

NEWS IN brief

Car bomb kills 9 in northern Syria

AFP, Beirut

A car bomb killed nine people including four civilians in a Turkish-held border town in northern Syria yesterday, a Britain-based war monitor said. Two children were among those killed in Tal Abyad. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the bombing. The area has been shaken by repeated such bombings since Turkish troops and their Syrian proxies seized a strip of border land including Tal Abyad from Kurdish forces in a cross-border operation last month.

Mike Pence visits troops in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

US Vice President Mike Pence flew in to Iraq yesterday to meet American troops stationed in the country's western desert, a security source told AFP. Pence's unannounced landing at Ain al-Asad base -- his first visit to Iraq as vice president -- came nearly a year after President Donald Trump made his own surprise trip to the sprawling complex. No schedule has been announced for Pence's visit. The US has 5,200 troops stationed in Iraqi bases across the country.

Colombia vows reforms amid protests

AFP, Bogota

Protesters picketed the home of Colombian President Ivan Duque on Friday, defying a curfew and the leader's promises of a "national conversation" on social policies following massive anti-government demonstrations that have left three dead and dozens wounded. The popularity of Duque's right-wing government -- a key ally of the United States -- has been on the wane since his election 18 months ago, as it deals with hosting 1.4 million refugees from neighboring Venezuela's economic meltdown.



Demonstrators assault a riot policeman during a protest against the government in Santiago on Friday. The death toll from violent unrest in Chile rose to 23 on Friday as the country entered its fifth week of social unrest. Looting and demonstrations took place in cities across the South American nation, and an agreement on a political roadmap that will see Chile draft a new constitution has halted neither the anger, nor the bloodshed.

PHOTO: AFP

Trump may not sign HK democracy bill

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump on Friday stopped short of saying he will sign legislation supporting the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement that has cast a shadow over his efforts to clinch a trade deal with Beijing.

Six weeks after it was announced, the "phase one" bargain between Washington and Beijing appears no closer to becoming a reality as both sides claim they are prepared to hold out for better terms.

In Beijing on Friday, President Xi Jinping said China wants a deal but is "not afraid" to "fight back" if necessary.

Trump's riposte came several hours later in a freewheeling live dial-in to Fox News in which he told on-air hosts the deal was "potentially very close" but that Xi was under greater pressure to strike a bargain.

He also said that, when it comes to Hong Kong, he is balancing competing interests.

Beijing has denounced new US legislation adopted this week to support the restive semi-autonomous city's democracy movement.

"We have to stand with Hong Kong but I'm also standing with President Xi," Trump said. "We have to see them work it out."

The world's two biggest economies have been locked in a bruising trade conflict for more than a year, hitting each other with volleys of tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of goods.

Diana Choyleva, chief economist at Enodo Economics, said Xi's comments do not mean that Beijing is about to go on the offensive but it shows that it is "not going to budge."

Trump has fostered distrust among the Chinese, making Xi "very determined that there is no point to really give up much," Choyleva told AFP at the New Economy Forum.

'Bully' US is the world's biggest source of instability

Beijing attacks Washington at sidelines of the G20 meeting

REUTERS, Beijing

The United States is the world's biggest source of instability and its politicians are going around the world baselessly smearing China, the Chinese government's top diplomat said yesterday in a stinging attack at a G20 meeting in Japan.

Relations between the world's two largest economies have nose-dived amid a bitter trade war - which they are trying to resolve - and arguments over human rights, Hong Kong and US support for Chinese-claimed Taiwan.

Meeting Dutch Foreign Minister Stef Blok on the sidelines of a G20 foreign ministers meeting in the Japanese city of Nagoya, Chinese State Councillor Wang Yi did not hold back in his criticism of the United States.

"The United States is broadly engaged in unilateralism and protectionism, and is damaging multilateralism and the multilateral

trading system. It has already become the world's biggest destabilising factor," China's Foreign Ministry cited Wang as saying.

The United States has, for political purposes, used the machine of state to suppress legitimate Chinese businesses and has groundlessly laid

charges against them, which is an act of bullying, he added.

"Certain US politicians have smeared China everywhere in the world, but have not produced any evidence."

The United States has also used its domestic law to "crudely interfere" in China's internal affairs, trying to

damage "one country, two systems" and Hong Kong's stability and prosperity, he added.

