

EU agrees to link funds to rule of law

AFP, Brussels

European leaders for the first time yesterday agreed to link payment of EU funds to a member state with respect for the bloc's legal norms -- although Poland and Hungary insisted they had blocked tougher planned measures.

A hard-fought deal on a 750-billion-euro coronavirus recovery package and the EU's seven-year budget includes powers to cut funding from countries that breach so-called "rule of law" standards.

"It is the first time that the respect for rule of law is a decisive criteria for budget spending," EU Council President Charles Michel, who chaired the marathon summit, told reporters.

The final text is a compromise between northern countries that wanted all money stopped to governments that break the rules, and Hungary and Poland, which are under investigation for allegedly undermining European legal standards and democratic values.

Poland and Hungary had threatened to veto the EU's entire budget package if there was any linkage between funding and rule of law but, as the talks continued through a fourth night, a deal was finally reached.

Under the agreement, the European Commission, which oversees rule of law complaints, would propose punitive measures to the EU Council, which represents member states.

Any cuts would have to be approved by a qualified majority of those member states. This would require a vote of 55 percent of the EU countries representing 65 percent of its total population, which would make it easier for targeted governments to build a blocking minority of supportive capitals.



Burning trees are seen as a wildfire rages near highway 36 about 5 miles from Susanville, California, on Monday. The fire, which started on Saturday, has quickly devoured more than 6,000 acres and created its own weather system, generating lightning, thunder, rain and fire whirls out of a huge pyrocumulonimbus ash plume towering above. The Lassen County Sheriff's office issued a mandatory evacuation order for the area. No structural damage or casualties have been reported so far.

PHOTO: AFP

Thunberg donates 1m euro rights prize to green groups

Climate activist Greta Thunberg was on Monday awarded a Portuguese rights award and promptly pledged the million-euro prize to groups working to protect the environment and halt climate change. "That is more money than I can begin to imagine, but all the prize money will be donated, through my foundation, to different organisations and projects who are working to help people on the front line, affected by the climate crisis and ecological crisis," the Swedish teen said in a video posted online. She was awarded the Gulbenkian Prize for Humanity for the way she "has been able to mobilise younger generations for the cause of climate change and her tenacious struggle to alter a status quo that persists," Jorge Sampaio, chair of the prize jury, said earlier. The million euro (\$1.1 million) is the largest prize won by the 17-year-old environmental campaigner who has also won Amnesty International's top human rights prize and the Swedish Right Livelihood Award, often presented as an alternative Nobel.

US adds 11 China companies to blacklist over Uighurs

The US Commerce Department on Monday added 11 Chinese companies implicated in what it called human rights violations in connection with China's treatment of its Uighurs in Xinjiang in western China to the US economic blacklist. The department said the companies were involved in using forced labor by Uighurs and other Muslim minority groups. They include numerous textile companies and two firms the government said were conducting genetic analyses used to further the repression of Uighurs and other Muslim minorities. Blacklisted firms cannot buy components from US companies without US government approval. It was the third group of companies and institutions in China added to the US blacklist, after two rounds in which the Trump administration cited 37 entities it said were involved in China's repression in Xinjiang.

Trump will be 'fumigated out' if he refuses to quit after polls

The top US Democrat said on Monday that Donald Trump might not like the outcome of the Nov 3 presidential election but reminded the Republican president that he will have to vacate the White House if he loses. "There is a process. It has nothing to do with if the certain occupant of the White House doesn't feel like moving and has to be fumigated out of there because the presidency is the presidency," House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in an interview with MSNBC. Trump equivocated when asked in a "Fox News Sunday" interview, "Are you suggesting that you might not accept the results of the election?" "No. I have to see," Trump said. "Look you - I have to see. No, I'm not going to just say 'yes'. I'm not going to say 'no'. And I didn't last time, either." Despite lack of evidence, Trump frequently complains that mail-in balloting, which promises to be more widely used in this coronavirus-plagued election year, could lead to voter fraud.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Oxford vaccine developer cautious on 2020 roll-out

REUTERS, London

The University of Oxford's possible COVID-19 vaccine could be rolled out by the end of the year but there is no certainty, the lead developer of the vaccine said yesterday.

