



SINGAPORE: Fireworks explode above Singapore's financial district at the stroke of midnight to mark the New Year's celebrations today.— AP

CELEBRATIONS KICK OFF AS WORLD RINGS IN 2017

Continued from Page 1

Despite the terror fears, revellers in Hong Kong and Taipei were expected to throng city streets to watch firework performances.

Shoppers in Japan had earlier filled markets to buy tuna and crabs-seen as expensive items for special feasts for New Year's Day family gatherings.

Truck blockades

Security concerns have hit many New Year events with truck blockades a new tactic to try to prevent vehicles ploughing into crowds, with Sydney using garbage trucks. The German capital has beefed up security after the December 19 carnage, deploying more police, some armed with machine-guns.

"This year, what's new is that we will place concrete blocks and position heavy armored vehicles at the entrances" to the zone around Brandenburg Gate, a police spokesman said. Visitors seemed undeterred by recent events as they began to gather under a cold blue sky for a series of concerts ahead of large midnight firework display in the area. In Paris, there will be a firework display again, after muted 2015 celebrations following the massacre of 130 people by jihadists in the French capital. Nearly 100,000 police, gendarmes and soldiers will be deployed across France against the jihadist threat. Brussels has reinstated its firework show after last year's was cancelled at the last minute due to a terrorist threat.

With more than a million people expected to turn out to watch the ball drop in Times Square, New York is deploying 165 "blocker" trucks and some 7,000 police. Rome has deployed armored vehicles and greater numbers of security forces around the Coliseum and St Peter's Square, where Pope Francis will celebrate a "Te Deum" hymn of thanksgiving.

Moscow police will deploy more than 5,000 officers backed by thousands more from the new national guard and volunteer militia to maintain order. Thousands traditionally gather in Red Square, but for the second year in a row, the area will be open solely to 6,000 invitees.

London will have 3,000 officers on patrol with crowds flocking to line the banks of the Thames to watch the fireworks. Up to two million people are expected to party at Rio's Copacabana beach. But with Brazil mired in its worst recession in a century, the fireworks have been cut to just 12 minutes.

Normally boisterous Bangkok will see in the new year on a more sombre note as the nation grieves for King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who died in October.

And, at the stroke of midnight, the celebrations will last one second longer—a leap second—decreed by the International Earth Rotation and Reference Systems Service to allow astronomical time to catch up with atomic clocks that have called the hour since 1967.

Las Vegas

More than 300,000 visitors are expected to descend on Las Vegas for an extravagant New Year's Eve celebration. Nightclubs are pulling out all the stops with performances from DJ Calvin Harris, rappers T-Pain and Kendrick Lamar and artists Drake and Bruno Mars. The city's celebrity chefs have crafted elaborate prix fixe menus complete with caviar and champagne toasts.

An eight-minute fireworks show will kick off at the stroke of midnight, with rockets launching from the tops of half a dozen casinos.

Federal officials have ranked the celebration just below the Super Bowl and on par with the festivities in Times Square. FBI and Secret Service agents will work alongside local police departments that are putting all hands on deck for the big night.

Germany

In Berlin the mood was more somber than celebratory. "I don't like the way politics is going," said Daniel Brandt. "Fears are being fanned and people are so angry with each other."

The tone of public debate in Germany has become shriller over the past two years with the influx of hundreds of thousands of migrants. Some Germans blame Chancellor Angela Merkel for attacks such as the recent rampage in Berlin, where a failed asylum-seeker from Tunisia rammed a truck into a crowded Christmas market, killing 12 people and injuring dozens more.

As the country heads for a general election in which the anti-immigration Alternative for Germany party is expected to poll strongly, Brandt said he was hoping for "proper solutions to our problems."

Two Israeli tourists, on a visit to the German capital, seemed at a loss when asked about their wishes for 2017. "Peace on Earth. Just happiness, really," said Nathan and Libat, declining to give their last names.

Berlin hosts Germany's biggest open-air New Year's Eve celebration near the city's iconic Brandenburg Gate. Security, as in previous years, was tight Saturday, with police checking the bags of those entering the party zone. Authorities have also increased police presence at hotspots in other major cities, including Cologne, where a string of robberies and sexual assaults last year that were blamed largely on migrants from North Africa prompted nationwide outrage.