China was incensed this week after the US House of Representatives passed two bills to back protesters in Hong Kong and send a warning to China about human rights, with President Donald Trump expected to sign them into law, despite delicate trade talks with Beijing.

China runs Hong Kong under a "one country, two systems" model whereby the territory enjoys freedoms not enjoyed in mainland China like a free press, though many people in Hong Kong fear Beijing is eroding this. The government denies that.

Wang said that China's development and growth was an inevitable trend of history that no force could stop.

"There is no way out for the zero-sum games of the United States. Only win-win cooperation between China and the United States is the right path."



Trump gives blessing for Mike Pompeo's exit

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump said Friday he would support Secretary of State Mike Pompeo if he quit to run for Senate, as the top US diplomat becomes increasingly embroiled in the impeachment drama.

Trump's blessing for his close ally's potential departure marks the first public confirmation that Pompeo is considering the Senate race next year in his home state of Kansas.

Always careful not to upset Trump, Pompeo has been coy in his statements on a Senate bid even as his repeated trips to Kansas and regular interviews with media in the Great Plains state increasingly left little doubt.

In an interview with "Fox and Friends," Trump said that Pompeo told him, "Look, I'd rather stay where I am" but that he "loves Kansas."

"If he thought there was a chance of (the

Republican Party) losing that seat, I think he would do that, and he would win in a landslide because they love him in Kansas," Trump said.

Kansas is heavily Republican and has not elected a Democrat to the Senate since 1932, the longest streak that any state has shut out one of the two major US parties.

But neither party is taking chances on next year's election, in which Trump is seeking a second term.

Kansas elected a Democrat as governor last year and the Republican candidates for the Senate nomination include Kris Kobach, a firebrand anti-immigration activist who is unlikely to appeal to centrists.

Pompeo, an evangelical Christian former congressman with roots in the populist Tea Party movement, is widely seen as harboring ambitions to run for president himself in 2024.



Lebanese demonstrators take part in a civilian Independence Day parade in Beirut's Martyr Square Friday, more than a month into protests demanding an overhaul of the entire political system. Lebanon celebrated 76 years of national self-rule Friday, tens of thousands massing for joyous street festivities rather than stiff military parades to hail what a new protest movement calls "real independence".

Chinese spy defects to Australia with trove of intel

A Chinese spy has defected to Australia with a trove of intelligence on China's political interference operations in Hong Kong, Taiwan and elsewhere, according to a media report yesterday. The Nine network newspapers said the defector, named as Wang "William" Liqiang, had given Australia's counter-espionage agency the identities of China's senior military intelligence officers in Hong Kong and provided details of how they funded and conducted operations in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Australia. Wang said he was personally involved in infiltration and disruption operations in all three territories, according to the report, published in Nine's The Age and Sydney Morning Herald newspapers. Wang is currently living in Sydney with his wife and infant son on a tourist visa and has requested political asylum.

South Korea, Japan seek summit after intel pact thaw

Japan and South Korean foreign ministers yesterday agreed to arrange a summit between their leaders next month, seeking to build on a lowering of tensions after Seoul stuck to a key military pact. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Moon Jae-in could meet in China next month, their ministers agreed on the sidelines of a G20 meeting in Nagoya, Japan. Ties between the two countries, both key US allies in the region, have hit rock bottom in recent months over trade and Japan's historic war-time atrocities. The accord, known as GSOMIA, enabled the two US allies to share military secrets, particularly over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile capacity.

Bolivia accuses ex-president Morales of 'terrorism'



Bolivia's caretaker government on Friday filed a complaint accusing Evo Morales of "sedition and terrorism" after the ex-president allegedly called on supporters to maintain blockades in the crisis-hit country. Interior Minister Arturo Murillo referred the case to federal prosecutors in La Paz, which has been choked by road blocks for weeks, causing food and fuel shortages in the seat of government. If Morales -- who fled to Mexico after resigning on November 10 -- were charged and convicted, he would face a maximum penalty of 30 years in jail. The legal action against Bolivia's first indigenous president comes as Congress debates when to hold new elections seen as crucial to quelling weeks of unrest that erupted after the disputed October 20 ballot.

SOURCE: AFP

BJP makes surprise comeback in Maharashtra

AFP, Mumbai

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party yesterday made an unexpected comeback to power in wealthy Maharashtra state, home to the country's financial capital, after prolonged backroom negotiations saw presidential rule lifted after days of uncertainty.

