

NEWSIN brief

US vaping-linked death toll hits 26

AFP, Washington

Twenty-six people have died from illnesses associated with e-cigarette use since March, US health authorities said Thursday, while some 1,300 have suffered lung injuries linked to vaping. Officials have yet to identify the cause for the outbreak, which dates back to late March, and are pursuing multiple lines of investigation. More than three-quarters of those sickened used tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the primary psychoactive substance of marijuana, with or without nicotine products.

Japan braces for Typhoon Hagibis

AFP, Tokyo

Japan yesterday braced for a powerful typhoon barreling towards Tokyo that has already forced the cancellation of two Rugby World Cup matches, disrupted the Suzuka Grand Prix and grounded flights. Overnight, Typhoon Hagibis was downgraded slightly from its "super typhoon" status, but was still forecast to be packing maximum gusts of 216 kilometres per hour when it makes landfall late today. The massive storm is expected to dump up to half a metre of rain on the Tokyo area in the 24 hours to midday tomorrow, with up to 80 centimetres forecast for the central Tokai region.

Bus mows down 7 Indian pilgrims

AFP, Lucknow

Seven pilgrims sleeping by a roadside in northern India, on their way to make a ritual dip in the holy Ganges river, were killed when they were run over by a bus yesterday, police said. The driver fled and a manhunt was underway after the tragedy in Uttar Pradesh state, media reports said. The dead -- four women and three children -- were among pilgrims planning to take part in an early-morning dip in the Ganges.

IMPEACHMENT PROBE

Trump predicts polls 'backlash' against Dems

AFP, Minneapolis

An angry, energized President Donald Trump whipped supporters into a frenzy Thursday at a Minneapolis campaign rally where he predicted a 2020 election "backlash" against Democratic attempts to impeach him. Democrats are investigating Trump for possible impeachment over his alleged bid to pressure Ukraine into digging up dirt on election rival Joe Biden, who currently sits near the top of the Democratic pack. But to roaring cheers and boos from the full-capacity crowd in a basketball arena, Trump put two difficult weeks behind him. In a speech lasting one hour and 40 minutes, he bathed in supporters' adulation, hitting all his favorite talking points with a trademark mix of jokes, insults and populist exaggeration. He said Democrats are only trying to impeach him because they're "getting desperate."

"They want to erase your vote like it never existed, they want to erase your voice and they want to erase your future, but they will fail because in America, the people rule again."

And in 2020 this will "produce a backlash at the ballot box the likes of which they have never even heard before."

Public support for impeachment is slowly growing, with a new poll from Fox News -- a channel favored by US conservatives -- showing 51 percent now back his removal from office.

With control of the lower house of Congress, Democrats are likely to impeach in the coming months, even if few believe the Republican-led Senate will actually convict Trump and force him from office.



China's President Xi Jinping shakes hands with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi during their visit to the Pancha Rathas complex in Mamallapuram on the outskirts of Chennai, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'Missiles' hit Iranian tanker off Saudi coast

AFP, Tehran

Suspected missile strikes hit an Iranian oil tanker off the Saudi coast yesterday, its owner said, the first Iranian vessel targeted since a spate of attacks in the Gulf Washington blamed on Tehran.

The National Iranian Tanker Company said the hull of the Sabiti was hit by two separate explosions off the Saudi port of Jeddah, saying they were "probably caused by missile strikes".

Oil prices surged more than two percent on the news, which raised fresh concerns about Middle East supply with tensions still high after last month's attacks on Saudi facilities onshore.

In those attacks, two of Saudi Arabia's biggest oil installations were hit, wiping out five percent of global production.

"This clearly puts fuel on the Mideast fire," SEB commodities analyst Bjarne Schieldrop told AFP.

"After the attack on Saudi a few weeks ago... it's not a matter of if we get new comparable events -- but when, and how

much."

The National Iranian Tanker Company said the hull of the vessel was hit by two separate explosions about 100 kilometres (60 miles) off the Saudi coast, which damaged two of its tanks on the starboard side.

It identified the tanker as the Sabiti and said the blasts were "probably caused by missile strikes" but denied media reports that they originated from Saudi territory.

"All the ship's crew are safe and the ship is stable too," NITC said, adding those on board were trying to repair the damage.

It added the ship is slowly moving back towards the Gulf.

Iran's foreign ministry said the tanker was attacked "from a location close to the corridor it was passing, east of the Red Sea."

Oil was leaking from the tanker into the waters of the Red Sea, it added.

According to ship tracking service TankerTrackers, the Sabiti is fully laden with one million barrels and has declared the Gulf as its destination.



'Death shied away from me'

Nobel Peace laureate Abiy Ahmed's meteoric rise from son of poor villagers to Ethiopian PM

AFP, Addis Ababa

The son of poor villagers, a spy boss, and now the man behind dizzying attempts to reform Africa's fastest-growing economy and heal wounds with Ethiopia's neighbours, Abiy Ahmed has seen an unpredictable and peril-strewn rise to fame.

Another chapter was added to his remarkable tale yesterday when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Since becoming Ethiopian prime minister in April 2018, the 43-year-old has aggressively pursued policies that have the potential to upend his country's society and reshape dynamics beyond its borders.

Within just six months of his swearing-in, Abiy made peace with bitter foe Eritrea, released dissidents from jail, apologised for state brutality, and welcomed home exiled armed groups branded "terrorists" by his predecessors.

Born in the western town of Beshasha to a Muslim father and Christian mother, Abiy "grew up sleeping on the floor" in a house that

lacked electricity and running water.

"We used to fetch water from the river," he said in a wide-ranging radio interview with Sheger FM last month, adding that he didn't even see electricity or an asphalt road until the seventh grade.

