

NEWS IN brief

Israel expelling HRW country director

AFP, Tel Aviv
Israel was set to expel the country director of Human Rights Watch yesterday after a lengthy court battle over claims he supports a boycott of the Jewish state. American citizen Omar Shakir, the New York-based rights group's director for Israel and the Palestinian territories, arrived at Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv yesterday afternoon, where he was greeted by around 20 supporters. He denies the allegations and accuses the Israeli government of seeking to suppress dissent.

Detective flees Lanka after death threats

AFP, Colombo
A Sri Lankan detective investigating high-profile cases has fled the country after receiving death threats soon after the change of government, police and media reports said yesterday. Inspector Nishantha Silva has sought asylum in Switzerland, according to media reports. He left the island on Sunday without informing his Criminal Investigations Department superiors, a police statement said. "There are various allegations that this officer had been biased during his investigations in the past four and a half years," the police statement said.

Airstrikes kill 8 Yemeni rebels

AFP, Hodeidah
Saudi-led coalition airstrikes killed eight Yemeni Huthi rebels near the port of Hodeidah yesterday, triggering fierce battles around the flashpoint city, local officials said. The new escalation threatens a fragile truce in the Red Sea city that was reached after United Nations-brokered peace talks in Sweden late last year. Several more rebels were wounded in yesterday's raids that targeted military positions of the Iran-backed Huthis north of Hodeidah, two local officials told AFP.



Lebanese anti-government protesters burn tyres to block the road leading to the southern entrance of the northern port city of Tripoli yesterday. Lebanon has faced five weeks of anti-government protests, fuelled by anger at corruption among the sectarian politicians who have governed Lebanon for decades. Demonstrators want to see the entire ruling class gone from power. PHOTO: AFP

Assange 'could die' in UK jail

More than 60 doctors tell Britain's home secretary in open letter

AFP, London
More than 60 doctors wrote an open letter published yesterday saying they feared Julian Assange's health was so bad that the WikiLeaks founder could die inside a top-security British jail. The 48-year-old Australian is still fighting a US bid to extradite him from Britain on charges filed under the Espionage Act that could see him given a sentence of up to 175 years in a US prison. In the letter to Home Secretary Priti Patel, Britain's interior minister, the doctors call for Assange to be moved from Belmarsh prison in southeast London to a university teaching hospital. They based their assessment on "harrowing eyewitness accounts" of his October 21 court appearance in London and a November 1 report by Nils Melzer, the United Nations special rapporteur on torture. The doctors are from the United States, Australia, Britain, Sweden, Italy, Germany, Sri Lanka, Poland. The independent UN rights expert said Assange's "continued exposure to arbitrariness and abuse may soon end up costing his life". Assange used WikiLeaks to publish classified military and diplomatic files in 2010 about US bombing campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq that proved highly embarrassing to the US government. "We write this open letter, as medical doctors, to express our serious concerns about the physical and mental health of Julian Assange," the doctors said in their 16-page open letter.

More secrets leaked

Classified govt documents made public by int'l group of journos describe repressive inner workings of detention camps

AFP, Beijing
Leaked government documents outlining the need to prevent escape, double lock doors and constantly monitor detainees in China's network of internment camps in Xinjiang refute Beijing's defence of "vocational education centres" in the region, experts say. Obtained by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and published by 17 media outlets worldwide on Sunday, the documents show the strict protocols governing life in the camps in Xinjiang, where an estimated one million Uighurs and other mostly Muslim minorities are held. In one document, local officials are told to monitor inmates at all times -- including during toilet breaks -- to prevent escape. Staff are also banned from befriending inmates and engaging in "personal interactions" to prevent "collusion", the document read. "It shatters (the Chinese Communist Party's) CCP's narrative about these camps as benign vocational training centres where Uighurs and other Chinese Muslim(s) willingly undertake training," said James Leibold, an expert on ethnic relations in China and a professor at Melbourne's La Trobe University. Instead, the documents outline "in the Party's own words... the calculated, coercive, and extrajudicial nature of these detentions," he told AFP. The leak comes one week after The New York Times reported, based on more than 400 pages of internal papers it had obtained, that Chinese President Xi Jinping ordered officials to act with "absolutely no mercy" against separatism and extremism in a 2014 speech following a Uighur militant attack on a train station. After initially denying their existence, China acknowledged that it had opened "vocational education centres" in Xinjiang aimed at preventing extremism by teaching Mandarin and job skills. In light of ICIJ's investigation, China's foreign ministry remained dismissive, with spokesman Geng Shuang yesterday accusing "some media" of "smearing China's counter-terrorism and anti-extremism efforts in Xinjiang". The Chinese embassy in London denied such documents existed, telling the Guardian, one of the partners in publishing the memos, they were "pure fabrication and fake news".



