

## NEWS IN brief

### Typhoon toll in Philippines hits 50

AFP, Manila

The number of people killed by a powerful storm that pummeled the central Philippines over Christmas has risen to 50, authorities said yesterday, making it the nation's deadliest storm of 2019. Typhoon Phanfone's destructive winds and heavy rains brought down flimsy homes and destroyed commercial buildings mainly in the central island of Visayas, affecting more than two million people. At least 80,000 remain in emergency shelters and might have to stay until the New Year, given the scale of destruction.

### Al-Shabaab claim Mogadishu blast

AFP, Mogadishu

Al-Shabaab Islamist militants have claimed responsibility for Saturday's massive car bomb in the Somali capital Mogadishu that killed 81 people, including two Turkish citizens. The attack hit a busy checkpoint in the southwest of the city, leaving vehicles charred and twisted at a crossroads in the deadliest assault in two years in the Horn of Africa country. Scores more were wounded in an area clogged with traffic.

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Hashd al-Shaabi (paramilitary forces) fighters set fire on the US Embassy wall to condemn air strikes on their bases, in Baghdad, Iraq yesterday. Inset, a protester holds a rock to break a glass window of a security guard building of the US Embassy.

## Trump blames Iran

Expects Iraq to use its forces as protesters scale walls of embassy in Baghdad after airstrikes kill 25 pro-Iran militias

AGENCIES

US President Donald Trump yesterday blamed Iran for "orchestrating" an attack on the US embassy in Baghdad and said he will hold Tehran responsible.

"Iran killed an American contractor, wounding many. We strongly responded, and always will. Now Iran is orchestrating an attack on the US Embassy in Iraq. They will be held fully responsible. In addition, we expect Iraq to use its forces to protect the Embassy, and so notified," Trump said in a Twitter post.

"We expect Iraq to use its forces to protect the Embassy, and so notified!" he tweeted.

Iraqi supporters of pro-Iran factions attacked the embassy early yesterday, breaching its outer wall and chanting "Death to America" in anger over weekend air strikes that killed two dozen fighters.

It was the first time in years that protesters have been able to reach the US embassy, which is sheltered

behind a series of checkpoints in the high-security Green Zone. The embassy guards fired tear gas and stun grenades, Reuters witnesses said. The ambassador and other staff were evacuated.

The demonstrators were protesting

### ATTACK ON US EMBASSY

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against US air strikes that killed at least 25 fighters from a hardline Hashed faction known as Kataeb Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades) on Sunday.

Those strikes were in response to a 36-rocket attack last week that killed one American contractor at an Iraqi base, the latest in a string of attacks on

areas where US troops are deployed.

They have not been claimed, but US security assessments have largely blamed them on Kataeb Hezbollah.

Caretaker prime minister Adel Abdel Mahdi said that the crowds that had stormed the US embassy should leave the compound "immediately." "We recall that any aggression or harassment of foreign embassies will be firmly prohibited by the security forces," Abdel Mahdi's office said several hours after the attack began.

Relations between Washington and Tehran have deteriorated since the US in 2018 pulled out of the landmark Iran nuclear deal.

Trump has since imposed sweeping sanctions aimed at curbing the clerical regime's regional influence.

Iraq had long feared being caught in the middle of escalating tensions between the two countries, which are its main allies, reports AFP.

Protesters yesterday carried posters reading: "Parliament should oust US troops, or else we will."

### AGITATIONS OVER CAA, NRC IN INDIA

## Protest parties to welcome 2020

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Thousands of Indians are ringing in the new year by holding protests against a citizenship law, despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi's attempts to dampen demonstrations that have run for nearly three weeks.

India has been rocked by the protests since December 11, when the government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), easing the way for non-Muslim minorities from the neighbouring Muslim-majority nations of Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan to gain Indian citizenship.

Combined with opposition to a proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC), many Indians fear the move will discriminate against the minority Muslim community and chip away at the country's secular constitution.

Protesters plan at least three demonstrations in New Delhi, the capital. Poetry recitals and speeches are planned by organisers at a protest outside New Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia university, which was stormed by police this month.

Student and civil society groups, opposition parties and others also plan events on New Year's Day to mark their opposition to the law. At some meetings, mass pledges to defend the constitution and hunger strikes are planned.

Similar "protest parties" are being organised at designated sites in other major Indian cities.

In the southern city of Hyderabad, at least two small groups of demonstrators have been organising flash protests, to skirt police restrictions on larger gatherings. Street-side poetry recitals, stand-up comedy, and music performances are also planned in the financial capital of Mumbai and the eastern city of Kolkata.

### DENUCLEARIZATION OF KOREAN PENINSULA

## Kim mulling 'new path' as US misses deadline

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was set to make a closely watched New Year address yesterday which is likely to offer a glimpse of a "new path" he has vowed to take if the United States fails to meet his deadline to soften its stance over denuclearisation.

The New Year address is expected to touch upon a wide range of issues from foreign affairs and military development to the economy and education.

In his 2019 speech, Kim said he might have to change course if Washington sticks to its pressure campaign and demands unilateral action, while stressing a "self-reliant" economy, a drive he has launched amid tightening sanctions.

The United States was on track to ignore a year-end deadline set by Kim, which Washington has downplayed as artificial, to show more flexibility to reopen talks aimed at dismantling North Korea's nuclear and

missile programmes.

