

Russia slams Turkey over claim of 'ethnic cleansing'

REUTERS, Istanbul
Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, yesterday said that accusations by Turkey of Moscow allegedly conducting ethnic cleansing in Syria are "groundless". Turkey's prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu accused Russia on Wednesday of attempted "ethnic cleansing" in northern Syria, saying Moscow was trying to drive out the local Turkmen and Sunni Muslim populations to protect its military interests in the region.

Ahmet Davutoglu's comments could further harm strained relations between Moscow and Ankara, already at their worst in recent memory after Turkish forces downed a Russian warplane near the Turkish-Syrian border late last month.

"Russia is trying to make ethnic cleansing in northern Latakia to force (out) all Turkmen and Sunni population who do not have good relations with the regime," Davutoglu told foreign reporters in Istanbul.

"They want to expel them, they want to ethnically cleanse this area so that the regime (of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad) and Russian bases in Latakia and Tartus are protected," he said, speaking in English.

The Turkmen are ethnic skin of the Turks and Ankara has been particularly angered by what it says is Russian targeting of them in Syria.

Davutoglu said Russian bombing around Azaz, also in northwest Syria, was designed to cut supply lines to Syrian groups opposed to Assad, Moscow's ally, and ultimately to benefit Islamic State militants.

Both Moscow and Ankara have repeatedly accused the other of helping Islamic State. Both deny the charge.



A man walks near a building on fire following a reported air strike by government forces in the rebel-held region of Eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of the Syrian capital Damascus on Wednesday. Syria's nearly five-year war has left more than 250,000 dead and forced some 12 million people from their homes. PHOTO: AFP

RAMADI OPS AGAINST IS US ready to send advisers, choppers

REUTERS, Washington
The United States is prepared to deploy advisers and attack helicopters if requested by Iraq to help it "finish the job" of retaking the city of Ramadi from Islamic State, US Defense Secretary Ash Carter said on Wednesday.

Carter's remarks were the latest sign of US preparations to intensify its military campaign against the group, which controls wide swaths of Iraq and Syria and has orchestrated and inspired attacks abroad.

Islamic State captured Ramadi, a provincial capital just a short drive west of Baghdad, in May in its biggest conquest since last year. Retaking it would be a major victory for Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

Carter, speaking at a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, said it has taken a "frustratingly long time" for Iraq security forces to claw back territory.

But he pointed to significant gains, including recapturing the Anbar Operations Center on the northern bank of the Euphrates River in the past 24 hours.

"The United States is prepared to assist the Iraqi Army with additional unique capabilities to help them finish the job, including attack helicopters and accompanying advisers, if circumstances dictate and if requested by Prime Minister Abadi," Carter said.

Meanwhile, the first batch of German troops and aircraft took off yesterday for Turkey as part of a deployment in the battle against the Islamic State group in Syria. Forty soldiers and two Tornado reconnaissance jets left from the Jagel military airbase in northern Germany's Schleswig-Holstein state. An A310 MRT aerial refuelling jet left separately from Cologne-Wahn base for the Incirlik airbase in southern Turkey.

Opponents of Assad agree joint group for peace talks

Gulf backs 'political solution'; Russia, US, UN to hold talks today

AGENCIES
Opponents of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad yesterday agreed to bring together political and armed factions in a single body in preparation for possible peace talks with his government, an opposition member said.

The opposition meeting in Riyadh comes amid escalating conflict in Syria and accelerated diplomacy to find a political solution to a war which has drawn in regional military powers and driven millions of refugees to seek safety abroad.

Delegates from Islamist insurgent groups, exiled political opposition figures and Damascus-based activists are aiming to bridge differences which have plagued previous attempts to unite Assad's opponents around a common strategy.

The conference agreed on Wednesday that Assad and his lieutenants should play no part in a transition to democracy.

There was no immediate indication of agreement on the figures who would be chosen to fill those positions.

At the Riyadh talks a declaration of principles was

still being drafted, a rebel commander said.

Another commander added that there was agreement on keeping Syria united, on the departure of foreign forces and militias and that there should be no sectarian quotas in Syria's government, which a political opposition leader also confirmed.

The role that Islam should play in a future Syria, and what status the country's religious and ethnic minorities will have, has been a point of contention between the country's rebel groups which include hardline Islamists.

Meanwhile, Gulf monarchs yesterday endorsed a "political solution" for war-ravaged Syria, under an international framework agreed to last month. The GCC represents the oil and gas-rich states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

In a new diplomatic push, Moscow and Washington yesterday announced that they and the United Nations will hold talks on Syria in Geneva today. UN peace envoy Staffan de Mistura was also set to take part in the talks aimed at ending a brutal war that has killed more than 250,000 people and forced millions from their homes since March 2011.

