

Iraq asks US for team to prepare troop pullout

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's caretaker premier Adel Abdel Mahdi has asked the United States to send a delegation to Baghdad to begin preparing for a troop pullout, his office said yesterday.

In a phone call late Thursday with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Abdel Mahdi "requested that delegates be sent to Iraq to set the mechanisms to implement parliament's decision for the secure withdrawal of (foreign) forces from Iraq."

Some 5,200 US soldiers are stationed at bases across Iraq to support local troops preventing a resurgence of the Islamic State group.

They make up the bulk of a broader US-led coalition, invited by the Iraqi government in 2014 to help combat the jihadists.

Their deployment was based on an executive-to-executive agreement never ratified by Iraq's parliament.

But on Sunday, Iraq's parliament voted in favour of rescinding that



invitation and ousting all foreign troops.

The following day, US commanders sent a letter to their counterparts in Baghdad saying they were preparing for "movement out of Iraq."

The letter said the coalition would "be repositioning forces over the course of the coming days and weeks to prepare for onward movement."

The Pentagon said the letter was a draft sent by mistake but Abdel Mahdi disputed that account, saying his office had received signed and translated copies.

He has demanded clarification from Washington of its intentions.



Mourners light candles for the victims of Ukrainian Airlines flight 752 which crashed in Iran during a vigil at Mel Lastman Square in Toronto, Canada on Thursday night.

Inset, an image grab from footage obtained from the state-run Iran Press news agency yesterday shows what Iran's civil aviation says is the black box of the Ukrainian airline flight that crashed near Tehran killing all 176 on board.

PHOTO: AFP



House votes to rein in Trump

Non-binding measure limits president's ability to go to war with Iran without first seeking congressional approval

AFP, Washington

US lawmakers concerned about rushing to war with Iran adopted a measure Thursday aimed at reining in President Donald Trump's ability to take military action against the Islamic republic.

The resolution was introduced by Democrats after Trump's order to kill an Iranian commander and retaliatory missile strikes by Tehran dramatically escalated tensions and raised fears of a devastating war between the two foes.

The mostly symbolic but politically charged vote, 224 to 194, was largely along party lines, with three members of Trump's Republican Party joining Democrats in approving the measure demanding the president not engage in military action against Iran unless authorized by Congress.

Among them was Matt Gaetz, one of Trump's staunchest supporters in Congress who noted in a floor speech that the measure did not criticize Trump, but said that "engaging in another forever war in the Middle East would be the wrong decision."

"If the members of our armed services have the courage to go and fight and die in these wars, as Congress we ought to have the courage to vote

for them or against them," Gaetz said.

As lawmakers launched a scalding, day-long debate over presidential authority, Trump insisted he needs no one's blessing to launch attacks, essentially scorning existing legal requirements for consulting with Congress.

US-IRAN TENSIONS

Trump ridicules his Democratic opponents in Congress

Trump must de-escalate and must prevent further violence: Pelosi



"I don't have to," Trump said when asked whether he would seek congressional approval for more military action against Iran.

"And you shouldn't have to," he added, "because you have to make split-second decisions sometimes."

Trump signalled Wednesday he was stepping

back from the brink of war with Iran after a US drone strike that killed commander Qasem Soleimani was followed by Iranian missile volleys against bases housing American forces in Iraq.

But on Thursday he fought back against criticism that he'd ordered the killing, risking all-out conflict, without real justification.

At a reelection campaign rally in Toledo, Ohio, Trump insisted, without providing any evidence, that Soleimani was "actively planning new attacks," including against US embassies, "and we stopped him cold."

He ridiculed his Democratic opponents in Congress, calling them insulting names and claimed that if he had consulted with them they would have leaked the secret operation to the "fake news."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, speaking to reporters about the resolution, said Trump "must de-escalate and must prevent further violence. America and the world cannot afford war."

The House measure was introduced as a concurrent resolution, a form of legislation that does not carry the weight of law. But as a political instrument it could serve as a rebuke to Trump's foreign policy.

Trump sends N Korea's Kim birthday wishes

US President Donald Trump wished North Korea's Kim Jong Un a happy birthday, Seoul said yesterday -- with nuclear talks deadlocked and six years after former Chicago Bulls star Dennis Rodman serenaded Pyongyang's leader. North Korea has never officially confirmed Kim's age or date of birth, but Rodman's breathy Marilyn Monroe-style performance of "Happy Birthday" took place before an exhibition basketball match in Pyongyang on January 8, 2014. In a sanctions document, the US Treasury has said Kim was born on that day in 1984, which would make him 36, but there is speculation he could be a year or two older.

Meghan returns to Canada amid royal storm



Prince Harry's wife Meghan has returned to Canada following the couple's bombshell announcement that they were quitting their frontline royal duties, it emerged yesterday, as the monarch held urgent talks with her family to resolve the crisis. The Duke and Duchess of Sussex spent an extended Christmas holiday in Canada with their son before returning to break the news this week that they would "step back" their royal roles. The Daily Mail newspaper reported that Meghan flew back on Thursday, having never intended to be in Britain long. She left baby Archie behind in Canada with his nanny, and "she may stay there for the foreseeable future", it said.

Protest-hit HK sees surge in depression, PTSD: study

Nearly one in three adults in Hong Kong reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder during months of often violent social unrest in the city, according to a study published in The Lancet medical journal yesterday. And around one in 10 had symptoms of probable depression, figures comparable to those seen in areas of armed conflict or following terrorist attacks, the decade-long study led by researchers from the University of Hong Kong found. Prevalence of PTSD symptoms was six times higher than after the last major pro-democracy "Occupy" protests in 2014, rising from about five percent in March 2015 to almost 32 percent in September-November 2019.

