



Relatives mourn during the funeral of Mohammed al-Aqra, a Palestinian man who was reportedly killed in a strike on the Egyptian side of the border with Gaza, in Gaza City, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Jeff Sessions confirmed as US attorney general

AFP, Washington

The US Senate confirmed Jeff Sessions as attorney general Wednesday, despite fierce debate about his civil rights record and Democratic concern over whether he serves as the nation's top law enforcement officer independent from President Donald Trump.

Lawmakers greenlighted the senator as the 84th US attorney general on a mostly party line vote of 52 to 47, with one Democrat, Joe Manchin of West Virginia, voting with the Republican majority.

Trump has harangued Democrats for slow-walking his nominees, blasting their unprecedented obstruction as a "disgrace."

Sessions, widely seen as an inspiration for Trump's anti-immigration policies, is just the sixth of 15 cabinet members to be confirmed, in addition to the cabinet-rank positions of CIA director and US ambassador to the United Nations.

He takes charge of the Justice Department and its 113,000 employees

amid a swirling legal debate over Trump's most controversial White House action to date, an executive order temporarily blocking all refugee arrivals and immigration from seven mainly Muslim countries.

With Trump using Twitter to bully a judge who rolled back the ban, and an appeals court weighing whether to reinstate it, debate over Sessions grew increasingly acrimonious and personal.

On Tuesday night, it turned ugly. Senate Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell sternly rebuked Democrat Elizabeth Warren for reading a letter written by the widow of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr that criticized Sessions's civil rights record.

"She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted," McConnell said of Warren's violation of the chamber's rules of decorum.

Warren, a potential 2020 presidential candidate, later said: "I will not be silent about a nominee for AG who has made derogatory and racist comments that have no place in our justice system."



Britain's FM renounces US citizenship

AFP, London

British Foreign Minister Boris Johnson, who was born in New York, has renounced his US citizenship, according to a United States Treasury Department document released Wednesday.

Alexander Boris Johnson figured in the Treasury list of people who had given up their US citizenship in the last quarter of 2016.

The former mayor of London has held both British and US passports. Johnson had said in 2015 he intended to give up his dual nationality for patriotic reasons.

He said his US passport was "an accident of birth" and that he had to "find a way of sorting it out" with the then US ambassador Matthew Barzun.

IS claims rocket fire at Israel resort from Egypt

Hamis says air strike kills 2 Palestinians

AFP, Gaza City

The Islamic State group yesterday said that it fired rockets at the Israeli resort of Eilat from the Sinai Peninsula in a rare attack on the Jewish state from Egyptian territory.

The Israeli army said there were no casualties from Wednesday evening's rocket fire -- three of the rockets were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome air defence system and a fourth fell short of the town.

A few hours later, two Palestinians were killed elsewhere in the Sinai. The Islamist Hamas movement which rules Gaza said it was an Israeli air strike. The Israeli army denied carrying out any such action.

"Thanks to God alone, a military platoon fired several Grad rockets yesterday" towards Eilat, the jihadists' Egyptian affiliate said in a statement circulated on social media.

It was the first time since 2015 that rockets had been fired at Israel from Egypt, said Ely Karmon, senior research scholar at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism.

Egypt is one of just two Arab countries that have signed a peace treaty with the Jewish state.

IS has been waging a deadly insurgency against Egyptian security forces in the Sinai but it has rarely attempted attacks against Israel.

A few hours after the rocket attack, two Palestinians died elsewhere in the Sinai near the border with Gaza. Hamas, the Islamist movement that runs territory, said the two men were hit by an Israeli air strike just inside Egypt.

Italy unveils plan to better integrate fewer migrants

AFP, Rome

The Italian government on Wednesday unveiled a series of measures aimed at easing the crush of migrants pouring into the country, including a new push at integration.

But the plan also calls for fresh efforts to curb the influx, and to expel migrants whose asylum applications are rejected.

"We have to welcome and integrate those who have a right to stay, and send home the others," interior minister Marco Minniti told a parliamentary commission.

Asylum seekers will also be asked to earn their keep by working with little or no pay on civic projects, such as maintaining parks, giving language classes or helping the Red Cross.

The programme has already been tested over the past months in the northern town of Belluno, but in a country where youth unemployment is around 40 percent, many regional councils are bristling at the plan, saying they should be giving jobs to their own

citizens.

Labour unions officials have said the project exploits the migrants, a concern echoed by refugee advocates.

More than 500,000 migrants have entered Italy since 2014, and nearly 175,000 asylum seekers are waiting in reception centres.

The government plans to distribute migrants more evenly across the country, with a goal of 2.5 migrants to every 1,000 residents.

It will provide a total of 100 million euros (\$107 million) to municipalities accepting to increase their share of migrants.

But the new measures will go hand in hand with a new push to deport migrants who fail to qualify for asylum, and stronger border patrols.

Currently, reviews of asylum requests take six months on average, and about 40 percent of the requests are approved.

But for those who fail to qualify, an appeal process can take up to two years.

To speed up the process, a new legal authority will be created for refugees contesting a refusal of asylum.



Court saves world's largest refugee camp

AFP, Nairobi

Kenya's High Court yesterday blocked the government's decision to close the Dadaab refugee camp -- the world's largest -- and to send Somali refugees home.

Judge John Mativo ruled that the plan to shut down the camp was unconstitutional and amounted to persecution of refugees.

Dadaab is home to some 256,000 people, the vast majority of them Somalis who fled across the border following the outbreak of civil war in 1991.

The government has taken a hardline stance on the sprawling camp, saying it acts as a terrorist training ground for Shabaab Islamists, and repeatedly stating its intention to deport all Somali refugees.

But Mativo ruled that "the government decision specifically targeting Somali refugees is an act of group persecution, illegal, discriminatory and therefore unconstitutional".

