



POLITICAL UPHEAVAL

Putin rejects idea of Soviet-style leaders for life

AFP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin has said he does not want Russia to return to the Soviet-era practice of rulers dying in office without a succession plan, as speculation swirls over his future after he unleashed a political upheaval this week.

The 67-year-old Russian leader said a transition plan for the country was crucial, in comments several days after his shock proposal of sweeping changes to the constitution saw the government resign and a new prime minister appointed.

Putin, who has been in power for two decades, was asked if he could consider removing presidential term limits from the constitution during a meeting with World War II veterans in his hometown of Saint Petersburg on Saturday.

But he appeared to reject the idea. "In my view, it would be very worrying to return to the situation of the mid-1980s when heads of state one by one remained in power until the end of their days, (and) left office without having secured necessary conditions for a transition of power," Putin said.

"So, thank you very much, but I think it's better not to return to the situation of the mid-1980s."

Soviet rulers Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko all died in office. Chernenko's successor Mikhail Gorbachev introduced perestroika and glasnost reforms to transform the Soviet system and presided over the eventual collapse of the USSR.

India, Lanka seek closer ties

Vow to widen maritime links with neighbours to counter China's growing influence in the region

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka and India vowed to strengthen military ties and widen maritime links with neighbours after security talks, the president's office said yesterday, as China's economic clout increases in the region.

China, a long-time regional rival of India, has been widening its footprint in the region, including building ports and expressways and upgrading airports in Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval met Saturday with recently elected Sri Lanka President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and discussed setting up a maritime research coordination centre, Rajapaksa's office said in a statement.

It did not give details of the proposed centre, but said other nations in the region should be included as observers.

It said the two countries also discussed closer military and coastguard cooperation.

The meeting followed Rajapaksa's visit to New Delhi in late November for talks with Prime Minister Narendra

Modi, who offered \$450 million in aid to Sri Lanka after his landslide victory in the presidential election.

Local media reports said Rajapaksa will travel to China -- his second foreign visit since coming to power -- while his prime minister brother

SECURITY TALKS

PM Modi offered \$450m in aid to Colombo after his landslide victory

China's FM held talks with Rajapaksa on Tuesday

Mahinda will visit India on his first overseas trip.

No exact dates have been announced, but official sources said it could happen within weeks.

Sri Lanka has traditionally been allied to India, but China invested and loaned billions of dollars to the island

nation during the decade-long reign of Rajapaksa's elder brother, Mahinda. Chinese investments grew under the previous Colombo government too.

China's foreign minister Wang Yi held talks with President Rajapaksa on Tuesday during a brief transit stop in Colombo and the two men discussed the president's impending Beijing visit.

"As Sri Lanka's strategic partner, China will continue to stand by Sri Lanka's interests," Rajapaksa's office quoted Wang as saying.

The visit will focus on technology, tourism and infrastructure as well as other areas, the president's office said last week.

Rajapaksa in December warned India and Western nations that Sri Lanka would be forced to seek more finance from China if they do not invest in the island.

Sri Lanka was forced to hand over the strategic Hambantota port south of Colombo to China in 2017 on a 99-year lease after the government at the time said it was unable to repay loans taken to build it.

'Don't divide India'

India's anti-CAA protesters launch postcards to PM Modi campaign

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Protesters in India have launched a postcard campaign in which they plan to send thousands of letters to India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, urging him to rollback the contentious Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) seen as anti-Muslim.

Demonstrators in the Muslim-dominated Shaheen Bagh area of the Indian capital, New Delhi, on Saturday wrote postcards asking the Hindu nationalist leader to not force them to prove their citizenship.

CAA, passed by the Indian parliament last month, fast-tracks naturalisation of non-Muslim refugees from three neighbouring countries - Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan - who came to India before 2015.

The government says the law is aimed at helping "persecuted"

minorities - Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians - in the three countries, but blocks naturalisation for Muslims.

The opposition parties and activists say the CAA violates India's secular constitution and have challenged the law in the Supreme Court, which is due to hear multiple pleas next week.

Coupled with a proposed



nationwide National Register of Citizens (NRC), Muslims, who form nearly 15 percent of India's 1.3 billion population, fear the moves are aimed at marginalising them,

an allegation the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) denies.

