

NEWSIN brief

Russia bombed 4 Syria hospitals in 12 hours

AFP, Washington

Russian warplanes bombed four hospitals in rebel-held territory in Syria over a period of just 12 hours earlier this year, The New York Times reported on Sunday. The May strikes -- which the newspaper tied to Moscow through Russian radio recordings, plane spotter logs and accounts by witnesses -- are part of a larger pattern of medical facilities targeted by forces supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Philippine drug war chief quits

AFP, Manila

The Philippines' top policeman, who leads the nation's deadly drugs crackdown, yesterday quit as he faces allegations of protecting officers accused of selling a huge haul of seized narcotics. Though the scandal dates from before Oscar Albayalde's time as national police chief, it has raised fresh criticism of President Rodrigo Duterte's signature anti-narcotics campaign, which is key to his massive popularity among Filipinos.

French police hold 5 over knife attack

AFP, Paris

French police yesterday detained five people linked to a radicalised employee at the Paris police headquarters who killed four colleagues in a knife attack earlier this month, sources said. Police staged raids at three locations in the northern suburbs of Paris, judicial sources and those close to the investigation said, confirming a report by the broadcaster RTL. Mickael Harpon, a 45-year-old computer expert, stabbed to death four colleagues at the police headquarters on October 3 before being shot and killed.



This picture taken yesterday shows smoke rises from the Syrian town of Ras al-Ain, from the Turkish side of the border at Ceylanpinar district in Sanliurfa, on the sixth day of Turkey's military operation against Kurdish forces. Inset, Syrians welcome regime forces at the western entrance of the town of Tal Tamr in the countryside of Syria's northeastern Hasakeh province.



PHOTO: AFP

TYPHOON-HIT JAPAN

Death toll tops 50

15 missing; rescuers battle mudslides, waist-high waters to seek survivors

AFP, Tokyo

Tens of thousands of rescuers worked into last night to find survivors of a powerful typhoon in Japan that killed at least 56 people, as fresh rain threatened to hamper their efforts.

Typhoon Hagibis crashed into the country on Saturday night, unleashing high winds and torrential rain across 36 of the country's 47 prefectures, triggering landslides and catastrophic flooding.

The death toll from the disaster has risen steadily, with national broadcaster NHK saying that 56 people had been killed and 15 were still missing.

It cited its own tally based on local reporting. The government has given lower numbers but is still updating its information.

"Even now, many people are still unaccounted for in the disaster-hit area," Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told an emergency disaster meeting yesterday.

"Units are trying their best to search for and rescue them, working day and night," Abe said.

Later in the day, he pledged to "do whatever the country can" for victims and survivors, ordering the defence ministry to call up to 1,000 reserve troops to join 31,000 active forces in search operations.

Rescue workers waded through muddy, waist-high waters searching for missing people yesterday. The rescue work that was continuing into the night risked being hampered by additional rain falling in central and eastern Japan that officials warned could cause fresh flooding and landslides.

Mobile phones back in J&K

Internet still unavailable both on cellphone, fixed line networks

AFP, Srinagar

Mobile phone networks were restored in Indian Kashmir yesterday after a 72-day blackout, authorities said, but the internet remains off-limits to the region's seven million-plus people.

India cut access to mobile networks in the restive Kashmir Valley in early August citing security concerns as it scrapped the region's semi-autonomous status and imposed a lockdown.

The easing of restriction covers around four million post-paid mobile phone contracts, but only for calls and text messages. The internet is still unavailable both on cellphone and fixed line networks.

Landlines were restored previously, although residents say connections are erratic.

The stripping of Kashmir's special status on August 5 also saw New Delhi send in tens of thousands of extra troops to what even before was one of the world's most heavily militarised zones.

Several hundred Kashmiri politicians, activists, lawyers and

others remain in custody, mostly without charge.

Several thousand ordinary Kashmiris were also detained, including children as young as nine, with protesters and security forces clashing at regular rallies. Most have since been released.

UN human rights chief Michelle



Bachelet said last month she was "deeply concerned" while Washington called for the "rapid" lifting of restrictions.

Mohammad Akbar, a businessman, told AFP in the main city Srinagar that he was pleased that mobile phones were working again, but had harsh words for the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"Mobile phones are a commercial

service that we pay for, not a favour," he said. "They slash our basic rights and then ease things as favours and call it normalcy."

Having mobile phones "is something completely normal in most countries. But here in Kashmir it is a big deal," said law student Mashouq.

