

TRUMP'S MIDDLE EAST PEACE PLAN

WORLD REACTION

US President Donald Trump's Middle East plan on Tuesday prompted a lukewarm response from Europe and the UN, and a furious rebuke from key Muslim countries who denounced it as betrayal of the Palestinians. Here are some of the reactions:

THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY: Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, who has taken part in previous US-led peace talks with Israel but stayed away from Trump's proposal, vowed that "this conspiracy deal will not pass." He pledged to "resist the deal in all its forms" after meeting with various Palestinian factions in the West Bank city of Ramallah. "Our people will take it to the dustbin of history."

EUROPE: Top EU diplomat Josep Borrell said the bloc will "study and assess" Trump's proposals on the basis of its commitment to a "negotiated and viable two-state solution that takes into account the legitimate aspirations of both the Palestinians and the Israelis." Germany, the EU's most powerful player, echoed Borrell's point by calling for a balanced approach. Britain gave the warmest reaction. "This is clearly a serious proposal, reflecting extensive time and effort," British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said in a statement.

THE UN: The United Nations said it remains committed to a two-state solution based on the borders in place before the 1967 war, when Israel seized the West Bank and Gaza.

Russia: Russia said it would study the plan and call on Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate directly to find a "mutually acceptable compromise."

TURKEY: Turkey, a strong advocate of the Palestinian cause, condemned the plan. "Jerusalem is sacred for Muslims. The plan to give Jerusalem to Israel is absolutely unacceptable. This plan ignores Palestinians' rights and is aimed at legitimising Israel's occupation," President Erdogan said.



An Israeli soldier kicks a Palestinian flag during a protest against the US president Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan, in Jordan Valley in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, yesterday.

DONALD TRUMP'S MIDEAST PLAN

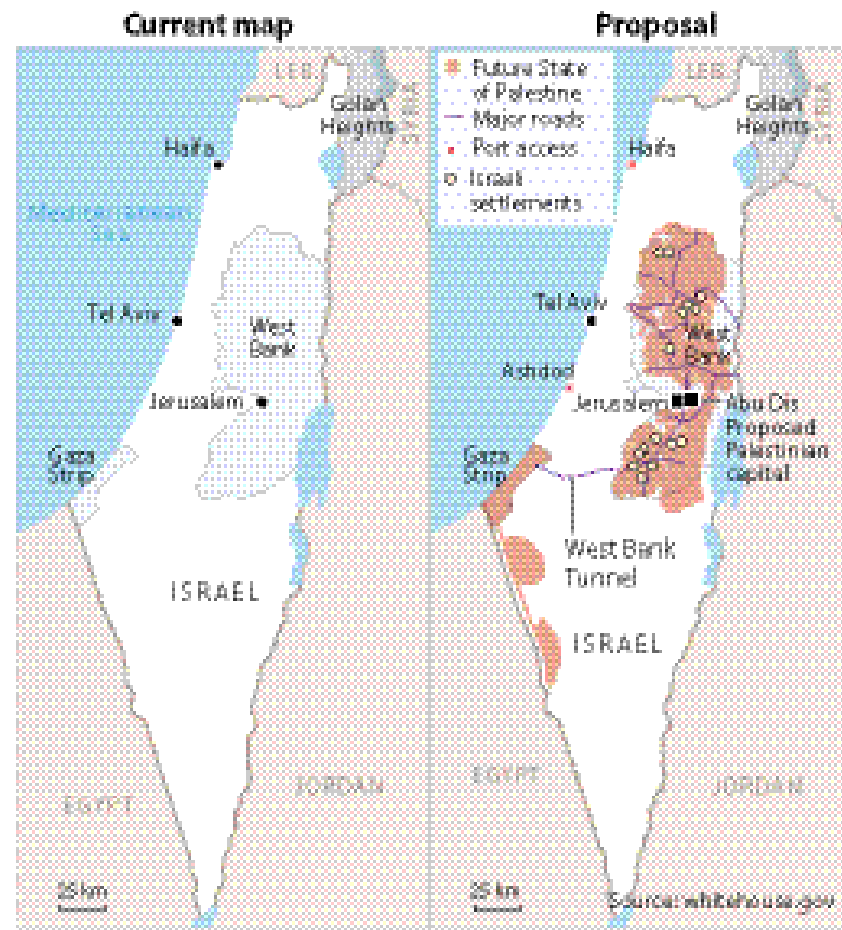


PHOTO: REUTERS

Present 'counter-offer' Pompeo urges Palestinians

AFP, London

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday urged Palestinians who rejected President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan to come up with a "counter-offer" that could win Israeli support, as he headed to Britain on a five-nation tour.

