

Putin's new PM promises 'real changes' for Russians

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin's new prime minister promised "real changes" yesterday as he was approved by lawmakers after the Kremlin announced sweeping reform plans.

The lower house State Duma voted overwhelmingly to approve Mikhail Mishustin as premier, less than 24 hours after Russia's political order was shaken by Putin's announcement of constitutional reforms and the resignation of the government.

No MPs voted against his candidacy, although Communist lawmakers abstained.

Speaking before his approval, Mishustin called on parliament to work with him to urgently enact Putin's programme.

"People should already now be feeling real changes for the better," Mishustin said.

The naming of a new premier was one in a series of bombshell announcements that rocked Russia on Wednesday, when Putin said constitutional reform would change the country's balance of power and his longtime prime minister Dmitry Medvedev resigned along with the cabinet.

Putin's current term as president ends in 2024 and observers say the 67-year-old could be laying the groundwork to assume

a new position or remain in a powerful behind-the-scenes role.

Mishustin said his priority would be to "increase citizens' real incomes" but also said the government must "restore trust" with the business community and drive innovation, echoing the state-of-the-nation speech on Wednesday when Putin announced the reforms.

Mishustin assured lawmakers that Russia can afford salary hikes and social payouts announced by Putin, estimating they will cost about four trillion rubles (\$65 billion) over the next four years.

In his state of the nation speech, Putin said he wanted more authority transferred to parliament from the president.

He also called for the power of the State Council, an advisory body, to be expanded and enshrined in the constitution -- adding to conjecture that Putin could take it over after 2024 to preserve power.

Outlining the proposals, which would be the first significant changes to the country's constitution since it was adopted in 1993, Putin said there was a "demand for change" among Russians.

While his nominee Mishustin was speaking in parliament, Putin met his newly formed working group for amending the constitution.



Migrants from Afghanistan rest on a rocky beach, following their arrival on a dinghy near the village of Kalo Limani on the island of Lesbos, Greece yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

3.5 lakh fled Idlib since Dec 1 Says UN as Russian-backed airstrike intensifies

AGENCIES

Around 350,000 Syrians, mostly women and children, have been displaced by a renewed Russian-backed offensive in the opposition-held Idlib province since early December, and have sought shelter in border areas near Turkey, the United Nations said yesterday.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in its latest situation report that the humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate as a result of the "escalating" hostilities.

Russian jets and Syrian artillery have pounded towns and villages in recent weeks in a renewed assault backed by pro-Iranian militias that aimed at clearing the opposition.

"This latest wave of displacement compounds an already dire humanitarian situation on the ground in Idlib," David Swanson, Amman-based UN regional spokesman for Syria, told Reuters.

Russian and Syrian jets resumed bombing of civilian areas in the opposition enclave two days after a ceasefire agreed between Turkey and Russia formally took effect on Sunday.

UN officials said earlier this month the humanitarian crisis had worsened with thousands of civilians on the run in Idlib province on top of close to 400,000 people who

fled earlier bouts of fighting to the safety of camps near the Turkish border, reports Reuters.

The latest offensive has brought the Russian-steered military campaign closer to heavily populated parts of Idlib province, where nearly 3 million people are trapped, according to the United Nations.

Meanwhile, dozens of fighters and civilians were killed in Syria's Idlib province as the government pressed a deadly offensive yesterday towards a key town in the country's last rebel bastion.

The latest violence, which followed air strikes that killed 18 civilians on Wednesday, buried a ceasefire deal announced by Russia and rebel backer Turkey that never really took hold.

"Clashes broke out around midnight on Wednesday south of the city of Maaret al-Numan, together with heavy bombardment despite the Russian-Turkish truce," Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said.

According to the Britain-based war monitor, the fighting raged in areas south of Maaret al-Numan, the key target of the Syrian government's latest military offensive.

At least 22 anti-government fighters were killed, most of them members of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a group that includes fighters from the former al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, reports AFP.



SYRIA OFFENSIVE

FIGHT AGAINST IS

US resumes joint military operations in Iraq

AFP, Washington

The United States on Wednesday resumed joint military operations with Iraq that had been put on pause after the US drone strike that killed a top Iranian general in Baghdad, the New York Times reported.

