

International

Arrests in UK as fears grow of nightclub needle attacks

Revelers 'injected with drug-filled syringes' at clubs

News in brief

Senior Qaeda leader killed

WASHINGTON: A senior Al-Qaeda leader was killed in a US drone strike in Syria, the Pentagon said Friday. The strike comes two days after a base in southern Syria, used by the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State group, was assaulted. "A US airstrike today in northwest Syria killed senior al-Qaeda leader Abdul Hamid Al-Matar," said Central Command spokesman Army Major John Rigsbee in a statement. There were no known casualties from the strike, he said, adding it was conducted using an MQ-9 aircraft. "The removal of this Al-Qaeda senior leader will disrupt the terrorist organization's ability to further plot and carry out global attacks," he said. At the end of September the Pentagon killed Salim Abu-Ahmad, another senior Al-Qaeda commander in Syria, in an airstrike near Idlib in the country's northwest. — AFP

German infections soar

FRANKFURT: Germany's seven-day coronavirus incidence rate reached 100 infections per 100,000 people on Saturday for the first time since May, following a surge in cases in recent weeks. The number hit 100 after rising from 68.7 just eight days ago, the Robert Koch health institute (RKI) said. The milestone comes a day after the German health ministry warned that "we are seeing an escalation of the situation". The upwards trend "became visible in almost all age groups over the past week and it is to be expected that the increase in case numbers will pick up speed in the further course of autumn and winter," health ministry spokesman Oliver Ewald said. Germany recorded 86 new Covid-19 deaths on Saturday, with the country's total toll rising to 95,077, official figures said. There were also 15,145 new infections recorded over 24 hours, the figure having risen 31 percent over the last eight days. — AFP

JFK assassination files

WASHINGTON: The White House said Friday it would delay the release of long-classified documents related to the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy. President Joe Biden wrote in a statement that the remaining files "shall be withheld from full public disclosure" until December 15 next year - nearly 60 years after Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, Texas in 1963. In 2018, former president Donald Trump released several thousand secret files on the assassination, but withheld others on national security grounds. The White House said the national archivist needs more time for a review into that redaction, which was slowed by the pandemic. Biden also said the delay was "necessary to protect against identifiable harm to the military defense, intelligence operations, law enforcement, or the conduct of foreign relations" and that this "outweighs the public interest in immediate disclosure." — AFP

Eswatini bans protests

MANZINI: A ban on protests silenced Eswatini's pro-democracy movement Friday, as regional mediators sought to resolve the deadly unrest that enflamed the kingdom this week. Formerly known as Swaziland, Africa's last absolute monarchy has been rocked by demonstrations that prompted authorities to deploy the army and throttle the internet. At least two people were killed and dozens injured in clashes with security forces, who fired tear gas, live rounds and rubber bullets to disperse crowds. After the government stopped issuing protest permits, Friday saw shops reopen in the main cities of Mbabane and Manzini, with residents walking on the streets peacefully, according to an AFP correspondent. Mediators from the 16-nation Southern African Development Community met King Mswati III on Thursday and are scheduled to engage with various political parties on Friday. — AFP

Peru's death hits 200,000

LIMA: Peru, which has the world's highest COVID-19 death rate per capita, has surpassed 200,000 deaths from the coronavirus, the health ministry said on Friday. The ministry announced 25 new deaths over the previous 24 hours, taking the South American country over the symbolic threshold with 200,003 deaths since the pandemic started in March 2020. The Andean country of 33 million has also recorded 2.2 million infections. With 6,065 deaths per million population, Peru's COVID mortality rate is the highest in the world, according to an AFP count based on official data. The news comes at a time of falling daily cases and deaths attributed to the increase in vaccinations, although authorities remain worried about a potential new wave of infections due to the Delta variant that is now predominant in the country. "We're maintaining a high level of control," health minister Hernando Cevallos said recently. — AFP

LONDON: Police in England said they have arrested three men, after several days of increasing alarm at reports that revellers had been injected with needles at nightclubs. Young women and men, mostly students, have said they believe they were injected with drug-filled syringes at clubs and bars. Women have for years been warned to be alert to their drinks being spiked with alcohol or sedative drugs while on nights out.

