

Afghan govt, Taliban agree to Doha talks

Afghanistan's government and the Islamist Taliban group have agreed that Doha will be the venue for the first meeting in their peace talks. The talks, known as the intra-Afghan dialogue, will be the first high-level meeting between the two sides after years of fighting. No date has been announced for the meeting, but it is expected to take place after the two sides settle differences on the release by the Afghan government of 5,000 Taliban prisoners, which could be as soon as the end of next week. The Afghan government has released 3,000 Taliban prisoners so far under an agreement signed between the United States and the insurgent group in February. That deal outlined a roadmap for withdrawing foreign forces from Afghanistan and peace talks to end the 19-year war.

China to handle some Hong Kong national security cases

China will have jurisdiction over "some extremely rare" national security cases in Hong Kong, a senior official said yesterday as Beijing prepares to unveil its new anti-subversion law for the semi-autonomous business hub. Deng Zhonghua, deputy head of China's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, said enforcing the national security law would largely fall to Hong Kong's local authorities and police. "However, the central authorities should also reserve jurisdiction over some extremely rare cases when an offence takes place in Hong Kong and poses a serious threat to China's national security," Deng said. Under a "One Country, Two Systems" agreement ahead of the handover by Britain, China said it would let Hong Kong maintain certain liberties and autonomy until 2047, including legislative and judicial independence. But Deng's comments are the first time a Beijing official has made clear that mainland authorities will have jurisdiction over some national security cases once the law is passed.

Russia jails ex-US marine for 16 years over espionage



A Russian court found former US marine Paul Whelan guilty of spying for the United States yesterday and sentenced him to 16 years in jail, a move the US ambassador to Moscow called an egregious violation of human rights that would harm ties. Whelan, who holds US, British, Canadian and Irish passports, was detained by agents from Russia's Federal Security Service in a Moscow hotel room on Dec. 28, 2018. Russia says Whelan, 50, was caught red-handed with a computer flash drive containing classified information. Whelan, who pleaded not guilty, said he was set up in a sting and had thought the drive, given to him by a Russian acquaintance, contained holiday photos.

SOURCE: AFP, ANN



Nurses stage a flashmob protest over contracts, wages, precarious employment and job rights yesterday on Piazza del Popolo in Rome, Italy as the country eases its lockdown aimed at curbing the spread of the Covid-19 infection, caused by the novel coronavirus.

PHOTO: AFP

Nuke arms control outlook bleak: report

AFP, Stockholm

Nuclear powers continue to modernise their arsenals, researchers said yesterday, warning that tensions were rising and the outlook for arms control was "bleak". "The loss of key channels of communication between Russia and the USA... could potentially lead to a new nuclear arms race," said Shannon Kile, director of the nuclear arms control programme at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and co-author of the report. Kile was referring to the future of the New START treaty between the US and Russia, which is set to expire in February 2021. It is the final nuclear deal still in force between the two superpowers. At the same time, nuclear powers continue to modernise their weapons while China and India are increasing the size of their arsenals. The number of nuclear warheads declined in the past year. At the start of 2020, US, Russia, Britain, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea together had 13,400 nuclear arms, according to SIPRI's estimates, 465 fewer than at the start of 2019. Russia and the US account for more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons. The number of nuclear arms worldwide has declined since hitting a peak of almost 70,000 in the mid-1980s. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), a cornerstone of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime, celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. The five original nuclear powers -- Washington, Beijing, Moscow, Paris and London -- in March reiterated their commitment to NPT.

Atlanta killing a homicide

Medical report says Afro-American man's death caused by gunshot wounds; race protests force governments to rethink policies

AGENCIES

The death of Rayshard Brooks, a black man killed by a white police officer in Atlanta on Friday, was a homicide caused by gunshot wounds to the back, the Fulton County Medical Examiner's office said, as race protests around the world forced governments to rethink on their policies.

Brooks' death reignited protests in Atlanta after days of worldwide demonstrations against racism and police brutality prompted by the death of George Floyd, an African American, in Minneapolis police custody on May 25.

