

US eases sanctions on Myanmar

Says move to support reforms

REUTERS, WASHINGTON

The United States yesterday eased some sanctions on Myanmar to support ongoing political reforms, but maintained most of its economic restrictions in an effort to punish those Washington sees as hampering the country's newly elected government.

US officials said they were easing sanctions to encourage the "historic" progress in Myanmar, including the formation of the country's first democratically elected government in more than 50 years.

The moves included removing Myanmar state-owned banks from a US blacklist and the lifting of sanctions against seven key state-owned timber and mining companies.

Officials said they hope the actions will eliminate key obstacles to trade in Myanmar. Potential investors in Myanmar have long complained that the blacklisting of some of the country's biggest banks made business in the country too risky. Major firms including General Electric, Western Union Co, Gap Inc, and Coca-Cola have made business forays into Myanmar, and the moves announced yesterday will ease their and other companies' ability to operate there.

The announcement highlighted a key challenge for Washington, as it seeks to both encourage political reform while maintaining pressure on those it sees as spoilers. More than 100 individuals and groups remain on Washington's sanctions blacklist for Myanmar.

The US moves followed a landmark November election in which the party of Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's Nobel Peace Prize laureate, won a landslide victory.



A Sri Lankan resident looks out from her home inundated by floodwaters in Pugoda, about 35 kms from capital Colombo, yesterday. Heavy rains claimed 3 more lives in Sri Lanka yesterday, raising weather-related deaths to 11 as more than 50,000 families were driven out of their flooded homes, officials said.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Canada oil workers urged to flee blaze

BBC ONLINE

Around 12,000 people have been urged to leave Canada's oil sands camps near the fire-hit town of Fort McMurray as a resurgent wildfire heads towards them. A regional official told the BBC that 8,000 people were given precautionary evacuation orders late on Monday, in addition to some 4,000 who had already been advised to leave.

Modi to visit Iran to boost trade

AFP, New Delhi

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Iran this week, seeking to boost trade with the oil-rich country after international sanctions were lifted this year, it was announced yesterday. The Ministry of External Affairs said Modi would meet President Hassan Rouhani during a two-day visit starting Saturday. Iran was India's second largest supplier of crude oil until 2011/12.

N Korea appoints new foreign minister

AFP, Seoul

North Korea has appointed as its new foreign minister a career diplomat at the centre of managing relations with the United States and South Korea for more than 20 years. Ri Yong-Ho's appointment was confirmed in a diplomatic note sent to the British government by the N Korean embassy in London on Monday, an embassy official said.

Turkish police warn of possible IS attacks

REUTERS, Istanbul

Turkish police have issued a nationwide warning about possible Islamic State attacks on tomorrow's national holiday, state media said, with military facilities seen as targets after the army stepped up attacks on the militants in Syria. Both IS and Kurdish militants have staged bomb attacks in Turkey in recent months, fuelling concern about the spillover of conflict from its southern neighbour.

Smugglers made \$5-6b off migrants

REUTERS, Geneva

People smugglers made over \$5 billion from the wave of migration into southern Europe last year, a report by international crime-fighting agencies Interpol and Europol said yesterday. Nine out of 10 migrants and refugees entering the European Union in 2015 relied on "facilitation services, the report said. About 1 million migrants entered the EU in 2015. Most paid \$3,400-\$6,800 each, the report said.

Myanmar joins regional body to fight terror

AGENCIES

Myanmar parliament has anonymously approved a decision to join the Bimstec Convention on cooperation in combating international terrorism, transnational organised crime and drug trafficking.

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation includes Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan and Nepal.

The deputy home affairs minister General Aung Soe told MPs: "Bimstec can increase cooperation with the international community and promote the country's stability and security. It will benefit the nation and the region," Aung Soe said.

The main objective of Bimstec is regional technological and economical cooperation, including commerce, investment, technology, tourism, human resource development, agriculture, transport and communication.

