

Mexico won't budge on wall

PM scraps Trump meet; White House backs away from 20% trade tariff

AGENCIES

Mexico is willing to talk with the United States in order to maintain good relations, but paying for President Donald Trump's border wall "is not negotiable," Mexican Foreign Minister Luis Videgaray said Thursday.

"There are things that are not negotiable, things that cannot and will not be negotiated. The fact that it is being said that Mexico should pay for the wall is something that is simply not negotiable," Videgaray said during a press conference at the Mexican embassy in Washington.

The top diplomat was at the White House Thursday to help pave the way for a visit by Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto.

Trump had been scheduled to receive Pena Nieto at the White House on Tuesday, for their first meeting since the inauguration.

Instead, the Republican president is engaging a foreign policy spat with a normally friendly nation and key trade partner during his first week in office.

The escalating war of words over who would pay for the proposed border wall -- a central pledge made by Trump during his successful presidential campaign -- hit the breaking point on Thursday.

"If Mexico is unwilling to pay for the badly needed wall, then it would be better to cancel the upcoming meeting," Trump said on Twitter in the morning.

Pena Nieto, who had good relations with former US president Barack Obama, didn't take long to rise to the challenge.

"We informed the White House this morning that I will not attend the working meeting scheduled for next Tuesday" with Trump in Washington, the Mexican leader

responded on Twitter. "Mexico reiterates its willingness to work with the United States to reach agreements in both nations' interests."

Hours later, Trump told Republican lawmakers at a retreat in Philadelphia that the cancellation was by mutual agreement.

"Unless Mexico is going to treat the United States fairly, with respect, such a meeting would be fruitless, and I want to go a different route. I have no choice," he said.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer said the "lines of communications" would remain open and Washington hoped to "schedule something in the future."

But in a move that is sure to increase tensions, Spicer later said that Trump could fund the wall's construction by slapping a 20 percent tax on goods from Mexico.

"By doing that, we can do \$10 billion a year and easily pay for the wall just through that mechanism alone," he said.

The White House later backtracked and called it just one idea among many.

Such a tax, Videgaray said Thursday, would only harm Americans.

Trump signed an order Wednesday for work to begin on building a wall along the 2,000-mile (3,200-kilometer) border.

But the US leader has struggled to articulate how the wall will be paid for, though he has suggested recently that the United States would fund it first and Mexico would reimburse the cost later.

Trump has also ordered officials to scour US government departments and agencies in search of "direct and indirect" aid or assistance to the Mexican government and report back within 30 days.

It looks like the world is preparing for war

Warns Gorbachev; Hollande says Trump rule poses 'challenges' for Europe

AGENCIES

Mikhail Gorbachev has urged Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump to strongly denounce nuclear war in the face of the "militarisation of politics and the new arms race".

The 85-year-old, who was the eighth and final leader of the Soviet Union and its Communist Party, said he believed it looked "as if the world is preparing for war".

The 'glasnost' Cold War politician made the comments in a piece for Time magazine ahead of Theresa May's first meeting with Trump yesterday.

The Russian-Ukrainian describes how troops, tanks and armoured personnel carriers are being brought to Europe.

He also writes how Nato and Russian forces and weapons, once deployed at a distance, are at "point-blank" range of one another.

Unconfirmed reports also say China has moved long-range missiles to the Russian border.

The frequently vocal critic also said state budgets were struggling to fund people's essential social needs but that military spending is growing.

He talks of submarines whose "single salvo" is capable of devastating half a continent.

"Politicians and military leaders sound increasingly belligerent and defence doctrines more dangerous," said Gorbachev.

"Commentators and TV personalities are joining the bellicose chorus. It all looks as if the world is preparing for war."

Meanwhile, French President Francois Hollande yesterday said that US President Donald Trump's administration poses "challenges" for Europe.

"Let's speak very frankly, there are challenges, there are the challenges the US administration poses to our trade rules, as well as to our ability to resolve conflicts around the world," Hollande said in Berlin at a joint press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Merkel, without mentioning Trump by name, said: "We see that global conditions are changing dramatically and quickly."

