

NEWSIN brief

More than 60 killed in latest Syria clashes
 AFP, Beirut

Clashes between Syrian regime forces and armed groups in the country's last major opposition bastion have killed more than 60 on both sides in the past 24 hours despite UN calls for de-escalation, a war monitoring group said yesterday. 38 jihadists and allied rebels had been killed in battles with regime forces in the northwestern province of Idlib since Thursday night, it said. It also killed 23 Syrian regime loyalists.

Quake jolts Pakistan, J&K, Afghanistan

REUTERS, Islamabad/Kabul

An earthquake shook some buildings in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Kashmir state in India yesterday, witnesses said. The magnitude 6.1 quake was centred in mountainous Hindu Kush region in Afghanistan, at a depth of 210 km, the US Geological Survey said. Officials in Kabul said they were assessing damage in areas around the sparsely populated epicentre. In Pakistan, tremors were felt strongly. There were no immediate reports of casualties. Tremors were also felt in India's Kashmir where people rushed out of their homes and offices.

Iraq's top Shia cleric urges polls to end crisis

AFP, Karbala

Iraq's influential top Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani yesterday called for early elections to end the political paralysis in the protest-hit country. Iraq has been rocked by two months of anti-government protests. The demonstrators have condemn official graft and a lack of jobs and demanded the ouster of the entire political class. About 460 people have been killed and 25,000 wounded in street clashes in the capital Baghdad and across the Shia-majority south.



Lebanese protesters block a road in the northern city of Tripoli, yesterday. Protesters blocked roads across crisis-hit Lebanon yesterday to condemn the designation of Hezbollah-backed Hassan Diab as prime minister in a divisive vote that sparked uproar among members of the Sunni community.

REPRESSION ON UIGHURS

EU parliament calls for China sanctions

AFP, Beijing

Beijing yesterday accused the European Parliament of hypocrisy, after a resolution called for targeted sanctions against Chinese officials over the treatment of the Uighur minority.

China has faced international condemnation for rounding up an estimated one million Uighurs and other mostly Muslim ethnic minorities in internment camps in the northwestern region of Xinjiang.

Members of the European Parliament said on Thursday that China's human rights record had worsened in the past year, and called for the Chinese government to "immediately end the practice of arbitrary detentions without any charge, trial or conviction".

In response to the resolution, Beijing called for the European Parliament to "abandon their double standards on counter-terrorism" and stop "interfering in China's internal affairs".

"The people of Xinjiang and the Chinese people have a greater right to speak (about the situation in Xinjiang) than those who are far away in Europe, who have never been to Xinjiang," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said at a regular press briefing.

MEPs had called for "targeted sanctions and freeze assets, if deemed appropriate and effective, against the Chinese officials responsible for severe repression of basic rights in Xinjiang".

Beijing initially denied the existence of the Xinjiang camps, but now says they are "vocational training centres" necessary to combat terrorism. Last month, the New York Times obtained 403 documents on Beijing's crackdown on mostly Muslim ethnic minorities in the region, including unpublished speeches by Chinese President Xi Jinping, who urged officials to show "absolutely no mercy" to extremists.

Now is the time for healing

Says UK PM as his Brexit deal secures first win in parliament

REUTERS, London

Prime Minister Boris Johnson won approval for his Brexit deal in parliament yesterday, the first step towards fulfilling his election pledge to deliver Britain's departure from the European Union by Jan 31 after his landslide victory.

Lawmakers voted by 358 to 234 pass the second reading of the legislation, underlining Johnson's large majority in parliament that should ensure a smooth ratification of the divorce deal to implement Britain's biggest policy shift in more than 40 years.

More than three years since Britain voted to exit the EU in a 2016 referendum, the deep uncertainty over Brexit has now been replaced by the firm deadline of the end of January. Only after that will the prime minister face talks to secure a trade deal with the bloc and another target date of the end of next year.

Getting "the Brexit vote wrapped up for Christmas" was the main aim for Johnson showing that, unlike his predecessor Theresa May, he now had free reign to drive Brexit forward

despite continued criticism from opposition lawmakers.

"This is the time when we move on and discard the old labels of 'leave' and 'remain' ... now is the time to act together as one reinvigorated nation, one United Kingdom," Johnson told parliament before the vote.

"Now is the moment to come together and write a new and exciting



chapter in our national story, to forge a new partnership with our European friends, to stand tall in the world, to begin the healing for which the whole people of this country yearn."

The final stages of ratification will take place after Christmas, with the lower house of parliament having until Jan. 9 to approve the legislation, or Withdrawal Agreement Bill, giving it just over three weeks to then pass

through the upper house and receive Royal Assent.

