

NEWSIN
brief

Philippines floods force
66,000 from homes

AFP, Manila

The Philippines' north has been hit by some of its worst flooding in decades, with torrents of muddy runoff forcing 66,000 from their homes and prompting rescues of trapped locals, authorities said yesterday. Luzon island has been hit by a string of storms that have battered its northern tip while monsoon rains were intensified by the passage of Typhoon Kammuri this week which killed at least 13 people.

Strike causes travel
chaos in France

AFP, Paris

Travellers faced a second day of chaos across France yesterday as unions pressed on with a strike aimed at forcing President Emmanuel Macron to abandon pension reforms that brought nearly a million people onto the streets. Dozens of trains, metros and flights were cancelled, many schools were again closed or offering only daycare, and four of the country's eight oil refineries remained blocked, raising the prospect of fuel shortages. French government yesterday said it will stick with the pension system reform plans.

HK protesters vow
weekend rally

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong pro-democracy activists yesterday vowed to hold another massive rally over the weekend and warned the city's pro-Beijing leader not to think a recent lull in violence means public anger is weakening. The semi-autonomous financial hub has been battered by six months of increasingly violent protests pushing for greater democratic freedoms and police accountability in the most stark challenge the city has presented to Beijing since its 1997 handover.



Palestinian protesters run from tear gas fired by Israeli forces during a demonstration along the border with Israel east of Bureij in the central Gaza Strip, yesterday.

PHOTO:
AFP

Parties meet as deal crumbles
US mulls sending more troops to ME as European powers
accuse Iran of developing nuke-capable ballistic missiles

AFP, Vienna

The signatories to the Iran nuclear deal remain committed to the faltering accord, China and Russia said yesterday, following crunch talks as Tehran has vowed to continue to breach limits on its nuclear programme.

Envoys from Britain, France, Germany, China, Russia and Iran took part in the three-hour-long meeting in Vienna, which is the first time the six parties have gathered in this format since July.

Since May, Iran has taken a series of measures, including stepping up uranium enrichment, in breach of the 2015 deal, with another such move likely in early January.

Iran insists that under the agreement it has the right to take these measures in retaliation for the US's withdrawal from the deal in 2018 and reimposition of crippling sanctions.

Since last month, European members have in turn begun raising the possibility of triggering the so-called "dispute resolution mechanism" foreseen in the accord, which could lead to the resumption of UN sanctions on Iran.

On the eve of what was already likely to be a strained

meeting, Britain, France and Germany accused Iran of developing nuclear-capable ballistic missiles, in a letter to the UN on Thursday. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif dismissed the allegation as "desperate falsehood".

Chinese delegation head Cong Fu told reporters after the talks that all parties remained committed to the deal and the dispute resolution mechanism -- which China is against activating -- was not evoked. Other envoys did not talk as they left the EU delegation, which hosted the meeting.



Meanwhile, the US Thursday said that Iranian authorities may have killed more than 1,000 people in a crackdown on demonstrations.

The damning account came as the US put new pressure in the region on its arch-enemy, with an official saying the Pentagon was considering sending 5,000 to 7,000 more troops.

Brian Hook, the US pointman on Iran, said that "many thousands" of Iranians have been wounded and that at least 7,000 protesters have been detained. President Donald Trump called the crackdown "brutal" and a "horrible situation" as he vowed to respond "strongly" to any threat from Iran against US interests.

WARNING TO TRUMP
N Korea revives
'dotard' insult

REUTERS, Seoul

US President Donald Trump's comments on military force and the North's leader, Kim Jong Un, would represent "a very dangerous challenge" if they were intended to provoke Pyongyang, a top North Korean diplomat said on Thursday.

Trump's comments threaten to return the two countries to the tensions of two years ago, Choe Son Hui, first vice-minister of Foreign Affairs for North Korea, said in a statement carried by state news agency KCNA.