"And it can be taken away at any time."

Kashmir has been split between India and Pakistan since 1947 and has been the spark of two wars and numerous skirmishes -- most recently in February when they conducted tit-for-tat air strikes.

Tens of thousands of people, most of them civilians, have died since 1989 in an uprising against Indian rule that New Delhi blames on Islamabad.

New Delhi maintains that some restrictions in the region are still required to combat a decades-old insurgency against its rule, which it accuses Pakistan of fomenting. Islamabad denies this, saying it provides only diplomatic and moral support to Kashmiri separatists.

Britain, EU enter make-or-break Brexit week

Queen sets out PM's legislative programme for next yr

AFP, London

Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday repeated that Britain must leave the EU on October 31, as divorce talks resumed in Brussels in a pivotal week that could define how and when Brexit finally happens.

In an elaborate ceremony in parliament in London, Queen Elizabeth II set out Johnson's legislative programme for the coming year, with leaving the EU top of the agenda.

"My government's priority has always been to secure the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union on October 31," she said in a speech to robed peers from a gilded throne in the upper House of Lords.

"My government intends to work towards a new partnership with the European Union, based on free trade and friendly cooperation."

But this depends on the outcome of

closed-door discussions in Brussels, where officials are racing to reach a deal on Britain's exit terms before a summit of EU leaders starting on Thursday.

If he cannot get a deal by Saturday, Johnson will fall foul of a British law demanding he ask the EU to delay Brexit for a third time rather than risk a potentially disastrous "no deal" departure.

"A deal is possible and it's possible this month," Irish Deputy Prime Minister Simon Coveney said as he arrived for talks with EU foreign ministers in Luxembourg.

"It may even be possible this week but we're not there yet."

Michel Barnier, the bloc's chief Brexit negotiator, briefed EU ambassadors late Sunday after a weekend of talks between officials described as "intense" and "constructive".



Oil, Iran top agenda as Putin visits Saudi Arabia

AFP, Riyadh

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday arrived in Saudi Arabia, where he was set to seal oil agreements and try to use his influence to defuse tensions boiling in the Gulf.

King Salman and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, welcomed Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at Al-Yamama Palace in Riyadh with full military honours.

Putin's visit follows attacks on Saudi oil installations that Riyadh and Washington have blamed on Moscow ally Tehran.

Oil will be "the main topic of discussion", Russian political analyst Fyodor Lukyanov said, as a deal between the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and Moscow is due to expire next spring.

Moscow is not a member of OPEC, but it has worked closely with the group to limit supply and push up prices after a 2014 slump that wreaked havoc on the economies of Russia and cartel heavyweight

Saudi Arabia.

Traditional US ally Riyadh and Moscow have made a striking rapprochement in recent years, marked in particular by King Salman's first visit to Russia in October 2017.

A year later, when the Saudi crown prince, known as MBS, was under fire over the assassination of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, Putin went out of his way to shake his hand at a G20 summit.

In an interview with Arabic-language television channels ahead of his visit, Putin praised his good relations with the Saudi royals.

"We will absolutely work with Saudi Arabia and our other partners and friends in the Arab world... to reduce to zero any attempt to destabilise the oil market," he said in the interview broadcast Sunday.

Analyst Lukyanov said that Moscow, with its older ties to Iran and new links with Saudi, could "play the role of peacemaker" as tensions soar between Tehran and Riyadh.



Protesters attend a rally in Hong Kong yesterday, calling on US politicians to pass a bill that could alter Washington's relationship with the trading hub. Strife-torn Hong Kong is sliding towards becoming a police state, US senator Josh Hawley warned, as the financial hub braces for a rally calling on Washington to punish China over sliding freedoms.

PHOTO: AFP

India tightens security ahead of Ayodhya case ruling

Authorities have tightened security restrictions in the northern Indian flashpoint city of Ayodhya ahead of a crucial Supreme Court ruling over the disputed site fiercely contested between Hindus and Muslims. Hindus and Muslims have for decades been bitterly divided over the 16th-century Babri mosque in Ayodhya, a city in Uttar Pradesh state. Tensions boiled over in 1992 when Hindu zealots destroyed the mosque, sparking religious violence that killed 2,000 people. The Supreme Court is expected to conclude on October 17 hearings into appeals against a key 2010 court ruling that both groups should split the site, with Hindus granted the lion's share.

