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Earthquake with 7.5 magnitude hits Ecuador

Quito, Ecuador

An earthquake with a magnitude of 7.5 hit Ecuador Friday but there were no immediate reports of casualties or major damage.

The quake struck before dawn in Ecuador's eastern Amazon region 17 kilometers (10 miles) from the town of Montalvo near the border with Peru, the US Geological Survey said.

It hit at a depth of 132 kilometers. Most major earthquakes in South America are at shallow depths of 70 kilometers or less, the USGS said.

Apps send intimate user data to Facebook

San Francisco, United States

News report yesterday said many smartphone apps were sending highly personal information such as menstrual cycles and body weight to Facebook, without notifying users.

The Wall Street Journal report based on its own in-house tests showed that intimate data could be shared with Facebook using a tool designed to help target ads, even if app users were not members of the leading social network.

France says kills top Al-Qaeda commander in Sahel

Paris, France

French forces have killed a top jihadist leader, Yahya Abou El Hamame, in an operation in Mali, Defence Minister Florence Parly said yesterday.

The Algerian, a commander in Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), was reputedly

responsible for kidnapping a number of Westerners in North and West Africa.

A ministry statement issued in Paris said he was "the mastermind and financier of several attacks".

El Hamame was killed Thursday when French land and air forces ambushed a column of

vehicles he was travelling with north of Timbuktu, Parly said.

He reportedly served as AQIM's "governor" in Timbuktu when the city was held by Islamist rebels from April 2012 to January 2013.

A number of other "terrorists" were "neutralised", Parly added. El Hamame was believed to

be second in command of the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM), also known as Nusrat al-Islam, led by Iyad Ag Ghali.

The group was formed by the merger of Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front, Al-Mourabitoun and El Hamame's Saharan branch of AQIM.

The operation was announced as Parly, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe and Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian were due to visit Mali, where some 4,500 French troops have been deployed since 2014 to reconquer the north of the country after it fell to jihadist fighters.

Saudi bags \$10bn oil deal

AFP | Beijing, China

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud met China's President Xi Jinping yesterday and bagged a \$10-billion oil deal.

Prince Mohammed arrived in Beijing on Thursday following visits to Pakistan and India.

"China is a good friend and partner to Saudi Arabia," Xi told Prince Mohammed in a meeting in the Great Hall of the People.

"Saudi Arabia's relations with China can be traced back a very long time in the past," the crown prince said.

"Over such a long period of exchanges with China, we have never experienced any problems with China."

He met with Chinese Vice Premier Han Zheng earlier on Friday.

China is looking to strengthen its economic ties with the kingdom, as Beijing pursues its ambitious Belt and Road trade infrastructure initiative, while Riyadh rolls out "Saudi Vision 2030".

Prince Mohammed told the Chinese President they could join the two projects "to realise more progress and jointly confront challenges".



Saudi Crown Prince with China's President Xi Jinping (Courtesy of Al Arabia)

Vice Premier Han suggested during his meeting with the crown prince that the two countries deepen partnerships

in energy, infrastructure construction, finance, and high-tech.

Saudi Aramco said it had signed an

China is a good friend and partner to Saudi Arabia

XI JINPING

agreement to form a Saudi-Chinese joint venture -- worth more than \$10 billion -- to develop a refining and petrochemical complex in northeastern Liaoning province.

The Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority also announced the signing of 35 non-binding memorandums of understanding, including deals related to energy, mining, transportation and e-commerce.

The two countries should boost partnerships in counterterrorism and law enforcement, and exchange experience on combating extremism, Han said in his meeting with Mohammed.

The Saudis said they "firmly supported" Beijing's efforts to keep the country secure, and opposed "interference by external forces in China's internal affairs", Xinhua added.

BIRTH PANGS

UK backlash at Meghan's lavish US baby shower

London, United Kingdom

Meghan Markle drew fresh scorn from British media this week after celebrating the imminent arrival of her first baby with what they described as an "extravagant" trip to New York in a private jet.

The Duchess of Sussex, due to give birth in the spring, returned to Britain Thursday after enjoying a party with celebrity friends at what British papers referred to as "the most expensive hotel suite in the US".

The party, hosted at Manhattan's Mark Hotel by Serena Williams and attended by other high-profile figures including

Amal Clooney, saw guests serenaded by a harpist and given expensive gifts, they reported.

Although neither Markle nor British taxpayers footed the bill, The Times led the critically-toned coverage, headlining its article on Friday: "Meghan's extravagant New York baby shower provokes flood of indignation."

It said the visit had "prompted a debate about extravagance, style and the environmental impact of crossing the Atlantic in a private jet", including criticism from environmental lobby Friends of the Earth.

The paper also trawled comments posted on the parenting

website Mumsnet, quoting one person who was "quite disgusted by the way she is burning through money".

The Times added: "To some British minds the mere concept of a baby shower -- an American import -- seems inappropriate."

In the right-wing Daily Mail, columnist Jan Moir asked what could Queen Elizabeth II make of the duchess's "lavish trip".

She added: "can you be a self-identifying international humanitarian and have a £300,000-plus baby shower held for your already fabulously privileged unborn child?"

Meanwhile the Daily Telegraph -- said to be the Queen's



Markle, 37, has been dubbed "the difficult duchess" following several royal staff departures

favoured newspaper each morning -- reported the "glamour" of the American gathering may have "surpassed" Markle's wedding last year to Prince Harry.



Meghan Duchess of Sussex



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04 Thailand jewellery expo

05 Hidden 'bomb' found in Dhaka fire



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