No breakthrough in talks

Divided powers vow to bolster truce; clashes kill dozens across country

AFP, Vienna

World and regional powers working to end the Syrian conflict vowed to bolster the country's shaky ceasefire yesterday but failed to set a new date for peace talks.

US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov put on their now customary joint appearance, but strains in the peace process were evident.

United Nations envoy Staffan de Mistura said he could not invite Bashar al-Assad's regime and the Syrian opposition back to peace talks until there is a "credible" ceasefire.

Kerry said the International Syrian Support Group (ISSG) had agreed there would be "consequences" for parties breaching the ceasefire and vowed to maintain pressure on Assad.

But Lavrov restated the Russian position that Assad's army is the best placed local faction to fight the Islamic State "terrorist" group and that Moscow would support it.

The evident divisions between ISSG co-chairs Russia and the United States have cast a pall on efforts to agree a framework under which Syria would "transition" away from Assad's rule.

And Kerry admitted the August 1 date set by the UN Security Council for agreement on the political framework was a "target" not a deadline, apparently softening the US stance.

Nevertheless, Kerry said the ISSG had agreed to strengthen its system for monitoring the ceasefire and that violators risked being expelled from the process.

Washington regularly accuses Assad's forces of violating the truce and of bombing civilians, whereas Russia accuses rebel factions of carrying out massacres.

Meanwhile, at least 50 fighters and two civilians were killed yesterday in clashes between rival anti-regime groups east of Syria's capital, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The powerful Jaish al-Islam has been locked in clashes with rival factions led by al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate in the opposition stronghold of Eastern Ghouta.

Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman said nearly three weeks of fighting had killed more than 500 fighters and a dozen civilians.

In Aleppo, a regime air strike left at least seven civilians dead yesterday, among them a mother and her young daughter, according to the Observatory.

In Bdama in Idlib province in the northwest, large swathes of which are held by al-Qaeda's local affiliate Al-Nusra, regime strikes left eight civilians dead.

The Syrian war erupted in early 2011 after Assad's forces launched a brutal crackdown on anti-government protests, and has since claimed more than 270,000 lives.



SYRIA CONFLICT

RUSSIA UNITED STATES

We used to have one Gaddafi, now we have fifty: Pope

Slams West for exporting own brand of democracy to ME

REUTERS, Rome

Pope Francis criticised Western powers for trying to export their own brand of democracy to countries such as Iraq and Libya without respecting indigenous political cultures, according to an interview published on Monday.

Speaking to France's Roman Catholic newspaper, La Croix, Francis also said Europe should better integrate migrants and praised the election of the new Muslim mayor of London as an example of where this had been successful.

"Faced with current Islamist terrorism, we should question the way a model of democracy that was too Western was exported to countries where there was a strong power, as in Iraq, or Libya, where there was a tribal structure," he said.

"We cannot advance without taking these cultures into account," the pope said.

"As a Libyan said recently, 'We used to have one Gaddafi, now we have fifty',

Francis said in reference to former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi who was deposed and killed in 2011.

Francis has frequently attacked what he calls "cultural colonialism", in which Western countries seek to impose their values on developing ones in return for financial aid.

The pope said that "ghettoising" migrants was not only wrong but was also misguided in the fight against terrorism.

He cited the militant attacks in Brussels in March when three suicide bombers killed 32 people, in which "the terrorists were Belgians, children of migrants, but they came from a ghetto".

By contrast, the pope praised this month's election of Sadiq Khan as the first Muslim mayor of London.

Ten days ago, the pope lambasted Europe over what he sees as its inadequate response to the influx of migrants fleeing war and poverty in the Middle-East and Africa.



US reveals \$117b Saudi debt secret

CNN ONLINE

Saudi Arabia stockpiled \$116.8 billion of US Treasuries as of March, the Treasury Department announced on Monday, ending four decades of keeping the figure secret.