Longstanding fears about the safety of women in public places have also come under renewed focus after the high-profile murder of a London woman by a rogue police officer earlier this year. Police have said there had been around 140 confirmed reports of drink spiking in September and October and 24 reports of injection. Senior officer Jason Harwin of coordinating body the National Police Chiefs' Council said the reports were "very concerning" and the council was "working at pace" to "understand the scale of offending".

Arrests

Police in Nottinghamshire county in central

England said on Friday they had made two arrests in an ongoing investigation into "spiking" incidents. The pair were suspected of conspiring to administer poison "with intent to injure, annoy or aggrieve". The force said the arrests were not linked to any specific recent report of drink spiking or use of a

needle. Police in neighboring Lincolnshire arrested a man on suspicion of possessing drugs with intent to administer them, though officers said no needle was involved. Nottinghamshire Police said they had 15 reports of "alleged spiking by something sharp"

'Vile crimes'

Students in dozens of university towns and cities have responded with plans to boycott nightlife venues next week, calling for tighter entrance security and better safeguarding. More than 163,000 have signed a petition urging the government to make it compulsory for nightclubs to thoroughly search guests on entry.

Victims have reported passing out or feeling woozy shortly after experiencing a sharp pain, and later finding apparent puncture marks on their skin. Their accounts were discussed by the House of Commons home affairs committee on Wednesday, with its chair, Yvette Cooper, describing the alleged attacks as "vile crimes". Some medics and drugs experts, though, have questioned what powerful sedative substance could be administered in such a way without the victim immediately noticing. — AFP

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Two Americas: How US left and right stopped communicating

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump may have lost last year's US presidential election but within his own dominion he remains the undisputed leader of the free world. The entirely false notion that Democrats stole the presidency from Trump is likely to be a hot topic on "TRUTH Social," a conservative platform he is adding to the already hyper-polarized US media ecosystem.

Wednesday's announcement of the launch planned for early next year is noteworthy because it bolsters speculation that Trump - who is banned from Twitter - is gearing up for another presidential run in 2024. More profoundly, it demonstrates how the former reality TV star is able to capitalize on deep fractures in American society that are being intensified like never before through the echo chambers of social and traditional media.

Where once Americans could agree on a shared set of facts, now two implacable tribes eye each other suspiciously from their respective siloes, each armed with their own version of reality served up by their favorite media outlet or smartphone app. Investigative journalist Carl

Bernstein, whose reporting on the Watergate affair alongside Bob Woodward helped bring down Richard Nixon, has called for media and politicians to pay more attention to countering misinformation splitting the country.

"The division that is separating and polarizing us in this country is vicious. It is deep," he said. "It is full of hate and anger. And most of that hate and anger is resting on big lies." Watch conservative Fox News on any given evening, and you could almost be convinced that it is reporting on an entirely different country from the one covered by left-leaning MSNBC, often with almost no overlap in the news agenda.

'Owning the libs'

Depending on whether Americans hone their opinions on Parler or Twitter, Trump is either the last bulwark against a woke cultural tide presaging a socialist takeover - or the biggest threat to democracy since the Civil War. The inhabitants of these two competing bubbles rarely encounter information that might challenge their world view or show them what their opponents are think-



LOS ANGELES: A person checks the app store on a smartphone for 'Truth Social,' with a photo of former US President Donald Trump on a computer screen in the background. — AFP

ing. Put more simply, no one talks to the other side anymore.

It's not just last year's election that gets completely contradictory coverage from right-wing and progressive media sources. Reporting on the nationwide demonstrations that followed the murder by police of African American George Floyd offered the same dichotomy, with the left being fed images of noble protest for racial justice and the right told the country was on the verge of a violent takeover by communist thugs.

This bifurcation has reached the point where someone's views on a

range of hot-button issues - from abortion, LGBT rights and immigration to gun control and health care - can be reliably inferred from their choice of cable news channel. Division has been a hallmark of the Trump era. A record 81 million people voted for Joe Biden in 2020, but the 74 million that voted for Trump marked the second-highest figure ever posted by a candidate. On the right, figures like the former president's son Donald Trump Jr prioritize "owning the libs" - sparking outrage and hand-wringing among progressives - over serious debates about ideology. — AFP

Trapped migrant regrets Belarus-EU crossing

KLESZCZELE: Exhausted and trapped in a cold, "cruel" forest, Lebanese barber Ali Abd Alwareth said he regretted his week-long bid to enter the European Union via the Belarus-Poland border. "It's miserable. Something that you don't wish for your worst enemy... A nightmare," the soft-spoken 24-year-old with Crohn's disease told AFP.

