known chemical attack in a year and raised fears of further use, said Jim Jeffrey, the US special representative for Syria.

No independent verification was available of the attack from northwestern Syria, where rights observers say that more than 1,000 people have been killed and 400,000 displaced since the government began its bombardment in April.



Students shout slogans during a "Fridays for Future" march calling for urgent measures to combat climate change, in New Delhi, India, yesterday. Tens of thousands, mostly young people, around the world marched yesterday marking another Friday of protests to save the planet from catastrophic effects global warming.

PHOTO: REUTERS

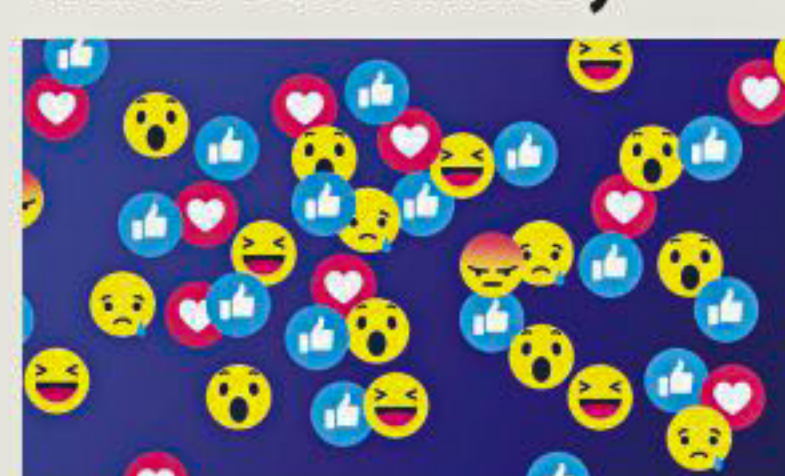
US plans to cap number of refugees for resettlement

The Trump administration said on Thursday it plans to allow only 18,000 refugees to resettle in the United States in the 2020 fiscal year, the lowest number in the history of the modern refugee program. In a move immediately decried by immigrant advocates as an affront to the nation's humanitarian commitments, the administration said it had to shift focus to processing a backlog of hundreds of thousands of asylum claims, most of which are filed by migrants from Central America crossing the US-Mexico border. Trump has made cutting immigration a centerpiece of his presidency. Of the proposed 18,000 spots, 4,000 would be reserved for Iraqis, 5,000 for those fleeing religious persecution and 1,500 for people from the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. That leaves 7,500, or roughly 40%, for all others.

Countries at UN commit to fighting fake news

Twenty countries, including France, Britain and India, signed an agreement at the UN on Thursday that aims to stop the spread of fake news online. The signatories, which also included South Africa and Canada, committed to promoting "independently reported, diverse and reliable" information on the internet, under an accord initiated by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a press freedom watchdog. "The emergence of a global digital space is shaking up the world of information, bringing with it progress as well as risks," said French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian. He added that misinformation online, especially during election campaigns, "undermined trust in democratic institutions." The agreement underlines the responsibility of internet providers to promote trustworthy content and pluralism to escape the current "information chaos," RSF said in a statement.

FB hides 'likes' in Australia trial to ease anxiety



Facebook has begun hiding the number of "likes" for posts in Australia, it said yesterday, a trial designed to ease social pressure that could be rolled out worldwide. Account holders across the country will also be blocked from viewing the number of reactions and video views on other people's posts from Friday, but will still be able to see how people respond to their own. "We don't want Facebook to feel like a competition," the company said in a statement. More than one billion people use Facebook worldwide, but the social media giant has come under pressure to combat the platform's impact on mental health. SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

All agreements off if Israel annexes WB

Palestinian president warns at UN

AFP, United Nations

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas told the United Nations Thursday he would terminate all signed agreements with Israel if it moved forward with plans announced by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to annex a key part of the West Bank.

occupation and any obligations therein will be terminated," said Abbas.

"And it is our right to defend our rights by all possible means, regardless of consequences, while remaining committed to international law and combating terrorism," he warned.

Abbas made a similar vow in July, but did not follow through.



In the early 1990s, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, then headed by Yasser Arafat, signed a number of peace agreements under US sponsorship.

The agreements were supposed to be for a transitional five-year period, but a longer-term deal proved elusive and a second bloody Palestinian intifada, or uprising, broke out in 2000.

Abbas, 84, also renewed a pledge to hold fresh parliamentary elections, which last took place in 2006.

