

NEWS IN brief

UN likely to be able to pay staff in Nov

REUTERS, United Nations
The United Nations has received enough partial payments from some countries to be able to pay its staff next month, a UN spokesman said on Thursday after UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned last week of a cash shortfall. UN spokesman Farhan Haq did not say which countries had paid or how much money the world body had received. "We are getting some money in and at this stage our expectation is that we will be able now to meet our payroll for the month of November and we'll see where we go from there," Haq told reporters.

Pakistan denies entry to CPJ official

AFP, Islamabad
Rights organisations have slammed Pakistani authorities after a member of a leading media watchdog was denied entry to the country, calling the move a "slap in the face to those concerned about press freedom". Immigration officials at Lahore airport Thursday told Steven Butler -- the Asia programme coordinator of The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) -- he was on an Interior Ministry "stop list", the rights group said.

UN condemns Egypt crackdown on activists

AFP, Geneva
The UN yesterday condemned Egypt over the recent arrests of prominent activists and demanded that Cairo probe allegations that they were tortured by the security services while in custody. Several activists who played key roles in the 2011 revolution have been arrested in recent weeks, including blogger and journalist Esraa Abdel Fattah and Alaa Abdel Fattah, an iconic figure in Egypt. Esraa Abdel Fattah has been accused by Egyptian authorities of collaborating with a terrorist organisation.



Catalan demonstrators wave Esteladas (Catalan separatist flags) as they block a road during Catalonia's general strike in Sant Just Desvern, Spain, yesterday, the fifth day of protests against the jailing of separatist leaders. PHOTO: AFP

Turkey, Kurds need to fight 'like two kids'

Says Trump, welcomes truce in Syria
AFP, Dallas

US President Donald Trump Thursday welcomed the temporary ceasefire in northern Syria and said he allowed Turkish and Kurdish forces to clash in deadly battle because they were like children who needed to fight each other. "It was unconventional what I did. I said they're going to have to fight a little while," Trump told a rally of supporters in Dallas, Texas. "Like two kids in a lot, you have got to let them fight and then you pull them apart. "They fought for a few days and it was pretty vicious." Trump triggered the week-long Turkish offensive against the Kurds by withdrawing US troops from northeast Syria. More than 500 people have been killed, including dozens of civilians, mostly on the Kurdish side, and 300,000 civilians have been displaced within Syria, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor. Trump stressed that "not one drop of American blood" was shed. Earlier he hailed the announcement that Turkey had agreed to suspend its offensive, calling it a "great day" for the Turks and the Kurds. "We have a five-day ceasefire," Trump told reporters, after Vice President Mike Pence said Ankara had agreed to suspend its military operation, and end it entirely once Kurdish fighters withdraw from a safe zone along the Turkey-Syria border. "It's a great day for the United States," the president said in Fort Worth, Texas, ahead of a re-election rally. "It's a great day for Turkey," Trump said. "It's a great day for the Kurds. It's a great day for civilization."

'Modi is riding a tiger'

Pak PM slams Indian PM for using force to silence Kashmiris; internet shutdown fuels fake news battle

DAWN ONLINE, AFP
Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan yesterday once again drew attention to the situation in occupied Kashmir, criticising Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for thinking he could "get his agenda of annexation" by using force to silence Kashmiris. In a post shared on Twitter, the premier said: "Modi is riding a tiger — he thought he could get his agenda of annexation by using 900,000 forces to silence Kashmiris. "You don't need 900,000 troops to fight terrorism; you need them to terrorise 8m Kashmiri people." In a subsequent tweet, the prime minister said the Indian premier was now "fearful" because "he knows the moment the siege is lifted, there will be a bloodbath — which would be the only way to subdue the Kashmiri people". Frustration, anger and fear have been growing in occupied Kashmir since August 5, when the Indian

government stripped the region of its semi-autonomous status and imposed a curfew and a communications blackout. While some call and text services for mobile phone services were previously restored in the region, text messaging services were again blocked on Tuesday.



The clampdown has now continued for over 70 days. According to Radio Pakistan, Friday is being observed as Kashmir Day across the country to express solidarity with Kashmiris. In this regard, sirens were rung at 3:00pm and people stood up to express solidarity with their Kashmiri brethren.

