

Biden to run for
US presidency

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US Vice President Joe Biden has revealed he intends to mount a presidential bid in 2020. Biden has been jointly elected twice as the running mate of outgoing President Barack Obama. He previously pursued the Democratic presidential nomination in 1988 and in 2008, but dropped out of the race early on both occasions.

NYT sees digital
subscriptions surge

AFP, New York

The New York Times has seen an exceptional surge in digital subscriptions in the period just before and after the November election, its top executive said Monday. New York Times Co chief executive Mark Thompson told a business conference the prestigious daily has added more than 200,000 net subscribers since late September. The newspaper had some 1.55 million subscribers at the end of September for digital services, including news and crossword puzzles.



Poland SC rejects
Polanski extradition

AFP, Warsaw

Poland's Supreme Court yesterday rejected a bid to extradite Oscar-winning director Roman Polanski, 83, to the United States, where he faces sentencing over a decades-old case of statutory rape. Polanski is still wanted in the US for sentencing over the 1977 statutory rape of Samantha Gailey after a photo shoot in Los Angeles. He was arrested after Gailey, now Geimer, accused him of forcing her to have sex after drugging her. She was 13 at the time. Polanski was 43.



S Korea scam: Park to
accept impeachment

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's scandal-hit President Park Geun-Hye yesterday said she would accept the result of a looming and possibly lengthy impeachment process, but defied pressure to resign immediately. An opposition-sponsored impeachment motion is almost certain to be adopted by the national assembly on Friday, with some 30 rebel MPs from Park's Saenuri party saying they will vote in favour.



Veterans join activists in a march just outside the Oceti Sakowin camp to demonstrate against plans to pass the Dakota Access pipeline adjacent to the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, near Cannon Ball, North Dakota, US, on Monday. The US Army Corps of Engineers on Sunday nixed plans for a controversial oil pipeline crossing in North Dakota, a major victory for Native Americans and environmentalists who had staged months of protests.

PHOTO:
AFP

IS loses Sirte

AFP, Tripoli

Forces loyal to Libya's UN-backed government said Monday they had seized full control of Sirte from the Islamic State group, in a major blow to the jihadists who fought for months to retain their bastion.

The battle for the coastal city, which was the last significant territory held by IS in Libya, cost the lives of hundreds of loyalist troops and an unknown number of IS fighters.

The offensive was backed by a US bombing campaign launched in August, which as of December 1 had seen American warplanes, drones and helicopters carry out 470 strikes.

"Our forces have total control of Sirte," Reda Issa, a spokesman for pro-government forces, told AFP. "Our forces saw Daesh (IS) totally collapse."

"Our forces are combing the last pockets and carrying out a major operation to trap those trying to flee," said the spokesman, adding that around 30 jihadists had surrendered.

Issa said a public announcement of "the liberation of Sirte" would follow within hours "once the last jihadist has been wiped out".

Forces allied with the country's unity government began the offensive to retake Sirte on May 12, quickly seizing large areas of the city and cornering the jihadists.

But IS put up fierce resistance with suicide car bombings, snipers and improvised explosive devices.

The country descended into chaos following the Nato-backed ousting of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, with rival administrations emerging and well-armed militias vying for control of its vast oil wealth.

The infighting and lawlessness allowed extremist groups such as IS to seize several coastal regions. The fall of Sirte is a major setback for IS, which has also faced a series of military defeats in Syria and Iraq.

Army seize key ground
in fierce Aleppo battle

Say no to ceasefire call; Russia, China veto UN resolution

AFP, Aleppo

Syria's army seized key ground in its battle to retake Aleppo yesterday, capturing five more districts including a strategic neighbourhood at the heart of rebel territory.

The advance came as Moscow and Washington traded barbs over stalled efforts to end fighting in the city, where forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad have made significant advances in recent days.

Yesterday, government troops retook five districts including the strategic Shaar neighbourhood and were in control of 70 percent of former rebel territory in east Aleppo, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The monitoring group described Shaar as "the most important neighbourhood in the heart of east Aleppo", and said rebels were being reduced to fighting a "war of attrition" with regime troops.

The rapid regime gains have left opposition fighters scrambling to defend the shrinking enclave they still control in Aleppo's southeastern districts.

Despite mounting criticism of the offensive, world powers have struggled to find a

way to halt the fighting.

