

World News Roundup



Local officials inspect the damage to a mosque following Monday's powerful earthquake in Papua New Guinea, in Boven Digoel, Papua province, Indonesia. Severe damage to phone networks and roads from the earthquake in Papua New Guinea was hindering efforts to assess the extent of the destruction Tuesday, although officials in the remote central region fear dozens of people may have been injured or killed. (AP)

More than 30 believed dead in PNG quake

More than 30 people are believed to have died after a powerful earthquake struck Papua New Guinea's mountainous interior, a report said Tuesday as details of "extensive" damage began to emerge. The 7.5-magnitude tremor struck 90 kms (55 miles) south of Porgera in the Pacific nation's Enga province early Monday, with two strong aftershocks rattling the rugged

region. Phone lines were largely cut, but the PNG Post Courier newspaper cited Hela provincial administrator William Bando as saying there were casualties. It reported that at least 13 died in the Southern Highlands capital Mendi while 18 others were believed to have been killed in nearby Kutubu and Bosave.

Some 300 people were injured, it added, and properties damaged, with reports of landslides and sinkholes. The Papua New Guinea Today website, quoting Catholic priest Pius Hal, said at least 10 died, including four children, in quake-triggered landslides. AFP was unable to confirm the death toll. (AFP)

Subcontinent

**Taleban calls for US talks:** The Taleban has called for direct talks with the US to find a "peaceful solution" to the conflict in Afghanistan, in an apparent policy shift after months of escalating attacks.

Civilian casualties surged in recent months as militants from the Taleban unleashed a wave of bloodshed in urban areas and on security forces in response to a new open-ended military policy by US President Donald Trump.

In a statement posted late Monday, the Taleban said it "calls on American officials to talk directly to the Political Office of Islamic Emirate regarding a peaceful solution to the Afghan quandary", using the name it calls itself.

The statement referenced local reports that said US envoy Alice Wells had suggested during a recent visit to Kabul that a window was still open for talks.

It came days before the second round of a regional peace conference in Kabul, where representatives from 25 countries will discuss counter-terrorism and conflict resolution strategies in the war, which US officials have described as a stalemate.

Washington has long called for talks with the Taleban, but historically insisted that any dialogue must include the Afghan government in Kabul. There has been no response to the Taleban's offer from US officials. (AFP)



Wells

**Muslims, Buddhists clash:** At least five people were wounded and several shops and a mosque damaged in a clash between majority Sinhalese Buddhists and minority Muslims in eastern Sri Lanka, police said on Tuesday.

Renewed tension has been growing between the two communities since last year, with some headline Buddhist groups accusing Muslims of forcing people to convert to Islam and vandalising Buddhist archaeological sites.

Police had been deployed in the eastern town of Ampara to control the unrest after a Sinhalese mob attacked a mosque, four shops and several vehicles late on Monday, spokesman Ruwan Gunasekara said.

Last year, diplomats condemned violence against Muslims and urged the government to uphold minority rights and freedom of religion after more than 20 attacks on Muslims, including arson at Muslim-owned businesses and mosques.

President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime

Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe have promised to protect minorities, but attacks against Muslims have continued.

Muslims comprise around 9 percent of Sri Lanka's population of 21 million. Buddhists make up about 70 percent and Hindus about 13 percent. The government ended a full-blown 26-year civil war by defeating mostly Hindu Tamil Tiger rebels in 2009, with claims of atrocities on both sides.

The United Nations criticised Sri Lanka last year for slow progress in addressing war crimes and human rights abuses. The United Nations and rights activists have accused the Sri Lankan military of killing thousands of civilians, mostly Tamils, in the last weeks of the war. (RTRS)

**India seeks fugitive:** Indian police said Tuesday they are seeking custody of a fugitive arrested in Hong Kong who is wanted for a daring jailbreak in Punjab that freed a militant and for a string of other crimes.

Ramanjit Singh, an Indian national on Interpol's global watch list, was detained this month by Hong Kong authorities for his alleged involvement in a local robbery, according to local media reports.

India's federal police had asked Interpol to issue a red notice for Singh's arrest so he could be extradited and tried for crimes ranging from jailbreak to forgery, attempted murder and financing extremism.

A red notice is a request to locate and provisionally arrest a person pending extradition.

Police in Punjab, the northern Indian state where Singh was born, said they wanted the 29-year-old brought home to stand trial. (AFP)

**Maldives minister resigns:** Maldives State Health Minister Dunya Maumoon has resigned, she said in a letter on Tuesday, gripped by the arrest of her father, the island nation's longest-serving leader, after President Abdulla Yameen declared a state of emergency.

The Maldives' top court last week validated a 30-day extension of the state of emergency sought by Yameen over what he has called a national security threat and constitutional crisis.

"Today, at this time of pain and crisis for both my family and my country, it is my sincere hope to see my father home at the earliest," said Dunya Maumoon, who becomes the second minister to resign from Yameen's ruling party since the crisis began on Feb 1.