In 2017 the two leaders famously engaged in a war of words, with Trump calling Kim "Rocket Man" and North Korea slamming the US president, now 73, as a "dotard".

Since then Trump and Kim have met three times, but negotiations over North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile arsenal have stalled.

This year saw a number of short-range ballistic missile launches by North Korea, and Kim has warned that the United States has until the end of the year to change its stance or he could take an unspecified "new path."

On Tuesday Trump once again called Kim "Rocket Man" and said the United States reserved the right to use military force against North Korea.

"If this is meant to make expressions, reminiscent of those days just two years ago when a war of words was fought across the ocean, surface again on purpose, it will be a very dangerous challenge," Choe said, arguing that the comments aroused concern and undermined the dignity of North Korea's leader.

The lack of courtesy shown to Kim had "prompted the waves of hatred of our people against the US and the Americans and they are getting higher and higher", Choe said.

'Mega fire' threatens Sydney

AFP, Sydney

Several Australian bushfires have combined to form a "mega fire" that is burning out of control across a swathe of land north of Sydney, authorities said yesterday, warning they cannot contain the blaze.

New South Wales Rural Fire Service deputy commissioner, Rob Rogers said "there are probably more than eight fires in all" that have merged to form what has been dubbed a "mega fire" in an area of national park forest.

The blaze was burning across 300,000 hectares -- an area roughly 60 kilometres across -- within an hour's drive of Australia's largest city, which was again subsumed in a soup of toxic smoke.

"There is just fire that whole way" said Rogers, who added that firefighters could do little more than get any residents out, protect property and hope for an end to fire-friendly dry and windy conditions.

We "cannot stop these fires, they will just keep burning until conditions ease, and then we'll try to do what we can to contain

them," he told public broadcaster ABC.

Prolonged drought has left much of eastern Australia tinder-dry and spot fires have raged every day for the past three months.

Bushfires are common in Australia but scientists say this year's season has come earlier and with more intensity due to a prolonged drought and climatic conditions fuelled by global warming.

More than 600 homes have been destroyed and six people have died since the crisis began in September. That is many fewer than Australia's deadliest recent fire season in 2009 when almost 200 people died, but 2019's toll so far belies the scale of devastation.

An estimated two million hectares have burned -- the size of some small countries -- across a region spanning hundreds of kilometres (miles).

The fires have taken a toll in Sydney and other major cities, which have been blanketed in toxic smoke for weeks and occasionally sprinkled with snow-like embers.



'We must remember
the crimes clearly'

Merkel expresses 'shame' during Auschwitz visit

REUTERS, Oswiecim

Angela Merkel expressed "deep shame" yesterday during her first visit as chancellor to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Holocaust memorial and vowed to fight rising racism and anti-Semitism in Germany and Europe.

Dressed in black, Merkel said the crimes committed at the site in southern Poland where the Nazis ran their largest death camp would always be part of German history.

"This site obliges us to keep the memory alive. We must remember the crimes that were committed here and name them clearly," Merkel said during a ceremony attended by Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

"I feel deep shame given the barbaric crimes that were committed here by Germans," she added.

Merkel brought a 60-million-euro (\$66.13 million) donation from Germany's federal government and its 16 states to help conserve the site where 1.1 million people were killed, most of them Jews.

Before her speech, Merkel and Morawiecki toured the camp's crematorium where victims' bodies were burned. They walked through the camp's iron gate bearing the motto "Arbeit macht frei" (Work sets you free) and visited the barracks.

Merkel has regularly acknowledged German responsibility for atrocities in World War Two. Her visit ensured she followed in the footsteps of two former chancellors by seeing the site while in office.