Yet Abiy progressed quickly through the power structures created



by the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

Fascinated with technology, he joined the military as a radio operator while still a teenager.

He rose to lieutenant-colonel before entering government, first as a securocrat -- he was the founding head

of Ethiopia's cyber-spying outfit, the Information Network Security Agency.

He then became a minister in the capital Addis Ababa, and a party official in his home region of Oromia.

The circumstances that led to Abiy's ascent to high office can be traced to late 2015.

When then-prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn abruptly resigned, the coalition's member parties chose Abiy to become the first Oromo prime minister.

Ethnic violence has been on the rise in recent years, causing Ethiopia to record more internally displaced people last year than any other country.

And last June, Abiy faced the greatest threat yet to his hold on power when gunmen assassinated high-ranking officials including a prominent regional president and the army chief.

Abiy seems well aware of the danger he faces. "There were many attempts so far, but death didn't want to come to me," he said. "Death shied away from me."

Assange ordered to court for extradition hearing

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was ordered yesterday to make his first in-person London court appearance to determine whether he can be released from prison as he fights extradition to the United States. The 48-year-old Australian has been in custody at the high-security Belmarsh prison in southwest London since being dramatically dragged from Ecuador's embassy in April. He could be sentenced to spend up to 175 years in a US prison if convicted on all charges filed under the US Espionage Act. London's Westminster Magistrates' Court judge Tan Ikram ordered Assange to appear in person for a case management hearing on October 21. The final extradition hearing has been scheduled for February 28 next year.

Climate change protesters target BBC HQ

Around 50 Extinction Rebellion climate protesters yesterday blocked the main entrances at the BBC's London headquarters, with one journalist reporting that the building was on "lockdown". "We, the people, have decided to do your job and Tell the Truth from the BBC Broadcasting House about where we're headed if we don't change course," Extinction Rebellion said in a statement on its Facebook page about the latest stunt. "We hold you accountable for your criminal and corrupt complacency for totally marginalising the seriousness of the #PlanetaryEmergency." The group has carried out a wave of demonstrations in the British capital and around the world since Monday. The protests in Britain have seen more than 1,000 people arrested since Monday.

First spacemaker Alexei Leonov dies, aged 85



Alexei Leonov, a Soviet-era cosmonaut who was the first man to conduct a spacewalk in 1965, died in Moscow on Friday aged 85 after a long illness. Leonov was a close friend of Yuri Gagarin, who became the first human to go to outer space in 1961. Four years later Leonov made history when he left a spacecraft during the Voskhod 2 mission for a spacewalk that lasted 12 minutes and nine seconds.

SOURCE: AFP

EU members give go-ahead for more intense Brexit talks

AFP, Brussels

EU member states yesterday gave Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier the go-ahead for more intense talks with Britain over the weekend, just days before a key European summit.

"The EU and the UK have agreed to intensify discussions over the coming days," the European Commission said.

"The Commission will take stock with the European Parliament and Member States again on Monday in view of preparing the General Affairs Council (Article 50) on Tuesday morning."

The General Affairs Council is a meeting of EU member state ministers in Luxembourg to draw up the agenda for the European Council summit on Thursday and Friday.

Barnier's team has been in "technical talks" with British officials for some time, but these were not making enough progress towards a treaty text that could forestall a chaotic "no-deal" Brexit in three weeks.

Barnier yesterday met his British opposite number, Brexit minister Stephen Barclay, for talks that both sides described as "constructive" -- without giving details.

Following the breakfast meeting, Barnier briefed ambassadors from the other 27 EU capitals, seeking their input on entering political negotiations on a text.

Afterwards, diplomats told AFP that the other member states had given Barnier the green light to step up talks.

"The EU's position remains the same," the Commission said.

"There must be a legally operative solution in the withdrawal agreement that avoids a hard border on the island of Ireland, protects the all-island economy and the Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions, and safeguards the integrity of the Single Market."

It is still far from clear whether the talks will produce a workable draft text before the key European Union summit starting on October 17 -- or before Britain's exit from the bloc on October 31.

STABBING AT UK SHOPPING MALL

UK launches terror probe; 5 injured

AFP, Manchester

Counter-terror police were yesterday probing a mass stabbing at a shopping centre in northwest England that left several people injured and needing hospital treatment.

The attack happened at the Arndale shopping centre in the heart of Manchester shortly after 11:00 am, where an Islamist extremist suicide bomber killed 22 after an Ariana Grande concert in 2017.

A man in his 40s was arrested on suspicion of serious assault. Footage posted online appeared to show one police officer restraining the suspect on the floor as another stands over him pointing a Taser.

A shop worker who gave his name only as Jordan, 23, told Britain's domestic Press Association news agency that "a man was running around with a knife lunging at multiple people, one of which came into my store visibly shaken with a small graze."

Greater Manchester Police and North West Ambulance Service said four people were injured during the incident. The injured were taken to hospital with stab wounds and were said to be in a stable condition.

Earlier, the force said: "Given the location of the incident and its nature, officers from Counter Terrorism Police North West are leading the investigation as we determine the circumstances." Officers were "keeping an open mind about the motivation", the force said.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he was "shocked by the incident in Manchester and my thoughts are with the injured and all those affected".



People march to protest against what they say is the abuse of pro-democracy protesters by Hong Kong police, at Chater Garden in Central district, Hong Kong, yesterday. A woman holds a placard during the protest. Hundreds of mask-wearing pro-democracy protesters marched through Hong Kong's central business district yesterday, occupying a main thoroughfare and disrupting traffic as the Chinese-ruled city braced for another weekend of unrest.

PHOTO: REUTERS