

NEWS IN brief

Iran quake kills at least 6, injures 300

REUTERS, Dubai
A strong earthquake of magnitude 5.8 struck northwestern Iran yesterday, killing at least six people and injuring more than 300, according to Iranian state media. The US Geological Survey said the magnitude 5.8 quake struck at 2:17 am 83 km southwest of Ardabil in East Azerbaijan province. State news agency IRNA said the quake was followed by more than 60 aftershocks, causing panic among residents who rushed out of their houses in the middle of the night.

UK police name 39 Vietnamese victims

AFP, London
British police yesterday named the 39 Vietnamese people who died in a refrigerated truck last month, with the youngest aged just 15 and many of them from the same province. Ten teenagers including two 15-year-old boys were among the victims whose bodies were found on October 23 in a container in Essex. The majority of victims, 20, were from the central Vietnamese region of Nghe An, with another 10 from Ha Tinh.

Brazil court verdict could see Lula freed

AFP, Brasilia
Brazil's Supreme Court voted Thursday to overturn a ruling requiring convicted criminals to go to jail after losing their first appeal, paving the way for leftist icon Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to be freed. The decision means thousands of convicts could be released from prison, including Lula, who is among dozens of political leaders caught up in a sprawling corruption probe. They would remain free until they had exhausted their rights to appeal their conviction -- a process critics say could take years in cases involving people with deep pockets.

IMPEACHMENT PROBE

Trump pressure on Ukraine harmful to rule of law

Says top US diplomat
AFP, Washington
A senior US diplomat saw President Donald Trump's pressure for Ukraine to investigate his Democratic rival as a threat to the rule of law in both countries, testimony released Thursday showed. As Congress moved towards launching public hearings on impeaching Trump next week, it also upped the pressure on his key aides to appear behind closed doors. Acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney had already been summoned to appear yesterday, but investigators raised the stakes, issuing a subpoena, US media reported late Thursday. It was not clear if he would comply. The testimony released earlier in the day from Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Kent added to the evidence that Trump may have abused his office and violated election laws by seeking Ukraine's help for his re-election campaign. Kent indicated both concern and resistance in the State Department to Trump's efforts to gain election support from Kiev, and also fingered Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani as central to those efforts. He told House investigators on October 15 that he believed White House pressure on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to open investigations against US Democrats would undermine US policy toward Ukraine. Kent's concerns in mid-August, after he learned of a linkage between US military aid to Ukraine and Zelensky doing what Trump wanted, were strong enough to file an official State Department memo.



This handout picture received from Kelly-ann Oosterbeek yesterday shows flames from an out of control bushfire seen from a nearby residential area in Harrington, some 335 kilometres northeast of Sydney. Australian firefighters warned they were in "uncharted territory" as they struggled to contain dozens of out-of-control bushfires across the east of the country.

PHOTO: AFP



Pakistan ex-PM Sharif seeks permission to travel abroad

The family of former Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif are trying to get a travel ban against him lifted so that he can go abroad for medical treatment, one of his close aides told AFP yesterday. Sharif, Pakistan's longest-serving premier, was ousted from his third term in office in 2017 and later imprisoned on corruption charges. But his health has deteriorated in prison. Last month, he suffered a minor heart attack, his party said, adding that he is suffering from an autoimmune blood disorder. Sharif also suffers from high blood pressure and his kidney functions are deteriorating, according to aides. His doctor has claimed via Twitter that Sharif is "fighting for his life".

UK might not exist in a decade: Ipsos poll

The United Kingdom might not exist in its current form in a decade's time, half of its citizens believe, an Ipsos MORI poll found. The 52-48% vote in 2016 to leave the European Union has strained the bonds that tie England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom: Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to stay while England and Wales voted to leave. As the United Kingdom heads towards its latest Brexit deadline of January 31, there are growing demands for an independence referendum in Scotland and for a vote on Northern Ireland unifying with the Republic of Ireland. Scots rejected independence by 55 to 45 percent in a 2014.

Michael Bloomberg mulls US presidential race



Former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg is preparing to enter the crowded race to become the Democratic nominee for the 2020 presidential election, US media reported Thursday. The 77-year-old is expected to file paperwork in at least one state this week declaring himself a candidate, according to multiple outlets including The New York Times. Bloomberg had said back in March he wouldn't run, but has been toying for weeks with the idea of seeking the White House after all, according to an advisor, who was quoted as saying he had yet to make a final decision.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Dozens die in Iraq

Thousands of demonstrators dig in for third week as politicians do the same

AFP, Baghdad

Anti-government protests in Iraq entered their third week yesterday amid fresh bloodshed, but leaders appeared to have closed rank around the country's embattled premier.

More than a dozen demonstrators had died in the capital Baghdad and the southern port city of Basra within 24 hours, medical sources told AFP yesterday.

That pushed the death toll since the first protests erupted on October 1 closer to 300, according to an AFP tally kept as officials have stopped providing updated figures.

In Basra, seven protesters were killed in confrontations on Thursday and early yesterday, with security forces trying to reopen roads blocked by sit-ins, medical sources said.

