



Smoke and fire billow after shelling on the Islamic State group's last holdout of Baghouz in the eastern Syrian Deir Ezzor province on Sunday. — AFP

## Philippines seizes 1,500 rare turtles

MANILA: Some 1,500 live exotic turtles - some restrained with duct-tape - have been found inside an airline passenger's luggage, Philippines authorities said yesterday, as they vowed a crackdown on the lucrative wildlife trade. The Philippines is a major source and transit point of wildlife trafficking, according to a 2018 report by the US State Department. The turtles and tortoises were found at Manila airport on Sunday in the luggage of a Filipino passenger, who had arrived from Hong Kong, hidden among clothes and shoes.

The person fled before authorities could confront him, customs officials said. "We saw the images from the x-ray (machine)," Manila airport customs chief Carmelita Talusan told AFP. "We never expected it would reach as

many as 1,530," Talusan said. "Our staff were taking care not to hurt them because duct tape was used to immobilise the turtles." Talusan said the matter was under investigation and authorities had identified the passenger, who could face charges of violating the nation's illegal wildlife trading law, which carry a maximum two years in prison.

The turtles seized were estimated to be worth 4.5 million pesos (\$87,000), the customs bureau said. Among the animals found were the Indian Star Tortoise, classified as "vulnerable" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. The turtles confiscated on Sunday were likely destined to be sold in the Philippines or smuggled to other countries using false documents, environment officials said.

"It's for business purposes. Those turtles are expensive. It's such a lucrative business. There are buyers and collectors who treat them as pets," environment undersecretary Benny Antiporda told AFP. "We are stepping up our all-out drive against the black market of endangered species." Antiporda added the Philippines would ask Chinese authorities whether they wanted to take back the confiscated turtles which were being quarantined and treated in Manila.

Sunday's haul was the latest in a series of seizures of smuggled wildlife at the capital's airport. More than 50 iguanas were discovered in the luggage of a passenger from Bangkok last month, with some of the animals hidden in water bottles and socks, Talusan said. — AFP



MANILA: This undated handout photo received yesterday shows turtles found inside a suitcase covered with duct tape. — AFP

## US downgrades its Palestinian...

Continued from Page 1

where a new Palestinian affairs unit will operate. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says the move will not constitute a change in policy and is intended to improve "efficiency and effectiveness". The State Department said yesterday that "the administration remains fully committed to efforts to achieve a lasting and comprehensive peace that offers a brighter future to Israel and the Palestinians".

But the change means Washington's relations with the Palestinians will now fall under the authority of US ambassador to Israel David Friedman, who has been a supporter of Israeli settlement building in the occupied West Bank. Palestinians view him - along with Trump's administration - as blatantly biased in favor of Israel. Palestinian leaders froze contact with the White House after Trump's 2017 decision recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and castigated the consulate closure.

Saeb Erekat, Palestine Liberation Organization secretary general, called the closure "the last nail in the coffin of the US administration's role in peacemaking". Senior Palestinian official Hanan Ashrawi said "the Trump administration is intent on leaving no room for doubt about its hostility towards the Palestinian people and their inalienable rights as well as its abject disregard for international law and its obligations under the law". Israeli officials had not commented on the move yesterday.

At the ornate consulate on Agron Street in downtown Jerusalem, the flag ceremony was kept low key under grey winter skies. Friedman, who helped spearhead May's relocation of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to a different converted consular building in south Jerusalem, was not present. US officials said the Stars and Stripes

banner was taken down and presented to departing consul Karen Sasahara as a farewell gift, in keeping with foreign service custom, after which another US flag was run up. "Our work and our team will continue to work on reaching peace in this land," Sasahara said on YouTube.

The State Department has not confirmed reports that the consul general's residence in Jerusalem will eventually become the home for the US ambassador as part of the embassy's move to the disputed city, which occurred last May. Located near Jerusalem's Old City, it has been the home of the consul general since 1912, while the US permanent diplomatic presence in the city was established in 1857.

Trump, who is expected to release his long-awaited peace plan in the coming months, has also cut more than \$500 million in Palestinian aid in a bid to force Palestinian leaders to negotiate. Palestinian leaders call it an attempt to blackmail them into accepting a plan that they believe will destroy their hopes for independent statehood. Trump's decision to move the embassy to Jerusalem broke with decades of international consensus that the status of the city must first be decided upon through negotiations by Israel and the Palestinians.

Israel occupied mainly Palestinian east Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War and later annexed it in a move never recognized by the international community. It sees the entire city as its capital, while the Palestinians view the eastern sector - where key holy sites for Christians, Muslims and Jews are located - as the capital of their future state. The consulate closure comes amid growing warnings over diminishing possibilities for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israeli settlement construction approvals in the West Bank on land the Palestinians consider part of their future state has accelerated since Trump took office. Trump has been far less critical of settlement construction than Barack Obama's White House. The White House is expected to unveil its plan for what Trump calls the "ultimate deal" - Israeli-Palestinian peace - sometime after Israel's April 9 elections. — Agencies

denied any such violations.

Meanwhile, the Cabinet yesterday decided to return the citizenship of Saad Al-Ajmi, which was revoked about four years ago when the government revoked the citizenship of several opposition activists. The government has so far returned the citizenship of several of these people but others have not yet been returned.