Tension high after UN failure

AFP, New York

Tensions between the United States and Iran escalated yesterday as Washington deployed more troops to the Gulf and Tehran challenged its arch-enemy to provide evidence it attacked Saudi oil facilities.

The Pentagon announced it was sending 200 troops with Patriot missiles to bolster Saudi Arabia's defenses following the strikes this month that knocked out half of the Kingdom's oil production. The US Defense Department said the troop deployment would involve one battery of surface-to-air missiles, along with four Sentinel radars used for air and missile defense systems.

After a week of diplomacy at the United Nations where European leaders unsuccessfully tried to arrange a US-Iran meeting, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani demanded that Washington back up its accusations that Iran was behind the attacks.

"Those who make the allegations must provide the needed proof. What is your evidence?" he told reporters.

Tensions between Iran and the United States have soared since President Donald Trump pulled out of a 2015 international deal that was meant to lift

sanctions in exchange for a commitment from Tehran that it would cease trying to develop nuclear weapons.

The US, France, Germany, UK and Saudi Arabia have all, to varying degrees, blamed Iran for the brazen September 14 air strikes on the kingdom's Abqaiq plant and Khurais oil field.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo

US-IRAN ROW

- US to send 200 troops, Patriot missiles to Saudi Arabia
- Rouhani demands proof of Saudi oil heartland attack
- British-flagged tanker sets sail after Iran release

said the United States shared evidence on the attacks with other countries during the UN General Assembly.

Tehran has blasted the allegations as "ridiculous." It denies responsibility, and the attacks have been claimed by Yemen's Iranian-backed Huthi rebels.

In its latest move to ratchet up pressure, the United States banned senior

Iranian regime figures and their families from entering the United States. It came 24 hours after Washington announced it would punish Chinese companies that bought Iranian oil, on the last official day of Trump's participation at the UN General Assembly.

Meanwhile, the British-flagged oil tanker Stena Impero, which had been held off the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas for more than two months, set sail yesterday, the provincial maritime organisation said.

The ship's seizure was widely seen as a tit-for-tat move after authorities in the British overseas territory of Gibraltar detained an Iranian tanker on suspicion it was shipping oil to Syria in breach of EU sanctions.

The tanker is expected to head the United Arab Emirates.

Rouhani yesterday said that Iran's abidance by nuclear inspections proves it does not seek to develop atomic weapons despite having scaled back its compliance with a 2015 accord.

His comment came a day after UN's nuclear watchdog confirmed that Iran has started using advanced models of centrifuges to enrich uranium, in a new breach of the agreement with world powers.

NEWS IN brief

US toll from vaping linked illness hits 12

AFP, Washington

Twelve people in the United States have died from vaping-related illness, health officials said on Thursday, reporting 805 cases of lung injury associated with e-cigarette use. The latest toll was reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which said the specific substance causing the illnesses has not yet been identified. However, most patients have reported a history of using e-cigarette products containing THC.

Indonesia quake toll rises to 23

AFP, Jakarta

The death toll from a 6.5-magnitude earthquake that rocked Indonesia's remote Maluku islands has risen to 23, the disaster agency said yesterday, as more than 15,000 people were evacuated to shelters. More than 100 people were also injured. Hundreds of houses, offices, schools and public facilities have also been damaged in the disaster. Authorities have set up emergency tents and public kitchen for the evacuees in several districts.

Afghans vote today for a president

REUTERS, Kabul

Millions of Afghans are expected to brave the threat of militant attacks to vote in a presidential election today. About a dozen candidates are in the fray for the presidency but the incumbent President Ashraf Ghani and his chief executive Abdullah Abdullah are the top contenders for the job at a time when Taliban insurgents have intensified attacks.



Security personnel stand guard as they block a road during a lockdown at Maisuma locality of Srinagar, yesterday. Security forces imposed tough new restrictions in Indian Kashmir yesterday, fearing protests ahead of UN speeches by rival Indian and Pakistani leaders at the United Nations.

PHOTO: AFP

The Muslim looking after a Hindu shrine in India

AFP, Guwahati

Even in the topsy-turvy world of Indian religion, Motibar Rahman stands out as a Muslim looking after a Hindu shrine, as his family has done for centuries -- on the orders of Lord Shiva himself.

Like his forefathers, Rahman, 73, sweeps the Burha Gosairi Than shrine every morning and lights candles for Shiva, one of Hinduism's foremost deities, who many believe resides inside.

"Before me, my father used to do this work and his father before him. Our family has been the keepers of this holy place for the past 500 years," the 73-year old told AFP.

