

News in brief

Kurdish fighters refuse to leave Syria's Aleppo after truce



◆ Kurdish fighters rejected a call to leave Syria's Aleppo yesterday after the government announced a truce in deadly fighting that forced thousands of civilians to flee. Since Tuesday, government forces had been fighting the US-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Aleppo, the country's second city. The violence killed 21 people and was the latest challenge for a country still struggling to forge a new path after Islamist authorities ousted longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad just over a year ago.

◆ **Rescue workers** searched yesterday for dozens of people buried under a mountain of garbage that collapsed at a landfill in the central Philippines, killing at least two. About 50 sanitation workers were buried when the towering pile of refuse toppled onto them at Binaliw Landfill, a privately operated facility in Cebu City, on Thursday. "There are signs of life," Cebu Mayor Nestor Archival told a news briefing yesterday, adding that hundreds of rescuers already on site would be joined by "another 500" for search efforts he expected to last through to Sunday.

◆ **Two dead, dozens missing after Philippine dump site collapse**



◆ **France has right to say 'no' to US, Paris says**



◆ France has the right to say "no" to its historical ally the United States when it acts in a way deemed unacceptable, the foreign minister said yesterday, warning that the European political order was "in danger". In his annual address to France's ambassadors, Jean-Noël Barrot warned that the European Union was threatened by adversaries from the outside, and also hit back at US claims Europe faced "civilisational erasure". European leaders are juggling multiple priorities as they try to come up with a plan to help end nearly four years of Russia's war against Ukraine and formulate a coordinated response to Washington's increasingly assertive foreign policy posture including Donald Trump's designs on Greenland.

CURIOSER & CURIOSER

New Zealand's rare flightless parrot begins breeding again



New Zealand's critically endangered kakapo parrots

AFP | Wellington

New Zealand's critically endangered flightless parrot, the kakapo, started breeding last week for the first time in four years, the government conservation department said.

Only 236 of the rotund and regal-looking green parrots remain in three breeding populations on some of New Zealand's most remote southern islands.

That includes 83 breeding age females, with high hopes this year could bring the most hatched chicks since records began.

"It's always exciting when the breeding season officially begins, but this year it feels especially long-awaited after such a big gap since the last season in 2022," said Deidre Vercoe, the Department of Conservation's kakapo recovery operations manager.

"Now it is underway, we expect more mating over the next month and we are preparing for what might be the biggest breeding season since the programme began 30 years ago."

In 1995 the Department

of Conservation and indigenous Maori tribe Ngai Tahu launched the Kakapo Recovery Programme, with a population of just 51 birds at serious risk of extinction.

By 2022, numbers had rebounded to 252, but 16 birds died over the past four years.

This mating season is the 13th in the past 30 years, with the bird breeding every two to four years.

"Kakapo are still critically endangered so we'll keep working hard to increase numbers," Vercoe said.

"But looking ahead, chick numbers are not our only measure of success. We want to create healthy, self-sustaining populations of kakapo that are thriving, not just surviving."

"This means with each successful breeding season we're aiming to reduce the level of intensive, hands-on management to return to a more natural state."

Tane Davis, a Ngai Tahu representative on the recovery programme, said it was hoped kakapo would one day thrive throughout New Zealand's South Island.

Defiant Khamenei insists 'won't back down' in face of Iran protests

Supreme Leader labels demonstrators "vandals"

◆ **Iran hit by largest protests in weeks**

◆ **Nationwide internet blackout imposed**

◆ **Government buildings set on fire**

AFP | Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei yesterday insisted the Islamic republic would "not back down" in the face of protests after the biggest rallies yet in an almost two-week movement that has shaken the clerical authorities.

Chanting slogans including "death to the dictator" and setting fire to official buildings, crowds of people opposed to the leadership marched through major cities late Thursday.

Internet monitor Netblocks said authorities had imposed a total connectivity blackout and added early yesterday that the country has "now been offline for 12 hours... in an attempt to suppress sweeping protests".

The demonstrations represent one of the biggest challenges yet to the Islamic republic in its over four-and-a-half decades of existence, with protesters openly calling for an end to its theocratic rule.

But Khamenei struck a defiant tone in his first comments on the protests that have been escalating since January 3, calling the demonstrators "vandals" and "saboteurs", in a speech broadcast on state TV.

Khamenei said US President Donald Trump's hands "are stained with the blood of more than a thousand Iranians", in apparent reference to Israel's June



Protesters wave the national flag of Iran as they gather for a demonstration against the Iranian regime's crackdown on protests, in central Paris (file photo)

war against the Islamic republic which the US supported and joined with strikes of its own.

He predicted the "arrogant" US leader would be "overthrown" like the imperial dynasty that ruled Iran up to the 1979 revolution.

"Last night in Tehran, a bunch of vandals came and destroyed a building that belongs to them to please the US president," he said in an address to supporters, as men and women in the audience chanted the mantra of "death to America".

"Everyone knows the Islamic republic came to power with the blood of hundreds of thousands of honourable people, it will not back down in the face of saboteurs."

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AYATOLLAH ALI KHAMENEI

"enthusiasm to overturn that regime is incredible" and warned that if the Iranian authorities responded by killing protesters, "we're going to hit them very

hard. We're ready to do it."

In the Fox News interview, Trump went as far as to suggest 86-year-old Khamenei may be looking to leave Iran.

"He's looking to go somewhere," he said.

'Red line'

The son of the shah of Iran ousted by the 1979 Islamic Revolution, US-based Reza Pahlavi, said the rallies showed how "a massive crowd forces the repressive forces to retreat" and called for even bigger protests yesterday evening.

But judiciary chief Gholamhosseini Mohseni Ejei warned that punishment of "rioters" would be "decisive, the maximum and without any legal leniency".

Trump says he scrapped new Venezuela attack after prisoner release

AFP | Washington

US President Donald Trump said yesterday he called off a second wave of attacks on Venezuela after the government, whose leftist president was removed by Washington, began releasing prisoners.

Trump made the comments as he prepared to meet major oil corporations that he said will invest at least \$100 billion in Venezuela, which has the world's largest oil reserves.

Trump was implicitly making clear he is ready again to use force to get his way in Venezuela, which he has vowed to force to enrich the United States, especially oil companies.

"Venezuela is releasing large numbers of political prisoners as a sign of 'Seeking Peace,'" Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform.

"Because of this cooperation, I have cancelled the previously expected second Wave of Attacks," he said.

The United States yesterday



An officer stands guard at the entrance to El Helicoide - a facility and prison owned by the Venezuelan government

also announced that it had seized another tanker near Venezuela as it enforces an embargo on its oil, which makes Washington the undisputed power on its key export.

Prisoners' release

Venezuela began releasing

prisoners on Thursday in the first such gesture since US forces removed and detained president Nicolas Maduro in a deadly January 3 raid, with his deputy Delcy Rodriguez taking over.

Former Venezuelan opposition candidate Enrique Marquez -- who opposed Maduro in the

contested 2024 presidential election -- was among those released Thursday.

"It's all over now," Marquez said in a video taken by a local journalist of him and his wife, accompanied by another released opposition member, Biagio Pilieri.

The White House quickly took credit for winning the prisoners' freedom.

Trump had earlier played down democracy as a motivating factor for the attack, despite years of the United States saying that Maduro was illegitimate elections were filled with fraud.

But Trump said he would meet next week with Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, whom he earlier brushed aside as a "very nice woman" who lacked the "respect" to lead Venezuela.

"I understand she's coming in next week sometime, and I look forward to saying hello to her," Trump told Fox News host Sean Hannity in an interview.