I'm doing good for the Muslims: Trump

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Donald Trump has claimed that his Muslim friends think his suggestion to bar every foreign member of the religion from entering the US is "fantastic". The Republican candidate's pledge to prevent any Muslim from entering or reentering the US "until Congress can figure out what is going on" has caused outrage around the world.

Trump was continuing to defend himself as the number of signatures on petition calling on the UK to ban him from visiting the country passed 380,000. It has been signed by people from every area of Britain, analysis showed, and will be considered for debate in the House of Commons.

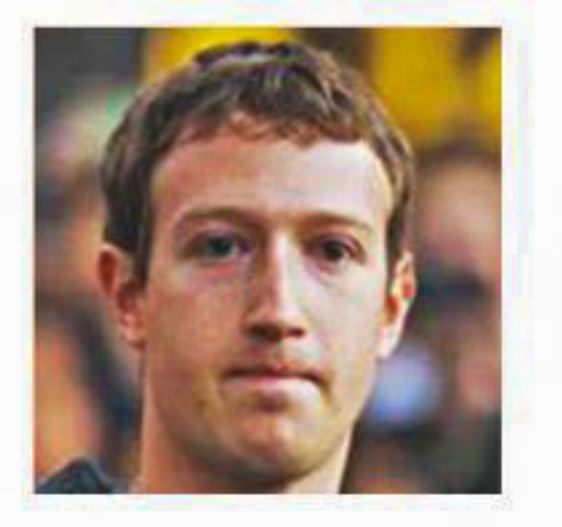
As global condemnation of Trump's comments continued he defended himself from racism accusations in an interview on CNN News.

"I am the least racist person that you have ever met," he said. "I'm doing good for the Muslims... many Muslim friends of mine are in agreement with me. They say, 'Donald, you brought something up to the fore that is so brilliant and so fantastic.'"

Trump also claimed that while world leaders, including David Cameron, the UN Secretary-General and Benjamin Netanyahu have criticised him, the American people have not. That assertion did not seem to be reported by damning newspaper headlines across the US and several Twitter trends being used to mock the politician.

Boxing legend Muhammad Ali has become the latest public figure to criticise Donald Trump's proposed ban on Muslims entering the US.

The former heavyweight champion, who converted to Islam in 1964, issued a rare public statement calling on Muslims "to stand up to those who use Islam to advance their own personal agenda".



Zuckerberg vows to protect rights of Muslims

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Following a week of "hate", Mark Zuckerberg has vowed to "fight to protect the rights" of Muslims on Facebook.

In the wake of sustained attacks from Donald Trump, in which he called for a total ban on Muslim immigration to the US, the Facebook founder posted a short message on his page on Wednesday to support the Muslim community.

Drawing on his religious upbringing, the Facebook founder said that it is important to support Muslims in the face of rising Islamophobia because "attacks on freedom for anyone will hurt everyone".

Zuckerberg, who called himself the "leader of Facebook", said that he was speaking after "the Paris attacks and hate this week".

"I can only imagine the fear Muslims feel that they will be persecuted for the actions of others," Zuckerberg wrote.

"As a Jew, my parents taught me that we must stand up against attacks on all communities. Even if an attack isn't against you today, in time attacks on freedom for anyone will hurt everyone.

"If you're a Muslim in this community, as the leader of Facebook I want you to know that you are always welcome here and that we will fight to protect your rights and create a peaceful and safe environment for you," Zuckerberg wrote.

CLIMATE CHANGE: HOW BAD CAN IT GET?

Ministers in Paris have until today to conclude a 195-nation pact to stop Earth's climate becoming inhospitable to humans and other species. If humankind continues to emit greenhouse gases unabated, the average global temperature by 2100 will be about 5.2 degrees Celsius (9.4 degrees Fahrenheit) higher than pre-Industrial Revolution levels. The goal is not to exceed 2C (3.6F). Ever. But even if countries fully honour the carbon-curbing pledges they submitted to bolster the hoped-for Paris pact, average warming will be 3C (5.4F) by century's end, scientists say. The year 2015 is set to hit the 1C mark -- halfway to the targeted ceiling.

HEATWAVES: Some 1.5 billion people will be exposed to heatwaves every year by 2100 under 2C, according to Avoid 2, a British government-funded consortium of climate change research institutes. The number will rise to about 4.5 billion under 3C, and 12 billion under 5.2C.