The experimental vaccine, which has been licensed to AstraZeneca, produced an immune response in early-stage clinical trials, data showed on Monday, preserving hopes it could be in use by the end of 2020.

"The end of the year target for getting vaccine roll-out, it's a possibility but there's absolutely no certainty about that because we need three things to happen," Sarah Gilbert told BBC Radio.

She said it needed to be shown to work in late-stage trials, there needed to be large quantities manufactured, and regulators had to agree quickly to license it for emergency use before large numbers of people could be vaccinated.

England's Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty

and his deputy Jonathan Van-Tam took differing views on the potential timeline.

"The chance of us getting a vaccine before Christmas that actually is highly effective are, in my view, very low," Whitty told lawmakers.

Van-Tam, however, said he was "cautiously optimistic that we will have some vaccine this side of Christmas."

The Oxford scientists had eyed a million doses of the potential vaccine to be produced by September.

Although the deal with AstraZeneca has provided manufacturing capacity to do that, the lower prevalence of the novel coronavirus in Britain has complicated the process of proving its efficacy.

Late-stage trials crucial for providing data are under way in Brazil and South Africa and are due to start in the United States also.

There are no approved vaccines yet for Covid-19, but the World Health Organization has said AstraZeneca's shot is one of the leading candidates.



LIBYA INTERVENTION

Egypt parliament backs Sisi

REUTERS, Cairo

Egypt's parliament gave President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi the green light for possible military intervention in Libya by approving the deployment of armed forces abroad to fight "terrorist groups" and "militias".

A sharp military escalation in Libya, where fighters led by eastern commander Khalifa Haftar have been battling the forces of the internationally recognised government, could risk igniting a direct conflict among the foreign powers that have poured in weapons and fighters in violation of an arms embargo.

Sisi warned last week that Egypt would not stand idle if there was a threat to national security in Egypt and its western neighbour, Libya.

Egypt, alongside the United Arab Emirates and Russia, backs Haftar, who abandoned an offensive on the capital last month after Turkey stepped up support for Tripoli.

Egypt has flown air strikes on suspected militants in Libya since the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 plunged the oil producer into chaos.

It has also supported Haftar, an ex-Gaddafi general, since 2014 when he assembled a force in eastern Libya, according to UN reports. But sending ground-combat troops would be a major escalation.

The eastern-based Libyan parliament allied to Haftar asked Cairo this month to intervene militarily to counter Turkey.

Egyptian state TV later ran banners on the screen saying: "Egypt and Libya, one people, one fate."

The last time Egypt sent ground troops abroad for combat was in 1991 in Kuwait as part of a US-led coalition to drive out Iraqi troops.

Shortly before the vote, Sisi and US President Donald Trump spoke by phone. "The two leaders affirmed the need for immediate de-escalation in Libya, including through a ceasefire and progress on economic and political negotiations," the White House said in a statement.

UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters: "There is no military solution to the current crisis in Libya and there must be an immediate ceasefire."

Egypt is concerned about instability in Libya and Turkey's support for Tripoli forces. The Tripoli government's forces have moved closer to the central city of Sirte, which they hope to recapture from Haftar's Libyan National Army and is the gateway to oil-exporting ports held by the LNA. Sisi has declared the Sirte front line a red line for Egypt.



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo meets with Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson at Downing Street in London, Britain, yesterday. Pompeo said he had a constructive discussion on ways how to tackle the growing might of China during the talks, just a week after London ordered a purge of Huawei gear from its 5G mobile phone network. As Britain toughens its stance on China due to its handling of the novel coronavirus and a crackdown in Hong Kong, Pompeo's visit is an attempt to stiffen Johnson's resolve and dangle the potential reward of a post-Brexit free trade deal, diplomats say. Beijing says the West -- and Washington in particular -- is gripped by anti-Chinese hysteria and colonial thinking about the communist state.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Military critic Pak journo 'goes missing'

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Rights groups have demanded information on the whereabouts of a prominent Pakistani journalist, known for his criticism of the country's powerful military, after he reportedly disappeared earlier yesterday.