An autopsy conducted on Sunday showed that Brooks, 27, died from blood loss and organ injuries caused by two gunshot wounds, an investigator for the medical examiner said in a statement. The manner of his death was homicide, the statement said.

As demonstrators in Atlanta took to the streets and chanted for the officers in Brooks' case to be criminally charged, at one point late on Saturday blocking traffic on a nearby interstate highway, the Wendy's restaurant went up in flames.



Macron rejects removing controversial statues

UK PM to form racism commission

UN rights council agrees to urgent debate on racism, police violence

restaurant went up in flames.

On Sunday, police offered a \$10,000 reward and published photos of what appeared to be a masked white woman being sought in connection with the case, reports Reuters.

Ressa found guilty of libel

Duterte-critic journo faces up to six years in jail; media watchdogs say verdict a blow to media freedom

REUTERS, Manila

Veteran Philippine journalist Maria Ressa, whose website has put President Rodrigo Duterte under tough scrutiny, was convicted of libel yesterday and faces up to six years in jail, in a ruling widely seen as a blow to media freedom. Ressa, chief executive of Rappler (www.rappler.com) and a former CNN journalist, was charged with "cyber libel" over a 2012 article that linked a businessman to illegal activities.

Reynaldo Santos, a former Rappler researcher and writer, was also found guilty. Both were granted bail pending an appeal.

After the verdict, Ressa a dual US-Filipino citizen, vowed not be silenced and accused the judiciary of becoming complicit in a campaign to stifle press freedom in the Southeast Asian nation.

"We're at the precipice, if we fall over we're no longer a democracy," she told reporters.

The decision fuelled concern over human rights in a country where Duterte's war on drugs has



left thousands dead and he recently renewed a threat to kill drug dealers, despite condemnation in a UN report.

He is soon expected to sign an anti-terrorism law his opponents fear could target them, but which he says is needed to fight extremism.

To the shock of many, leading broadcaster ABS-CBN Corp, which had criticised Duterte, had to stop broadcasts last month after its licence expired.

Human rights lawyer Amal Clooney, part of a legal team representing Ressa, called the conviction "an affront to the rule of law, a stark warning to the press, and a blow to democracy in the Philippines".

The cyber libel case is one of numerous lawsuits the government

has filed against Ressa and Rappler that have spurred global concern about the intimidation of reporters.

Media watchdogs and human rights groups condemned Monday's verdict, which Amnesty International called a "sham" that "should be quashed".

The Philippines slipped two places in the World Press Freedom Index this year to 136 among 180 countries, down from 134.

Media watchdogs have said numerous charges against Ressa, including alleged foreign ownership violations and alleged tax evasion, aimed to intimidate critics of Duterte.

Rappler has questioned the accuracy of Duterte's public statements and scrutinised his war on drugs and foreign policies. Duterte has lashed out at the news site in public speeches.

Presidential spokesman Harry Roque said Duterte supported freedom of speech and it was a previous administration that pushed for the "cyber libel" law. Duterte had never filed a libel case against a journalist, he added.



Supporters of US President Donald Trump wave flags as they participate in a boat rally to celebrate Donald Trump's birthday in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, US on Sunday. President Trump turned 74 on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP



'Hug curtain'

AFP, Sao Paulo

A retirement home in Brazil has come up with a creative solution to allow friends and families to enjoy personal contact with aging residents particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus: a "hugging curtain." The large plastic curtain, installed in a retirement home in the city of Sao Paulo, allows residents on one side and visitors on the other to engage in the sort of comforting hugs that COVID-19 has made impossible for months. The curtain has pockets through which resident and visitor can insert their arms, and they are outfitted with shoulder-length black gloves for added protection. "It really feels good; I missed her so much!" 68-year-old Silvio Nagata told AFP after enjoying a long, emotional hug with his sister, Luiza Yassuko, who is 76, at a retirement home in the affluent Morumbi neighborhood.

'Trump Heights' in Golan Heights

Israel to build new settlement named after US president

AGENCIES

An Israeli cabinet minister said the government has approved plans to build a new illegal settlement in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights named after US President Donald Trump.