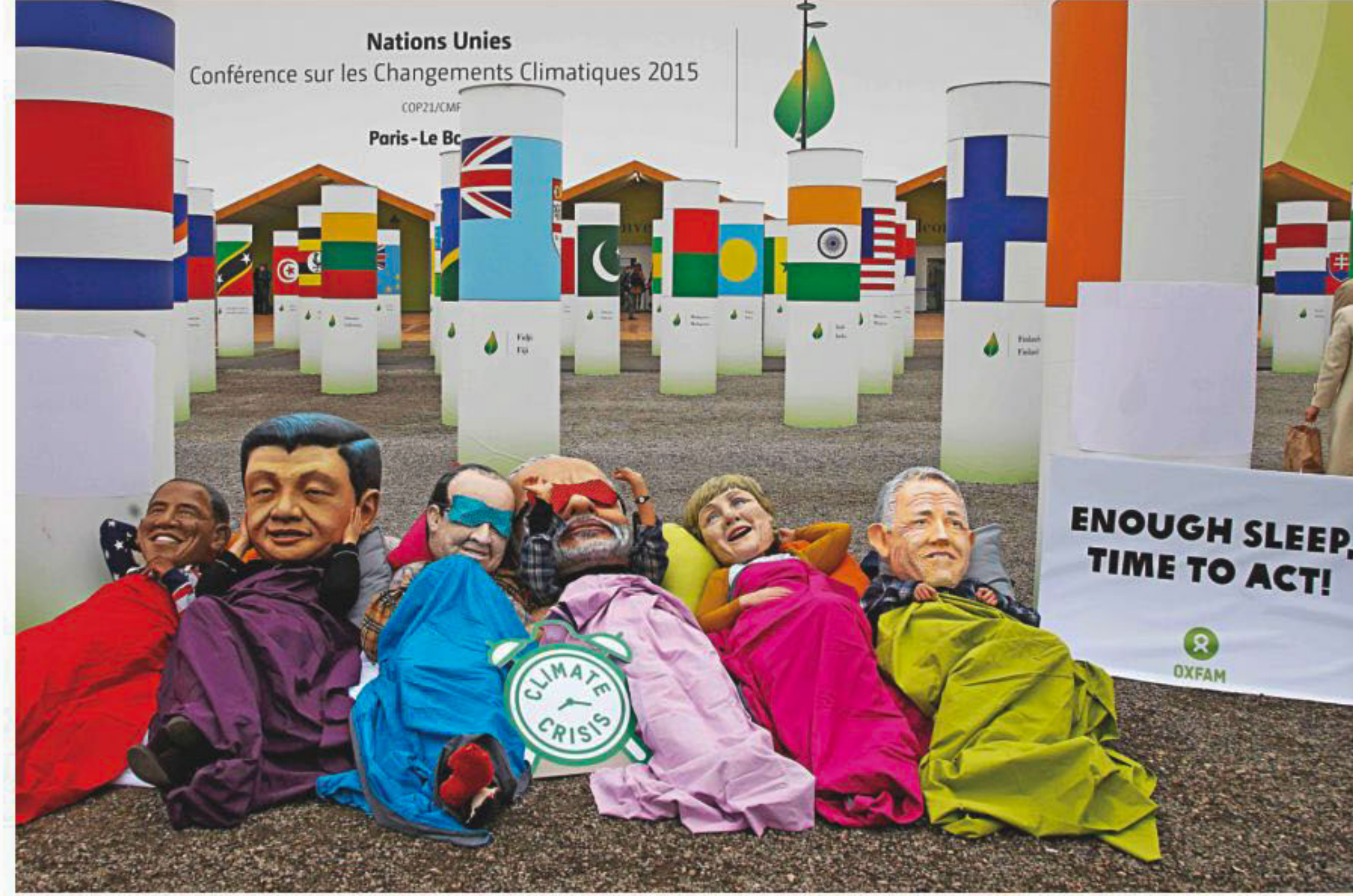
FLOODING: An estimated 30 million people would be affected by flooding every year by 2100 under 2C, says Avoid 2. This would rise to about 60 million under 3C, and double that number at 5.2C.

RIISING SEAS: According to Jozuel, sea levels would be about 40 cm (17 inches) higher by 2100 in a 2C-warmer world by 2100, some 60 cm at 3C and at 4-5C, closer to 80 cm. "And it won't stop there." Driving the rise are ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica shedding mass faster than ever, melting glaciers, and oceans that expand as they warm. Even a 2C rise as targeted by the UN would submerge land currently

occupied by 280 million people, according to Climate Central, a US-based research group. The change could take a few hundred years, or up to 2,000 years.

WATER DILEMMA: Global warming can lead to long-running droughts and devastating floods, which means some parts of the world will not have enough water and others too much. In a 2C world, an estimated 1.5 billion people would be exposed to some level of "water stress" in 2100, rising to about 2 billion at 5.2C.

