



Australian PM accused of 'buying polls'

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was yesterday accused of "buying" his narrow election victory last year after he admitted personally gifting Aus\$1.75 million (US\$1.32 million) to the cash-strapped Liberal Party campaign.

The multi-millionaire former banker, known as "Mr Harbourside Mansion", had repeatedly dodged questions about the issue, but changed his mind during an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. "I contributed Aus\$1.75 million, that was the contribution I made," Turnbull said late Wednesday.

"It's been talked about and speculated about, so there it is." The Sydney Morning Herald said it was the largest political donation by an individual in Australian history.

Turnbull's Liberal/National coalition was narrowly re-elected after a fiercely fought campaign last July, and the Labor opposition claimed it effectively bought power. "It stinks. Malcolm Turnbull had to buy his way out of trouble," said shadow finance minister Jim Chalmers.

"He couldn't win an election on his merits so he got out his wallet. "If he didn't have \$1.75 million to splash about he wouldn't be the leader of the Liberal Party and he wouldn't be the prime minister."

Reports said the cash was used to fund television advertising, direct mail-outs and opinion polls. Treasurer Scott Morrison lashed out at Labor's "grubby smear" of Turnbull.



South Korean Christians supporting US President Donald Trump wave flags during a rally to welcome the visit of the US Defense Secretary James Mattis in Seoul yesterday.

Mattis takes stock of N Korea threat

South Korea and the United States yesterday agreed to push through with the deployment of a US missile defence system strongly opposed by China, the prime minister said. Hwang Kyo-Ahn and US Defence Secretary James Mattis confirmed that the two allies will go ahead with the installation of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in the South this year as planned, the prime minister's office said.

The two allies last year announced plans to deploy the THAAD system following a series of North Korean atomic and missile tests, infuriating China which fears it will undermine its own ballistic capabilities.

Mattis arrived yesterday in South Korea on the first leg of a trip that also includes Japan, two key allies rattled by US President Donald Trump's ascent to power. It is the first overseas tour by a senior official in Trump's administration as concerns rise about the direction of American policy in the region under the protectionist and fiery leader.

"President Trump ... wanted me to make a very clear statement about the priority that we place on this alliance between our two allies", Mattis said at the start of his talks with Hwang, who serves as the South's acting leader following the impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye in December over corruption charges.



PHOTO: AFP

PHILIPPINES' WAR ON DRUGS Duterte vows to use military

AFP, Manila

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte yesterday announced the military would take a leading role in his deadly drug war, while vowing to kill more traffickers and addicts.

"I'm taking in the AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines) and raising the issue of drugs as a national security threat so that I will call on all the armed forces to assist," Duterte said as he promised to kill more "son of a bitch" drug addicts.

His comments were the first following a report from Amnesty International that the killings in the drug war, in which more than 6,500 people have died in seven months, may amount to crimes against humanity.

They were also the clearest signal of Duterte's plans for the drug war, after he admitted this week the police force that had initially led the campaign was "corrupt to the core" and said they would no longer be allowed to take part.

The 71-year-old former state prosecutor won presidential elections last year after promising during the campaign to eradicate drugs in society within six months by killing tens of thousands of people.

However Duterte has had to sideline the police after a series of scandals emerged over the past month in which police were caught committing murder, kidnapping, extortion and robbery using the drug war as cover.



EU could shut Med route

Says Donald Tusk, seeks full determination of bloc members to curb influx from Libya to Europe

AFP, Brussels

Shutting the migrant smuggling route from Libya to Europe is "within our reach", EU chief Donald Tusk said yesterday, arguing that doing so would be in both sides' interest.

Flanked by Libya's UN-backed leader Fayeze al-Sarraj in Brussels, Tusk said he would propose extra "concrete and operational measures" to curb migrant flows when European Union leaders meet in Malta today.

Tusk said the EU "proved" it could shut the eastern Mediterranean route with its deal last March with Turkey that has slashed the numbers of asylum seekers landing in Greece, previously the main entry point to Europe.

"Now it is time to close down the route from Libya to Italy," Tusk told reporters, adding he discussed the issue on Wednesday with Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni.

"I can assure you it is within our reach," the former Polish prime minister said. "What we need is the full determination to do that."

He said the EU summit in Valletta, which he will co-host as European Council president, will discuss boosting cooperation with Libya.

"We have a shared interest and determination to reduce the number of irregular migrants risking their lives crossing

the central Mediterranean," he said.

"This is not sustainable ... as the smugglers let people drown and undermine the authority of the Libyan state for their own profit," he added.

Though far fewer than the hundreds of thousands who had arrived in Greece before the deal with Turkey, a record 180,000 migrants landed in Italy last year while some 4,500 died on that central route.

MIGRANT CRISIS



Unlike the asylum seekers arriving in Greece from war-torn Syria and other conflict zones, most of those leaving Libya are sub-Saharan Africans deemed illegal economic migrants who face voluntary or involuntary expulsion.

The EU has begun training and equipping Libya's coastguard to crack down on the smugglers and its leaders are expected today to examine a proposal to release new funds for the training programme as well as for UN agencies that can help the Libyans

look after the migrants.

"We hope that EU mechanisms to help Libya will be more practical," Sarraj said, adding the funds so far come to "very small amounts".

Sarraj's government is locked in a power struggle with a rival administration in eastern Libya as it seeks to end years of lawlessness following the 2011 overthrow of Moamer Gaddafi.

1,400 migrants rescued in Med

AFP, Rome

More than 1,400 migrants have been rescued in the Mediterranean within 24 hours, Italy's coast guard said yesterday.

The coast guard said more than 1,300 people had been rescued Wednesday from 13 makeshift boats.