"Modi ji [an honorific in Hindi], please stop CAA, NRC and NPR. We completely reject these divisive acts on the basis of religion. Please don't divide India. We really love India," read one of the letters.



An anti-government protester waves a national flag as he stands above a statue of a policeman's hat during a demonstration in the central Iraqi holy shrine city of Najaf yesterday. *Inset*, protesters stand before tire smoke at a make-shift roadblock during the demonstration in Najaf.

PHOTO: AFP



'One minute to live'

Trump recounts US strike that killed Iran general

AFP, Washington

Cameras "miles in the sky", a countdown and then "boom": US President Donald Trump has recounted the final moments of Iran's powerful General Qassem Soleimani in an American drone strike.

Trump delivered the account Friday night to Republican Party donors gathered at his Florida residence Mar-a-Lago for a fundraising dinner, US media said. CNN on Saturday broadcast an audio recording in which the president gave new details about the January 3 strike at the airport in Baghdad.

"He was supposed to be invincible," Trump said. In the audio released by CNN, Trump did not refer to an "imminent" attack which Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has said Soleimani was planning. Nor was there a reference to "four embassies" which Trump later alleged were being targeted.

"He was saying bad things about our country. He was saying like, 'We're going to attack your country. We're going to kill your people.' I said 'Look, how much of this shit do we have to listen to?'," Trump told his guests.

He then described the scene, relaying the words of the military officers giving live updates to him in Washington.

"They said, 'Sir, and this is from, you know, cameras that are miles in the sky. They are together sir. Sir, they have two minutes and 11 seconds. No bullshit. They have two minutes and 11 seconds to live, sir. They're in the car. They're in an armored vehicle going. Sir, they have approximately one minute to live, sir... 30 seconds, 10, nine, eight... then all of sudden boom. They're gone, sir.'"

Haftar must end 'hostile' attitude to end conflict

Says Erdogan as world powers make fresh push in Berlin

AFP, Berlin

Libya's military strongman Khalifa Haftar must drop his "hostile attitude" so that the conflict in the war-torn nation can be resolved, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said ahead of crunch talks in Berlin yesterday.

"For a political solution and the implementation of other phases of a solution, Haftar's hostile attitude should come to an end," Erdogan was quoted as saying by Turkey's state-run Anadolu news agency.

The comments reportedly came during a meeting with Russian leader Vladimir Putin shortly before the start of an international summit on Libya.

Turkey and Russia are on opposed sides in the deadly conflict, with Erdogan backing the UN-recognised government of Fayez al-Sarraj, while Putin supports rival Haftar's troops.

The Berlin summit, attended by a slew of world leaders including the two main rivals in the Libyan crisis, hopes to extract a pledge for a lasting ceasefire

and an end to foreign interference.

Ankara and Moscow brokered a fragile Libyan ceasefire earlier this month but both warring sides have accused each other of repeated violations since then.

"But we have not lost hope that the dialogue will be continued and we sincerely aspire to the resolution of the conflict," Putin said in Berlin.

The Libyan conflict is of great concern to Europe especially, he added, because Libya's wide-open doors have seen "an influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa to Europe".

Leaders of both warring factions -- strongman Khalifa Haftar and the head of Tripoli's UN-recognised government Fayez al-Sarraj -- are also expected at what is the first such gathering since 2018.

Pro-Haftar forces upped the ante ahead of the talks by blocking oil exports at Libya's key ports, crippling the country's main income source in protest at Turkey's decision to send troops to shore up Sarraj's Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA).

Harry, Meghan begin new life as ordinary people

They were stripped of royal titles, funding by Queen

AFP, London

Britain's Prince Harry and his wife Meghan began a new life yesterday as -- somewhat -- ordinary people with financial worries and security concerns after being stripped of their royal titles and public funding by the Queen.

The settlement announced by Buckingham Palace on Saturday saw the 93-year-old monarch assume her painfully familiar role of managing a family crisis that threatened the very foundations of one of Britain's oldest institutions.

The "Megxit" mess began when the young couple gave up their front-line family duties and announced plans to chart a "progressive new role" in North America on January 8.