Sitting cross-legged on a bed of pine needles and dead leaves near the border town of Kleszczele in eastern Poland, Abd Alwareth described being a ping-pong ball for the guards. "I tried crossing like five, six times, and every time I got caught and deported back to the border" by Poland, he said in English. The Belarusian side meanwhile refused to let him return to Minsk to fly home. Abd Alwareth said security forces told him: "You have only two choices: either you die here or you die in Poland. That's it."

One of thousands of migrants - mostly from the Middle East - who have tried to penetrate the 400-



KLESZCZELE: 24-year-old Ali Abd Alwareth from Lebanon sits in the woods outside the Emergency State zone at the Polish-Belarusian border and waits for arrival of Border Guard patrol. — AFP

kilometre border since August, Abd Alwareth said he left the financial crisis in Lebanon in search of a better life. The whole journey from his home region of Bekaa cost \$4,000 and involved help from a Minsk-based company he found on social media. The EU suspects Belarus is masterminding the unprecedented influx of migrants into Poland as a

form of retaliation against EU sanctions, but the regime has put the blame on the West.

'I feel like a puppet'

Poland has sent thousands of troops, built a razor-wire fence and implemented a three-month state of emergency that bans journalists and charity workers along the immediate border area. During his gruelling time in the woods, Abd Alwareth said he drank water off of leaves, was too cold to sleep, and was once hit on the head by either the Polish army or police. Though "exhausted" and "devastated," he said he understood that the border guards "are doing their job. They are protecting their country. We are illegal."

On Friday, Abd Alwareth and his Syrian walking companions managed to get in touch with Polish activists, who met them in the forest with warm clothes and food as well as offering support when the guards arrived. His fate up in the air, Abd Alwareth hopes to receive asylum in Poland - or at the very least, to return to Lebanon. "Okay, you don't want me here, you don't want me in Belarus. Just depict me back home. That's all I'm asking for," he said. "What is happening in the forest is cruel... I feel like a puppet. It was my decision, I came this way - but not to be treated like this," he added. "I refuse to die at the border. I just want to see my mum." — AFP

'Monument' Merkel gets standing ovation at last EU summit

BRUSSELS: European leaders gave German Chancellor Angela Merkel a standing ovation on Friday at her last EU summit after a 16-year reign that helped guide the bloc through major ups and downs. Merkel has attended a staggering 107 EU summits that saw some of the biggest twists in recent European history, including the euro-zone debt crisis, an inflow of Syrian refugees, Brexit and the creation of the bloc's landmark pandemic recovery fund.

"You are a monument," the host of the summits, European Council chief Charles Michel, said in the closed-door homage to her, according to an official in the room. An EU summit "without Angela is like Rome without the Vatican or Paris without the Eiffel tower", Michel said. He handed Merkel a perspex cube with a globe described as an "artistic impression" of the Europa

building where EU summits are hosted.

Merkel, with characteristic lack of fanfare, thanked journalists for their long nights at summits, though she offered a strong word of caution on the challenges still facing the EU, and her German successor. "I am leaving the European Union, as far as my responsibility of Federal Chancellor is concerned, at a point in time where there is cause for concern," she said. "We have overcome many crises but we have a series of unresolved problems," she said, citing disputes on migration, the bloc's economy, and rule of law in EU countries.

'Compromise machine'

Luxembourg's Prime Minister Xavier Bettel called Merkel a "compromise machine" who "usually did find something to unite us" through



BRUSSELS: (Left to right) Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, France's President Emmanuel Macron and Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban arrive on the second day of a European Union (EU) summit on October 22, 2021. — AFP

marathon intra-EU negotiations. "Europe will miss her," he said. Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg called her "undoubtedly a great European" and "a haven of peace, if you like, within the European Union". Her departure, he said, "will leave a

hole". Her final summit, a two-day affair in Brussels, leaned once again on her soft-power skills to ease a burning row with Poland over its rejection of the EU's legal order - something many believed could be the next existential threat to the European Union. — AFP