Turkey

Neslihan Dogruol, a restaurant owner in a chic Istanbul neighborhood, said she hopes for peace in 2017 following a year filled with "unrest and death." "2016 affected everyone badly," she said, referring to major attacks that hit Turkey in the past year.

The restaurant, adorned with snowflakes and tiny decorative lights for the evening, will have fewer people for dinner. "There is a serious gap between 2015 and 2016 in terms of business, people are going out less," Dogruol said, adding that she expects more people to come for drinks.

Security measures were heightened in major Turkish cities. Traffic leading up to

key squares in Istanbul and the capital, Ankara, will be closed, police said. In Istanbul, 17,000 police officers have been put on duty, some camouflaged as Santa Claus and others as street vendors, Turkey's state-run Anadolu news agency reported on Friday.

Ankara and Istanbul were targeted by bomb attacks in 2016, killing more than 180 people. Turkey has been in the throes of violence, combatting the Islamic State group, Kurdish militants and a coup attempt blamed on the US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen.

China

Residents in Beijing and Shanghai, China's two largest cities, will pass New Year's Eve in a relative state of security lockdown, according to Chinese media reports citing police. The Bund waterfront in Shanghai will not have any celebrations, authorities announced this week, while the sale, use and transportation of fireworks in central Shanghai will be prohibited altogether. Large buildings that often display light shows will also stay dark. More than 30 people died two years ago in a deadly stampede on Shanghai's waterfront, where 300,000 people had gathered to watch a planned light show.

Beijing police also said countdowns, lightshows, lotteries and other organized activities will not be held in popular shopping districts such as Sanlitun and Guomao. Beijing police advised citizens to avoid crowded areas, closely watch elderly relatives and children, and be aware of exit routes in venues.

Chinese President Xi Jinping said in his annual New Year's Eve address that his government will continue to focus on poverty alleviation at home and resolutely defending China's territorial rights on the foreign front.

South Korea

Hundreds of thousands of South Koreans ushered in the new year with a massive protest demanding the resignation of disgraced President Park Geun-hye. It was the 10th straight weekend of protests that led to Park's impeachment on Dec. 9 over a corruption scandal.

The evening rally was to overlap with Seoul's traditional bell-tolling ceremony at the Bosonggak pavilion at midnight, which was also expected to be a political statement against Park. The city's mayor, Park Won-soon, invited as guests a man whose teenage son was among more than 300 people who died during a 2014 ferry sinking, and a woman who was forced into sexual slavery by Japan's World War II military.

Park came under heavy criticism over the way her government handled the ferry disaster. "So many unbelievable things happened in 2016. It didn't feel real; it felt like a movie," protester Lee Hye-mi said about the bizarre scandal that brought Park down. "So I hope 2017 brings a movie-like ending to the mess. Everything getting solved, quickly and all at once, leaving us all happy."

India

For most people in India, New Year's Eve is a time for family. In New Delhi and many other cities, newspapers are full of big advertisements for lavish parties at upscale hotels and restaurants. The big draws at the hotel parties are song and dance performances from Bollywood and television stars.

Police with breath analyzers check for drunk driving, and security is tightened in malls and restaurants. The western city of Mumbai will host big street parties with thousands of people at the iconic Gateway of India, a colonial-era structure on the waterfront overlooking the Arabian Sea. There'll be music and dancing and occasional fireworks.

The Philippines

The Philippines' notorious tradition of dangerous New Year's Eve celebrations persisted after President Rodrigo Duterte delayed to next year his ban on the use of powerful firecrackers, often worsened by celebratory gunfire. Powerful firecrackers and gunfire have maimed hundreds of people and killed some each year across the Philippines despite government crackdowns, an annual government scare campaign and efforts by officials to set up centralized fireworks displays, like on Saturday night.

Duterte's southern Davao City hasn't been tainted by the bloody record because of a largely successful firecrackers ban he enforced when he was still the city's crime-busting mayor. Last month, he said he would delay his plan to replicate his Davao ban nationwide by a year because many have already invested in firecrackers and he was concerned by the impact of an abrupt ban on poor Filipinos employed in the industry.

