

NEWS IN brief

Najib takes stand in 1MDB trial

AFP, Kuala Lumpur
Former Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak was a "victim" of the multi-million dollar 1MDB scandal that saw state coffers drained on his watch, his lawyer said yesterday, as the ex-premier gave evidence in his own fraud trial. Najib, 66, went on trial in April over the controversy, in a case centred on the transfer of 42 million ringgit (\$10.1 million) from former 1MDB unit SRC International into his bank accounts. Najib's coalition was ousted at the polls last year after six decades in power, largely due to public anger over the scandal.

Typhoon kills two in Philippines

AFP, Manila
Typhoon Kammuri killed at least two people in the Philippines yesterday as it tore roofs of houses and forced the international airport in Manila to shut down. The storm roared ashore late Monday and passed south of Manila -- home to 13 million people. Authorities were still assessing the storm's impact, but a small local airport was seriously damaged, many power poles toppled and homes were battered.

Lanka suspends House ahead of snap polls

AFP, Colombo
Sri Lanka's new president suspended parliament for a month from yesterday ahead of snap elections he wants to call in March to consolidate his sweeping victory. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, 70, is hoping to ride a wave of popularity by calling an election six months before the current parliament's five-year term expires in August.



Social activists and supporters shout slogans to protest against the alleged rape and murder of a 27-year-old veterinary doctor in Hyderabad, during a demonstration in New Delhi, yesterday. Sexual violence against women is rife in India, and the latest case recalled the national and international outrage at the gang-rape and murder of a woman by six men on a Delhi bus in 2012. PHOTO: AFP

Nato must tackle China's rise

Says Stoltenberg as Trump kicks off alliance's 2-day London meet blasting Macron

AGENCIES

Nato must address the "security implications" of China's rise as a military power, the head of the alliance said yesterday, but insisted he did not want to make an adversary of Beijing. His comment came after US President Donald Trump launched a blistering attack on French President Emmanuel Macron's criticism of the alliance. Jens Stoltenberg said China's growing military capabilities -- including missiles that could hit Europe and the United States -- meant the alliance had to tackle the issue together. The leaders of Nato's 29 member states kick off a two-day summit today where they are set to approve a report on how the alliance should approach China and its growing international assertiveness. "We have now recognised that the rise of China has security implications for all allies," the Nato secretary general said at the event in London. "China has the second largest defence budget in the world and



'Nasty' France 'insulting' Nato: Trump
Erdogan threatens to block Nato's Baltic defence plan
Trump says he will 'stay out' of UK polls

has recently displayed a lot of new, modern capabilities including long-range missiles able to reach the whole of Europe and the United States." Nato's defence remit is limited to Europe and North America, but Stoltenberg said China's influence was beginning to reach its shores. "It's not about moving Nato into the South China Sea but about taking into account that China is coming closer to us in the Arctic, in Africa, investing heavily in our infrastructure in Europe, in cyberspace," he said.

Macron had tried to shake up the agenda for the London summit by branding the 70-year-old alliance "brain dead", but Trump slapped him down and warned that he could see Paris "breaking away" from Nato. "I think that's very insulting," he said of Macron's comment, branding it a "very, very nasty statement essentially to 28 countries. Asked whether the US alliance with Nato was shaky, Trump denied it, but said: "I do see France breaking off ... I see him breaking off."

The heat between US and France has increased significantly since Monday after Washington threatened Paris with sanctions over digital services tax. Washington says the tax is discriminatory, claiming that it singles out US tech giants such as Google and Facebook. The European Union yesterday said the block will answer tariff threats by the US against France "as one" and urged Washington to engage in dialogue. If the Macron comments set an angry tone for the meeting, there are also expected to be clashes with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who has warned it will block a Nato plan to defend Baltic countries unless the alliance recognises a Kurdish militant group in Syria as terrorists. Meanwhile, Trump yesterday said he would meet British Prime Minister Boris Johnson but promised to "stay out" of Britain's election campaign during his two-day visit. "I don't want to complicate it," he said. "I think Boris is very capable and I think he will do a good job."