Settlements Minister Tzipi Hotovely wrote on Facebook that her ministry will start preparations for Ramat Trump - Hebrew for "Trump Heights" - to house 300 families. The Jewish settlement is currently known as Bruchim and is more than 30 years old and has a population of 10 people.

Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria in the 1967 Middle East war and annexed it in 1981. The vast majority of the international community considers the move illegal under international law.

But during a visit to Washington, DC by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in March last year, just weeks before the Israeli elections, Trump changed decades of US policy by signing an executive order, officially recognising the strategic mountainous plateau as Israeli territory.



According to Israeli media, the plan will involve earmarking 8 million shekels (\$2.3m) for developing the settlement.

At a cabinet meeting on Sunday, Netanyahu said Israel would "begin practical steps in establishing the community of Ramat Trump on the Golan Heights, Israel's sovereignty over which was recognized by President Trump".

Developing Trump Heights will not be easy. Ringed by high yellow grass and landmines, it is located roughly 20km (12.5 miles) from the Syrian border and a half-hour drive from the nearest Israeli settlement, Kiryat Shmona, where 20,000 Jewish settlers live near the Lebanese border.

According to Israeli figures, almost 50,000 people live in the occupied Golan Heights, including about 22,000 Jewish settlers and nearly 25,000 Arab Druze residents.

Last month, Israel pressed ahead with plans to annex large parts of the occupied West Bank in line with Trump's so-called Middle East plan - unveiled in January - which strongly favours Israel and was rejected by the Palestinians. The plan gives Israel the green light to annex Israeli settlements and strategic areas of the West Bank.

For much of the international community, such a move by Israel would amount to a grave violation of international law and crush hopes of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It could also further inflame regional tensions.

'ARREST' OF TWO OFFICIALS IN ISLAMABAD

India summons Pakistan envoy

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India summoned the Pakistan charge d'Affaires in New Delhi yesterday and lodged a strong protest with him against the reported arrest of two officials of the Indian High Commission in Islamabad.

According to the Pakistani media, two unidentified Indian High Commission staffers in Islamabad, who went missing this morning, were arrested by Pakistani authorities for their alleged involvement in a "hit-and-run accident".

Official sources in New Delhi said the Pakistan charge d'Affaires was summoned to the Ministry of External Affairs and a demarche (protest in diplomatic parlance) was handed over to him over the reported arrest of the two officials.

The demarche made it clear that there should be no interrogation or harassment of the Indian officials and the responsibility for their safety and security lay squarely with the Pakistani authorities, the sources said. Pakistan was also asked to return the officials immediately.

The incident comes two weeks after India expelled two Pakistan High Commission officials for espionage.

Following their expulsion, Pakistani agencies started harassing a number of Indian High Commission officials in Islamabad including Charge d'Affaires Gaurav Ahluwalia. Ahluwalia's car was aggressively tailed by Pakistani agencies on at least two occasions following which India lodged a strong protest with the Pakistan Foreign Office.

Pakistan downgraded diplomatic ties with India by expelling the Indian High Commissioner following New Delhi's decision to withdraw special constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir in August last year.

TERRITORIAL DISPUTE WITH NEPAL

India pushes talks to resolve issues

THE STATESMAN/ANN

Indian Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh yesterday said the relation between India and Nepal is not an ordinary one and any dispute between the neighbours will be resolved through dialogue.

Addressing a virtual conference, Singh reiterated that the 80 km-long new road connecting the Lipulekh pass in Uttarakhand with Kailash Mansarovar route in Tibet inaugurated by him on May 8 is built on Indian territory.

Rajnath Singh further said that some misconceptions have risen in Nepal regarding the road and added, "But I would like to say that as far as Nepal is concerned, we not only have social, geographical, historical or cultural relations with them but also a devotional relation. India can never forget this".

Singh further assured that if any misconception has risen among people of Nepal due to the construction of road from Lipulekh to Dharachula, then the Government of India will find a solution through dialogue.

In a major setback for India, the parliament of Nepal on Saturday voted in favour of the constitutional amendment bill in a special session to update the country's map. The updated map claims over the strategically key areas of Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura along the border with India, despite strong protest by New Delhi.