That makes Saudi Arabia the 13th largest foreign holder of US debt, though well behind the \$1 trillion-plus owned by China and Japan each. The Saudi figure was first reported by Bloomberg News based on a Freedom of Information Act request.

Unlike with most other major owners of US debt, the Treasury Department kept Saudi Arabia's precise holdings secret since the 1970s. Saudi's holdings were lumped together with that of other oil exporting nations, including Venezuela and Iraq.

But that policy ended on Monday as the Treasury Department disclosed precise holdings by specific countries that were previously grouped together. A Treasury official told CNNMoney the move was made following a review aimed at trying to provide more "comprehensive and transparent" data.

The new Treasury report also revealed that the Cayman Islands, a country of less than 60,000 people, owned \$265 billion of US Treasuries as of March. That's the third-highest sum in the world and a reflection of the nation's status as a major tax haven. The Cayman Islands does not have a corporate tax, encouraging multinational companies to store vast sums of money there to avoid taxes.



Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF, in red) party members of parliament are physically removed from the South African parliament after repeatedly ignoring the instructions of the Speaker, yesterday, in Cape Town. A brutal fistfight broke out in the South African parliament yesterday as security guards ejected opposition lawmakers in an ugly fracas that underlined heightened political tensions over Jacob Zuma's presidency.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Pak opposes draft bill on India map

Seeks UN intervention; New Delhi fumes

PII, New Delhi

India yesterday reacted strongly to Pakistan seeking UN intervention on the Indian draft bill on map, saying it was an "entirely internal legislative matter" and Pakistan or any other party has no locus standi on it.

External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Vikas Swarup said India "firmly rejects" repeated and increasing attempts by Pakistan to impose on the international community matters that it has always been open to address bilaterally with it.

Earlier, in Islamabad, Pakistan Foreign Office issued a statement saying it has expressed "serious concern" to the UN over a draft bill in the Indian Parliament over the map of Kashmir and has asked the world body to uphold its resolutions and urge India to stop such acts which are in "violation of international law".

It further said that "in violation of UNSC resolutions, the official map of India has been depicting the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir as part of India which is factually incorrect and legally untenable".

Wrong depiction of the map of India could land the violators in jail with a maximum term of seven years and impose a fine up to Rs 100 crore.

Democrats vie for 2 more states

Clinton says her husband to play a role in her administration

AFP, Hopkinsville

Polls yesterday opened in a Kentucky primary that could give Hillary Clinton a chance to bolster her almost insurmountable delegate lead over Democratic rival Bernie Sanders, who has vowed to slog on despite long odds.

Though Clinton holds a slim poll lead, Sanders was gunning for victory in the Bluegrass State, building on his win last week in neighboring West Virginia as he battles to keep his long-shot nomination bid alive.

West Virginia and Kentucky are linked to coal, as is much of Appalachia -- the largely white, long-struggling eastern US region where many feel they have been given the cold shoulder in the lukewarm recovery from the 2007-2008 financial crisis.

The northwest state of Oregon on Tuesday was also holding its Democratic and Republican primaries, where limited polling has indicated Clinton is ahead.

Both races could be fairly competitive, national polls predict.

Clinton has won 94% of delegates needed to win the nomination, a total of 24 states to Mr Sanders' 19.