Police said Matiullah Jan was last seen outside a government school in the Pakistani capital Islamabad yesterday morning.

"He came here to the government girls school in the G-6 [neighbourhood], where his wife is a teacher, to drop her off," said



Nasrullah, an officer investigating the case. "His car is still standing here."

Journalists in Pakistan are under threat from a variety of actors, with rights groups decrying increasing government and military censorship, intimidation and harassment of journalists in recent years.

Rights group Reporters Without Borders ranked Pakistan 145th out of 180 countries in its 2020 World Press Freedom Index.

Since 1992, at least 61 Pakistani journalists have been killed in connection with their work, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

Amnesty International and The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan demanded the government to ensure the safe recovery of the journalist.

Jan, known for his outspoken political commentary, had become increasingly critical of PM Imran Khan's government since 2018, when he resigned from hosting a news television talk show on television station Waqt News.

'Power of an Afghan girl'

Teenager kills Taliban fighters after militants killed her parents

AFP, Ghazni

An Afghan girl shot dead two Taliban fighters and wounded several more after they dragged her parents from their home and killed them for supporting the government, officials said.

The incident happened last week when insurgents stormed the home of Qamar Gul, a teenager from a village in the central province of Ghor.

The fighters were looking for her father, the village chief, local police head Habiburrahman told AFP.

Her father was a government supporter, which is why the Taliban fighters went to his house and dragged him out, Malekzada said.

When his wife resisted, the Taliban fighters killed the couple outside their home, Malekzada said.

"Qamar Gul, who was inside the house, took an AK-47 gun the family had and first shot dead the two Taliban fighters who killed her parents, and then injured a few others," he said.

Gul is aged between 14 and 16, according to different officials. It is common for many Afghans to not know their precise age.

Several other Taliban fighters

later came to attack her house, but some villagers and pro-government militiamen expelled them after a gunfight. Afghan security forces have now taken Gul and her younger brother to a safer place, said government sources said.

Since the incident, social media networks have been flooded with praise for Gul's "heroic" act. A photograph of Gul, wearing a headscarf and holding a machinegun across her lap has gone viral in the past few days.

"Hats off to her courage! Well done,"

wrote Najiba Rahmi on Facebook. "Power of an Afghan girl," wrote another Facebook user Fazila Alizada.

"We know parents are irreplaceable, but your revenge will give you relative peace," said Mohamed Saleh in his post on Facebook.

The Taliban regularly kill villagers who they suspect of being informers for the government or security forces.

In recent months, the militants have also stepped up their attacks against security forces despite agreeing to peace talks with Kabul.



Climate change on track to wipe out polar bears by 2100

AFP, Paris

Climate change is starving polar bears into extinction, according to research published Monday that predicts the apex carnivores could all but disappear within the span of a human lifetime.

In some regions they are already caught in a vicious downward spiral, with shrinking sea ice cutting short the time bears have for hunting seals, scientists reported in Nature Climate Change.

Their dwindling body weight undermines their chances of surviving Arctic winters without food, the scientists added.

"The bears face an ever longer fasting period before the ice refreezes and they can head back out to feed," Steven Amstrup, who conceived the study and is chief scientist of Polar Bears International, told AFP.

On current trends, the study concluded, polar bears in 12 of 13 subpopulations analysed will have been decimated within 80 years by the galloping pace of change in the Arctic, which is warming twice as fast as the planet as a whole.



The threat is not rising temperatures per se but the top-of-the-food-chain predators' inability to adapt to a rapidly shifting environment.

"If somehow, by magic, sea ice could be maintained even as temperatures increase, polar bears might be fine," Amstrup said by email.

"The problem is that their habitat is literally melting."

Half of Earth's land-based megafauna are classified as threatened with extinction, but only polar bears are endangered primarily by climate change. But that status may not be unique for long, and should be seen as a harbinger of how climate will impact other animals in the coming decades, the authors warned.