Trump has unsettled his traditional European allies with a range of radical policy plans, from calling Nato "obsolete" to announcing he would rip up a planned transatlantic trade plan.



SYRIA PEACE NEGOTIATIONS IN GENEVA Talks 'postponed'

AFP, Geneva

The timing of Geneva talks on the Syrian conflict was thrown into doubt yesterday, as the UN said it could not confirm a Russian statement that they had been postponed.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told a meeting with minor Syrian opposition delegates in Moscow that the UN-hosted talks planned for February 8 had been "put back until the end of next month".

The news comes after negotiations between Syrian government and rebel representatives in Kazakhstan wrapped up on Tuesday without any tangible progress in finding a political solution to the war in Syria, which has claimed more than 310,000 lives since it started in 2011.

A spokeswoman for UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura said there was "no confirmation" the February talks had been postponed.

"We're going to be sure when the special envoy is back" from talks on the issue in New York next week with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres.

UN spokeswoman Alessandra Vellucci also said that the list of those invited to the Geneva talks has not been finalised.

The main opposition groups stayed away from yesterday's meeting in Moscow with Lavrov, as the Kremlin seeks to impose its influence as the key powerbroker in Syria.

Key players Russia, Turkey and Iran backed the Astana talks and the main result was an agreement by the three sides to try to shore up a shaky ceasefire on the ground in the war-torn country.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (C) meets with representatives of Syria's political opposition in Moscow, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Getting married under the sea

THE INDIAN EXPRESS ONLINE

In a unique wedding ceremony, an Indian groom and his Slovakian bride exchanged wedding vows under the sea just off the coast of nearby Kovalam on Thursday.

The couple - Nikil Pawar from Maharashtra and Eunika Pogran - in their wedding attire and scuba gear exchanged rings and specially designed garlands made of shells undersea in a brief ceremony.

The one hour wedding ceremony was held in the morning at Kovalam, the picturesque beach that is promoting itself as a wedding destination.

A small podium was made under the sea where the couple could stand and perform the ceremony, Jackson, one of the managing partners of Bond Safari, Kovalam, which organised the wedding, said.

Printed questions that are part of weddings were shown to the couple to which they replied "I do" in sign language, the organisers said.

Pawar, who works as a diver at Kovalam, told reporters after they emerged from the waters that "it was a dream come true" to get married undersea, while Eunika said though she enjoyed it, she was a "bit nervous".

The organisers claimed that this was the first undersea wedding in India.

The couple, whose close friends attended the wedding, said they would register their marriage in Maharashtra.



White House misspells UK PM's name

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The White House misspelled Theresa May's name three times in an official schedule of her visit to the US, even as the prime minister talked up the "special relationship" in a speech at the Republican Retreat.

Staff in Donald Trump's administration missed out the 'h' in her name in a document setting out the plan for talks, including a "bilateral meeting" in the Oval Office and a "working luncheon".

The mistake was later corrected. Teresa May is the name of a porn actress who starred in films including Whitehouse: The Sex Video and Leather Lust.

AL SHABAAB CARNAGE IN SOMALIA 'Dozens of Kenyan troops killed in raid on army base'

REUTERS, Mogadishu

The Islamist group al Shabaab said its fighters killed dozens of Kenyan troops when they attacked a remote military base in Somalia yesterday, while Kenya's army dismissed the report and said "scores" of militants were killed.

A spokesman for al Shabaab, which often launches attacks on troops of the African Union's AMISOM force, said its fighters killed at least 66 Kenyans at the base in the southern town of Kulbiyow, near the Kenyan border.

Al Shabaab said it lost fighters but did not give numbers.

Kenyan military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Paul Njuguna denied the claim that al Shabaab had killed dozens of soldiers but did not give any casualty figures.

In a statement, he said al Shabaab attackers used a vehicle packed with explosives to try to blast their way into the camp of the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF). "KDF soldiers repulsed the terrorists, killing scores," he said.