They did so without winning Queen Elizabeth II's permission or seemingly knowing how it was all going to work out.

A mad rush of royal family meetings and screaming headlines in the tabloid press culminated with a ruling Saturday that The Daily Telegraph called "the hardest Megxit

possible".

The couple lost their right to be called "his and her royal highness" (HRH) -- much as Harry's late mother Princess Diana did when she divorced Prince Charles in another family drama that upset the Queen in 1996.

They further agreed to repay £2.4 million



(\$3.1 million) of taxpayer's money spent on renovating their Frogmore Cottage home near Windsor Castle.

Harry was also stripped of the military titles and patronages he was awarded after serving two tours in Afghanistan with the British Army and rising to the rank of captain.



Migrants from Central America, part of a caravan travelling to the US, wait to cross into Mexico at the border between Guatemala and Mexico, in El Ceibo, Guatemala on Saturday. Mexico deployed around 200 National Guard officers to the Guatemalan border in an effort to block the migrant caravan.

PHOTO: REUTERS

400 hurt in Lebanon anti-govt protest

AFP, Beirut

Almost 400 people were wounded during running battles between Lebanese anti-government protesters and security forces in Beirut Saturday, rescuers said, the heaviest toll since the demonstrations erupted three months ago.

More street rallies were expected late yesterday as part of popular protests since October 17 that have demanded the wholesale ouster of the Lebanese political class, which activists condemn as inept and corrupt.

Yesterday morning, the streets were mostly empty as rain fell on the centre of Beirut, with police cars guarding the entrances to the main protest hub at Martyrs' Square.

On a side street leading towards the seat of government, a tea pot lay among black cinders on the pavement where unknown perpetrators set fire to protest tents the night before.

Ali, a 34-year-old who had camped in one of the tents, said he had lost his belongings in the blaze and was left with "just the clothes I'm wearing and the papers I had in my pocket".

But "the attack made us stronger. We will continue with even more energy to speak out the truth," he said, as he huddled around a wood fire next to the wreckage wrapped in a thick blanket.

On Saturday, at least 377 people were injured -- both protesters and members of the security forces -- according to a toll compiled by AFP from figures provided by the Red Cross and Civil Defence.

An AFP photographer at the scene said security forces fired rubber bullets at stone-throwing protesters as thick clouds of tear gas covered central Beirut. Yesterday, social media users and a local television channel shared the testimonies of relatives of at least two young men they said were hit in the eyes by rubber bullets.

Facebook sorry for Xi Jinping's name gaffe

Facebook apologised Saturday for a distasteful mistranslation of Chinese President Xi Jinping's name from Burmese language posts during his much-touted visit to Myanmar. His two-day visit to Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw was the first made by a Chinese leader in almost two decades. But the historic moment was dimmed by the automatic translation feature on Myanmar's Facebook page -- which rendered Xi Jinping's name from Burmese into English as "Mr Shithole". The error most notably appeared on the official Facebook page of Myanmar's civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi. "Mr Shithole, President of China arrives at 4 PM," said a translated announcement posted earlier Saturday. Facebook said it was sorry and blamed a technical glitch.

China reports 17 new cases of mystery virus

China reported 17 new cases of the mysterious SARS-like virus yesterday, including three people in serious condition, heightening fears ahead of China's Lunar New Year holiday when hundreds of millions of people move around the country. The new coronavirus strain has caused alarm because of its connection to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, which killed nearly 650 people across mainland China and Hong Kong in 2002-2003. Of the 17 new cases in the central city of Wuhan -- believed to be the epicentre of the outbreak -- three were described as "severe", of which two patients were too critical to be moved, authorities said. Those infected range from 30 to 79 years old.

Israel starts to install sensors along Lebanon border



Israel's army said it would start drilling to install ground sensors along its border with Lebanon yesterday, a year after an operation to destroy tunnels dug across the frontier. "We are deploying a defensive system into the ground.. in various locations" along the border, spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Conricus told journalists. Work went underway yesterday at the Israeli kibbutz town of Misgav Am, he said, to deploy the new noise-detecting technology. The move comes a year after Israel concluded a weeks-long operation to destroy tunnels it accused Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah of building.

SOURCE: AFP