Pompeo was on his way to London to help forge to a post-Brexit alliance with Prime Minister Boris Johnson -- a leader Trump once called the UK version of himself.

His tour also includes talks in Kiev on Friday that are likely to touch on many of the controversies surrounding the Ukraine-linked impeachment trial of the mercurial White House chief.

Pompeo found himself on the immediate defensive over a delayed Middle East initiative that was pronounced dead on arrival by the Palestinians but embraced by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Palestinian leaders were "free to come up with a counter offer if that's what they think is appropriate", Pompeo told reporters travelling with him.

"I know the Israelis would be prepared to sit down and negotiate on the basis of the vision that the president laid out."

Trump's proposals reportedly included no Palestinian input and grants Israel much of what it has sought in decades of international diplomacy.

Pompeo said the misgivings were coming from "the same critics who have failed for 70 years".

Johnson was one of the first to voice support for Trump's proposals on Tuesday and said in his defence that "no peace plan is perfect but this (one) has the merit of a two-state solution".

The Conservative prime minister will be eager to present a united front as he looks for a US trade deal that can fill the void of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union on Friday.



IRAN: Iran, which does not recognise Israel and has been in a confrontation with the Trump administration, denounced the plan as a threat to regional stability. "The shameful peace plan imposed by America on the Palestinians is the treason of the century and doomed to fail", the Iranian foreign ministry said.

UAE: The United Arab Emirates praised the plan. "The plan announced today offers an important starting point for a return to negotiations within a US-led international framework", the UAE embassy in Washington said on Twitter.

EGYPT: Egypt called on "the two concerned parties to undertake a careful and thorough examination of the US vision to achieve peace and open channels of dialogue".

JORDAN: Jordan's foreign ministry said that an independent Palestinian state based on pre-1967 borders was "the only path to a comprehensive and lasting peace".

SAUDI ARABIA: Saudi's foreign ministry said it "appreciates" Trump's efforts and called for the start of direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

SOURCE: AFP

Countries rush to make vaccine

After US, Russia and China join the race; Australian scientists claim breakthrough; Beijing allows int'l experts to study virus

AGENCIES

Russia and China are working to develop a coronavirus vaccine and Beijing has handed over the genome of the virus to Moscow, a Russian diplomatic mission in China said yesterday.

The announcement came a day after the United States announced its push for a vaccine for the deadly coronavirus that has killed 132 so far. The number of confirmed cases crossed 6,000.

"Russian and Chinese experts have begun developing a vaccine," the Russian consulate in Guangzhou city said in a statement.

It was not clear if Russian and Chinese scientists were working together or separately. The consulate in Guangzhou could not be reached for comment.

Russia, which has not had any confirmed cases of the virus, on Tuesday began screening all Russian tourists returning from China, the national consumer health watchdog said on Wednesday.

"The Chinese side handed over the virus genome to Russia, which has allowed our scientists to rapidly develop express-tests that make it possible to identify the virus in the human body within two hours," the consulate said in the statement.