Two US military officials quoted by the paper said the Pentagon wanted to resume these operations in order to pick up the fight against the Islamic State group.

Washington began the pause on January 5 two days after the strike that killed Iranian general Qassem Soleimani at the Baghdad airport.

The same day of the suspension furious Iraqi lawmakers voted to expel the more than 5,000 US troops that are in Iraq.

It was not immediately clear if anyone in the Iraqi government had approved the resumption of the joint military operations, the Times reported.

The Pentagon said it had no information to provide concerning a resumption when contacted by AFP.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Monday that Iraqi leaders have told him

privately they support the US troop presence, despite public appeals for them to leave.

The Iraqi parliament last week voted to rescind the invitation to foreign troops after a US strike at the Baghdad airport killed Soleimani, which also has wide influence in the country.

But Pompeo -- whose State Department often insists it cannot divulge details of his calls -- said he heard a different message in conversations with around 50 Iraqi leaders since the start of the month.

"They won't say so publicly. But privately they all welcome the fact that America is still there executing its counter terror campaign," Pompeo said at a forum at Stanford University.

The US troops are ensuring that the Islamic State extremist group does not re-emerge and "providing an opportunity for the Iraqis to gain the sovereignty and independence that most Iraqis want," Pompeo said.

Pompeo -- who shared the stage with a predecessor, Condoleezza Rice -- said he spoke to leaders of all backgrounds in Iraq including the Shia majority, which enjoys religious ties with Iran.

White House violated law on Ukraine aid Says watchdog

AFP, Washington

The White House budget office "violated the law" by freezing military aid to put political pressure on Ukraine's government, a US congressional watchdog announced yesterday as President Donald Trump's impeachment trial looms.

The damning report from the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office says it "issued a legal decision concluding that the Office of Management and Budget violated the law when it withheld approximately \$214 million appropriated to DOD (Department of Defense) for security assistance to Ukraine."

Congress passed legislation appropriating the financial assistance to Ukraine last year as a way to provide a much-needed boost to the country's national security efforts amid a deadly military conflict with Russia that began in 2014.

The House impeachment inquiry concluded that Trump's administration improperly withheld the aid as leverage in an effort to get Ukraine to open investigations that would help the president politically.

"OMB withheld funds for a policy reason, which is not permitted under the Impoundment Control Act," the GAO said, noting that the budget office actively took steps to make the funds "unavailable" despite being congressionally appropriated.

"Faithful execution of the law does not permit the President to substitute his own policy priorities for those that Congress has enacted into law," it said.

The report's damning assessment landed just as Trump's impeachment trial was set to convene in the US Senate.



Prince Harry resurfaces after royal bombshell

AFP, London

Britain's Prince Harry made his first public appearance yesterday since he and his wife Meghan's bombshell decision to quit as full-time royals.

The Duke of Sussex hosted the 2021 Rugby League World Cup draw at Buckingham Palace -- with all eyes on whether he will address the still-unresolved royal crisis.

Harry, 35, is patron of the Rugby Football League, the sport's governing body in England, and his participation in the draw was planned long before last week's shock announcement.

The couple want to step back as senior royals, split their time between Britain and Canada, become financially independent from official royal funding and pull out of the palace's media arrangements.

They made the announcement unilaterally on a new website -- without first squaring their wishes with Queen Elizabeth II.

Harry was summoned to a hastily-arranged family meeting on Monday with his grandmother, father Prince Charles and brother Prince William to thrash out a way forward.

The final outcome is set to be determined in the coming days.

Harry will now face the tricky decision of whether to say anything about the rolling storm as he hosts the draw from 1200 GMT.



Honduran migrants walk to Puerto Barrios, in Izabal department, Guatemala, after breaking a police fence at the border crossing between Corinto, Honduras and Guatemala, on Wednesday. Some 1,000 Hondurans started a new caravan from San Pedro Sula, in the north of Honduras, to the US, in search of the "American dream".

PHOTO: AFP

CATASTROPHIC BLAZES

Relief as heavy rain falls over Australia

AFP, Nowra

Heavy rain fell across parts of fire-ravaged eastern Australia yesterday and more wet weather was forecast, giving some relief following months of catastrophic blazes fuelled by climate change.