Poland's nationalists win majority in parliament

Poland's nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) party secured a second term in power in Sunday's parliamentary election, partial results showed yesterday, but fell short of the landslide victory it needs to overhaul the constitution. After four years in power marked by judicial and media reforms that Poland's European partners criticised as subverting democratic norms, PiS campaigned on a promise to enshrine more Catholic and patriotic values in public life. Partial results showed it winning 44.4% of votes, against the 37.6% it won in 2015, a result that gives PiS a narrow majority in parliament but not enough to reshape the constitution, its ultimate ambition.

NZ creates unit to target online extremism



New Zealand will establish a team of investigators dedicated solely to tackling online extremism, as it moves to address failures exposed by the Christchurch mosques massacre, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said yesterday. Ardern has led global efforts to force technology firms to clamp down on extremist material since a lone gunman killed 51 Muslim worshippers in March, streaming part of the atrocity on Facebook. But she said the attack, which targeted two mosques in the South Island city, also showed her own government needed to improve resources to curb the spread of online hate. "We will have a dedicated team focused on targeting and disrupting violent extremist content across our digital channels," she said.

SOURCE: AFP

Spain jails 9 separatist leaders

Targets Puigdemont with new int'l arrest warrant; protesters take to streets in Barcelona

AFP, Barcelona

Thousands of angry protesters took to the streets of Barcelona yesterday after Spain's Supreme Court sentenced nine Catalan separatist leaders to between nine and 13 years in jail for sedition over the failed 2017 independence bid.

As the news broke, demonstrators turned out en masse, blocking streets in Barcelona and elsewhere as police braced for what activists said would be a mass response of civil disobedience.

The long-awaited ruling capped weeks of rising tension, and puts the Catalan question at the heart of the political debate less than a month before Spain heads into its fourth general election in as many years.

Ahead of the ruling, Barcelona had woken up to a heavy police presence, with forces noticeably visible around the regional high court, the main Sants train station and El Prat, Spain's second busiest airport.

"I feel very affected by the sentence even though I expected it. I feel fury and a sense of powerlessness," said Joan

Guich, a 19-year-old maths student who was protesting on Gran Via.

"They have been convicted for an ideology which I agree with."

The 12 defendants were put on trial in February for their role in the

CATALAN SECESSION BID



banned October 1, 2017 referendum and the short-lived independence declaration that followed it.

The harshest sentence of 13 years was handed to former Catalan vice president Oriol Junqueras who served as the main defendant in absence of Carles Puigdemont, the region's leader

who fled Spain to avoid prosecution.

In a tweet from Brussels, Puigdemont denounced the sentences as an "outrage".

"100 years in all. An outrage. Now more than ever, by your side and those of your families. It is time to react as never before," he wrote.

A Spanish judge yesterday issued a new international warrant for the arrest of Puigdemont who fled to Belgium.

Five other pro-independence leaders escaped with him and are variously living in Belgium, Switzerland and Scotland. Of the six, four were wanted for rebellion and two were wanted for misuse of public funds.

Of those that stayed in Spain, 12 were put on trial, with the Supreme Court convicting nine of them yesterday on the lesser charge of sedition.

"Following the Supreme Court decision we need to turn the page based on peaceful co-existence in Catalonia through dialogue," Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said, speaking in English.

Aussie wrongly jailed for 19 yrs awarded millions

AFP, Sydney

An Australian economist who wrongfully spent nearly two decades in prison for the assassination of a high-ranking police officer was awarded more than Aus\$7 million (US\$4.75 million) in compensation yesterday.

Former public servant David Eastman was convicted in 1995 of killing Australian Federal Police officer Colin Winchester and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Eastman, who had always maintained his innocence and mounted several appeals, was freed in 2014 after his conviction was quashed.

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Supreme Court ordered the jurisdiction's government to pay him just over Aus\$7 million.

Eastman had sought at least Aus\$18 million in compensation. The 74-year-old told the court that not only had he lost the opportunity to have a family and pursue his career, his mother and sisters died while he was behind bars.

The court also heard that he witnessed a murder during his incarceration and still suffers vision impairment in one eye after he was assaulted by another prisoner in 2006.

Lawyer Sam Tierney told reporters outside the court in Canberra that his client was "very happy" with the decision.

"He's lost a significant chunk of his life and he's obviously got some thoughts in mind as to what he might do with (the money)," he said.

It was unclear whether the ACT government would appeal the decision. The case had already cost the territory more than Aus\$30 million, according to public broadcaster ABC.

Winchester was shot dead while getting out of his car near his home in suburban Canberra in 1989.

No one has been held accountable for the murder.