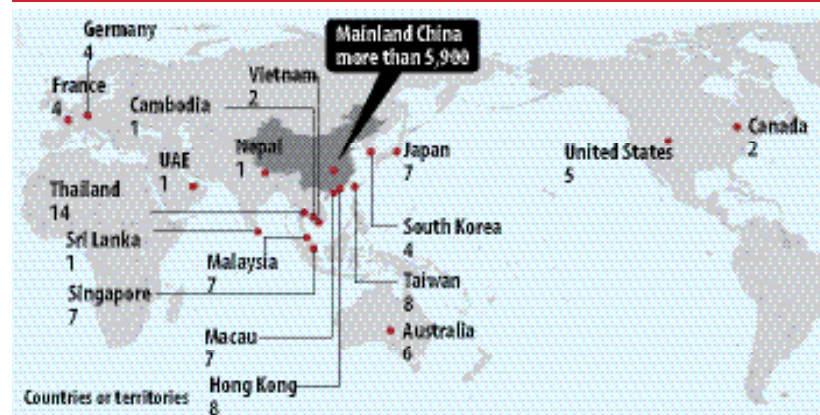
The US process would take three months to start the first trial, three more months to gather data, before being able to move into its second phase, and is being undertaken by the biotech firm Moderna.

Separately, the chief scientific officer of Johnson & Johnson told AFP that his company was also developing a vaccine. The company has made Ebola vaccine.

Meanwhile, scientists in Australia have become the first to recreate the new coronavirus outside of China in what they have called a "significant breakthrough".

The discovery will be shared with the World Health Organization (WHO) in the hope it may help efforts

THE SPREAD OF THE CORONAVIRUS



to diagnose and treat the virus.

The World Health Organization announced later Tuesday that China had agreed to allow a team of international experts into the country to work with their Chinese counterparts.

China was quick to sequence the genome of the 2019 novel Coronavirus and make it public, allowing scientists around the world to develop diagnostic tools and winning praise for its efforts, in contrast to the SARS outbreak.

Syrian army retakes key northwest town

Erdogan says Russia not abiding deal

AFP, Beirut

Syria government forces recaptured a strategic highway town in the northwest from jihadist and allied rebels yesterday, in the latest blow to the country's last major opposition bastion.

Maaret al-Numan, a former anti-government protest hotspot turned ghost town after weeks of bombardment, lies on a key highway connecting the capital to second city Aleppo. The M5 highway has long been in the sights of the government, as it seeks to revive a moribund economy ravaged by almost nine years of war.

In 2011, Maaret al-Numan was one of the first towns in the northwestern province of Idlib to rise up against the Damascus government. The following year, it was captured by rebels fighting against President Bashar al-Assad's rule. It is the latest town to fall in a Russian-backed offensive on the Idlib region this year.

The region of some three million people is dominated by jihadists from Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, but allied rebels are also present.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday accused Moscow of "not honouring these agreements".

Tens of thousands of civilians have fled the government's advance into the south of Idlib in recent weeks, seeking safety closer to the Turkish border further north.



Members of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament react before MEPs were set to ratify Brexit at the Europa Building in Brussels, yesterday. After half a century of sometimes awkward membership, the United Kingdom will leave the EU at midnight Brussels time on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Facebook to allow users to control third-party data

AFP, Washington

Facebook said Tuesday a new tool allowing users of the social network to view and delete data it collects from third parties is rolling out to the estimated two billion members of the leading social network worldwide.

The new feature, part of a stepped-up effort to improve privacy practices, allows users to see and clear "off Facebook activity" used for targeted advertising.

Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg said the tool offers "a new level of transparency and control" for the social network, which has been roiled by revelations in the past few years on how it collects and uses data.

"We've been working on this for a while because we had to rebuild some of our systems to make this possible."

Zuckerberg said Facebook users would be prompted to review their data when they check their feeds, as part of a "privacy checkup" implemented by the social network. "As of today, our Off-Facebook Activity

tool is available to people on Facebook around the world," Zuckerberg said in a blog post.

The feature will lift a veil on some aspects of Facebook's practices, including the collection of data from third-party apps, Facebook logins, "likes" and other techniques that determine which ads are served up to users.

"Other businesses send us information about your activity on their sites and we use that information to show you ads that are relevant to you. Now you can see a summary of that information and clear it from your account if you want to," Zuckerberg said.

Facebook gets data from users' activity online and also from apps such as Airbnb, Uber and Fandango.

The new tool is part of an effort by Facebook to shore up its image in the wake of a series of privacy scandals, including the hijacking of personal data on millions of users by a British consultancy developing voter profiles for Donald Trump's 2016 campaign.



