

NEWSIN brief

At least four dead in NYC shooting

AFP, New York

At least four people died and three were wounded in a shooting at a social club in New York early yesterday, police said. No one has been arrested over the shooting, which took place in Brooklyn, and the motive and exact circumstances are not known, a New York police official told AFP. The local affiliate of ABC News described the place where the shooting took place as an after-hours club. Two other men and a woman suffered non life threatening injuries, he said.

Nepal bus crash kills 11: 108 hurt

AFP, Kathmandu

An overloaded bus plunged down a hill in central Nepal, killing at least 11 and injuring 108 people, an official said yesterday. The overcrowded bus was ferrying passengers -- who had been celebrating the Hindu festival of Dashain -- from Sindhupalchowk to neighbouring Kathmandu when it fell more than 50 metres at a bend. An official said 108 people were injured but only 39 were kept for treatment. "We are investigating what caused the accident," she said.

Acting US homeland security chief resigns

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump announced late Friday that acting US homeland security chief Kevin McAleenan has resigned, becoming the latest in a long list of top officials to leave the administration. McAleenan served in the role for six months, replacing Kirstjen Nielsen, who sat at the helm of the powerful agency for 1.5 years. Trump said he would announce a new acting homeland security secretary next week, and that there were "many wonderful candidates."

Catalan separatist leaders to get '15 years in jail'

REUTERS, Madrid

Spain's Supreme Court plans to convict and sentence Catalan separatist leaders to a maximum of 15 years in prison over a 2017 bid for independence, a judicial source said yesterday.

The most prominent of the 12 Catalan leaders on trial would be found guilty of charges of sedition and misuse of public funds but none would be convicted and sentenced for the more severe charge of rebellion, the source told Reuters.

The decision was taken unanimously by the seven members of the top court, the source added. The verdict is expected to be signed by the judges and made public next week, most likely on Monday, the source said.

The trial's top judge, Manuel Marchena, declined to comment on the media leaks.

However, he added that "everything is open (because) a ruling will not be completed until it is signed by every single judge." Marchena was speaking to reporters at an event celebrating Spain's national day in comments quoted by several Spanish media, including La Vanguardia and ABC newspapers.

A Supreme Court spokeswoman declined to comment. Major Spanish newspapers including El Pais, La Vanguardia and El Mundo have published similar information about the court's verdict, also citing sources.

The ruling could provoke a strong reaction in Catalonia, where a secessionist push two years ago triggered Spain's biggest political crisis in decades. It could also complicate Spanish politics in the run-up to the fourth national election in four years.

The charges stem from the leaders' role in an October 2017 referendum, which was held despite being ruled illegal by Spanish courts, and a short-lived declaration of independence that followed in Spain's most economically important region.



An aircraft helps fight the Saddleridge fire by dropping fire retardant along a ridge in Newhall, California, on Friday. Inset, A firefighter battles the same fire in the early morning.

PHOTO: AFP

CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES

Mass evacuations as fire rages on

AFP, Los Angeles

Wind-driven wildfires forced the evacuation of about 100,000 people in southern California Friday and destroyed dozens of structures and homes as authorities warned it could take days to extinguish the flames.

By Friday evening, the strongest blaze, dubbed the Saddleridge Fire, had consumed 7,542 acres (3,052 hectares) in areas of the San Fernando Valley, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) north of downtown Los Angeles, fire officials said.

They added that it had damaged or destroyed at least 31 structures and was 13 percent contained as of Friday evening.

One man in his 50s died of a heart attack as he struggled to save his home in the Porter Ranch area, fire officials said.

The fire quickly got out of control after it erupted late Thursday for unknown reasons in the city of Sylmar, driven by low humidity and gusts known as the Santa Ana winds.

He said some 1,000 firefighters, backed by water-dropping helicopters and planes releasing fire retardants, were battling the blaze that forced the shutdown of several major highways. The metro line in the area was also closed as were schools and businesses.

Some 200 firefighters were meanwhile battling several other blazes in Riverside County, east of Los Angeles, including one that tore through a trailer park and was started by burning trash. That blaze, dubbed the Sandalwood fire, destroyed 76 homes and buildings and killed an 89-year-old woman who was unable to escape the flames.

Defiant Turkey steps up assault

200,000 displaced in Kurdish region in Syria; world ramps up threats

AGENCIES

Ankara stepped up its assault on Kurdish-held border towns in northeastern Syria yesterday, defying mounting threats of international sanctions, even from Washington.

Buoyed by a night of steady advances in the countryside, Turkish troops and their Syrian allies entered the battleground town of Ras al-Ain, sources on both sides said.

The Turkish defence ministry hailed its forces' capture of the first Kurdish-held town of the offensive so far.

But Ras al-Ain's Kurdish defenders denied the town had fallen and an AFP correspondent near the town said Turkish troops and their Syrian allies had entered but had yet to capture it.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, who were the main ground partner in the US-led campaign against the Islamic State group, have taken mounting losses against the vastly superior firepower



of the Turkish army.

At least 20 SDF fighters were killed in clashes overnight, taking their losses since the Turkish offensive began on Wednesday to 74, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said.

Turkish air strikes on Kurdish-held towns and intense artillery exchanges caused mounting casualties on both sides of the border, with 28 dead on the Syrian

side, according to the Observatory, and 17 dead in Turkey, according to Turkish reports. The Turkish army has lost four troops.

The town of Ras al-Ain and that of Tal-Abyad further west have been primary goals of the Turkish offensive and have both come under heavy bombardment.