The upcoming speech is expected to be the culmination of an ongoing meeting of the ruling Workers' Party's 7th Central Committee, a key policy-making body, which Kim convened on Saturday. It was still under way on Tuesday, state media said.

North Korea has provided few hints for what the "new path" may involve, but US military commanders said Pyongyang next move could include the testing of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), which it has halted since 2017, alongside nuclear bomb tests.

US national security adviser Robert O'Brien warned Washington would be "extraordinarily disappointed" if North Korea tests a long-range or nuclear missile, while Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said he hoped it would choose peace over confrontation.

The US Air Force flew an RC-135 surveillance plane over South Korea on Monday and yesterday.



## Taiwan passes law to combat China influence

REUTERS, Taipei

Taiwan's parliament passed an anti-infiltration law yesterday to combat perceived threats from China as the island gears up for a presidential vote on Jan 11.

The legislation is part of a years-long effort to combat what many in Taiwan see as Chinese efforts to influence politics and the democratic process, through illicit funding of politicians and the media and other methods.

The move further strains ties between Taiwan and Beijing, which suspects Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen of pushing for the island's formal independence.

Lawmakers of Tsai's DPP backed the bill. Lawmakers of the main opposition Kuomintang, which favours close ties with China, did not participate in the vote.



This picture taken and released yesterday shows a helicopter fighting a bushfire near Bairnsdale in Victoria's East Gippsland region.

PHOTO: AFP

## Fires encircle Aussie towns

Thousands of holidaymakers, locals forced to flee to beaches

AFP, Sydney

Thousands of holidaymakers and locals were bedding down at beaches in fire-ravaged southeast Australia on New Year's Eve after fleeing deadly blazes that ripped through popular tourist areas and cut off several towns.

In seaside communities along a 200-kilometre (135-mile) strip of coast, terrified crowds -- wrapped in blankets and wearing make-shift facemasks -- sought refuge from the inferno near the water.

Some with boats earlier took to the sea in near-darkness, hoping to find safety, as one of the worst days yet in Australia's months-long bushfire crisis prompted a military deployment to help relief efforts.

Three people have died, five more are unaccounted for, and scores of properties were feared destroyed after a brutal 24 hours in which flames reached well-populated towns like Batemans Bay, normally bursting with visitors during Australia's summer holidays.

"We've got literally hundreds, thousands of people up and down the coast, taking refuge on the beaches" and in surf clubs, said Shane Fitzsimmons, commissioner of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service.



"In the majority of these cases, we're being told that people will be sleeping over at these clubs," Surf Life Saving Australia's Steven Pearce told ABC.

"We'll have instances of 500 people or more trying to sleep in and around our surf clubs."

Around 4,000 people were trapped on the foreshore in the town of Mallacoota, where towering columns of smoke turned the sky pitch black and nearby fires caused waves of "ember attacks".

## Russia, Ukraine finalise Europe gas transit deal

AFP, Kiev

Moscow and Kiev on Monday signed a five-year agreement on the transit of Russian gas to Europe via Ukraine, finalising months of difficult talks just ahead of a New Year deadline.

The current deal between the two ex-Soviet countries expires Tuesday and ties between them have been shredded since Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014 and supported a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine.

Presidents Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky discussed the deal by phone and congratulated each other ahead of New Year's celebrations, a sign that their relations could be on the mend.

The gas deal "creates a positive atmosphere for solving other bilateral problems," the Kremlin said in a statement.

About 18 percent of the European Union's annual natural gas consumption comes from Russia via Ukraine, which put pressure on EU officials to help broker the deal.

The agreement should prevent a repeat of so-called gas wars that previously disrupted supplies and in some years caused real energy problems in EU member states.

EU Commission vice president in charge of energy Maros Sefcovic called the deal "great news for Europe's energy security" on Twitter, while German Chancellor Angela Merkel thanked Russia and Ukraine.

### SMS service to resume in Kashmir after 5 months

India has decided to restore mobile messaging services in Kashmir from New Year, nearly five months since its suspension. Broadband internet services will also be allowed in hospitals across the union territory from the New Year, although curbs on civilian use may remain. The curbs on internet and mobile messaging services were part of the communications clampdown imposed on Jammu and Kashmir after the scrapping of its special status under Article 370 on August 5. The authorities said it was done to ensure that "trouble-makers" do not succeed in mobilising the people against the administration. The decision to ease restrictions in Kashmir were announced by Rohit Kansal, official spokesman of the union territory administration, at a press conference yesterday.

### Pak media mogul rejects rape accusations

The chief executive of one of Pakistan's most influential newspapers has denied accusations he raped an acclaimed filmmaker, in a case that has spotlighted sexual abuse targeting men and added momentum to the country's fledgling #MeToo movement. Director Jamshed Mahmood Raza took to social media over the weekend to allege that Dawn newspaper's Hameed Haroon raped him 13 years ago. Haroon -- who hails from one of Pakistan's most influential families -- issued a fierce denial in Dawn, the country's most popular English daily, late Monday, calling the accusations "simply untrue and intentionally fabricated".

### Prince William unveils prize for climate innovation



Prince William yesterday announced what was described as "the most prestigious environment prize in history" to encourage new solutions to tackling climate change. The Earthshot Prize will be awarded to five people every year over the next decade, and aims to provide at least 50 answers to some of the greatest problems facing the planet by 2030. They include promoting new ways of addressing climate change and issues surrounding energy, nature and biodiversity, the oceans, air pollution and fresh water. The prize promises "a significant financial award", a statement said. SOURCE: AFP