The shutdown was ordered without proper consultation of people affected by the decision, in violation of the constitutional right to fair legal proceedings, he said in his ruling.

"Hence the said decision is null and void," he said, adding that sending refugees home would be in breach of Kenya's obligations under international law.

The ruling also blocks the government's decision to disband the Department for Refugee Affairs.

The government can appeal the court ruling, which comes after the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights and rights group Kituo Cha Sheria filed a case challenging the legality of the shutdown.

Amnesty International's East Africa chief Muthoni Wanyeki hailed the ruling as "historic".

Wife leaves husband for voting Trump

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Burning passions over Donald Trump's presidency are taking a personal toll on both sides of the political divide. For Gayle McCormick, it is particularly wrenching: she has separated from her husband of 22 years.

The retired California prison guard, a self-described "Democrat leaning toward socialist," was stunned when her husband casually mentioned during a lunch with friends last year that he planned to vote for Trump -- a revelation she described as a "deal breaker."

"It totally undid me that he could vote for Trump," said McCormick, 73, who had not thought of leaving the conservative Republican before but felt "betrayed" by his support for Trump.

"I felt like I had been fooling myself," she said. "It opened up areas between us I had not faced before. I realised how far I had gone in my life to accept things I would have never accepted when I was younger."

Three months after the most divisive election in modern US politics fractured families and upended relationships, a number of Americans say the emotional wounds are as raw as ever and show few signs of healing. A Reuters/Ipsos opinion poll shows it has worsened, suggesting a widening of the gulf between Republicans and Democrats and a hardening of ideological positions that sociologists and political scientists say increases distrust in government and will make political compromise more difficult.



A displaced Syrian girl walks at a refugee camp in the eastern Ghouta region on the outskirts of the capital Damascus on Wednesday. More than half of Syria's population has been displaced since the country's conflict began with anti-government protests in March 2011.

PHOTO: AFP

Veteran Qaeda leader killed in Syria

AFP, Washington

The US military said Wednesday that it had killed eleven al-Qaeda operatives, including a veteran leader and suicide bombing pioneer, in a bombing raid in Syria.

The Pentagon said Abu Hani al-Masri, the Qaeda veteran, was one of those killed in the precision airstrikes near Idlib carried out on February 3-4.

Al-Masri was an early official in al-Qaeda, overseeing the group's training camps in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s as he worked with Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden.

There "he recruited, indoctrinated, trained and equipped thousands of terrorists who subsequently spread throughout the region and the world," the Pentagon said in a statement.

Yemen: Where hungry children turn to begging

AFP, Sanaa

After Mustafa's father was killed in Yemen's conflict between the government and Shia Huthi rebels, the 15-year-old turned to begging to survive.

He is just one of scores of Yemeni children who plead for donations at the rebel-held capital's road junctions every day to feed themselves and their siblings.

Some have lost one or both parents in the war that escalated in 2015, while others seek to help parents whose public salaries have dried up in the conflict.

After Mustafa's father died two years ago in the northern town of Haradh, the teenager moved to the capital with his mother and three brothers.

"I tried to find a job but I couldn't," says Mustafa.

"We've been begging in the streets of Sanaa since we stopped finding anything to

eat," he says, adding he makes no more than \$5 a day.

Nearby, eight-year-old Abeer runs from one car to the next asking for money, her younger brother Abdulrahman in tow.

"We don't have anything to eat so we came to find some money or food," she says, as she quickly tucks away a banknote in her handbag.

Thin and pale-faced, child beggars gather outside mosques and restaurants waiting for donations.

At street intersections, young boys equipped with rags and plastic bottles filled with soap water strive to make a living by wiping windshields.

Others sit beside their mothers selling boxes of tissues.

Yemen's conflict has taken a heavy humanitarian toll since it worsened in March 2015 with the military intervention of a Saudi-led coalition in support of the government.



Blast at French nuke plant; no risk of radiation

AFP, Caen

An explosion at a nuclear power plant on France's northwest coast yesterday caused minor injuries, but the authorities said there was no risk of radiation.

The blast took place in the engine room at the Flamanville plant, which lies 25 kilometres west of the port of Cherbourg and just across from the Channel Islands.

"It is a technical incident. It is not a nuclear accident," senior local official Jacques Witkowski told AFP.

He said a ventilator had exploded outside the nuclear zone at the plant, which has been in operation since the 1980s.

"It's all over. The emergency teams are leaving," Witkowski said. Five people suffered smoke inhalation but there were no serious injuries.

Brexit bill faces lords test after MPs vote

AFP, London

Legislation empowering Prime Minister Theresa May to start Brexit negotiations moves to Britain's House of Lords yesterday -- with ministers urging peers to do their "patriotic duty" and back it.

MPs in parliament's lower chamber, the House of Commons, overwhelmingly backed the bill late Wednesday to allow May to trigger Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty, which she has promised to do by the end of March.

Downing Street played down a warning by an unnamed government source that the unelected second chamber could face abolition if it stands in the way of Britain's exit from the European Union.

The source had earlier told journalists that the Lords, which many believe has long been ripe for reform, "will face an overwhelming public call to be abolished if they now try and frustrate this bill".

May's Conservative party does not have a majority in the House of Lords, raising the possibility that peers may seek to block Brexit. However, the opposition Labour leader in

the chamber, Baroness Angela Smith, said in October that she would not be obstructive.

"We will scrutinise; we will examine; we will not block," she said.

Britain's upper house, with 805 members, is the second-largest parliamentary chamber in the world, beaten only by China's National People's Congress.



The European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill passed the Commons by 494 votes to 122 on Wednesday and after parliament takes a break next week, will be debated on the Lords starting on February 20.

Ministers hope it will be approved on March 7.