

India to get S-400 missiles as planned

REUTERS, Brasilia

Russia plans to deliver S-400 surface-to-air missile systems to India on schedule, President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday. India agreed to buy the S-400 system from Russia last year despite US warnings the purchase could trigger sanctions against it. India said it needed the weapons to bolster its defences against China. "As far as the S-400 deliveries are concerned, everything is going according to plan," Putin told reporters at a summit of BRICS countries in Brazil.

State of emergency in flood-hit Venice

AFP, Venice

Another exceptional high tide swamped flood-hit Venice on Friday, prompting the mayor to order St Mark's square closed after Italy declared a state of emergency for the UNESCO city. Luigi Brugnaro ordered the iconic square closed as the latest sea surge of around 1.6 metres (over five feet) struck and strong storms and winds battered the region -- lower than Tuesday's peak but still dangerous.

Trump to attend Nato summit in London

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump will visit Britain for Nato's 70th anniversary summit next month, the White House said yesterday, in a trip that falls days before the country votes in the December 12 election. The White House said in a statement that Trump and First Lady Melania would visit Britain from December 2 to 4, attending both the Nato gathering and a reception hosted by Queen Elizabeth II. Trump backs a "no deal" Brexit, and he has already roiled the election campaign by suggesting last month that the terms of Johnson's current EU divorce deal mean that London could struggle to continue trade with the US.



Rick Wright inspects the damage next to his house at Nabiac, some 350kms north of Sydney, Australia yesterday braced for strong winds that began to whip up bushfires in two states, potentially adding to a toll of more than 270 homes destroyed and 2.5 million acres of land ravaged during the past week. At least four people died.

PHOTO: AFP

Israel-Gaza violence tests fragile ceasefire

AFP, Gaza City

Israel launched fresh strikes against Islamic Jihad targets in Gaza early yesterday in response to rocket fire, underscoring the fragility of a ceasefire agreed after an escalation that killed 34 Palestinians. No Israelis were killed. Israeli medics said they had treated 63 people as of Wednesday night for mild injuries and stress. The ceasefire began on Thursday morning following two days of fighting triggered by Israel's targeted killing of an Islamic Jihad commander. The Israeli military said it carried out new strikes overnight against Islamic Jihad, the second most powerful Palestinian militant group in the Gaza Strip after Hamas. They came after at least seven rockets were fired at Israel from Gaza, two of which were intercepted by air defences. Two wounded Palestinians were being treated in hospital in the southern part of the territory, according to the health ministry in Gaza. The ceasefire brokered by Egyptian and UN officials, the usual mediators between

Gaza and Israel, was agreed as the flare-up raised fears of a new all-out conflict. To keep a lid on tensions, Palestinians cancelled weekly protests along the Gaza-Israeli border that have often led to violence since March 2018. At least 311 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire in Gaza or the border area since then, most of them during demonstrations and associated clashes. ISRAEL TO PROBE CIVILIAN ATTACKS Meanwhile, Israel's military yesterday said it would investigate unanticipated civilian casualties in a strike the previous day on an Islamic Jihad target in the Gaza Strip. It said, according to information, no civilian was expected to be harmed at the time of the attack. Israel hit the home of Rasmi Abu Malhous, who it described as an Islamic Jihad commander, early on Thursday before a truce between the sides went into force. The strike killed him, five children and two women, according to the Palestinian health ministry in the strip, where the Islamist Hamas movement rules. Islamic Jihad is the second most powerful Palestinian militant group in Gaza after Hamas.

Lanka votes for new leader

Former defense secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, minister Sajith Premadasa vie for presidential post in today's election

CNN ONLINE

Sri Lankans head to the polls today to elect a new president months after deadly terrorist attacks shook confidence in the government and security services and left more than 250 people dead. A record 35 candidates are vying to replace outgoing President Maithripala Sirisena, and election officials said the ballot paper will be 26 inches long in order to include them all. Sirisena's term was marred not only by the Easter bombings but also by a failed attempt to remove Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe from office. That sparked a constitutional crisis that even when resolved by the Supreme Court -- which restored Wickremesinghe to his position -- left a government essentially cleaved in two. It also exacerbated communication failures that meant key information which might have stopped the bombings was not acted on. Under the Sri Lankan system, the Prime Minister is appointed

by the President from members of Parliament, who nominate the most suitable.

