

NEWSIN
brief

US to Japan: Pay \$8b to keep US troops

REUTERS, Tokyo

Washington wants Tokyo to increase annual payments for the 54,000 US troops in Japan to around \$8 billion from about \$2 billion, Foreign Policy said, citing three unnamed former defence officials. The current agreement expires in March 2021. The demand was made to Japanese officials during a trip to the region in July by John Bolton, at that time Trump's national security adviser. A spokesman for the Japanese foreign ministry said the report by the US global affairs publication is incorrect.

Bloomberg in \$100m ad blitz against Trump

AFP, New York

US billionaire Michael Bloomberg has yet to decide whether to run for president but on Friday he announced a \$100 million online advertising campaign attacking Donald Trump. "This is an all-hands-on-deck moment. We're taking the fight to Trump directly," the former New York mayor tweeted. The digital ads focus on the swing states of Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, which will be crucial to winning the keys to the White House in 2020.

Car bomb kills 14 in northern Syria

AFP, Beirut

A car bomb yesterday killed 14 people, nine of them civilians, in the Turkish-controlled town of Al-Bab in northern Syria. The bomb, which struck a bus and taxi station in the town, also wounded 33 people. There was no immediate claim of responsibility. The town near Aleppo, was one of the westernmost strongholds of the IS jihadists' self-styled "caliphate" which was finally eradicated by US-backed Kurdish forces in eastern Syria in March.

Personnel from the Chinese People's Liberation Army helps to clean-up a Hong Kong street yesterday after a week of violence and disruption caused by pro-democracy protesters. *Inset*, Local residents scuffle with an anti-government protester outside the University of Hong Kong.

PHOTO: AFP



Chinese army 'steps in'

PLA troops emerge from barracks to help clean-up as govt supporters march after a week of chaos

AFP, Hong Kong

Soldiers from the Chinese People's Liberation Army briefly left their Hong Kong barracks yesterday to help the clean-up after a week of disruption caused by pro-democracy protests, a rare and highly symbolic troop movement unsolicited by the city's embattled government.

The action saw scores of soldiers from the garrison, which is confined to the barracks under Hong Kong's mini-constitution, with crewcuts and identical gym kits conduct a lightning-quick removal of bricks and debris near their base.

Chinese state media has repeatedly warned that troops could be deployed to quell an unprecedented crisis in the semi-autonomous city that has entered its sixth month.

Confirming the brief deployment on Weibo, China's Twitter-like social media platform, the PLA said it acted to open a debris-strewn road outside their Kowloon Tong barracks to traffic, winning "applause from residents" in

the process.

The last time soldiers assisted in the city was in 2018 to clean up after a typhoon.

A spokesman for Hong Kong's embattled government said the troop movement was not solicited by city authorities and instead was a voluntary community activity initiated by themselves.

Their appearance on Hong Kong's streets raised tensions in a city rocked

HONG KONG CRISIS

by a week of intensified violence and chaos.

The city remains strewn with debris, barricades and scarred by scorch marks from petrol bombs thrown during clashes between police and protesters.

The increasingly ugly scenes prompted China's President Xi Jinping to warn the "one country, two systems" model governing Hong Kong was being jeopardised by the protests.

Semi-autonomous Hong Kong enjoys more freedoms than the mainland, although many feel those liberties are being chipped away.

Article 14 of the Basic Law -- Hong Kong's mini-constitution since its handover from Britain to China in 1997 -- allows the local government to request help from PLA garrisons in the city in the event of a public order breakdown.

Although it was not requested, the PLA's cameo "sends a subtle message that China is behind" the government, said political analyst Dixon Sing.

Arguments and scuffles also broke out yesterday between pro-government and pro-democracy activists during clean-ups across the city.

Earlier yesterday morning a group of around 500 people, mostly middle-aged and senior citizens, rallied outside the Hong Kong government's headquarters to show support for the police, who have been heavily criticised over their handling of the crisis.

North Korea calls Biden 'rabid dog'

Says he 'must be beaten to death'

AFP, Seoul

North Korea launched a visceral diatribe against US Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, calling the former vice-president a "rabid dog" -- while also borrowing the terminology of Donald Trump.

Pyongyang is renowned for its vitriol, but the verbal deluge was unusually ferocious even by its own standards.

Biden "had the temerity to dare slander the dignity of the supreme leadership of the DPRK", the North's official KCNA news agency said late Thursday, referring to the country by its official name.

