

FOREIGN BRIEFS

Pakistan buries teen killed in mass shooting at Texas school

● Hundreds mourned a Pakistani exchange student killed in a mass shooting at a Texas high school last week during her burial in Karachi yesterday. Sabika Sheikh was among the 10 people gunned down at a high school in Santa Fe last Friday when a heavily armed student opened fire on classmates. Relatives sobbed and hugged as Sheikh's remains arrived at her family home in a casket draped with a Pakistani flag. The body was then taken to a public meeting ground where hundreds gathered to say prayers and pay their respects before the burial at a nearby cemetery.

As Brexit looms, number of Britons switching citizenship doubles

● The number of Britons who have obtained German citizenship has shot up dramatically since Britain's decision to quit the European Union, official data showed yesterday. "A link with the upcoming Brexit is obvious – in the two years 2016 and 2017, a total of 10,358 Britons acquired German citizenship, more than twice as many as in the period spanning 2000 to 2005," said German statistics office Destatis. In 2015, 622 Britons were naturalised in Germany, while the number soared three-fold to reach 2,865 in 2016. The trend continued in 2017 with 7,493 Britons becoming Germans, a new record.

Malaysia to end search for missing Flight MH370

● The search for flight MH370 will end next week, Malaysia's transport minister said yesterday, more than four years after the plane disappeared and triggered one of the world's greatest aviation mysteries. The Malaysia Airlines jet vanished in March 2014 with 239 people – mostly from China – on board, en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. No sign of the plane was found in a 120,000 square kilometre sea search zone and the Australian-led hunt, the largest in aviation history, was suspended in January last year.

Ebola patients running to pastors, witchdoctors

DR CONGO
Mbandaka

Health workers fighting Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo have run into an invisible, but powerful hurdle – a belief system that deems the disease to be a curse or the result of evil spirits.

Some people are refusing medical care and turn instead to preachers and prayers to chase away the threat, they say.

The pastor of an evangelical church Wednesday last week died several days after he "prayed" for an Ebola victim who went to him for help, a doctor said.

"Some sick people believe that the Ebola epidemic comes from sorcery – they refuse to be treated and prefer to pray," Julie Lobali, a nurse on the front line against the DRC's ninth Ebola outbreak, said.

She is working in a hospital in Mbandaka, a port city on the Congo River in northwest DRC where the first urban case was reported last Thursday.

Since the outbreak was declared in the remote area of Bikoro on May 8, 51 cases of Ebola have been reported with 27 deaths.

One superstition that has become prevalent in the city, she says, is believing that Ebola began in Bikoro as "a curse on those who ate stolen meat" – a wild animal hunted in the countryside.

Blandine Mboyo, who lives in Mbandaka's district of Bongondjo, told AFP "a hunter put a curse on the village because his big game was stolen".

"This curse is so powerful because it hits those who ate this meat, having heard about



Residents gather at the town Hall of Mbandaka, a port city in northwest DRC on Monday during the launch of the Ebola vaccination campaign. The Ebola death toll has risen to 26

the theft or having seen the stolen animal," Nicole Batoa, a local vendor, added.

Another resident, Guy Ingila, observed that officials have said on the radio "this disease is incurable... It is because it is about witchcraft".

For doctors and health officials these beliefs raise serious concerns, complicating efforts to contain and roll back the deadly Ebola virus.

In Geneva on Tuesday, African health officials said they were preparing to send anthropologists to the DRC to help with an Ebola vaccination campaign.

A prototype vaccine will first be given to frontline health workers and then to people who have been in contact with Ebola cases.

"If we do not handle communication well, the

vaccination programme may suffer," John Nkengasong, the head of Africa Centres for Disease Control, told reporters in Geneva.

"So we are also assessing how in the next two weeks or so to deploy anthropologists to support the vaccine efforts."

Bad spirits

In DR Congo, as elsewhere in Africa, disease and death are often not looked on as natural phenomena.

"So many deaths is a sign of a curse and can only have been provoked by a bad spirit," Zacharie Bababaswe, a Congolese specialist in cultural history, said, explaining people's perceptions of Ebola.

Before the expansion of evangelical churches in the country, Bababaswe says many Congolese would go see the

witchdoctor or village healer for treatment.

Today there is still widespread superstition – but, since the 1980s, it has taken a different form, with some people turning for help to a church or a pastor who claims to have healing powers.

Two people infected with Ebola from Bikoro went to the churches rather than a medical centre for help, local witnesses said.

Another patient, who had been hospitalised in Mbandaka, left the medical centre to seek out a local healer, they said.

To break the spread of Ebola, "we have to convince villagers that the disease is not a curse", Bavon N'Sa Mputu, an elected official from Bikoro, said, pointing to the key role that churches can play.

AFP