A communications blackout in Kashmir region is fuelling a fake news war with Pakistan, as both sides unleash a deluge of disinformation to fill the vacuum and shape opinion. "Both sides are stoking tensions, and both sides benefit from the information vacuum to fill the void with their own narratives and push them to domestic and international audiences," said Jan Rydzak, who has researched related topics at Stanford University. "Pakistan cannot afford to let (the Indian) government's 'business-as-usual' narrative flood its citizens' social media feeds; India cannot afford to let reports of mass incarceration and chaos flood theirs." Disinformation has ranged from old photos from Gaza purportedly showing how India has turned Kashmir into a "living hell", to old images of happy children falsely claiming all is well in "the new Kashmir".

Pakistan risks joining terror financing 'blacklist'

Says FATF, gives Feb 2020 deadline for progress

AFP, Paris
A global anti-corruption body yesterday warned that Pakistan could join a blacklist of nations failing to fight money laundering and terror financing unless it changed course within four months. "Despite a high level commitment by Pakistan to fix these weaknesses, Pakistan has not made enough progress," Xiangmin Liu, president of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), said in Paris. "If by February 2020 the country has not made significant progress, we will consider further actions which potentially could include placing the country... on the blacklist," he said. Pakistan has been on the FATF's so-called grey list since 2018, when it agreed to an "action list" of 27 measures to curb illicit money transfers used by terror groups operating in the country. So far it has sufficiently addressed only

five of them, the FATF said after this week's plenary meeting in Paris, where it is based. Pakistan had been on the FATF grey list for years before it was removed in 2015 following "significant progress" in fighting terror financing. Prime Minister Imran Khan, elected last year, has been struggling to stamp out terror threats while coming under pressure over painful austerity measures taken to rectify a shaky economy and conform to the terms of its latest IMF bailout. "The Pakistani government has demonstrated strong political will to implement its action plan," Liu said. "We will provide all the necessary training and assistance, and we have called on our members and our global network to help in that regard," he added. Only two countries, North Korea and Iran, are on the FATF blacklist, which severely crimps their access to the global financial system as well as international aid.

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ILLEGAL MIGRANTS

Mexico deports 300 Indians to Delhi

REUTERS, Mexico City
Mexico has deported over 300 Indian nationals to New Delhi, the National Migration Institute (INM) said late on Wednesday, calling it an unprecedented transatlantic deportation. The move follows a deal Mexico struck with the United States in June, vowing to significantly curb US-bound migration in exchange for averting US tariffs on Mexican exports. "It is unprecedented in INM's history - in either form or the number of people - for a transatlantic air transport like the one carried out on this day," INM said in a statement. The 310 men and one woman that INM said were in Mexico illegally were sent on a chartered flight, accompanied by federal immigration agents and Mexico's National Guard. They arrived in New Delhi yesterday. Most of the deportees were from India's northern Punjab state, an Indian official said. Police will run checks if any of them had criminal history, another official said. The deportees were issued an "emergency certificate" each, which is a one-way travel document that allows an Indian citizen to enter India in an emergency. Such papers are issued to individuals who lose, damage or have no valid passports. INM said never before had Mexico carried out a deportation exercise of this scale.

What next after UK, EU agree Brexit deal?

AFP, London
Britain and the European Union have struck a new Brexit accord but it is by no means a done deal, as Prime Minister Boris Johnson has to get it through parliament. The House of Commons has rejected a previous divorce text three times, forcing Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May, to delay Brexit twice. If that happens again today, her successor will be forced by law to ask Brussels to postpone again beyond the October 31 deadline. DEAL APPROVED? Leaders from the EU's 28 member states have signed off on the deal. The British parliament is holding its first Saturday sitting since the 1982 Falklands War for MPs to debate the text. If MPs approve the deal, it must be formally implemented through an EU Withdrawal Bill. Such complicated legislation would normally take months but officials insist they can rush it through to allow Britain to leave the EU as planned on October 31. REJECTION AND DELAY? There is a real risk MPs do not agree the deal today, meaning Johnson will be forced to ask the EU to delay Brexit, as he has no majority in the House of Commons.