Ankara says its forces' mission is to establish a safe zone run by its mainly Arab Syrian allies in which some of the 3.6 million mainly Arab

refugees in Syria can be rehoused. But the Kurds say that the Turkish invasion, which has led to an exodus of civilian residents, Arab as well as Kurdish, amounts to an attempt to redraw the ethnic map of the region at their expense.

The offensive has so far displaced some 200,000 people, according to Kurdish sources.

The Turkish offensive began after US President Donald Trump ordered US troops to pull back from the border and he stands accused of giving it a green light. He has since toughened his policy towards Ankara and on Friday threatened crippling sanctions if the operation goes too far.

But Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan has voiced defiance and vowed to push ahead with the assault.

Meanwhile, Turkey yesterday denied targeting a US base in northern Syria after the Pentagon said its troops had come under artillery fire.



Damaged houses by Typhoon Hagibis are seen in Ichiara, Chiba prefecture, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

PROTECTING SAUDI ARABIA FROM IRAN THREAT

US sends 3000 troops

Announces deployment of two fighter squadrons, missile defense batteries

REUTERS, Washington

The United States announced the deployment of additional American military forces to Saudi Arabia on Friday to bolster the kingdom's defenses after the Sept 14 attack on its oil facilities, which Washington and Riyadh have blamed on Iran.

The large deployment, which was first reported by Reuters, includes fighter squadrons, an air expeditionary wing and air defense personnel, the Pentagon said. Together with the 200 forces to Saudi Arabia announced last month, the deployment totaled about 3,000 troops, it said.

In a bid to better shield Saudi Arabia, the Pentagon said it was sending two additional Patriot batteries and one Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD).

US Defense Secretary Mark Esper told reporters the deployments were designed to deter Iran.

Trump said the United States would not bear the expense of the deployment. "Saudi Arabia, at my request, has agreed to pay us for everything we're doing," he told reporters.

Some of Trump's Republican allies have called for retaliatory strikes, which the president has so far declined to carry out.

It was unclear whether some of the newly announced troops might replace other American forces expected to depart the region in the coming weeks or months.

Iran vows response to attack on tanker

Meanwhile, Iran yesterday vowed not to let an attack on one of its oil tankers off the coast of Saudi Arabia to go unanswered, the semi-official ISNA news agency reported.

The National Iranian Tanker Company, which owns the Sabiti, said its hull was hit by two separate explosions on Friday off the Saudi port of Jeddah.

But the state-owned company denied reports the attack had originated from Saudi soil.

The attack caused oil to spill from the tanker into the Red Sea, the NITC said, before it was eventually controlled and the vessel began slowly moving back towards Gulf waters.



Japan on highest alert as typhoon makes landfall

2 killed; 7.3m served non-compulsory evacuation orders

AFP, Tokyo

Powerful Typhoon Hagibis slammed into Japan yesterday, killing at least two people and prompting authorities to issue their highest level of disaster warning over "unprecedented" downpours that caused flooding and landslides.

Around 7.3 million people were placed under non-compulsory evacuation orders and more than 30 people were injured, four seriously.

Even before making landfall, Hagibis caused enormous disruption, forcing the cancellation of two Rugby World Cup matches, delaying the Japanese Grand Prix and grounding all flights in the Tokyo region.

It crashed into Japan's main Honshu island just before 7:00pm (1000 GMT), barreling into Izu, a peninsula southwest of Tokyo, the Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA) said, packing gusts of wind up to 216 kilometres per hour (134 miles per hour) around an hour.

The storm claimed its first victim hours before arriving on the coast, when strong

winds from its outer bands flipped a car in Chiba east of Tokyo and killed the driver.

But it was Hagibis' torrential rain that prompted the JMA to issue its highest-level emergency warning for parts of Tokyo and the surrounding areas, warning of disaster.

"Unprecedented heavy rain has been seen in cities, towns and villages for which the emergency warning was issued," JMA forecaster Yasushi Kajiwara told reporters.

"The possibility is extremely high that disasters such as landslides and floods have already occurred. It is important to take action that can help save your lives."

At least two landslides were already confirmed, with a man in his sixties killed in one in Gunma north of Tokyo.

By early evening, tens of thousands were in shelters and receiving emergency rations and blankets, though a 5.7-magnitude quake that rattled the Tokyo area did little to calm nerves.

Japan is hit by around 20 typhoons a year, though the capital is not usually badly affected.

Trump ousted me based on 'false claims'

Ex-Ukraine envoy tells
impeachment inquiry

REUTERS, Washington

The former US ambassador to Ukraine on Friday told a House of Representatives impeachment inquiry into President Donald Trump that Trump ousted her based on "unfounded and false claims" after she had come under attack by his personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani.

Marie Yovanovitch, the ambassador who was abruptly recalled from Kiev in May, spent more than nine hours in a closed-door meeting with House members and staff.

Yovanovitch, according to a copy of her opening statement posted online by US media, said she was told by a senior State Department official about "a concerted campaign against me" and said Trump had pushed for her removal since the middle



of 2018 even though the department believed "I had done nothing wrong."

She expressed alarm over damage to diplomacy under Trump and warned about "private interests" circumventing "professional diplomats for their own gain, not the public good."

The impeachment inquiry focuses on a July 25 phone call in which Trump pressed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to investigate a leading rival seeking to face Trump in the 2020 presidential election, former Democratic Vice President Joe Biden, and Biden's businessman son Hunter Biden.