

NEWS IN BRIEF

Beirut port blast crater 43 metres deep: report

The huge chemical explosion that hit Beirut's port, devastating large parts of the Lebanese capital and claiming over 150 lives, left a 43-metre (141 foot) deep crater, a report said yesterday. The blast Tuesday, which was felt across the county and as far as the island of Cyprus, was recorded by the sensors of the American Institute of Geophysics (USGS) as having the power of a magnitude 3.3 earthquake. It was triggered by a fire in a port warehouse, where a huge shipment of hazardous ammonium nitrate, a chemical that can be used as a fertiliser or as an explosive, had languished for years, according to authorities.

Seven die in fire at Covid-19 hotel facility in India

At least nine people died after a massive fire broke out at a hotel that was being used as a Covid-19 facility in India's southern Andhra Pradesh state early yesterday, police said. "Several people who were trapped and injured have been rescued and moved to a government hospital. Fire is under control," said Lakshmi, a constable at the police control room. Last week, eight Covid-19 patients died in a fire that broke out in the intensive care ward of a private hospital in India's western city of Ahmedabad. Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh Nara Chandrababu Naidu has instructed officials to conduct an inquiry into the hotel fire, ANI reported.

Nagasaki marks 75 yrs since atomic bombing

The Japanese city of Nagasaki yesterday commemorated the 75th anniversary of its destruction by a US atomic bomb, with its mayor and the head of the United Nations warning against a nuclear arms race. The US dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, killing around 140,000 people. Three days later at 11:02 am (0202 GMT), the US dropped a plutonium bomb on the port city of Nagasaki, killing 74,000 people. Japan announced its surrender in World War II on August 15, 1945.

New Zealand reaches 100-day without virus transmission

New Zealand marked 100 days yesterday with no recorded cases of the coronavirus in the community but health officials warned there was no room for complacency. There are still 23 active cases but all were detected at the border when entering the country and are being held in managed isolation facilities. The World Health Organization has hailed the country of 5 million people as an example to others for having "successfully eliminated community transmission". Since the first patient was diagnosed in February, there have been 1,219 confirmed cases of the virus in New Zealand with the last case of community transmission recorded on May 1. As a result, New Zealanders are enjoying a near-normal, pre-coronavirus lifestyle with no social distancing and spectators allowed at sports and cultural events.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Protesters hold placards during a demonstration against the Israeli government near the Prime Minister's residence in Jerusalem, early yesterday. Thousands of Israelis rallied outside Netanyahu's residence in Jerusalem as anger mounted over corruption allegations and his handling of the coronavirus crisis.

PHOTO: AFP

At least 43 killed in India landslide

AFP, New Delhi

At least 43 bodies have been recovered after a massive landslide triggered by monsoon rains swept away dozens of tea estate workers in southwestern India, police said yesterday.

The landslide in Idukki district, around 250 kilometres (155 miles) from Kerala state's capital Thiruvananthapuram, occurred Friday but the ongoing search and rescue efforts have been hampered by torrential downpours.

The toll rose to 43 yesterday afternoon, Idukki district's police chief, R Karuppasamy, told AFP.

Twenty-six of the bodies were recovered on Friday night, a police official said earlier yesterday.

About 30 km from the popular tourist destination of Munnar, the tragedy took place when big boulders came down on four lines of estate houses.

The massive search exercise is being carried out by a huge number of rescue personnel drawn from the NDRE, Kerala Police, Fire Force, locals and volunteers.

They faced extreme difficulty getting there as the roads and bridges in the area have been washed away in the heavy rains and resultant floods. A 21-member family is feared buried under the debris. Many houses of plantation workers and the estate canteen were swept away in the landslide.

Local media reported that some 78 people were believed to live in the area, with many still missing.

Kerala has been hit by deadly floods during the annual monsoon. The monsoon across South Asia is critical to replenishing rivers and groundwater, but also causes widespread death and destruction.

More than 300 people have died in floods and landslides in eastern and northeastern India, Bangladesh and Nepal in recent weeks.

Afghan peace talks near

'Loya jirga' okays release of 400 'hard-core' Taliban prisoners

AFP, Kabul

The Afghan government and the Taliban are "on the verge of peace talks" after thousands of prominent Afghans approved the release of about 400 'hard-core' militant prisoners, the head of Kabul's peace council said yesterday.

The prisoners' fate has been a crucial hurdle in launching peace talks between the two warring sides, which had committed to completing a prisoner exchange before negotiations can start.

The resolution was passed at the end of a three-day "loya jirga" -- a traditional Afghan meeting of tribal elders and other stakeholders sometimes held to decide on controversial issues.

"In order to remove the hurdles for the start of peace talks, stopping bloodshed, and for the good of the public, the jirga approves the release of 400 prisoners as demanded by the Taliban," jirga member Atefa Tayeb announced.

According to an official list seen by AFP, many of the inmates are accused of serious offences, including many involved in attacks that killed scores of Afghans and foreigners, with more than 150 of them on death row.

The jirga urged the government to give assurances to the population that the released prisoners would be monitored and would not be allowed to return

to the battlefield, adding that foreign fighters should be sent back to their respective countries.

It also demanded a "serious, immediate and lasting ceasefire" in the country.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said he would sign a decree to release the prisoners immediately.

The Afghan government has released almost 5,000 Taliban inmates, but authorities had balked at freeing the final prisoners demanded by the Taliban. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pushed for the release of the detainees, while recognising the decision would be "unpopular".

The prisoners include 44 insurgents of particular concern to the United States and other countries for their role in "high-profile" attacks.

"Based on the information I have, the intra-Afghan talks would begin within two to three days after the release of the 400 Taliban prisoners," former president Hamid Karzai told the loya jirga.