"The first man in our family is Borhansa. Lord Shiva came to Borhansa and told him, 'I want to live in this place. From now on it will be the responsibility of your family to keep this place. I shall accept service from your family only and no one else,'" Rahman explained.

The shrine is in Assam state, part of India's far-flung northeast, long a melting pot of ethnic groups and religions sandwiched between Muslim-majority Bangladesh and mostly Buddhist Myanmar.

Tensions have been stoked by a recent citizens' register in the state of 33 million that its proponents hope will weed out "non-indigenous" people, many of them Muslims.

According to the 2011 census, 61 percent of Assamese are Hindu and 34 percent Muslim. The remainder are Christian, Buddhist, Sikh or of other religions.

Rahman says that his name was included in the citizens' register -- unlike some 1.9 million people who now face the possibility of being made stateless, put in detention camps and even deported.

'No reasons for concern'

Egypt leader shrugs off fresh protests after mass arrests

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian President Fattah al-Sisi yesterday dismissed a call for a second weekend of protests as "no reason for concern", with hundreds already arrested in an intensifying crackdown on a rare show of discontent on the streets.

Last week's open defiance of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi -- triggered by viral videos from exiled Egyptian businessman Mohamed Aly -- has surprised observers in a country where opposition of all stripes has been severely curtailed.

Elected president in 2014 after pushing predecessor Mohamed Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood from power the previous year, Sisi is seen by many as one of the most authoritarian figures in the Middle East.

Construction magnate Aly has called for a "million-man march" to take place Friday and a "people's revolution" to unseat the uncompromising head of state.

But after he arrived home from the UN General Assembly in New York, Sisi insisted there was no

KSA offers tourist visas for first time

Eases dress code for foreign women

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia said yesterday it was offering tourist visas for the first time, opening up the ultra-conservative Islamic kingdom to holidaymakers as part of a push to diversify its economy away from oil.

The kingdom also eased its strict dress code for foreign women, allowing them to go without the body-shrouding abaya robe that is still mandatory public wear for Saudi women, as authorities open up one of the last frontiers of global tourism.

The push comes just under two weeks after devastating attacks on Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure -- blamed by Washington on Iran -- which roiled global energy markets and raised fears of a wider regional conflict.

"We make history today," tourism chief Ahmed al-Khateeb said in a statement.

"For the first time, we are opening our country to tourists from all over the world."

Citizens from 49 countries are eligible for online e-visas or visas on arrival, including the United States, Australia and several European nations, the statement said.

Kickstarting tourism is one of the centrepieces of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 reform programme to prepare the biggest Arab economy for a post-oil era.



cause for alarm. "There are no reasons for concern. Egypt is a strong country thanks to Egyptians," he told reporters with a smile.

"The case does not deserve all" this attention, Sisi said. "It is an attempt to create an image that is absolutely not real."

Road blocks prevented traffic from entering Cairo's Tahrir Square yesterday morning, AFP journalists said, although it was still possible to move into the area on foot.

Aly accuses Sisi of building lavish palaces while taxpayers grapple with the impact of austerity under an IMF loan programme totalling \$12 billion.

Alongside beefing up their presence on the streets, the security forces have also detained people they suspect of being key influencers of unrest -- journalists, human rights activists and lawyers.

Human Rights Watch said Friday that nearly 2,000 people had been arrested over the past week, in what could be the biggest crackdown since 2013.



'HONOUR KILLING'

Brother of Pak social media star gets life

AFP, Multan

The brother of Pakistani social media star Qandeel Baloch was sentenced yesterday to life in prison for her murder -- the patriarchal country's highest-profile "honour killing".

Baloch, 26, who shot to fame for her risque selfies -- tame by Western standards, but considered provocative in deeply misogynistic Pakistan -- was strangled in July 2016.

Her brother Muhammad Waseem was arrested. Days later he told a press conference that he had no remorse over what he did, saying that "of course" he had murdered his sister and that her behaviour had been "intolerable".

Five others were acquitted by the court, including an Islamic cleric Mufti Abdul Qavi who had been embroiled in controversy with Baloch months ahead of her death.

Baloch's murder made international headlines and reignited calls for action against an epidemic of so-called "honour killings", in which a victim -- usually a woman -- is murdered for flouting patriarchal social codes. Women have been burned, shot, stabbed and strangled for offences such as choosing their own husband or -- in Baloch's case -- bringing "shame" on their family by celebrating their sexuality.

The roots of "honour" killings lie in tribal social norms which remain prevalent across South Asia.