COURT CHALLENGE? There is speculation Johnson could try to get around the law but this would likely see an immediate challenge in the courts. 'NO-DEAL' BREXIT? The default legal position is that Britain leaves the EU on October 31 unless it asks to delay, and the other 27 member states agree. Business and markets across Europe fear the shock of a sudden Brexit that even the government's own assessment says would cause economic damage. ANOTHER ELECTION? Johnson has already tried twice to get an early general election, to allow him to win back a majority in parliament. But he needs the support of the main opposition Labour party to call one. Labour says it will back an election when the threat of a "no deal" Brexit is off the table. The opportunity could come when MPs vote on October 21 and 22 on Johnson's legislative agenda.

Pakistani man jailed for blasphemous FB post

A Pakistani court yesterday sentenced a man to five years jail and hard labour for a blasphemous Facebook post, in what is believed to be one of the first such cases under controversial cybercrime laws. Sajid Ali was charged with posting blasphemous and derogatory content against revered Islamic figures on the social network in 2017. Blasphemy is a hugely sensitive issue in conservative Muslim Pakistan, where the laws can carry a potential death sentence for anyone deemed to have insulted Islam. Even unproven allegations have led to mob lynchings and murder. Prosecutor Munam Bashir Chaudhry told AFP Ali's case is the first to be tried under a section of the cybercrime laws.

'Overrated general' Mattis takes swipe at Trump

Former US defense secretary James Mattis said he was honoured to be the "world's most overrated general" in a swipe at his former boss Donald Trump who insulted him earlier this week. At a gala charity dinner in New York Thursday evening, Mattis told diners he had now "achieved greatness." "I'm not just an overrated general. I am the greatest, the world's most overrated," he said. "I'm honored to be considered that by Donald Trump because he also called Meryl Streep an overrated actress," he said. "So I guess I'm the Meryl Streep of generals, and frankly that sounds pretty good to me," he said to laughter and applause at the annual Alfred E Smith Memorial Foundation dinner.

US makes history with first all-female spacewalk



US astronauts Christina Koch and Jessica Meir became the first all-female pairing to carry out a spacewalk yesterday, following a spacewalk flub earlier this year that caused the historic mission to be aborted. "Christina, you may egress the airlock," spacecraft communicator Stephanie Wilson told the pair shortly after they set out to replace a power controller on the International Space Station at 1138 GMT. They began their mission making standard safety checks on their suits and tethers, before making their way to the repair site. In a call to reporters a few minutes earlier, Nasa administrator Jim Bridenstine emphasized its symbolic importance.



Demonstrators wave Lebanese national flags yesterday as they gather during a mass protest in the southern Lebanese city of Sidon against dire economic conditions. Public anger has simmered since parliament passed an austerity budget in July to help trim a ballooning deficit and flared on Thursday over new plans to tax calls on messaging applications such as WhatsApp, forcing the government to axe the unpopular proposal. PHOTO: AFP

Fierce battles in Mexico

Cartel gunmen wage all-out battle against security forces, free drug kingpin El Chapo's son

AFP, Culiacán
Heavily armed gunmen waged an all-out battle against Mexican security forces Thursday as soldiers arrested -- then reportedly released -- a son of jailed drug kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman in his home state, Sinaloa. Security Minister Alfonso Durazo said soldiers on a routine afternoon patrol came under fire from a residence in the state capital, Culiacán. He said they responded by taking the house and detaining four people inside, including Ovidio Guzman, one of several sons of "El Chapo" who have partly taken over the Sinaloa cartel since he was extradited to the United States in 2017. Cartel gunmen then "surrounded the house, outnumbering the soldiers," and began a massive assault on various parts of the city, Durazo said. That triggered an hours-long battle that left blazing vehicles strewn across the street and sent terrified residents running for shelter.

"In order to protect the greater good, the people of Culiacán's safety and well-being, the (federal government's) security cabinet decided to suspend said actions," Durazo said in a video message. According to Mexican media reports, that included freeing Ovidio Guzman. Neither Durazo nor President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's office immediately responded to requests for further information, and details on the day's incidents remained murky. Durazo said the security cabinet would travel to Culiacán to personally oversee the next steps. Images carried on Mexican television showed army and police personnel under assault by men armed with heavy weapons. Gunmen blocked roads and highways into the evening, bringing the city of 750,000 people to a standstill, AFP journalists said. They also said an unknown number of inmates had escaped from the Aguaruto prison in Culiacán amid the chaos.