Outcry as Nepal's mass animal slaughter begins

The stench of raw meat hung in the air and pools of blood dotted the muddy ground yesterday as what is thought to be the world's biggest animal sacrifice swung into action in a remote area of Nepal. Efforts from activists and officials were expected to cut the death toll from the 200,000 butchers at the last Gadhimal Festival five years ago, but thousands of creatures were still set to be killed over the two days. The event in honour of a Hindu goddess kicked off in the early hours amid tight security, with the ceremonial slaughter of a goat, rat, chicken, pig and a pigeon. Thousands of worshippers from Nepal and neighbouring India have spent days sleeping out in the open and offering prayers ahead of the event in Bariyarpur village, close to the Indian border.

Man arrested for 'making 24,000 complaint calls'

A Japanese pensioner has been arrested after ringing a phone company 24,000 times to complain they had violated his contract, police and local media reported. Tokyo police said they took 71-year-old Akitoshi Okamoto into custody last week after he made hundreds of toll-free calls over eight days to the customer service section of major telephone operator KDDI. But this could be the tip of the iceberg, with media outlets reporting that he made thousands more calls from public pay phones to voice his displeasure with the company and insult customer service staff. Japan is seeing an increasing number of social problems caused by the nation's rapidly ageing population. Old drivers frequently cause fatal car accidents and railway operators have reported a spike in passenger violence against their staff from elderly customers.

Milan Kundera regains Czech citizenship



Novelist Milan Kundera has regained Czech citizenship which he had lost after leaving Communist-ruled Czechoslovakia for France in the 1970s, Czech media said yesterday. The Czech daily Pravo said on its website that Kundera and his wife Vera had received the documents from the Czech ambassador to Paris on November 28. Kundera, who is 90, left his home country for France in 1975 and lost Czechoslovak citizenship four years later before becoming a Frenchman in 1981. Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993, four years after shedding the Communist totality of four decades. His novels include "The Joke" (1967), "The Book of Laughter and Forgetting" (1979), "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" (1984) and "The Festival of Insignificance" (2013). SOURCE: AFP

China outclasses West

AFP, Paris

Teenagers from four big Chinese regions outshone their contemporaries in Western nations in a keenly watched survey of education capabilities published yesterday, which also showed no improvement trend in developed countries over the past two decades. The PISA survey is carried out every three years by the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), this time among its 37 member states and 42 partner countries and economies. The latest study, based on two-hour tests taken by 600,000 15-year-olds last year, showed that students in the four Chinese regions of Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang -- as well as Singapore -- topped the rankings, ahead of their Western counterparts in reading, mathematics and science. "In many Asian countries, the education of children is priority number one," said Eric Charbonnier, an education analyst at

KEY EDUCATION SURVEY

Chinese students topped rankings in reading, mathematics, science
Bigger European nations languished well behind in the rankings

the OECD. "Teachers have high-quality training and there have been investments in schools that had difficulties," he added. In reading, which the OECD considers its headline indicator of education potential, the best performing OECD state was the tiny Baltic nation of Estonia, followed by Canada, Finland and Ireland. Bigger European nations languished well behind in the rankings, with Britain in 14th place, Germany 20th and France 23rd. The United States placed 13th in reading. OECD secretary-general Angel Gurría said the students from the four Chinese provinces had "outperformed by a large margin their peers from all of the other 78 participating education systems". He cautioned that these four provinces and municipalities in eastern China "are far from representing China as a whole." The survey said among OECD countries, the mean performances in reading, mathematics and science remained stable from the previous survey.

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Physically challenged children enjoy at the Marina Beach during an event to mark the International Day of Disabled Persons in Chennai, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

2 killed, 9 hurt in Pak shelling at LoC in J&K

PTI, Jammu

Two civilians - a 35-year-old woman and a 16-year-old boy - were killed and nine others injured yesterday when Pakistan army heavily shelled forward posts and villages along the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir's Poonch district, officials said. The firing and shelling from across the border in Shahpur and Kirni sectors was retaliated by the Indian Army, but the casualties suffered by Pakistan was not known immediately, they said. "At about 2:30 pm, Pakistan initiated unprovoked ceasefire violation by firing of small arms and shelling with mortars in the two sectors. The Indian army is retaliating befittingly," a defence spokesman said.