"Rabid dogs like Biden can hurt lots of people if they are allowed to run about," it went on. "They must be beaten to death with a stick."

"Doing so will be beneficial for the US also," it added. It was not immediately clear what had provoked Pyongyang's ire, but Biden's campaign on Friday seemed to relish the attack.

"It seems that murderous dictator Kim Jong Un doesn't like me," Biden said in a statement. "Add him to the list of autocrats who don't want me to be president -- right next to Vladimir Putin. I wear their insults as a badge of honor."

Biden, who vowed not to "embrace dictators", said that Trump is "emboldening" the North Korean leader.

Kim "would love to see Trump re-elected, as would the rest of America's adversaries. That's just one more reason it's so important we beat him next November", Biden said.

GAZA TRUCE

Israel strikes Hamas after rocket fire

AFP, Gaza City

Israel targeted Hamas in air strikes on Gaza early yesterday after rockets were fired at it from the Palestinian enclave, the army said, two days after a fragile ceasefire began.

Hamas, the Islamist movement that has de facto control over the Gaza Strip, had been spared the brunt of Israeli bombardment during this week's flare-up which focused on its hardline ally Islamic Jihad.

A ceasefire has been in place since Thursday morning following the wave of tit-of-tat air strikes and rocket fire between Israel and Islamic Jihad -- the territory's second most powerful militant group.

The army said it launched strikes after "two rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip towards Israeli territory" and were intercepted by air defences.

It was not immediately known who fired the rockets.

Palestinian security sources said the Israeli strikes were aimed at two Hamas sites in the north of the territory.

There were no reports of casualties.

It was the first time Hamas had been hit since this week's escalation began with Israel's targeted killing of a top Islamic Jihad commander early on Tuesday.

That strike triggered almost immediate retaliatory rocket fire from Islamic Jihad, which set off air-raid sirens and sent Israelis rushing to bomb shelters in the country's southern and central regions.

The Israeli military said around 450 rockets were fired at its territory during the fighting and air defences intercepted dozens of them. The military responded with air strikes it said targeted Islamic Jihad militant sites and rocket- and missile-launching squads.

After two days of fighting which killed 34 Palestinians and no Israelis, a ceasefire was agreed.



One dead during petrol protests in Iran's Sirjan

One civilian was killed and other people injured in Iran's Sirjan, the semi-official news agency ISNA said yesterday, a day after protests in the central city over a petrol price hike. Iran imposed petrol rationing and raised pump prices by at least 50 percent on Friday, saying the move was aimed at helping citizens in need with cash handouts. Under the scheme, drivers will pay 15,000 rials (13 US cents) a litre for the first 60 litres of petrol bought each month, with each additional litre costing them 30,000 rials. "Scattered" protests against the measure also broke out in other cities including Abadan, Ahvaz, Bandar Abbas, Birjand, Gachsaran, Khoramshahr, Mahshahr, Mashhad and Shiraz, according to state news agency IRNA.

US to force hospitals to reveal service rates

The Trump administration said Friday it would begin forcing US hospitals to publish their prices of care and the discounted deals they reach with insurers from 2021 in a bid to rein in health care costs. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) proposed a separate new rule that would force private insurance companies to give patients cost estimates before they see a doctor or get treatment. The initiative is part of a wider effort to ensure more transparency in the US health care industry, which is notorious for being opaque when it comes to costs. HHS Secretary Alex Azar said the move would help by "shining light on the costs of our shadowy system."

Defying US, Turkey to use Russian S-400 system

Turkey will use the S-400 missile defence system it has bought from Russia despite the US threat of sanctions, a senior defence official said yesterday. The purchase of the Russian system and its subsequent delivery of the system in July has been a major source of friction between two Nato allies Turkey and the United States. Last month the US said Turkey would be spared sanctions under a 2017 law if the S-400 system is not turned on. The issue was raised in talks in Washington this week between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his US counterpart Donald Trump. Trump said afterwards that the issue created "serious challenges" for Washington.

SOURCE: AFP

Asean passes protocols to enhance air connectivity

ANN, Hanoi

Transport ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) yesterday adopted two protocols to integrate the air transport in the region, moving towards the ambitious goal of a single aviation market.

In a signing ceremony wrapping up the two-day-long 25th Asean Transport Ministers' Meeting (ATM) in Hanoi, 10 attending ministers signed a protocol to support air transport ancillary services within the bloc.

They also passed another protocol to recognise each other's flight simulation training devices.