After leaving, Britain will need to secure new trading arrangements with the EU - which the prime minister said would see the country agree a trade deal with no alignment to the bloc's rules.

In a change to the bill, Johnson made it illegal to extend those talks beyond the end of next year.

But while Johnson has the support of his 365 Conservative lawmakers in the 650-seat lower house, some opposition members criticised him for removing the opportunity for parliament to have oversight over his negotiating priorities in the next phase of talks, and for getting rid of workers' protections. Opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn described it as "terrible" and said his party would not support the bill.

Hoping to satisfy the demands of voters in northern and central England who broke their tradition of backing the Labour Party to support him, he has also pledged more funding to the state health service, education and policing.

Xi: China will not let foreign forces interfere in HK, Macau

REUTERS, Macau

President Xi Jinping yesterday said China would never allow foreign forces to interfere in its special regions, including Hong Kong, as he swore in a new pro-Beijing government for the gambling hub of Macau.

At a ceremony marking the 20th anniversary of Macau's handover to Chinese rule, Xi heaped praise on the former Portuguese colony for its patriotism and loyalty, but did not refer directly to six months of anti-government protests in the former British colony of Hong Kong.

"I must emphasize, since Hong Kong and Macau's return to the motherland, dealing with these two Special Administrative Regions' affairs is entirely China's internal affairs and none of the business of foreign forces," Xi said.

"We do not let any external forces interfere."

Macau returned to Chinese rule on Dec 20, 1999, with the same "one country, two systems" formula aimed at ensuring a high degree of autonomy under which Hong Kong is governed.

While protesters in Hong Kong, across the mouth of the Pearl River, are furious about what they see as Beijing's erosion of their freedoms, Macau has seen little dissent.

Beijing denies undermining Hong Kong's autonomy and has repeatedly blamed foreign governments, including the United States and Britain, for stirring up trouble in the financial hub.

Xi swore in new Macau chief executive Ho Iat-seng and his administration, which will run the enclave of several islands for the next five years.

Under a large Chinese flag and a smaller Macau one, Xi shook hands with Ho, who was selected in August by a largely pro-Beijing committee in a similar process to the way Hong Kong's leader is chosen.

Xi said Macau's patriotism was "the most important reason" for the success of its "one country, two systems formula of governance". He said China would be unwavering in the defence of its sovereignty.

Xi said he was pleased Macau had implemented national security legislation, unlike Hong Kong which has yet to do so because of widespread opposition.



'They have nothing to lose now'

Ruling Hindu nationalists' one move after another leave little space for imagination for country's 200 million Muslims, who couldn't but help worrying about their status in constitutionally secular India

AFP, Barpeta

Habib-ur-Rehman was locked up for four years after failing to prove he's Indian, and now worries he may be expelled. It's a fear shared by other Muslims under Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In recent days these worries have morphed into angry protests sparked by the passage of a new law giving non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh an easier path to citizenship.

"Five generations of mine have lived in this village and today I am being told that I am an infiltrator because I am a Muslim," said Rehman, 50, recently released from internment in Assam in northeast India.

He was declared an alien in 2015 by a special tribunal as part of long-running efforts in Assam to root out outsiders, which culminated earlier this year with a state-wide register that the Modi government now wants to roll out nationwide.

Assam's register excluded 1.9 million people who now face possible statelessness, detention in camps or even deportation, although that is not feasible.

Decades of ethnic tensions and immigration from Bangladesh and West Bengal make Assam a case apart, as those excluded from the register are a mix of both Muslims and Hindus -- the latter mostly Bengali speakers who Assamese fear will undermine their culture.

But elsewhere across India it is Muslims who fear they are Home Minister Amit Shah's target when he says the national



register will remove all "infiltrators" by 2024.

Modi says "genuine" Indians -- the country's 200 million Muslims included -- have nothing to fear, but the experience in Assam of people left off the register suggests otherwise.

Outside of Assam, Muslims -- as well as defenders of India's secular tradition -- are starting to panic, as seen in the current protests across the country of 1.3 billion people.

"The writing is on the wall. They want to build a Hindu nation along the lines of Israel... I feel as though this country is about to erupt," Zubair Azmi, 46, a Muslim lawyer based in Mumbai told AFP.

"I know secular Hindus who are fighting at our side... but their numbers are falling because other Hindus are believing

the BJP's propaganda against Islam," he said.

Ambreen Agha, a professor at the O.P. Jindal Global University in Sonapat, said the citizenship law follows other worrying events under Modi since he was re-elected in May.

In August New Delhi revoked the partial autonomy of Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state. In November the Supreme Court allowed a Hindu temple to be built in the flashpoint town of Ayodhya where Hindu zealots demolished a mosque in 1992.