A police officer said two civilians - Gulnaz Akhtar and Shoib Ahmad - were killed and nine others including two women and a minor boy were injured in the Pakistani shelling in Shahpur sector. The shelling is going on heavily in the area, he said, adding the injured were evacuated to a hospital and the condition of some of them was stated to be "serious". Several residential houses were also damaged but the exact details are awaited, the officer said.

With the latest deaths, the number of those killed in Pakistani shelling and firing along the LoC and the International Border (IB) this year has gone up to 32. There have been nearly 3,000 ceasefire violations by Pakistan along the LoC and the IB, including 950 post abrogation of Article 370 provisions on August 5, this year, the officials said.

Nasa finds Indian Moon lander

AFP, Washington

India's Vikram lunar lander, which crashed on its final approach to the Moon's surface in September, has been found thanks in part to the sleuthing efforts of an amateur space enthusiast. Nasa made the announcement on Monday, releasing an image taken by its Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO) that showed the site of the spacecraft's impact (September 7 in India and September 6 in the US). A version of the picture was marked up to show the associated debris field, with parts scattered over almost two dozen locations spanning several kilometers.



This handout image released by Nasa shows the Vikram Lander impact point. Inset, Artist's rendition of the Vikram lander. PHOTO: AFP



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In a statement, Nasa said it released a mosaic image of the site on September 26 (but taken on September 17), inviting the public to compare it with images of the same area before the crash to find signs of the lander. The first person to come up with a positive identification was Shanmuga "Shan" Subramanian, a 33-year-old IT professional from Chennai, who told AFP that Nasa's inability to find the lander on its own had sparked his interest. Nasa then performed additional searches in the area and officially announced the finding almost two months later. Blasting off in July, emerging Asian giant India had hoped with its Chandrayaan-2 ("Moon Vehicle 2") mission to become just the fourth country after the United States, Russia and regional rival China to make a successful Moon landing, and the first

on the lunar south pole. The main spacecraft, which remains in orbit around the Moon, dropped the unmanned lander Vikram for a descent that would take five days, but the probe went silent just 2.1 kilometers above the surface. Days after the failed landing, the Indian Space Research Organization said it had located the lander, but hadn't been able to establish communication.

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Climate change hits health, yet funds lacking: WHO

Study links hot weather to rise in early childbirth

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Climate change is harming human health as more people suffer from heat stress, extreme weather and mosquito-borne diseases including malaria, the World Health Organization (WHO) said yesterday. The UN agency, in a report issued a day after a climate summit began in Madrid, urged governments to meet ambitious targets to reduce heat-trapping carbon emissions saying it could save a million lives a year through lower air pollution alone. "Health is paying the price of the climate crisis. Why? Because our lungs, our brains, our cardiovascular system is very much suffering from the causes of climate change which are overlapping very much with the causes of air pollution," Maria Neira, Director of WHO's Department of Environment, Climate Change and Health, told a news briefing. Yet less than 1% of international financing for climate action goes to the health sector, she said, calling it "absolutely

outrageous". Global temperatures could rise sharply this century with "wide-ranging and destructive" consequences after greenhouse gas emissions hit record levels last year, international climate experts warned last week. "WHO considers that climate change is potentially the greatest health threat of the 21st Century," said WHO expert Diarmuid Campbell-Lendrum. Meanwhile, scientists linked hot weather to a spike in the number of babies being born early. Researchers in California said an average of 25,000 children were born up to two weeks early during warmer than average periods in the United States between 1969-1988 -- equivalent to 150,000 lost gestational days annually. While it is not certain why mothers appear to go into labour early as the mercury climbs, the authors of the study published in Nature Research Journals said premature births was an issue to be taken seriously.