In the meantime, opposition MP Riyadh Al-Adasani yesterday reiterated his threat that he would use all available constitutional tools against the government if authorities do not refer a suspected bribery and money laundering case involving MPs and businessmen to the public prosecution. Adasani said in a statement that he will continue to pursue this issue, which involves using millions of dinars to inflate the bank accounts of some MPs and businessmen. He said he will use constitutional tools - a reference to grilling - if the government fails to take proper action or takes a long time to do so.

## Award-winning Egypt journalist...

Continued from Page 1

He was detained in Aug 2013 while covering clashes between security forces and supporters of ousted Islamist president Mohamed Morsi that turned into a bloodbath in which hundreds of demonstrators died. "We were arrested in the first 30-40 minutes (after the clashes started). We were stripped of our equipment," he said. "The others were released two hours later ... I left my home to take photos and I didn't return for five and half years."

Shawkan was put on trial along with 739 defendants, most of them charged with killing police and vandalizing property. It was one of the largest mass trials since the 2011 uprising that toppled veteran president Hosni Mubarak. In September an Egyptian court upheld death sentences against 75 defendants and gave Shawkan a five-year jail term - which covered the time he had already served - but he remained

in jail awaiting his release.

Shawkan was accused of "murder and membership of a terrorist organization" - charges that can carry the death penalty - sparking condemnation from international rights groups which demanded his release. Amnesty International said at the time he had been convicted "simply for doing his job as a photojournalist and documenting the police brutality that took place that day". Amnesty hailed his release but denounced "the ludicrous probation measures" which will require him to spend the night at a police station for the next five years. Another 214 people who were sentenced in September to five years in prison were freed from prison yesterday.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, a former army chief, was elected in 2014 nearly a year after leading the military's overthrow of Morsi following mass protests against the Islamist's year-long rule. Sisi, who critics say has carried out a widespread crackdown on dissent, was re-elected in March 2018 after securing more than 97 percent of the vote in the absence of any serious competition. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranks Egypt 161st out of 180 countries on its press freedom index. More than 30 journalists are still in prison in Egypt according to the rights group. — AFP

## Tornadoes kill 23 in Alabama...

Continued from Page 1

HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday sent a cable of condolences to US President Donald Trump. In his cable, the Amir expressed his sincere condolences to the victims of the tornadoes that struck Alabama and resulted in the deaths of dozens of people and destruction of public facilities, wishing mercy to the deceased and swift recovery to the injured. Cables of similar sentiments were sent by HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah to Trump.

Search operations for those still missing had to be halted on Sunday night due to hazardous conditions, but were renewed yesterday morning with agencies from across the state and from neighboring Georgia joining the hunt. The swath of destruction left was a quarter mile wide and stretched for the "several miles that it traveled on the ground," according to Jones.

The powerful winds picked up a billboard from the Lee County Flea Market in Alabama and dumped it some 20 miles away, across the state line in Georgia, local media reported. More than 6,000 homes were left without power in Alabama, according to PowerOutage.US, while 16,000 suffered outages in neighboring Georgia. The search for missing people was focused in the area around Beauregard, about 95

km east of the state capital Montgomery.

While the heavy rains that accompanied the high winds had relented overnight, many roads in the worst-hit areas were blocked by debris, hindering search efforts. Residents in the town of Smith Station told local TV news crews of their shock at turning up to work to find their businesses destroyed, and seeing crying co-workers comforting one another. One bar in the town appeared to have lost its roof and most of its walls, in images screened by MSNBC, while a cell tower was completely destroyed.

"My sister and niece have been under tornado watch and warnings all day in Montgomery ... Prayers up for Alabama," Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Ava Duvernay tweeted Sunday. Trump expressed his condolences to those affected and said on Twitter that the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, "has been told directly by me to give the A Plus treatment to the Great State of Alabama and the wonderful people who have been so devastated by the Tornadoes."

The National Weather Service (NWS) had issued a tornado warning for areas including Lee County on Sunday, calling on residents to: "TAKE COVER NOW! Move to a basement or an interior room on the lowest floor of a sturdy building. Avoid windows." The warning for the first twister was issued at 2:58 pm, the NWS said. The warning for the second came less than an hour later, at 3:38 pm. NWS Birmingham said the first tornado to hit was "at least an EF-3 & at least 1/2 mi wide." The EF-3 designation - on a scale of 0 to 5 - means the tornado had winds of 218 to 266 km per hour. Around a dozen tornadoes were reported to have touched down in Alabama and Georgia in the course of the day, CNN reported. — Agencies

## Panel increases annual leave...

Continued from Page 1

Opposition MPs Mubarak Al-Hajraf and Al-Humaidi Al-Subaei yesterday decided to file a joint grilling against Commerce and Industry Minister Khaled Al-Roudhan over alleged violations. The two lawmakers signed the grilling request and went to the speaker's office to file it, but couldn't do so before the end of the day's working hours, as the speaker was at a meeting with HH the Amir. As a result, they decided to file the grilling today so as it can be debated two weeks later. Several MPs had warned Roudhan over alleged violations and had threatened to file to grill him. He has