The fires, unprecedented for Australia in terms of duration and intensity, have claimed 28 lives and killed an estimated billion animals.

Sustained hot weather and rare periods of light rain in the affected areas have deepened the crisis.

Downpours in the state of New South Wales, where many of the worst fires have burnt, yesterday offered hope that dozens of blazes could be brought under control.

"Relief is here for a number of firefighters working across NSW," the state's Rural Fire Service said in a social media post accompanying footage of rain falling in a burning forest.

"Although this rain won't extinguish all fires, it will certainly go a long way towards containment."

Before the rains, there were 30 blazes burning out of control in New South Wales.

Along the south coast of the state, locals who witnessed towns and forests being destroyed in recent weeks expressed cautious hope.

"We're thrilled and so relieved to have some dampness in the air because it makes things safe for a little while," Virginia Connor told AFP near the town of Nowra.

45m need urgent food aid in southern Africa: UN Blames drought, floods, economic hardship

AFP, Johannesburg

Roughly 45 million people in southern Africa are in urgent need of food aid as a result of drought, flooding and economic hardship, the UN said yesterday.

"This hunger crisis is on a scale we've not seen before and the evidence shows it's going to get worse," World Food Programme (WFP) regional director Lola Castro said in a statement.

The agency warned that it had secured only \$205 million (184 million euros) of the \$489 million it requires, saying families across the region were already skipping meals, taking children out of school, selling off precious assets and falling into debt to stave off agricultural losses.

In southern Africa as a whole -- where temperatures are rising twice as fast as the rest of the world -- people are experiencing the worst drought in 35 years, according to the UN.

Low growth, rising population, drought and floods have combined to worsen food

insecurity in the region.

"If we don't receive the necessary funding, we'll have no choice but to assist fewer of those most in need, and with less," Castro said.

The worst-hit countries were Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Nearly half of Zimbabwe's 15 million people live in a state of chronic food insecurity, according to UN figures.

Wildlife has also suffered, with over 200 elephants having starved to death in Zimbabwe in just three months last year.

Twenty percent of the population in drought-stricken Lesotho and about 10 percent of Namibians are also suffering from food insecurity.

In October, Zambia's Red Cross flagged that drought had left an estimated 2.3 million people facing "severe food insecurity".

Zambia was long known as the region's breadbasket but a recurring drought has cut water reserves at the hydroelectric dam of Kariba, the main source of energy of Zambia.

Europeans fear Trump's 'bully'

Says Iran after EU states abandon 2015 nuclear deal

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday accused European governments of sacrificing a troubled 2015 nuclear deal to avoid trade reprisals from US President Donald Trump who has spent nearly two years trying to scupper it.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Trump was again behaving like a "high school bully" and the decision by Britain, France and Germany to heed his pressure to lodge a complaint over Iranian compliance deprived them of any right to claim the moral high ground.

The three governments "sold out remnants of #JCPOA (the nuclear deal) to avoid new Trump tariffs," Zarif charged.

"It won't work my friends. You only whet his appetite. Remember your high school bully?"

Germany's defence minister yesterday confirmed a Washington Post report that the United States had threatened to impose a 25 percent

tariff on imports of European cars if EU governments continued to back the nuclear deal.

"This expression or threat, as you will, does exist," Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer told a news conference during a visit to London.

Zarif said Europe's unwillingness to antagonise the United States made a



mockery of its stated determination to rescue the nuclear deal.

"If you want to sell your integrity, go ahead," Zarif tweeted. "But DO NOT assume high moral/legal ground."

The European states triggered a dispute mechanism established under the deal, which allows a party

to claim significant non-compliance by another party before a joint commission, with appeals possible to an advisory board and ultimately to the UN Security Council.

Since Washington pulled out of the agreement and reimposed crippling unilateral sanctions in 2018, EU governments have sought to find a way to allow European businesses to continue trading with Iran without incurring huge US penalties.

As its economy has gone into reverse, an increasingly frustrated Iran has hit back with the step-by-step suspension of its own commitments under the deal.

The three European governments said they lodged their complaint in response to the latest step by Tehran suspending the limit on the number of centrifuges it uses to enrich uranium.

Speaking in India on Wednesday, Zarif already questioned how the European Union could allow itself to be "bullied" by Washington when it was the world's largest economy.