At dawn yesterday, the Aquarius, a humanitarian ship chartered by SOS Mediterranean and Doctors Without Borders (MSF), rescued 100 others, including seven women and 41 unaccompanied minors.

Picked up 22 nautical miles (41 km) off Sabratha, the rescued migrants -- travelling with only an old compass to help them navigate and no lifejackets -- said they had set off around 10:00pm along with other people.

"Those on board tell us there are other boats needing help so the crew is searching hard and fast," MSF Sea said on Twitter.

NEWS IN brief

Hungary's Orban hosts Putin to cement ties

AFP, Budapest

Russian President Vladimir Putin was in Budapest yesterday to cement closer ties with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, amid growing EU rifts over sanctions against Moscow. The meeting with the right-wing Orban -- who wants the European Union to lift its punitive measures -- is Putin's first visit to a bloc member since the shock election of US President Donald Trump in November.

Ukraine appeals for help against Russia

AFP, Avdiivka

Ukraine's president appealed for more global pressure against Russia yesterday as Moscow-backed rebels and government forces clashed around a frontline town for a fifth day in a surge of fighting that has claimed a reported 21 lives. The sworn foes have been exchanging mortar and rocket fire around the flashpoint eastern town of Avdiivka that sits just north of the Russian-backed rebels' de facto capital of Donetsk.

Saudi soldier killed in Yemen border

AFP, Riyadh

A Saudi soldier has been killed in a firefight on the border with Yemen, where a Saudi-led coalition has been battling rebels, the interior ministry said yesterday. A border guard post in Jazan province came under heavy Yemeni rebel fire at 6:30 am (0330 GMT) on Wednesday, the ministry said. The army intervened to back up the border guards and one soldier was killed.



Indian animal rights activists shout slogans during a demonstration outside Bihar Bhawan in New Delhi yesterday. Activists are protesting against the smuggling of camels from India's deserts to neighbouring Bangladesh. Camels are packed into trucks and illegally trafficked across the border via India's eastern state of Bihar for their skin and meat, activists say.

PHOTO: AFP

China tests missile with 10 nuke warheads

PTI, Beijing

China has reportedly tested a new version of a missile that can carry up to 10 nuclear warheads, signalling a major shift in its nuclear capability as Beijing gears up for a possible military showdown with the US under Trump Presidency.

The flight test of the DF-5C missile was carried out last month using 10 multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles, or MIRVs, the Washington Free Beacon reported.

The test of the inert warheads was monitored closely by US intelligence agencies, said two officials familiar with reports of the missile test.

The Dongfeng-5C missile, carrying 10 dummy warheads, was launched from the Taiyuan Space Launch Centre in Shanxi province, and flew to a desert in western China, the report said.

The missile is a new variant of the DF-5, an intercontinental ballistic missile that first went into service in the early 1980's. "The [Defence Department] routinely

monitors Chinese military developments and accounts for PLA capabilities in our defence plans," Pentagon spokesman Commander Gary Ross was quoted as saying by the report.

For decades, the US has put the estimated number of warheads in China's nuclear arsenal at about 250.

But the report suggested that the latest test with 10 warheads meant the actual number could be larger.

China also began adding warheads to older DF-5 missiles in February last year, according to US intelligence agencies.

US defence officials have previously warned that China's rapid development of long-range ballistic missiles, coupled with a lack of transparency about its nuclear capabilities, could bring uncertainty to stability in the region.

The timing of the test coincided with the election of Donald Trump as US President who signalled a tougher stance against China over a range of issues, from the trade deficit to Beijing's military build-up in the disputed South China Sea.

Kuwait bans visa for five nations

IANS, Kuwait City

Kuwait has suspended the issuance of visas for nationals of Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran.

After US President Donald Trump's executive order banning seven Muslim-majority countries last Friday, the Kuwaiti government has told would-be migrants from the five banned nations to not apply for visas, as it is worried about the possible migration of radical Islamic terrorists, Sputnik International reported.

Under the executive order signed by Trump, refugees from all over the world will be denied US entry for 120 days while all immigration from so-called "countries with terrorism concerns" will be suspended for 90 days. The countries included in the US ban are Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen.

'We can cut funding routes'

Australia, Indonesia vow to combat surge of terrorism

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia and Australia yesterday pledged to "choke off" funding to terrorist groups planning attacks, as fears grow in both countries that Islamic State group supporters may be hatching new plots.

There have been a series of IS-inspired assaults and foiled plans in the neighbouring countries in recent years as the appeal of IS spawns a new generation of extremists in the region.

Indonesian and Australian ministers meeting in Jakarta pledged to halt the flows of illicit money used to fund attacks, while financial intelligence agencies from both countries signed an agreement to tackle the scourge.

"We know that one of the most effective ways to combat the surge of terrorism is to attack the funding and the movement of money," Australian Attorney-General George Brandis told reporters after the talks.

Indonesian Chief Security Minister Wiranto, who like many Indonesians goes

by one name, said the discussions focused on "how we can choke off funding routes".

Indonesian militants fighting with IS in the Middle East are suspected of sending money to finance plots in recent years, while radicalised Indonesian domestic workers in wealthier parts of Asia, such as Hong Kong, have also been accused of transferring funds to extremists back home.

There have also been indications that money to fund extremist activities has been flowing between Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, and Australia.

In 2015 Indonesia's financial intelligence agency said it suspected that six billion rupiah (\$450,000) linked to terrorism had been transferred from Australia to Indonesia.

The agreement announced by the intelligence agencies is a seven-year collaboration that includes sending Australian IT specialists to help the Indonesian side and workshops on counter-terrorism financing.

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