"I therefore call upon the international community to support the Maldivian people to help us overcome this crisis and to build a stronger democratic system," she said in the letter reviewed by Reuters. (RTRS)

Asia

'Don't weaponise rights'

Prosecutors seek 30-yr jail for Park

SEOUL, Feb 27, (Agencies): South Korean prosecutors on Tuesday demanded a 30-year-jail sentence for former president Park Geun-hye, sacked over a wide-ranging corruption scandal which exposed shady links between big business and politics and prompted massive street protests.

The 66-year-old daughter of a former dictator was dismissed in March 2017 and has now been in custody for almost a year.

"We ask the court to hand down 30 years in prison and (a fine of) 118.5 billion won (\$110 million) for the accused, who must take ultimate responsibility for the scandal as the 18th president of this country," prosecutors said in a statement.

They said Park, in collusion with her secret confidante and long-time friend Choi Soon-sil, took or was promised bribes totalling 59.2 billion won (\$52 million) from three South Korean companies, Samsung, Lotte and SK, in return for policy favours.

**N. Koreans return home:** North Korea's delegation to the closing ceremony of the Winter Olympics left South Korea on Tuesday after a visit where the former general suspected of masterminding deadly 2010 military attacks told Seoul officials the North is willing to talk with Washington.

The delegation's return home completes North Korea's diplomatic outreach to the South during the Pyeongchang Olympics that was seen as an attempt to break out from the isolation and pressure North Korea faces over its nuclear program.

In a meeting with South Korean President Moon Jae-in shortly before the Olympic closing ceremony on Sunday, Kim Yong Chol, vice chairman of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party Central Committee, said the North has "ample intentions" for holding talks with the United States, Moon's office said.

**Japan arrests US tourist:** A US tourist has been arrested in Japan after a local woman he met through a dating app went missing earlier this month, her body believed to have been dismembered and scattered across several locations in western Japan, according to media.

Police arrested the 26-year-old man last week on suspicion of confining the woman, who had been reported missing since Feb 16, media said. They later found what appeared to be the woman's head inside a suitcase at a flat the man had booked in Osaka through a private holiday rental site, media said.

**'Do not weaponise rights':** The Philippines' top diplomat warned the United Nations on Tuesday not to "weaponise" human rights and urged it to send an impartial investigator to probe President Rodrigo Duterte's deadly anti-drug war.

The Philippines' human rights record was raised at a UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva this week, with Iceland Foreign Minister Gudlaugur Thor Thordarson urging Manila on Monday to accept a visit from the UN Special Rapporteur.

**Christians whipped:** Two Indonesian Christians were publicly flogged in conservative Aceh province Tuesday for playing a children's entertainment game seen as violating Islamic law, as hundreds of onlookers ridiculed them and took pictures.

The pair were among five people — including a couple whipped two dozen times each for showing affection in public — who were lashed with a rattan stick.

**US cuts support for Cambodia:** The United States is curbing military support and other aid programs for Cambodia amid concerns about recent democratic setbacks in the Southeast Asian nation, the White House said on Tuesday.

"Recent setbacks to democracy in Cambodia, however, caused us deep concern, including Senate elections on Feb 25 that failed to represent the genuine will of the Cambodian people," the White House said.

China

Lifetime Xi presidency

China drowns out critics

BEIJING, Feb 27, (AFP): China's propaganda machine kicked into overdrive Tuesday to defend the Communist Party's move to scrap term limits for President Xi Jinping as critics on social media again defied censorship attempts.

The country has shocked many observers by proposing a constitutional amendment to end the two-term limit for presidents, giving Xi a clear path to rule the world's second largest economy for life.

The rubber-stamp National People's Congress (NPC) is certain to endorse the move next week, meaning that Xi — already China's most powerful leader in decades — can stay as president beyond 2023.

Li Datong, a former editor at the state-run China Youth Daily, posted a draft letter urging legislators to vote against the move — which would abolish term limits set in 1982 under Deng Xiaoping to prevent a return to the decades of chaos under Mao Zedong.

"It was the highest and most effective legal restriction meant to prevent autocracy or putting individuals above the party and the state," said the letter. It was not sent to legislators but shared with hundreds of people in a private group on China's WeChat phone messaging app.

"Lifting the term limits of national leaders will be ridiculed by civilised nations all over the world and also sow the seeds of chaos for China," said the text posted on Monday.

WeChat users trying to share screen-

shots of the letter saw their posts blocked.

Meanwhile, the White House on Monday said a decision that could see Chinese leader Xi Jinping rule for life was an internal matter for the authorities in Beijing.

"I believe that's a decision for China to make," said spokeswoman Sarah Sanders, after the country's Communist Party called for the removal of presidential term limits.

"The president has talked about term limits in a number of capacities during the campaign and something that he supports here in the United States, but that's a decision that's up to China."

Trump has previously expressed the need for term limits for lawmakers.

Xi has long been seen as the most powerful Chinese leader of the last three decades, but with this latest consolidation of power, he could well rival Mao Zedong and is well poised to define US-China relations for decades to come.

The guarded US reaction reflects that reality, but also Trump's long-standing reluctance to criticize undemocratic regimes and his delicate relationship with Xi, with whom he has claimed a "quite extraordinary" personal relationship.

In another report, Chinese authorities in the far western region of Xinjiang are detaining suspects flagged by predictive software that combines data on everything from security camera footage to health and banking records, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said on Tuesday.

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