President Ram Nath Kovind imposed direct rule on India's richest state last week after fiercely fought elections last month led to weeks of haggling between parties over forming a government.

The state was previously ruled by Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and its right-wing regional ally Shiv Sena.

But they failed to agree another power-sharing deal despite results showing the coalition had won a comfortable majority for a second consecutive term.

Shiv Sena quit the partnership, hoping to convince their ideological rivals, the centre-left Indian National Congress, and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) to form a government instead.

In the end though the BJP pulled off a major upset by joining hands with a top NCP leader to form a coalition, announcing the deal yesterday.

The Shiv Sena, Congress and the NCP have approached the Indian Supreme Court after the BJP move.

"November 23 will be a black chapter in the history of India when an illegitimate government was constituted by the Governor acting as a hitman on the Constitution of India at the instance of the Home Minister," Congress said in a press conference adding the BJP has "betrayed" the people of Maharashtra.

The coalition still needs to prove its majority in the state legislature in a week's time in order to stay in power.

France slams US's ME inaction

Saudi defends dependable ally as Iran warns regional
states of consequences if found stoking unrest

AFP, Manama

French Defence Minister Florence Parly yesterday took aim at "gradual US disengagement" in the Middle East and said its failure to respond to provocations blamed on Iran set off a dangerous chain of events.

Since May, tensions in the Gulf have escalated alarmingly with attacks against tankers, a US unmanned drone being downed, and strikes on key Saudi oil facilities in September. Iran was blamed but denied involvement.

Despite the attacks on its Saudi ally and having one of its own drones shot down, the United States has avoided equivalent retaliation.

"When the mining of ships went unanswered, the drone got shot. When that in turn went unanswered, major oil facilities were bombed. Where does it stop? Where are the stabilisers?" Parly asked at the annual Manama Dialogue on regional security.

"The region is accustomed to the

ebb and flow of US involvement. But this time it seemed more serious."

Speaking from the same stage in Bahrain, Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir insisted there was no US withdrawal from the region and no doubt about its commitment.



"Some countries in the region should know that they will not have an easy life in the region if clues are found that show they intervened to create unrest in Iran," said Jahangiri, quoted by Fars.

Iran has blamed "thugs" linked to exiles and foreign foes - the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia - for stirring up unrest following hikes in gasoline prices which led to the detention of about 1,000 demonstrators and some of their supporters.

Relations between Iran and US and its Arab allies are at the lowest since US President Donald Trump withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions that have crippled Tehran's economy.

"We believe the US is very dependable ally, and has been for the past seven decades" he said of its staunch ally.

Parly also homed in on strains on Nato, saying it remained the cornerstone of security in Europe but that it was "time to move from the

brain-dead to the brainstorm."

Meanwhile, Iranian Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri yesterday warned regional countries of unspecified dire consequences if it is proven that they meddled to stoke unrest in Iran, the semi-official news agency Fars reported.

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STUDY REVEALS MUSIC'S UNIVERSAL PATTERNS ACROSS SOCIETIES

REUTERS, Washington

From love songs to dance tunes to lullabies, music made in disparate cultures worldwide displays certain universal patterns, according to a study by researchers who suggest a commonality in the way human minds create music.

The study, published on Thursday, focused on musical recordings and ethnographic records from 60 societies around the world including such diverse cultures as the Highland Scots in Scotland, Nyangatom nomads in Ethiopia, Mentawai rain forest dwellers in Indonesia, the Saramaka descendants of African slaves in Suriname and Aranda hunter-gatherers in Australia. Music was broadly found to be associated with behaviors including infant care, dance, love, healing, weddings, funerals, warfare, processions and religious rituals.

The researchers detected strong similarities in musical features across the various cultures, according to Samuel Mehr, a Harvard University research associate in psychology and the lead author of the study published in the journal Science.

"The study gives credence to the idea that there is some sort of set of governing rules for how human minds produce music worldwide. And that's something we could not really test until we had a lot of data about music from many different cultures," Mehr said.

Penn State University anthropology professor Luke Glowacki, a study co-author, said many ethnomusicologists have believed that the features in a given piece of music are most heavily influenced by the culture from which the music originates.

"We found something very different," Glowacki said. "Instead of music being primarily shaped by the culture it is from, the social function of the piece of music influences its features much more strongly."