Key Assad ally Russia had announced talks with the United States in Geneva for Tuesday or Wednesday on organising a rebel withdrawal from Aleppo ahead of a ceasefire.

But on Tuesday, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused Washington, which has backed rebel groups against Assad, of backtracking.

US Secretary of State John Kerry denied any change of plans.

Washington had also accused Moscow of stalling for time after Russia and China blocked a UN Security Council resolution on Monday calling for a seven-day ceasefire.

Syria's foreign ministry said it would not agree to any ceasefire without a guarantee of a rebel withdrawal.

The rebels have so far rejected any talk of leaving the city, with Yasser al-Youssef of the leading Nureddin al-Zinki faction describing the proposal as "unacceptable".

The loss of Aleppo would be the biggest blow yet to opposition forces in Syria's civil war, which erupted in 2011 with popular protests calling for Assad's ouster.

More than 300,000 people have since died and millions forced from their homes.

SYRIA WAR

'Not all can and will stay'

Merkel launches election bid with tough line on immigration

AFP, Essen

Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday lashed populists trying to exploit fears over Germany's refugee influx but set out a tough line on integration, including a ban on the veil, as she launched into election campaign mode.

Outlining her strategy to counter a wave of populism that has consumed key allies abroad, Merkel vowed there would not be a repeat of last year's record refugee influx.

She also stressed it was legitimate for Germany to expect newcomers to integrate, and this included rejection of the niqab full-face veil.

"The full veil must be banned wherever it is legally possible," she told the annual gathering of her centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

Next year's polls will "not be a walk in the park" as Germany is deeply polarised, noted the German leader, but urged the population to remain "sceptical about easy answers".

"Rarely is it the easy answers that bring progress to our country," she said, in a clear reference to the upstart anti-Islam and populist AfD, which Merkel had previously criticised as offering no solutions to problems.

Merkel, who has led Germany for 11 years, last month confirmed she would run for a fourth term but acknowledged that the election would be "more difficult" than any other she has contested.

There have also been questions about whether the 62-year-old has fresh ideas to offer in a world upended by Brexit, the surprise election of Donald Trump and the departure of Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi following



a crushing referendum defeat championed by populists.

The CDU has suffered setbacks in five consecutive state polls as voters punished Merkel for her liberal refugee policy, with more than a million people seeking asylum in Germany since 2015.

Tackling the hot potato issue head-on, Merkel vowed that "a situation like that of summer 2015 can and must not repeat itself." She also stressed that each asylum request would be examined carefully, and "not all can and will stay" in Germany.

Merkel secured the blessing of her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) to lead the party into next year's elections, but with one of the poorest results in the history of such polls.

Delegates of the centre-right CDU voted 89.5 percent for her to remain at the helm, in the second worst score achieved by Merkel.

During the last party vote in 2014, Merkel garnered 96.7 percent of support and national media suggested that any score below 90 percent would be a slap in the face.

Beyond domestic issues, Merkel also devoted a large part of her address to crises abroad as she noted that in 2016, "the world has not become stronger and more stable, but weaker and more unstable".

She deplored the failure of the international community to alleviate the suffering in Syria's besieged city of Aleppo, calling it a "disgrace".

She also underlined the importance of holding the European Union together, saying Germany will do well "only when Europe does well too."

Trump, China on
collision course?

AFP, Beijing

Donald Trump is a "diplomatic rookie" who must learn not to cross Beijing on issues like trade and Taiwan, Chinese state media said yesterday, warning America could pay dearly for his naivety.

Trump's protocol-shattering call with Taiwan's president and a subsequent Twitter tirade against Beijing's policies could risk upending the delicate balance between the world's two largest economies, major media outlets said.

"Provoking friction and messing up China-US relations won't help 'make America great again'," said a front-page opinion piece in the overseas edition of Communist Party mouthpiece People's Daily.

The nationalist Global Times newspaper's Chinese edition also ran a page-one story on Trump's "inability to keep his mouth shut", damning his "provocation and falsehoods".

Trump fired off two tweets on Sunday blasting China for devaluing its currency, taxing US imports, and building military installations in the South China Sea.