For a week, protesters have cut access to Basra's Umm Qasr port, which brings in most of Iraq's food and medical imports.

In Baghdad, six people died facing off against

security forces Thursday, a medical source told AFP.

Despite the violence, thousands again flocked to the capital's main protest camp in Tahrir (Liberation) Square yesterday, including members of Iraq's influential tribes.

"We sacrificed the blood of our tribe's sons," said one tribe member who had travelled from the southern city of Nasiriyah.

"We won't stop until the government resigns."

Throughout the night, loud blasts had echoed from around Tahrir as security forces tried to hold off protesters attempting to cross four bridges over the Tigris.

Even the use of tear gas has been deadly, with medics and rights groups documenting security forces firing canisters at point-blank range instead of up in the air to allow the gas to disperse.

The canisters have pierced protesters' skulls and chests, with the United Nations saying at least 16 people had been killed that way as of November 5.



ANTI-GOVT PROTESTS



A Palestinian protester hurls stones at Israeli soldiers during a weekly demonstration against the expropriation of Palestinian land by Israel in the village of Kfar Qaddum near the Jewish settlement of Qadumim, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, yesterday.

Iran downs drone near Gulf coast: reports

AFP, Tehran

The Iranian army shot down an unidentified drone near the port of Bandar-e Mahshahr on the Gulf coast yesterday, Iran's semi-official ISNA news agency reported.

The unmanned aircraft was downed over Iranian territory with a domestically manufactured Mersad surface-to-air missile, said Tasnim news agency which is close to the ultra-conservatives.

Neither news agency gave any further details of the incident which comes amid soaring tensions between Tehran and Washington since President Donald Trump unilaterally abandoned a landmark 2015 nuclear deal last year and reimposed crippling sanctions.

Trump in June authorised a military strike after Iran shot down a US drone, only to call off the retaliation at the last moment.

Washington insists the aircraft was in international airspace, but Iran says it was over its territorial waters.

The crisis deepened with the September 14 attacks on Saudi oilfield giant Aramco's Abqaiq processing plant and Khurais oilfield which halved the kingdom's crude output.

Yemen's Iran-backed Huthi rebels claimed responsibility, but the US says the attacks involved cruise missiles from Iran and amounted to "an act of war".

Washington has responded with a military build-up in the Gulf and on Thursday launched an operation with its allies to protect navigation in Gulf waters.

Top-level SPG cover to Gandhis withdrawn

NDTV ONLINE

The Gandhi family will no longer have Special Protection Group (SPG) cover, the government has decided, according to home ministry sources. Congress president Sonia Gandhi, her children Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra will now have Z Plus category protection.

Sources close to the Gandhis say they were not informed and found out from media reports.

The decision was taken after a security review recently, said government sources. The SPG, an elite force of 3,000, are now tasked with protecting only Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Sources referred to instances when the Gandhis "did not cooperate and impeded the smooth functioning of the SPG".

Z Plus security means the Gandhis will be guarded by around 100 personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF).

The decision is set to become a huge political flashpoint, with Congress leaders perceiving the move as a "downgrading" of

the security of the Gandhis, who have been under SPG cover since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.

"The BJP has descended to the ultimate personal vendetta mechanism, compromising the lives of family members of two former Prime Ministers to acts of terror and violence," tweeted Ahmed Patel,



a close aide of Sonia Gandhi.

The SPG was set up or the security of prime ministers and their families in 1985, a year after Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her bodyguards.

After the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the SPG Act was amended to provide security to former PMs and their families for 10 years.

Sea levels could rise even faster, higher than feared

Say scientists citing Earth's last warming interlude

AFP, Paris

Global warming could drive a much more dramatic increase in sea levels than current projections suggest, scientists say, citing a rise of 10 metres (33 feet) during Earth's last warming interlude more than 100,000 years ago.

Such a change far outstrips current projections and could be catastrophic for vast swathes of humanity, a team at Australian National University concluded in a study.

During the last interglacial period, "sea levels rose at up to three metres per century, far exceeding the roughly 0.3-metre rise observed over the past 150 years," they said in a blog about their findings, published Wednesday in the journal Nature Communications.

Over the last million years, Earth has alternated between roughly 100,000-year-long cold periods -- ice ages -- and shorter, temperate spells such as the last 11,500 years, known as the Holocene.

The scientists reported that during

Earth's last interglacial period 125,000 to 118,000 years ago, when temperatures were only 1.0 degrees Celsius higher than today, the sea rose 10 metres.

The findings do not necessarily foretell our short-term future but they do provide a plausible analogue for the consequences of manmade climate change.

"Greenhouse gas emissions over the past 200 years have caused climate changes that are faster and more extreme than experienced during the last interglacial," the scientists noted.

"This means past rates of sea level rise provide only low-end predictions of what might happen in the future."

Far from being a "sleeping giant", Antarctica is a key variable in rising sea levels, with ice sheets that "can change quickly".

In the last interglacial period it was ice loss in Antarctica -- as is happening today -- that changed "the way the Earth's oceans circulated," they said.

"This caused warming in the northern polar region and triggered ice melt in Greenland," they added.

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Wednesday, 11:59 pm

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6 December 2019
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