VOA NEWS

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(This) is VOA news. I'm David Byrd in Washington.

U.S.-backed forces in Syria moved to retake the last patch the Islamic State's self-declared caliphate in Syria, advancing on the terror group's remaining fighters late Friday.

The final assault began just a day after the lead commander said the northeastern Syrian village of Baghuz would be liberated within a week.

A Syrian [Defense] Democratic Forces' official, speaking to VOA on the condition of anonymity, said 15,000 troops were taking part in the operation with the backing of U.S. and coalition airpower and artillery.

Meanwhile, the U.S. and South Korea are expected to announce they will significantly scale back annual large-scale joint exercises.

Media reports quoting unnamed U.S. defense officials say the official announcement is expected in a few days. A Pentagon spokesperson declined to confirm the reports to VOA.

Scaling back the exercises could be seen as a good faith gesture to keep nuclear talks with North Korea alive following the failed Hanoi summit, would also address President Donald Trump's concerns over the high cost of the massive demonstrations of force.

The parents of an American college student who died after being detained in North Korea say the evil regime is responsible for his death.

AP's Sagar Meghani reports.

Fred and Cindy Warmbier are rebuking President Trump after he said yesterday he didn't think Kim Jong Un was aware of their son Otto's alleged mistreatment.

"He tells me that he didn't know about it and I will take him at his word."

The Warmbiers say they stayed silent while the president was meeting with Kim in Vietnam but now must "speak out."

In a written statement, they say "Kim and his evil regime are responsible for Otto's death" and "no excuses or lavish praise can change that."

Otto Warmbier died two years ago after being returned to the U.S. in a vegetative state.

Sagar Meghani of AP.

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Canada's Justice Department has begun the process of extraditing Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou to the United States to face charges of violating U.S. sanctions against Iran.

Meng, the company's chief financial officer, was detained in Canada last December. In January, the United States filed several charges against her and Huawei, including bank fraud, obstruction of justice and theft of technology.

Meng will appear in a Vancouver court March 6 when a date will be set for her extradition hearing.

In the Philippines Friday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the United States remains concerned about possible espionage from Huawei Technology.

"We want to make sure that the world has their eyes wide open as to the risks of having that technology to be part of infrastructure, backbone or networks."

China's embassy in Canada said it was "utterly dissatisfied" and firmly opposes Ottawa's decision.

Meng's lawyers say the U.S. extradition request is an abuse of the processes law.

The United States has issued a new round of sanctions against Venezuela and the government of embattled President Nicholás Maduro.

The State Department said it was imposing visa restrictions on individuals responsible for undermining Venezuela's democracy. It said the restrictions would apply to the numerous Maduro-aligned individuals and their families.

U.S. Special Representative for Venezuela Elliott Abrams says the United States has added six high-ranking Venezuelan security officials to its international sanctions list.

"... individuals associated with the obstruction of the entry of international humanitarian aid into Venezuela or violence against those who attempted to deliver the assistance."

The United States and several dozen other nations have recognized Venezuelan National Assembly leader Juan Guaidó as the country's legitimate president. Russia, China, Cuba and other nations say Maduro is the president.

An Indian pilot captured by Pakistan was handed back to his home country Friday.

AP's Karen Chammas reports.

Pakistani officials brought the Indian pilot captured from a downed plane to a border crossing with India for handover.

The pilot was taken in a convoy from the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore to the border crossing at Wagah, escorted by military vehicles with soldiers, their weapons drawn.

On the Indian side of the border, a group of cheering Indian residents from the area waved India's national flag and held up a huge garland of flowers to welcome him back.

Meanwhile, China has welcomed Pakistan's decision to "express kindness" by handing over the captured Indian pilot after four straight days of cross-border attacks in the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.

I'm Karen Chammas.

A positive day on Wall Street, with all three major indices posting gains.

For more, visit our website voanews.com. I'm David Byrd, VOA news.