Brexit to be sealed with final Brussels vote

London returns signed treaty to EU official

AFP, Brussels

Britain's departure from the European Union was set in law yesterday as London returned a signed treaty and MEPs prepared to vote to ratify the divorce.

After half a century of sometimes awkward membership, the United Kingdom will leave the EU at midnight Brussels time on Friday.

The day began with Britain's permanent representative Tim Barrow -- from Saturday to be its ambassador to the EU -- handing back the withdrawal agreement.

This had already been inked by Brussels' top figures and been sent to London for Prime Minister Boris Johnson to sign for the UK government.

"This step ensures that the UK has fulfilled its legal obligations regarding our exit from the EU," the British mission said.

But it was still an emotional day in the European Parliament in Brussels.

Nigel Farage, veteran MEP and leader of Britain's Brexit Party, was in triumphant mood after two decades as a thorn in Brussels' side.

But there were tears -- and some nostalgic

singing -- at farewell meetings between pro-European British MEPs and their European parties.

"At 11:00 pm UK time on January 31 will leave the European Union and we pass the point of no return," Farage declared at a news conference.

Farage said he had loved playing the "pantomime villain" in the Strasbourg assembly, feeding opposition to Europe at home with theatrical YouTube clips.

But he insisted on the seriousness of Brexit, comparing its significance to king Henry VIII taking Britain out of the Catholic church in 1534.

"He took us out of the Church of Rome, and we are leaving the Treaty of Rome," he said, referring to the EU's 1957 founding document.

Later in the day, Farage's fellow MEPs were to gather for a historic vote to incorporate the withdrawal agreement into EU law.

This will be the last legislative act of the 73 remaining British MEPs. Departure will be hard for some.

Iratxe Garcia Perez, the Spanish leader of the Socialist group, choked back tears as she said farewell to her British Labour Party comrades.

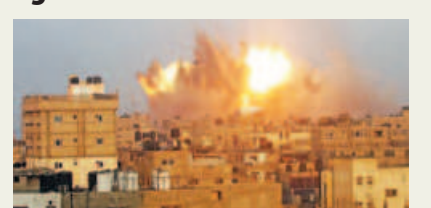
India moves to allow abortions up to 24 weeks

Indian cabinet yesterday approved moves to ease abortion laws, enabling rape survivors and other vulnerable women to terminate pregnancies up to 24 weeks after inception. Current Indian law does not allow terminations after 20 weeks unless the pregnancy threatens the life of the mother, but the restrictions often forced women to seek help from back street operators or resort to dangerous self-medication. In recent years a number of young rape survivors and trafficking victims have gone to court to seek the right to end pregnancies only discovered after 20 weeks. In 2017, a 10-year-old rape victim gave birth to a baby girl after her plea for a late abortion was rejected by the Supreme Court. An estimated 6.4 million abortions are carried out every year in India and over half are estimated to be unsafe, said a 2017 study by the Ipas Development Foundation.

US troops injured in Iran missile strike rises to 50

The number of US troops injured by an Iranian missile strike in Iraq this month has risen to 50, according to new figures released by the Pentagon on Tuesday. The personnel have been diagnosed with traumatic brain injury (TBI), Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Campbell, a Pentagon spokesman, said in a statement. The military had said on Friday that 34 troops were injured in the strike on the Ain al-Asad base in western Iraq on January 8. President Donald Trump had initially said no Americans were hurt by the missiles, and Democrats later accused him of trying to downplay the injuries. Iran fired on Iraqi bases housing US troops in retaliation for an American drone attack that killed Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad, raising fears of war.

Dutch court throws out case against Israel over Gaza strike



A Dutch court yesterday said it was not able to hear a war crimes case about a deadly 2014 Israeli air strike in which politician Benny Gantz was a named defendant. The case was lodged by a Dutch-Palestinian man, Ismail Ziada, six of whose relatives were killed in Operation Protective Edge, a major Israeli military operation targeting Gaza. But the court said that under international law it could not hear the case. In total, Operation Protective Edge left 2,251 dead on the Palestinian side, most of them civilians, and 74 on the Israeli side, most of them soldiers.

SOURCE: AFP