In a preview of what may likely be another bloody New Year's Eve, the Department of Health said Saturday that 139 people have already been injured by firecracker blasts in recent days, mostly children under 15. More than 800 revelers were injured last year.

UAE

In Dubai, hundreds of thousands of people were expected to watch as fireworks shoot from the sides of the world's tallest building, the 828-meter (2,716-foot) Burj Khalifa. The show also will be streamed live online. But authorities hope they won't see a repeat of last year's excitement, when police say faulty wiring sparked a fire several hours before midnight at The Address Downtown, a 63-story skyscraper nearby. The high-rise tower still remains under repair.

The United Arab Emirates, a staunch Western ally that hosts US military personnel fighting against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria, remains a peaceful corner in the otherwise turbulent Middle East.

However, the US Embassy in Abu Dhabi issued a warning Thursday to Americans that "extremist sympathizers or self-radicalized extremists may conduct attacks worldwide during this period with little or no warning." — Agencies

MERKEL: ISLAMIST TERRORISM...

Continued from Page 1

In her address, Merkel compared Brexit to a "deep incision" and said that even though the EU was "slow and arduous," its member states should focus on common interests that transcend national benefits. "And, yes, Europe should focus on what can really be better than the national state," Merkel said. "But we Germans should never be led to believe that each could have a better future by going it alone."

She was alluding again to the populist AfD, which wants Germany to leave the EU and shut its borders to asylum seekers, more than one million of whom arrived in the country this year and last.

The record number of migrants has hurt Merkel's popularity and fuelled support for the AfD, which says Islam is incompatible with the German constitution. But her conservatives are still expected to win the general election in nine months. Merkel has made security the main election platform for her Christian Democrats (CDU). In her speech, she said the government would introduce measures to improve security after a failed Tunisian asylum seeker drove a truck into a Christmas market in the capital on Dec. 19, killing 12 people in the name of Islamic State. He was shot dead by Italian police in Milan on Dec. 23 and investigators are trying to determine whether he had accomplices. — Reuters

IS BOMBINGS IN BAGHDAD KILL 29

Continued from Page 1

Meanwhile, a third blast later in the day killed four people in the eastern New Baghdad district, where a minibus packed with explosives blew up in a busy commercial street, police and medics said.

Islamic State has continued to launch attacks in the heavily fortified capital, even after losing most of the northern and western territory it seized in 2014. The recapture of Mosul would probably spell the end for Islamic State's self-styled caliphate, but the militants would still be capable of fighting a guerrilla-style insurgency in Iraq, and plotting or inspiring attacks on the West.

The second phase of a US-backed offensive launched on Thursday following weeks of deadlock has encountered fierce resistance. Conventional US forces deploying more extensively in this phase are now visible very close to the front lines. The third day of the renewed push saw heavy clashes on the southeastern and northern fronts. An army officer deployed in the southeast said there was fierce fighting on the edge of Intisar district on Saturday and advances were slowed by heavy machine gun fire, snipers and rockets attacks by militants entrenched in houses.

The officer said Islamic State fighters were firing from houses with white flags

raised over the roofs, falsely indicating they are civilians to avoid being targeted by Iraqi forces and coalition airstrikes.

"The more we advance the tougher it becomes. The job of differentiating between fake and real houses with civilians inside is becoming more painful to our troops," he told Reuters by phone.

An elite Interior Ministry unit continued to push yesterday through the Intisar district, where a US-trained army unit had struggled to advance far after entering the southeast district last month. Heavy gunfire was audible and attack helicopters fired overhead as hundreds of civilians fled their homes, a Reuters cameraman said.

In the north, a separate army unit pressed towards the border of Mosul proper after recapturing several outlying villages in the past two days. "There is a battle in Argoob area, which is considered the gateway to Hadba," Lieutenant Colonel Abbas al-Azawi said by phone, referring to a strategic northern neighborhood.

Since the offensive began on Oct 17, elite forces have retaken a quarter of Mosul in the biggest ground operation there since the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi has said the group would be driven out of Iraq by April. — Agencies



TOKYO: People hold balloons during the New Year celebrations at Prince Park Tower in the Japanese capital Tokyo yesterday. — AFP