More than 3 million of Poland's 3.2 million Jews were killed during the Holocaust, roughly around half of all the Jews murdered during World War Two.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel (2nd L), flanked by Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (2nd R) and the Director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum Piotr Cywinski (L), walks through the gate during her visit at the former German Nazi death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau in Oswiecim, Poland, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

265 killed in floods in East
Africa in two months

Two months of relentless rains have submerged villages and farms and sent rivers of mud crashing into houses across East Africa, with at least 265 killed, according to an AFP tally, as meteorologists warn of more to come. The extreme downpours have affected close to two million people and washed away tens of thousands of livestock in Kenya, Somalia, Burundi, Tanzania, South Sudan, Uganda, Djibouti and Ethiopia. With a tropical storm headed for Somalia and more rain forecast across the region in the coming weeks, fears are rising over waterborne diseases and the prospect of hunger as crops are destroyed. The extreme weather is blamed on the Indian Ocean Dipole -- a climate system defined by the difference in sea surface temperature between the western and eastern areas of the ocean.

China imposes 'reciprocal'
restrictions on US diplomats

China yesterday said it had taken "reciprocal" measures against US diplomats in the country, ordering them to notify the foreign ministry before meeting with local officials. Foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said China had notified the US embassy of the new measures on Wednesday, which she said were a "countermeasure" to Washington's decision in October to restrict Chinese diplomats. In October, the US ordered Chinese diplomats to notify the State Department in advance of any official meetings with US diplomats, local or municipal officials, and before any visits to colleges or research institutions.

56 polar bears crowd
Russian village for food



More than 50 polar bears have gathered on the edge of a village in Russia's far north, environmentalists and residents said, as weak Arctic ice leaves them unable to roam. The Russian branch of the World Wildlife Fund said climate change was to blame, as unusually warm temperatures prevented coastal ice from forming. The WWF said 56 polar bears had gathered in a one-square-kilometre area near the village of Rykpaipy in Chukotka on the northeastern tip of Russia. There were concerns they could enter the village of fewer than 1,000 people for food. Russia's weather service said temperatures in the region should fall from today and that coastal ice should freeze by December 11.

SOURCE: AFP

Don't want to 'peddle half truths'

Senior UK diplomat quits over Brexit as Corbyn accuses PM
Johnson of Brexit fraud over Northern Ireland's economy

REUTERS, London

A senior British diplomat in Washington has resigned, saying she did not want to "peddle half-truths" over Brexit for a government she did not trust, CNN reported yesterday.

Britons head to the polls on Dec 12 for an election which will decide the fate of Britain's exit from the European Union.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservatives have said they will deliver Brexit by the end of January, while the opposition Labour Party, who are trailing in the polls, plans to renegotiate the exit deal and put it to another referendum.

Citing a copy of her resignation letter, dated Dec 3, CNN reported Alexandra Hall, who had been Brexit Counsellor in the British embassy in Washington since 2018, said her position had become "unbearable personally, and untenable professionally".

"I have been increasingly dismayed by the way in which our political leaders have tried to deliver Brexit, with reluctance to address honestly, even with our own

citizens, the challenges and trade-offs which Brexit involves," she wrote.

"It makes our job to promote democracy and the rule of law that much harder, if we are not seen to be upholding these core values at home."

A former British ambassador to Georgia who had worked for the foreign office for



Jeremy Corbyn



Alexandra Hall

33 years, Hall Hall said her decision to quit had nothing to do with being "for or against Brexit, per se".

"I am also at a stage in life where I would prefer to do something more rewarding with my time, than peddle half-truths on behalf of a government I do not trust," she

wrote.

Earlier, Britain's opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn accused Prime Minister Boris Johnson of misleading the public unveiling a leaked government document which showed the damaging impact of PM's Brexit deal on Northern Ireland's economy.

Johnson has repeatedly said there would be no customs checks on goods moving between Northern Ireland and mainland Britain under the divorce deal which he agreed with the European Union.

But the document, marked "official, sensitive", says exporters would have to make customs declarations when moving goods between Northern Ireland and Britain and these new barriers will be "highly disruptive" to Northern Ireland's economy.

The leaked analysis warns that 98% of Northern Irish exporters to Britain are small to medium sized businesses, which are "likely to struggle to bear" the cost of new border checks.