SOURCE: AFP



Syrians demonstrate against the regime of Bashar al-Assad yesterday in the northwestern Idlib province, Syria's last major opposition bastion.

PHOTO: AFP

Bulgarian minister charged over water crisis in Pernik

Neno Dimov faces up to 8 yrs in jail

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Bulgarian Minister of Environment and Water Neno Dimov was charged with the deliberate mismanagement of water supplies for the western city of Pernik, prosecutors said yesterday.

Dimov faces up to eight years in jail for allowing water supplies to industrial users even when he had been informed that the water in a dam - the only source of drinking water to the city of 70,000 - has seriously decreased, prosecutors said.

Dimov resigned earlier yesterday.

Pernik, a town with a population of more than 70,000, has been subject to severe and continuing water restrictions for about two months, a matter that has been under investigation by several institutions.

Earlier, Prime Minister Boyko Borissov said Dimov's job was a matter for discussion with the ruling coalition partners.



In the third Borissov government, formed in May 2017, Dimov was nominated to the post by the minority partner in the coalition, the nationalist United Patriots.

The Prosecutor's Office said in a statement that Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev visited Pernik on Thursday to coordinate actions in the investigation connected to pre-trial proceedings regarding the water crisis in the town, which lies about 25 kilometres (16 miles) west of the capital Sofia.

"Evidence is being collected of crimes committed by officials that led to water supply problems in Pernik," the office said in a statement.

The Socialist Party - the largest opposition party - said it would file a no-confidence motion against Borissov's government, accusing it of failing to ensure proper water and clean air policies, resulting in the water restrictions in Pernik, and serious air pollution in many Bulgarian cities.

British lawmakers finally approve Brexit deal

AFP, London

Britain's parliament finally approved Brexit on Thursday, allowing it to become the first country to leave the European Union later this month, ending years of arguments that toppled two governments and splintered society.

The House of Commons erupted in cheers after MPs ratified Prime Minister Boris Johnson's divorce deal with Brussels by 330 votes to 231, turning the page on an extraordinary era of political drama and chaos.

For much of the time since the 2016 Brexit referendum, lawmakers have been at each others' throats over how, when or even if Britain should leave its closest trading partners after nearly 50 years.

Some view Brexit with horror, fearing it will strip them of their European identities and turn Britain into an insular, less important nation.

Others embraced it with fervour, viewing it as a chance to "take back control" from

officials in Brussels and see Britain regain some of its past might.

Businesses and governments in Europe, puzzled by Britain's struggles over what they viewed as a self-inflicted wound, hoped that Brexit could still somehow be undone.

But Johnson's comprehensive victory in last month's general election brought an abrupt end to the turmoil, giving his Conservatives a parliamentary majority with which to push it through.

MPs gave their initial blessing to the EU Withdrawal Agreement Bill before Christmas, and the government set aside just three days this week for detailed scrutiny of the complex text.

But few even bothered to turn up on Tuesday and Wednesday, with both sessions ending early.

The momentous day on which Johnson effectively won permission to abandon the European integration project was all but ignored in Thursday's media.



269 KILLED, SAKHALIN

SEPTEMBER 1, 1983: A South Korean Boeing 747 of Korean Air was shot down by Soviet fighter jets over the island of Sakhalin, after veering off course. Some 269 passengers and crew members were killed. Soviet officials acknowledged five days later that they had shot down the South Korean plane.

108 KILLED, SINAI DESERT

FEBRUARY 21, 1973: A Libyan Arab Airline Boeing 727 flying from Tripoli to Cairo was shot down by Israeli fighter jets over the Sinai desert. All but four of the 112 people on board were killed. The Israeli air force intervened after the Boeing flew over military facilities in the Sinai, then occupied by Israel. The Israeli authorities said fighters opened fire when the plane refused to land.

SOURCE: AFP



'Designed by clowns'

Internal Boeing messages raise questions about 737 MAX

AFP, New York

Boeing's 737 MAX plane is "designed by clowns who in turn are supervised by monkeys", a company employee wrote in one of a trove of newly published internal messages.

The communications were released on Thursday by Boeing, whose 737 MAX plane was involved in two crashes that killed a total of 346 people in late 2018 and early 2019.

They include employees mocking US aviation authorities and bragging that they could get the plane certified with minimal training for pilots.

The documents could further worsen Boeing's relations with regulators as it works to secure approval to allow the grounded jetliner to resume flights.

"I still haven't been forgiven by God for the covering up I did last year," one employee wrote in a message from 2018 in reference to dealing with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

"I know but this is what these regulators get when they try and get in the way. They impede progress," another wrote in August 2015.

"This airplane is designed by clowns, who in turn are supervised by monkeys," said another employee in 2017, apparently in reference to the FAA.

"Would you put your family on a MAX simulator trained aircraft? I wouldn't," a Boeing employee

wrote to a colleague in another exchange.

"No," the colleague answered.

Boeing said in a statement: "Some of these communications relate to the development and qualification of Boeing's MAX simulators in 2017 and 2018."

The messages were sent to congressional investigators in the interest of transparency, it added.



The mocking tone of the messages is yet another embarrassment for Boeing amid the 737 MAX crisis and worsens its already rocky relations with the FAA. The plane has been grounded worldwide since March 13.

"These newly released emails are incredibly damning," said Peter DeFazio, the chairman of the House Transportation Committee, which is investigating the plane.