Njuguna said the attack was launched around dawn on Friday.

In January 2016, al Shabaab said it had killed more than 100 Kenyan soldiers in El Adde, a Somali camp near the border with Kenya. The military never gave details of casualties, but Kenya media reports suggested a toll of that magnitude.

Sheikh Abdiyas Abu Musab, al Shabaab's military operation spokesman, had told Reuters al Shabaab fighters rammed two suicide car bombs into the base and seized it.

Al Shabaab, whose assessment of casualties often differs markedly from official versions, typically rams the entrance to a target site with a car or truck bomb so fighters can storm in.

NEWSIN brief

Yemen could face famine in 2017: UN

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations aid chief warned Thursday that Yemen was sliding deeper into humanitarian crisis and could face famine this year. About 14 million people -- nearly 80 percent of the entire Yemeni population -- are in need of food aid, half of whom are severely food insecure. At least 2 million people need emergency food assistance to survive, he added.

Death toll from Kashmir avalanches climbs to 20

AFP, Srinagar

Rescuers yesterday retrieved the bodies of another four Indian soldiers buried beneath tonnes of snow in Kashmir, taking the death toll from a series of avalanches to 20, the military said. The disaster struck an army post and a patrol along the de facto border that divides the disputed territory with Pakistan on Wednesday. All eleven members of the patrol were killed.

EU makes progress over asylum rules

AFP, Valletta

European Union interior ministers made progress Thursday towards breaking a deadlock on sharing the burden of asylum seekers that has fallen mainly on frontline Mediterranean states Italy and Greece, officials said. The ministers meeting in Valletta drafted ideas for reforming the so-called Dublin rules that require asylum seekers to apply for refugee status in the countries where they first land, which is usually Greece and Italy.

COW SLAUGHTER SC rejects plea for nationwide ban in India

AFP, New Delhi

India's top court yesterday rejected a petition seeking a nationwide ban on cow slaughter, a flashpoint issue for Hindus who consider the animal sacred.

The Supreme Court dismissed an activist's proposal to prohibit the slaughter of cows across India, a measure that would have effectively banned beef consumption in the nation of 1.25 billion.

Cows are revered in the Hindu scriptures as the "mother" of civilisation and many worshippers equate the slaughter of cows or eating beef as blasphemy. "One state may ban slaughter, the other may not," the court said in rejecting the petition.



A couple rest in a football field after a forest fire devastated Santa Olga, 240 kilometres south of Santiago, on Thursday. Raging forest fires in central Chile have killed 10 people, displaced thousands and destroyed entire villages. Multiple blazes fueled by strong wind and drought conditions have ravaged 273,000 hectares in just over a week. PHOTO: AFP

'Young ladies club' Indian governor resigns after womanising claims

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Facing charges of sexual harassment, Governor of north-eastern Indian state of Meghalaya V Shanmuganathan resigned on Thursday night after a section of Raj Bhavan employees demanded his removal for "seriously compromising" the dignity of the gubernatorial office.

Official sources said yesterday Shanmuganathan, 67, tendered his resignation from the post. The Governor of an Indian state is a high constitutional functionary.

Nearly 100 Raj Bhavan staff here petitioned Indian President Pranab Mukherjee, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and federal Home Minister Rajnath Singh seeking their intervention to remove the Governor and restore the dignity of Raj Bhavan.

The employees had alleged that Shanmuganathan had "seriously compromised the dignity of the Raj Bhavan and turned it into a 'young ladies club'".

"It has become a place where young ladies come and go at will on direct orders of the Governor... Many of them have direct access to his bedroom," Shanmuganathan became Governor of Meghalaya in May 2015.

Women activists had begun a signature campaign here seeking Shanmuganathan's removal. The campaign, spearheaded by women-led Civil Society Women Organisation (CSWO) and Thma u Rangli (TUR), was launched following reports of inappropriate behaviour by the Governor.