Amid the dozens of potential candidates, two men are seen as the likeliest to replace Sirisena: former Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Minister of Housing Sajith Premadasa.



Gotabaya



Sajith

The 70-year-old Rajapaksa only this year renounced his dual-US citizenship in order to contest the poll. He has been closely flanked at all public and media appearances by his elder brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa, who is blocked from running after serving two terms as President from

2005 to 2015. Few doubt that were Gotabaya Rajapaksa to win -- under the maroon banner of the Sri Lanka People's Front -- his brother would wield massive influence over his administration and could be considered President again in all but name. The elder Rajapaksa currently leads the opposition in Parliament and is widely expected to vie for the post of Prime Minister when parliamentary elections are held in 2020 -- bringing the country back in control of the two brothers. Premadasa is deputy leader of the ruling United National Party (UNP), but is contesting the election as a representative of the New Democratic Front, a coalition of right-wing parties. Premadasa is the son of onetime President Ranasinghe Premadasa, who was assassinated by Tamil Tiger rebels at a May Day rally in Colombo in 1993. The winner is expected to be announced by Monday midday, but officials have warned of potential delays should the result be contested or candidates demand a recount.

CONTROLLING DENGUE, ZIKA SPREAD

UN to test impact of mosquito sterilisation

AFP, Geneva

The UN said Thursday it was preparing to test a sterilisation technique targeting mosquitoes that could help rein in the spread of a range of devastating diseases such as dengue and Zika. A form of insect "birth control", called Sterile Insect Technique (SIT), has been used for decades to control crop-killing pests like fruit flies and moths. Now it is being evaluated in a species of mosquito as a potential key tool in halting the spread of human diseases. "It could be really, really significant," Florence Fouque, a scientist at the UN's Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR), told reporters. TDR has partnered with the World Health Organization, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization to develop a pilot programme for countries interested in using SIT on mosquitoes to test its impact on disease transmission. Fouque said a number of countries were being evaluated and that the participants should be chosen in early 2020 for tests lasting several years. The mosquitoes targeted are species that are particularly difficult to control in the Aedes family -- including the Asian tiger mosquito -- which are a major vector for diseases including Zika, dengue and chikungunya. Researchers have found a way to sterilise male mosquitoes using radiation, and tests have shown the technique can significantly reduce populations. Dengue fever has exploded in recent years, with the disease now seen threatening about half of the world's population.



Students and parents embrace after a shooting at Saugus High School in Santa Clarita, California, Thursday. A teenage boy gunned down fellow students at a California high school on his 16th birthday Thursday, killing two and wounding another three before turning the pistol on himself. The gunman was taken into custody in "grave" condition, police said. This incident is the latest in a relentless cycle of classroom shootings in the United States that have left around 300 youngsters dead over two decades.

PHOTO: AFP

Ayodhya: Muslim group rejects land for mosque

Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind (JuH), a key Muslim litigant in the Ayodhya title suit, has decided not to accept the 5-acre alternative land for building a mosque as mandated by the Indian Supreme Court. After its working committee meeting in Delhi on Thursday, the Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind said that nothing would be acceptable as an "alternative" to a mosque, be it money or land. In another big decision, JuH did not rule out the possibility of going for a review of the Supreme Court verdict. A five-member fact-finding committee to be headed by its president, Arshad Madani, would seek legal opinion on the issue.