Modi's first term also saw a rise in lynchings of Muslims over cows -- sacred to many Hindus -- and other hate crimes, activists say. Many Muslim-sounding towns and cities were re-named.

But the citizenship law has acted as the final straw.

"It happened first with the Kashmir issue. At that time we kept quiet... Then came the (Ayodhya) verdict," said Ayesha Renna, a Muslim woman who made headlines this week for protecting a fellow student from baton-wielding police in Delhi.

"Next they will be targeting the whole of India," she told a TV channel.

Professor Agha suggested opposition to the law would only grow.

"There were resistances in the past, but what is happening today on the streets is unprecedented in the history of modern India," she told AFP.

"They have nothing to lose now."

Rwandan faces 30-year jail term for genocide

Belgian prosecutors yesterday urged a court to impose a 30-year jail term on a former Rwandan official convicted of genocide for his part in the country's 1994 massacres.

Fabien Nereete, a 71-year-old agricultural engineer, was arrested in France in 2011 and was found guilty of genocide and war crimes on Thursday after a trial in the Brussels high court. Nereete, who protested his innocence throughout the trial, is the first person to be convicted in Belgium on a genocide charge. He was also convicted of war crimes for 11 killings in Rwanda, under Belgium's code of universal jurisdiction for the most serious offences.

Indian ex-lawmaker gets life term for rape of teen

A court sentenced a former lawmaker from India's ruling party to life imprisonment for raping a teenager, his lawyer said yesterday, the highest ranking Indian politician to get such a significant jail term in recent years.

Kuldeep Singh Sengar, a BJP legislator in Uttar Pradesh, was convicted earlier this week under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act. Sengar, who was later expelled from the party, had pleaded not guilty. The court in Delhi also fined him 2.5 million rupees (\$35,000). The case gained nationwide attention last year when the accuser, who was a teenager in 2017 when she says she was raped, tried to kill herself, accusing the police of inaction. In July, a truck crashed into a car she was travelling in. Two of her relatives were killed and she was injured.

Woman rejects settlement, sues Harvey Weinstein



A woman who alleges disgraced Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein sexually assaulted her when she was 16 filed suit against him on Thursday and rejected a settlement reached by other accusers. Kaja Sokola said the \$25 million settlement with dozens of women, designed to resolve almost every misconduct lawsuit brought against Weinstein, is neither fair nor just.

Sokola, now a clinical psychologist in Poland, said she moved to New York at 16 to work as a model and try to achieve her dream of becoming an actress. Her 23-page claim said she was introduced to Weinstein in September 2002. He invited her to dinner, allegedly leading her to believe that he wanted to help her career. Instead of taking her to a restaurant, he brought Sokola to his residence where he "sexually abused" her, according to the allegations.

SOURCE: AFP

BUSHFIRE CRISIS

Aussie PM apologises for vacation

REUTERS, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison issued a rare public apology yesterday and cut short a Hawaiian vacation in response to mounting public anger after two volunteer firefighters were killed battling bushfires sweeping the country's east coast.

Some areas of Sydney are set for "catastrophic" conditions today, and the deadly fires are now engulfing other parts of the country. Australia has been fighting wildfires across three states for weeks, with blazes destroying nearly 3 million acres of bushland.



Democratic presidential hopeful former Vice President Joe Biden (L) and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders participate in the sixth Democratic primary debate of the 2020 presidential campaign season at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California, on Thursday.

DEATH SENTENCE TO MILITARY RULER MUSHARRAF

Pakistan govt to file compliant against judges

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

The government of Pakistan will be filing a complaint against a senior judge who, heading the bench that convicted former military ruler Pervez Musharraf for high treason, called for the former president's corpse to be displayed outside parliament.

Judge Waqar Ahmed Seth, in personal observations recorded in a detailed verdict that was released on Thursday, said the former president should be apprehended and hanged by authorities as soon as possible.

"And if [Musharraf is] found dead, his corpse be dragged to the D-Chowk [in front of Pakistan's parliament building], Islamabad, Pakistan, and be hanged for three days," read the observation.

A special court convicted and sentenced Musharraf to death on Tuesday, an unprecedented verdict in a country that has been ruled by its powerful military for roughly half of its 72-year history.

Musharraf has lived in self-imposed exile in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) since 2016 and says he will appeal the verdict at the Supreme Court.

Federal Minister of Law and Justice Farogh Naseem termed the verdict "unprecedented and despicable".

Musharraf was appointed as army chief in 1998 and seized power in a military coup a year later, dismissing the government of PM Nawaz Sharif and appointing himself as chief executive.