Australia probes 'Chinese plot' to create spy MP

PM says allegations deeply disturbing

AFP, Sydney
Australia's prime minister insisted he was "not naive" to the threat of foreign interference yesterday, as authorities investigated an alleged plot by China to recruit a businessman and get him elected. Nine network programme "60 Minutes" broadcast explosive allegations Sunday night that suspected Chinese agents had offered Chinese-Australian Bo "Nick" Zhao Aus\$1 million (\$679,000) to run as a candidate in a federal seat in Melbourne. The 32-year-old luxury car dealer had reportedly disclosed the alleged approach for him to spy to the Australia Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) last year, before he was found dead in a motel room in March. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said yesterday the allegations surrounding Zhao, a member of his Liberal Party, were "deeply disturbing and troubling". "Australia is not naive to the threats that it faces," he told reporters in Canberra. "And that's why we strengthened the laws, why we increased the resources... to ensure Australia was in the best possible position to deal with any threats that come our way." In a rare public statement late Sunday night, ASIO head Mike Burgess said the agency was had been "actively investigating" the matter. "Hostile foreign intelligence activity continues to pose a real threat to our nation and its security," he added. Burgess said he would not comment further on Zhao's death as it was subject to an inquest. Police have been unable to determine how Zhao died. Parliamentary intelligence committee chief Andrew Hastie described the alleged episode in Melbourne as "surreal" and "like something out of a spy novel". "This isn't just cash in a bag, given for favours, this is a state-sponsored attempt to infiltrate our parliament using an Australian citizen and basically run them as an agent of foreign influence in our democratic system," he told 60 Minutes.



Britain in 'a mess'

Says ex-UK PM; warns neither Labour nor Conservatives deserves to win Dec 12 polls

REUTERS, London
Former prime minister Tony Blair said yesterday that Britain was in a dangerous mess and that neither his own Labour Party nor Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservatives deserved to win a December 12 election. Britain is holding an election three years ahead of schedule because parliament was deadlocked over Brexit, unable to agree on how or even whether to leave the European Union. "We're in a mess," Blair said at a Reuters Newsmaker event. "The buoyancy of the world economy has kept us going up to now, but should that falter, we will be in deep trouble." Blair, Labour prime minister from 1997 to 2007, said both major parties were peddling fantasies, adding that if the opinion polls were accurate, Johnson's party looked likely to win a majority. Blair, the only Labour leader to win three elections, said his party was now controlled by its "Marxist-Leninist wing" and that its leader Jeremy Corbyn was promising a revolution. "The problem with revolutions is never how they begin but how they end," said Blair. "The problem with revolutions is that they always end badly." "The truth is: the public aren't convinced either main party deserves to win this election outright." The December 12 vote presents a stark choice between a socialist-run state under Labour, which is offering a second referendum on leaving the EU, and the free-market Conservatives, who want to "get Brexit done" by the end of January. Blair, an opponent of Brexit, argued for a second referendum on the decision to leave, saying it would need to be followed by another general election. Blair cast doubt on that timetable and said there was still a risk that Britain could exit the EU in a year's time without having struck a deal with its biggest trading partner.



An Iraqi demonstrator throws back a tear gas canister during the ongoing anti-government protests in Baghdad, Iraq yesterday. Protesters are demanding the overthrow of a political class seen as corrupt and serving foreign powers while many Iraqis languish in poverty without jobs, healthcare or education. PHOTO: REUTERS

'Priceless' jewels stolen from German museum

Robbers made off with three priceless diamond sets from a state museum in Dresden, police and museum directors confirmed yesterday, in what German media have described as the biggest art heist since World War Two. The thieves broke into the Green Vault at Dresden's Royal Palace -- home to around 4,000 precious objects made of ivory, gold, silver and jewels -- after a power cut deactivated the alarm at dawn. The stolen items included three "priceless" sets of diamonds, the director of Dresden's state art collections Marion Ackermann told reporters. Ackermann confirmed the sets included brilliant-cut diamonds which belonged to an 18th-century collection of jewellery assembled by the museum's founder. Bild daily said the heist was "probably the biggest art theft since World War Two".