Chile to change its charter to restore peace

Chile's Congress has reached an agreement to reform the country's constitution in an effort to restore peace after weeks of violent protests that have led to the deaths of at least 20 people. Chilean Senate President Jaime Quintana said the new code would "build a true social contract" and be "100% democratic" compared to the current constitution, which was approved in 1980 during the rule of military dictator Augusto Pinochet. The protests initially began over a now-suspended price hike for subway tickets in Santiago but have since expanded, revealing anger among ordinary Chileans who feel they have been excluded from the nation's economic rise. Chilean President Sebastian Pineria had already promised social and economic reforms to tackle issues at the heart of the recent unrest, including pension raises, affordable medical insurance, lowering the price of medicine and stabilizing electricity prices.

Bolivia interim president rules out Morales polls bid



Bolivia's interim president Jeanine Anez on Thursday ruled out exiled leader Evo Morales from standing in new elections as thousands of demonstrators marched through La Paz in support of the socialist icon and against the new, acting leader. Pledging early elections, Anez -- until now a little-known lawmaker -- proclaimed herself acting president on Tuesday after Morales fled the country for Mexico, claiming to fear for his safety amid deadly protests. Her move was validated by the country's top court. Unrest erupted when Morales -- Bolivia's first indigenous president -- was accused of rigging the results of October 20 polls to gain re-election for a fourth term.

SOURCE: AFP

Free broadband for all

Promises UK Labour; Johnson extends lead ahead of polls

AFP, London

Britain's main opposition Labour party yesterday promised free, fast broadband internet for everyone, in the most eye-catching of a series of big spending pledges ahead of next month's election. The pledge comes as Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative Party extended its lead over the Labour Party to 13 points this week, according to a Panelbase poll. The poll, conducted after the Brexit Party said it would not stand in Conservative-held seats at the December 12 election, put the Conservatives on 43%, up 3 points from a poll last week, ahead of Labour who were unchanged at 30%. Labour said it would bring the parts of telecoms giant BT that deal with broadband into public ownership, as part of a sweeping programme of nationalisations. "The internet has become such a central part of our lives. It opens up



opportunities for work, creativity, entertainment and friendship," said Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. "What was once a luxury is now an essential utility. "That's why full-fibre broadband must be a public service, bringing communities together, with equal access, in an inclusive and connected society." Johnson has previously promised to deliver high-speed broadband to all households by 2025 via the private sector. He condemned Labour's plan as "slightly fantastical" saying it would cost "many tens of billions" of taxpayers' money.



Lobby group TechUK said the move was "fundamentally misguided" and would spell "disaster" for the telecoms industry and the fast-growing digital sector. The pledge is the most radical so far in the campaign for the December 12 election, which has been dominated by Britain's looming exit from the EU but also by promises to end a decade of austerity measures. Labour wants to nationalise the water, railways and mail delivery companies, and invest hundreds of billions of pounds in infrastructure and public services. Johnson's Conservatives, who were responsible for the belt-tightening measures since 2010, have also promised big investments but not on the same scale. Only eight percent of UK premises are connected to full-fibre broadband, compared to 97 percent in Japan and 98 percent in South Korea, Labour says.

Membrane in a minute

S'pore scientists produce in-vitro human skin

REUTERS, Singapore

A piece of skin about the size of your thumbnail can be printed in less than a minute, scientists in Singapore say, a game-changing step for the future of non-animal testing for cosmetics and other products. Made up of skin cells from donors and collagen, the in-vitro skin has the same chemical and biological properties as human skin, says John Koh, lab manager at start-up DeNova Sciences, which is collaborating with Singapore's Nanyang Technological University on the product. "We can see that the industry is moving towards animal-free testing," Koh said. "So we really want to offer a solution to testing on the skin without using animal or human

skin." The team has accelerated the manufacturing process by using a printing machine to put in precisely patterned layers that mimic human skin. Each tiny piece of skin takes less than a minute to print, which is the distinctive quality of this product. The mixture is then incubated for about two weeks, as the skin cells multiply and gain opacity, turning into a whitish membrane. The skin can be used to test the toxicity or irritation potential of a substance, and the penetrative qualities of active ingredients in products like cosmetics. His team is now focusing on developing skin that includes Asian pigment cells to test the whitening effects of cosmetics and skincare products.