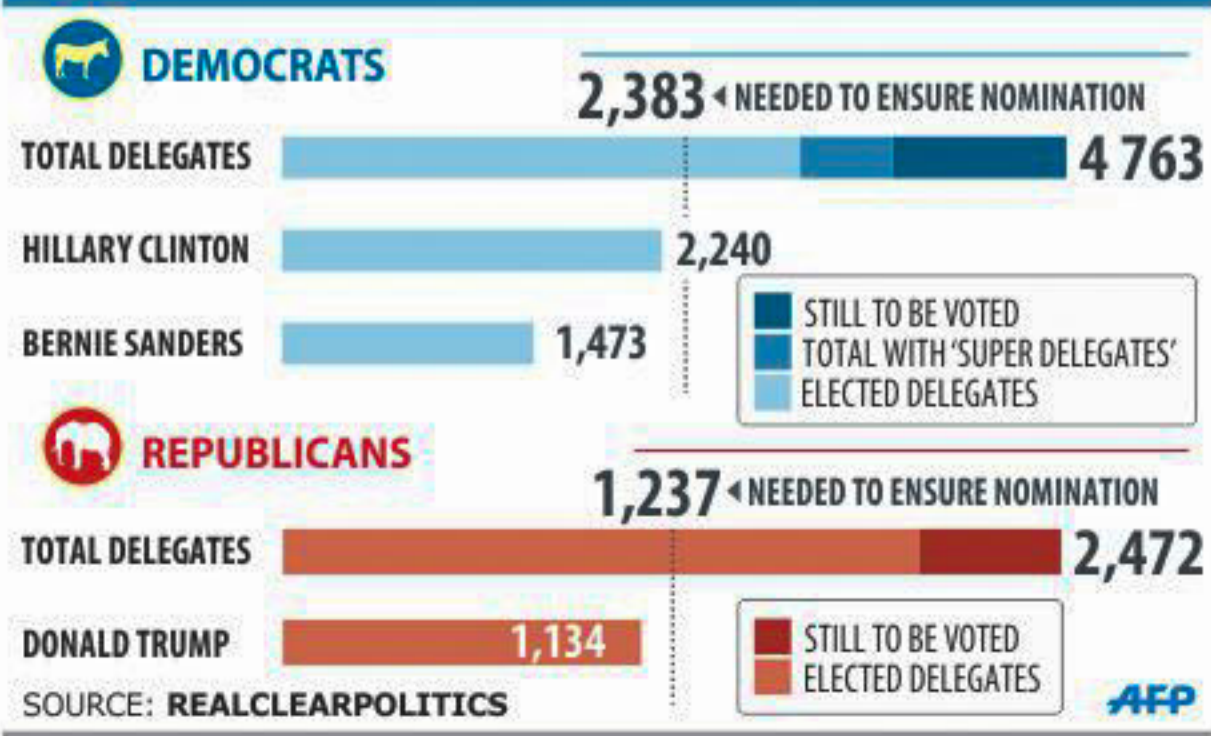
Republicans also vote in Oregon yesterday, but that race is all but decided, with front-runner Donald Trump having pushed out all of his competitors.

The Kentucky Democratic primary will award 60 delegates to go to the party's convention in Philadelphia while Oregon's primary will award 74.

No Democratic presidential candidate has won in Kentucky state since 1980 except for her husband Bill Clinton. On Sunday the former first lady appeared to indicate Bill would play a role in her administration if she were elected, promising to put him "in charge of revitalizing the economy."

Trump is only 103 delegates short of the 1,237 needed to clinch the Republican nomination and Mrs Clinton is 143 short of the 2,383 Democratic delegates she needs.

THE US PRIMARIES: WHERE THEY STAND



First S Korean wins Man Booker Prize

AFP, London

South Korean author Han Kang won the Man Booker International Prize on Monday, sharing the £50,000 award with her translator -- who had only taught herself Korean three years before.

Han Kang, 45, an author and creative writing teacher who is already successful in South Korea, is likely to enjoy a spike in international sales following the win for "The Vegetarian".

"I'm so honoured" she told AFP. "The work features a protagonist who wants to become a plant, and to leave the human race to save herself from the dark side of human nature."

"Through this extreme narrative I felt I could question... the difficult question of being human."

She was the first South Korean to win the prize. Described as "lyrical and lacerating" by chairman of the judges Boyd Tonkin, the tale traces the story of an ordinary woman's rejection of convention from three different perspectives.

It was picked unanimously by the panel of five judges, beating six other novels including "The Story of the Lost Child" by Italian sensation Elena Ferrante and "A Strangeness in My Mind" by Turkey's Orhan Pamuk.



Han Kang