Fresh arrests in Saudi Arabia net intellectuals

Saudi Arabia has detained at least eight people, mostly intellectuals and writers, two sources including London-based Saudi rights group ALQST said, amid a two-year crackdown on free expression in the kingdom. They were taken from their homes in the capital Riyadh and the Red Sea port city of Jeddah last week by plainclothes police but the reason was unclear, said one of the sources. The Saudi government communications office did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Riyadh denies having political prisoners, but senior officials have said monitoring of activists, and potentially detaining them, is needed to maintain social stability. Those detained are not frontline activists, the sources said.

Trump fires navy chief over discipline case



The chief of the US Navy on Sunday criticised Donald Trump after being sacked in a dispute over an elite SEAL commando whose demotion for misconduct was reversed by the president. Richard Spencer was ousted as Navy Secretary, a civilian position, in a case that has fueled reports that the US military leadership has been angered by Trump's interference in discipline cases. "I no longer share the same understanding with the Commander in Chief who appointed me, in regards to the key principles of good order and discipline," Spencer said in a stinging letter published by US media. "I hereby acknowledge my termination as United States Secretary of the Navy." SOURCE: AFP

New photos vs old

Comparisons show dramatic Swiss glacier retreat in the face of global warming

REUTERS, The Furka Pass
On the hairpin bend of a Swiss mountain pass, a Victorian-era hotel built for tourists to admire the Rhone Glacier has been abandoned now that the ice has retreated nearly 2 km (1.2 miles) uphill. Where mighty glaciers once spilled into Swiss valleys like frozen rivers of ice, a residue of grey scree and boulders remains, spliced through with raging streams. A Reuters montage of images - showing photos of modern-day mountain landscapes next to archive shots of the same scenes decades earlier - reveals the dramatic change. More than 500 Swiss glaciers have already vanished, and the government says 90% of the remaining 1,500 will go by the end of the century if nothing is done to cut emissions. Their retreat is expected to have a major impact on water levels - possibly raising them initially as the ice melts but depleting them long term. Officials fear the changes could trigger rockfalls and other hazards and affect the economy. The Belvedere Hotel, built in the 1880s during a surge in Alpine tourists, was an early victim of the decline. Once the scene of wild parties, it features in a James Bond car chase in "Goldfinger". Visitors can still walk into a cave carved into the glacier. But the ice above is now draped with huge white sheets to reflect the sun's heat. Despite such efforts, melt waters have formed a green lake. Down the valley, a mid 19th century photograph shows the glacier's bulging snout more than 100 metres thick. Now, animals graze and a river meanders on the same spot.



India courts pvt hospitals to boost 'Modicare' scheme

REUTERS, New Delhi
India will offer incentives to private hospitals to take part in the government's health insurance programme, potentially the biggest of its kind in the world, a senior government official told Reuters. Launched last year, the scheme is critical to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's plans to reform the country's health system, where private healthcare is too expensive for most people and public hospitals are overburdened and often dilapidated. The "Modicare" programme offers families health cover of up to 500,000 rupees (\$7,000) a year for serious ailments - a significant amount by Indian standards - but the scheme has struggled to gain traction. India has so far registered about 20% of the eligible 500 million people, due to lack of public awareness of the scheme and low private sector participation, said Indu Bhushan, CEO of the National Health Authority (NHA), which runs the programme. "There is a challenge of creating awareness and building the required infrastructure," Bhushan said in an interview. "We need to work more on awareness ... give us time." Under the programme, more than 6 million people have so far received treatment free of charge, he said. Currently, 60% of the approximately 20,000 hospitals registered under the programme are in the private sector, Bhushan said, adding that increasing their participation was critical to the scheme's success. Private hospitals, however, are concerned about costs. A report by Indian lobby group FICCI and consultants EY said in August that private hospitals complained that treatment rates offered by the NHA covered only 40-80% of their costs. Bhushan said his agency was in talks with hospitals, industry groups and service providers and was open to revising rates, even though he had last month increased payments offered to hospitals for some treatments. "We are hoping that private sector would come. If rates are not viable, private sector will not come," he said.