"Our bloc and partners have been co-operating and co-ordinating to better develop the aviation network," Minister of Transport Nguyen Van The said following the signing ceremony.

"But besides the two signed protocols, we also reached agreement on various programmes and projects to develop transport connectivity, especially co-operation programmes between Asean and three partner countries in 2020 and some long-term visions for the coming years," he said.

Three separate meetings between Asean and China, Japan and South Korea were held on the sideline of the ATM this year, as ministers discussed activities and projects to enhance transport connectivity between bloc members and partners.

While the 25th ATM revolved around regional air connectivity, co-operation in rail transport was almost absent from the agenda.

Ministers acknowledged the sector's absence in the bloc's discussions, blaming it on the costly investment for railways which made the countries hesitant to expand their train networks.

\$61 BILLION DRUG TRADE IN ASIA

6 countries to take on mega-cartel

AFP, Bangkok

Chinese drug police are working with Mekong countries to strike at the heart of a mega-rich meth syndicate, a senior Beijing drugs tsar said, as the region targets top-level drug traffickers instead of street dealers.

The porous lawless border areas of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos have for decades been a hub for heroin production, but the so-called "Golden Triangle" drug trade is now pumping unprecedented quantities of synthetic drugs into the global markets -- fuelling a \$61 billion drug trade.

In large part responsible for the dramatic shift to synthetic drugs is a mega-cartel known as "Sam Gor", which UN's Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) believes is Asia's biggest crime syndicate led by a Chinese-born Canadian citizen named Tse Chi Lop.

China is now stepping up efforts with Mekong countries -- Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam -- to take down Sam Gor in a "joint operation", said an official from China's National Narcotics Control Commission.

"They are one of the major threats," said deputy commissioner Andy Tsang on the

sidelines of a Friday meeting to stamp out a regional plan.

"The region as a whole, China included, will do our best to hit it where it hurts the most," he told AFP.

The production of methamphetamine



-- either in tablet "yaba" form or the highly potent crystallised "ice" version -- ketamine and fentanyl take place primarily in Myanmar's eastern Shan state, but much

of the precursor chemicals needed to cook them flows across the border from China.

Law enforcement has long focused on busting low-level dealers and users on the streets, a plan that has proved "static" when faced with the shifting trafficking routes used by Sam Gor, said Jeremy Douglas, UNODC's regional representative for Southeast Asia.

Now drug police from the six countries will share intelligence to target traffickers working at border "choke points" where drugs and precursor chemicals flow are rampant, he said.

"You can't engineer the surge of methamphetamine without the surge of chemicals," Douglas told AFP, adding that besides China, the chemicals also come from Thailand, Vietnam and India.

Sam Gor is also believed to launder its billions in drug money out through businesses springing up along the Mekong -- including casinos, hotels and real estate.

Thailand in 2018 netted more than 515 million yaba tablets, 17 times the amount for the entire Mekong region a decade ago -- and seizures this year have already outpaced that amount, said the UNODC.



Bolivian riot police clash with supporters of Bolivia's ex-President Evo Morales during a protest against the interim government, in Sacaba, Chapare province, on Friday. Bolivia's interim government said it has asked Venezuelan officials to leave the country, and accused Cubans, including doctors, of instigating unrest after the resignation of Morales, who faces charges if he returns to the country. At least 5 Morales supporters died in clashes with security forces on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

ASSOCIATION WITH JEFFREY EPSTEIN

I let the royal family down: Prince Andrew

CNN ONLINE

Britain's Prince Andrew, the Duke of York, has told the BBC that he let the royal family down by associating himself with Jeffrey Epstein, even after the late disgraced financier was convicted as a sex offender.

"I stayed with him and that's ... that's the bit that ... I kick myself for on a daily basis," Prince Andrew said. "Because it was not something that was becoming of a member of the royal family and we try and uphold the highest standards and practices and I let the side down, simple as that."

The Duke of York on Thursday for the first time spoke about his relationship with Epstein with BBC Newsnight's Emily Maitlis.

The Duke faces serious allegations over his relationship with the 66-year-old financier, who died by suicide in August while awaiting trial on federal charges accusing him of sexually abusing underage girls and running a sex trafficking ring. Epstein had pleaded not guilty to the charges.

In 2015, one of Epstein's accusers, Virginia Roberts Giuffre, said in a federal court filing that she was forced to have sex with the prince while underage. She alleged Epstein forced her to perform sex acts with a number of prominent men, including the Duke of York in 2001.

However, the prince said he does not remember meeting Virginia Roberts.