HUMANITARIAN CRISES: Heatwaves, droughts and heavy rains can spur disease, ravage crops, and destroy homes and livelihoods, pushing millions more people into poverty. Conflict over water or other dwindling resources could fuel mass migration or war. People living on low-lying islands such as the Maldives, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean, or the Philippines could become climate refugees, forced to flee their homes due to rising seas. AFP, LE BOURGET



Activists of global anti-poverty charity Oxfam wearing masks depicting some of the world leaders stage a protest outside the venue of the World Climate Change Conference 2015 (COP21) in Le Bourget, near Paris, France, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

TERROR PLOT 5 charged in Australia

AFP, Sydney

Five people, including a 15-year-old boy, were charged yesterday in Sydney over a terror plot targeting a government building, with authorities expressing alarm at the age of those being radicalised.

The teenager and a 20-year-old man were seized at their homes yesterday morning and accused of conspiracy to conduct an act in preparation for a terrorist act. Three others currently in jail, aged 21, 22, and 22, were later charged with the same offence, police said.

The arrests and charges stem from evidence gathered during pre-dawn raids in Australia late last year in which 15 people were taken into custody and an alleged plan to kidnap and abduct a member of the public was uncovered.

Could Saudi oil obstruct deal?

AFP, Le Bourget

Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest crude oil exporter, has a lot to lose if the global economy shifts to clean energy.

So at 195-nation UN talks in Paris aimed at forging a climate-saving accord that will slash greenhouse gas emissions, it is perhaps not surprising that Riyadh stands accused of playing the role of a spoiler.

"For a long time, Saudi Arabia was not on the front line in these negotiations," said Pascal Canfin, an analyst at the Washington-headquartered World Resources Institute.

"But here, they are blocking on pretty much every topic," Canfin told AFP.

Oil income accounts for more than 90 percent of public revenues in Saudi Arabia, the largest Arab economy.

With 267 billion barrels in proven crude reserves, it is the world's largest oil exporter and second-largest producer.

"They have everything to lose and not a lot to win," said ActionAid climate campaigner Harjeet Singh.

Taking effect in 2020, the Paris accord would seek to limit emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases driven by the burning of coal, oil and gas.

Scientists estimate that most fossil fuels would have to be left in the ground if the world is to meet its goal of capping planetary warming at or below 2.0 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) over pre-Industrial Revolution levels.

That would require a revolution in the global energy industry -- a switch that may be possible thanks to the growing use of renewable energies that are falling in price, or nuclear power.

Riyadh does not see it exactly the same way.

On stage at the Paris climate conference, Saudi Oil Minister Ali al-Naimi said he favoured a shift from oil to natural gas, of which the kingdom also has vast stocks, and the use of technology to capture and store fossil fuel emissions.

And while Saudi Arabia said it was committed to boosting the use of sun and wind energy, the oil chief called for "emission reduction policies that do not discriminate against any of the energy sources".

"That means 'you must not target fossil fuels', which is an unthinkable thing to say on stage just when the international community is trying to find ways to move away from them," said Celia Gautier of the Climate Action Network, a coalition of NGOs.

"They know there will be an end to oil. They are starting to diversify their economy. But they want to slow down the process -- that means preventing the Paris accord from accelerating," she said.

Venezuela, which relies on oil for half of its economic output, "is in the same situation," Gautier said.

"Oil groups are doing everything they can to have the least ambitious accord possible," the activist added.



Conservative Macri sworn in as Argentine president

AFP, Buenos Aires

Business-friendly conservative Mauricio Macri was sworn in as Argentina's new president yesterday, turning the page on 12 years under left-wing power couple Nestor and Cristina Kirchner.

The oath of office was administered by incoming Senate speaker Federico Pinedo, who had served as provisional president since midnight after a court ruled Kirchner's term officially ended on Wednesday.

Kirchner, irate over the spat, boycotted the inauguration along with her allies in Congress.

"This government will know how to defend freedom, which is essential for democracy," Macri vowed in an inaugural address that laid out a sweeping agenda for change.

He also promised to fight "untiringly for those who need it most," a nod to his campaign pledges to keep the Kirchners' popu-

lar social programs. Macri, 56, won a November 22 run-off election against Kirchner's chosen successor, Daniel Scioli.

The son of a wealthy businessman, he rose to fame as the president of Argentina's most popular football club, Boca Juniors, during a storied string of trophy wins.

The mayor of Buenos Aires since 2007, he won election at the head of a coalition called "Let's Change."

He has vowed to reboot Latin America's third-largest economy, which is slumping toward recession, by ending protectionist import restrictions, cutting heavy taxes on agricultural exports and scrapping the official exchange rate puffing up the Argentine peso.

Since the end of the country's 1976-1983 dictatorship, he is only the third leader elected from outside the "Peronist" movement founded by Juan Peron, the towering figure of 20th-century Argentina.