The intra-Afghan talks were slated under a US-Taliban deal agreed in February, in which Washington said it would withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by mid-2021 in return for security guarantees.

President Donald Trump, up for re-election in November, has said repeatedly that he wants to end America's longest war, which began nearly 20 years ago when Washington ousted the Taliban following the September 11 attacks.

US begins highest level Taiwan visit in decades

AFP, Taipei

A senior member of US President Donald Trump's administration landed in Taiwan yesterday for Washington's highest level visit since switching diplomatic recognition to China in 1979, a trip Beijing has condemned.

During the three-day visit Health Secretary Alex Azar will meet President Tsai Ing-wen, who advocates Taiwan being recognised as a sovereign nation and is loathed by China's leaders.

Azar's visit comes as relations between the world's two biggest economic powers plunge to historic lows. In recent days, Trump has ordered sweeping restrictions on Chinese tech giants and the US Treasury Department slapped sanctions on Hong Kong's leader over a tough law that curbs dissent.

Washington has billed the Taiwan trip as an opportunity to learn from the island's fight against the coronavirus and to celebrate its progressive values. But Beijing balks at any recognition of self-ruled Taiwan, which it claims as its own territory and vows to one day seize, by force if necessary. It has described Azar's visit as a threat to "peace



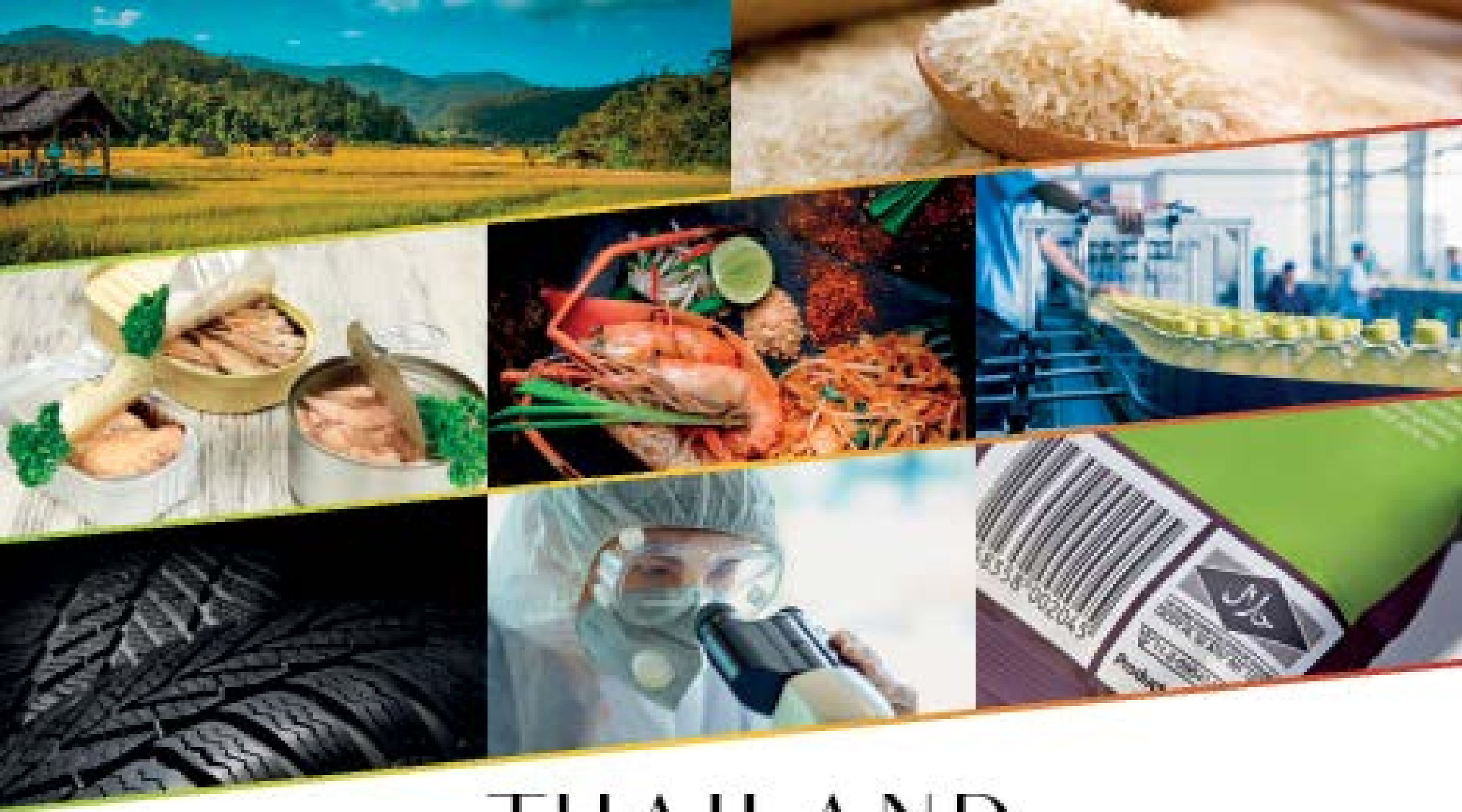
and stability" in the region.

Washington remains the leading arms supplier to Taiwan but has historically been cautious in holding official contacts with it.

Douglas Paal, a former head of the American Institute in Taiwan, Washington's de facto embassy, said the Trump administration was still paying heed to China's red line -- that no US official handling national security visit Taiwan.

Throughout the 1990s the United States sent trade officials to Taiwan with regularity.

The difference this time, he said, is the context, with Azar travelling at a time when relations between Washington and Beijing have hit a new low.



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