The comments followed criticism of Trump in US and Chinese media for taking a congratulatory phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, a move that flew in the face of nearly 40 years of diplomatic protocol and raised questions about whether the president-elect intends to pursue a hard line against Beijing.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi gestures after paying homage to the body of Jayalalithaa Jayaram, a powerful politician who died on Monday, in Chennai, India, yesterday. Former Tamil Nadu chief minister Jayalalithaa was laid to rest at M G R Memorial on the Marina Beach in Chennai yesterday evening with full state honours.

Cazeneuve
named new
French PM

AFP, Paris

French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve was named the country's new prime minister yesterday after Manuel Valls resigned to seek the Socialist nomination in next year's presidential election.

Cazeneuve, who has overseen the security forces' reaction to a string of jihadist attacks that have killed more than 230 people in France over the past two years, will head the Socialist government until the election in May.

The widely-respected lawyer was named to the post after President Francois Hollande accepted Valls' resignation.

Cazeneuve, 53, has served in various government roles, including budget and Europe minister

before becoming interior minister in April 2014. Cazeneuve will be replaced in the interior ministry by Bruno Le Roux, currently the leader of the Socialists in the lower house of parliament.

The mini-reshuffle comes after Valls, who was Hollande's right-hand man for the past two-and-a-half years, quit to focus on the presidential race.

Valls is currently placed in fifth place in polls.

Polls show Le Pen and Fillon far out in front in the opening round of the election on April 23, with Fillon expected to beat Le Pen in May's second round.

Cesarean births affecting
human evolution: study

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The success of Caesarean sections since the Second World War has led to a startling 20 per cent increase in obstructed childbirths, according to new research.

Scientists say the tendency since the 1950s and 1960s to opt for a Caesarean has caused babies to evolve bigger heads.

This has then prompted the huge increase in fetopelvic disproportion: when the fetal head is too big – or when the birth canal is too narrow – for natural childbirth.

The obstruction is "strikingly high" and now accounts for up to 6 per cent of all births worldwide.



Caesareans meanwhile account for one in four births across the UK and a third of all births in the US.

"We predict that this weak directional selection has led to a 10 to 20 per cent increase in the rate of fetopelvic disproportion since the regular use of Caesarean sections," said lead author Dr Philipp Mitteroecker, of the University of Vienna.

The research, entitled 'Cliff-edge model of obstetric selection in humans', was published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America.

The paper says that women's pelvic canals are not evolving to accommodate the increasingly larger brains and heads of babies.

15 get death
in S Arabia
for spying

AGENCIES

The Saudi Arabian government has sentenced 15 people to death and jailed many more over an alleged spy ring that handed secret documents to arch-enemy Iran.

A court in the capital of Riyadh also gave prison terms ranging from six months to 25 years, and acquitted two, over a three-year case that has involved 30 Saudis, one Iranian and one Afghan.

Critics have long said the high-profile trial is entirely politically motivated and serves as a distraction from the Gulf state's economic woes.

The 32 were detained in 2013 and went on trial in February charged with an exhaustive list of damning

'Time is short' for Brexit

EU sets Oct 2018 deadline for UK; May faces Tory revolt

AFP, Brussels

The European Commission's chief Brexit negotiator yesterday warned that time was short for talks, with a crucial deal for Britain's departure from the EU needed by October 2018.

Frenchman Michel Barnier added it was "difficult to imagine" any interim deal giving Britain special treatment between its departure and a fuller trade pact further down the line.

The new timeline adds to the pressure on Prime Minister Theresa May as Britain's top court holds the second day of a historic hearing to decide whether parliament has to approve the negotiations.

"Time will be short. It's clear that the period of actual negotiations will be shorter than two years," Barnier said in his first press conference since taking up the post in October.

Barnier has visited 18 EU countries in recent weeks to hammer out a common position on Brexit and aims to hold talks in all 27 apart from Britain by the end of January.

The former EU financial services commissioner said that if May triggers the two-year divorce process under Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty as promised in March 2017, then the window for talks will be tight.

Britain voted to leave the EU in a shock referendum result in June, but May is yet to set out London's demands in detail, with the government seeking a balance between control over immigration and access to the EU's single market.

Barnier also warned Britain against "cherry-picking" what it wanted in terms of EU benefits despite leaving.

May however faces her own problems with up to 40 lawmakers from her Conservative party threatening to back a motion in parliament demanding she publish her plan for Brexit before starting negotiations.

It comes as the government fights a legal challenge at the Supreme Court to stop parliament having the final say on a decision to trigger Article 50, which could delay the whole process.

