

EU seeks unity amid crises

European Union leaders yesterday celebrated the 60th anniversary of the bloc's founding treaties at a special summit in Rome in a symbolic show of unity despite Britain's looming departure.

Meeting without Britain, the other 27 member countries will endorse a declaration of intent for the next decade, on the Capitoline Hill where six founding states signed the Treaty of Rome on March 25, 1957.

EU President Donald Tusk and the prime ministers of Italy and Malta greeted the leaders as they arrived at the Renaissance-era Palazzo dei Conservatori next to the Forum, for a ceremony long on pomp and short on real politics.

"There will be a 100th birthday of the European Union," European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker said in an interview with German television ahead of the summit.

The leaders had the words of Pope Francis ringing in their ears, after he warned on the eve of the summit that the crisis-ridden bloc "risks dying" without a new vision.

The Argentine pontiff urged the leaders at a personal audience in the Vatican City on Friday to show solidarity as an "antidote" to populist parties whose popularity has surged in Europe. The White House congratulated the



Demonstrators hold placards and wave EU flags as they participate in an anti Brexit, pro-European Union (EU) march in London, yesterday, ahead of the British government's planned triggering of Article 50 next week. PHOTO: AFP

EU overnight on its 60th birthday, in a notable shift in tone for President Donald Trump's administration, whose deep scepticism about the bloc has alarmed Brussels.

But British Prime Minister Theresa May's absence, four days before she launches the two-year Brexit process, and a row over the wording of the Rome declaration underscore the challenges the EU faces.

The Rome Declaration that the leaders will sign proclaims that "Europe is our common future", according to a copy obtained by AFP.

But mass migration, the eurozone debt crisis, terrorism and the rise of populist parties have left a bloc formed from the ashes of World War II searching for new answers. The leaders are deeply divided over the way forward almost before they have started.

Myanmar rebuffs UN probe of crimes against Rohingya

Myanmar yesterday rejected the UN rights council's decision to investigate allegations that security officers have murdered, raped and tortured Rohingya Muslims, saying the probe would only "infect" the conflict.

The Geneva-based body agreed Friday to "urgently" dispatch a fact-finding mission to the Southeast Asian country, focusing on claims that police and soldiers have carried out a bloody crackdown on the Rohingya in Rakhine state.

The army operation, launched in October after militants killed nine policemen, has sent tens of thousands of Rohingya fleeing across the border to Bangladesh.

Escapees have given UN investigators gruesome accounts of security officers stabbing babies to death, burning people alive and committing widespread gang rape.

The reports have heaped enormous pressure on the one-year-old civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel laureate who won global acclaim for her decades-long democracy struggle against the former military junta.

Her administration lacks control over the armed forces but has vigorously swatted back calls for an international investigation

into the recent Rakhine bloodshed, disappointing rights groups.

Yesterday, Myanmar's foreign affairs ministry stopped short of pledging to block the UN-backed probe but said it "has dissociated itself from the resolution as a whole".

"The establishment of an international fact-finding mission would do more to inflame, rather than resolve the issues at this time," it added.

Myanmar's government is carrying out its own domestic inquiry into possible crimes in Rakhine.

But rights groups and the UN have dismissed the body, which is led by retired general turned Vice President Myint Swe, as toothless and inadequate.

The recent crackdown is only the latest conflict to pile misery on the stateless Rohingya, who are denied citizenship and face brutal discrimination in the Buddhist-majority country.

More than 120,000 Rohingya have languished in grim displacement camps ever since bouts of religious violence between Muslims and Buddhists ripped through Rakhine state in 2012.

Most are not allowed to leave the squalid encampments, where they live in dilapidated shelters with little access to food, education and healthcare.



Tillerson to attend Nato summit

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will meet with Nato members next week in Brussels, officials said Friday, as alliance diplomats worked to nail down the date.

"We are currently planning to hold the meeting of Nato foreign ministers on 31 March. Consultations on scheduling among Allies are ongoing," a Nato official in Brussels said.

The Nato foreign ministers meeting had been planned for April 5, but that was thrown into chaos on Tuesday when Tillerson revealed he would not be attending.

US officials now say Tillerson will head to Brussels on Friday next week.

On Tuesday, the State Department confirmed that Tillerson would not be able to attend the long-planned April 5 and 6 meeting.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping is expected to visit President Donald Trump in the United States in early April, and Tillerson would be expected to attend their meetings.

But his office has not confirmed that engagement, and word that Tillerson would stay away from the Nato talks stirred doubt about US commitment to its allies.

After almost two months in the job, Tillerson has yet to appoint a deputy or any assistant secretaries, has largely avoided the media and works with a small inner circle of advisers.

The administration, meanwhile, has been scrambling to reaffirm its commitment to US military alliances after Trump called into question their usefulness during the presidential campaign.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, a former Marine general, has declared US support for Nato, and last week Tillerson reaffirmed ties with Asian allies Japan and South Korea.

Filipino rescued after 56 days adrift in seas

A Filipino fisherman cast adrift in the high seas by a storm survived for nearly two months by drinking rainwater as he helplessly watched his uncle die beside him, the survivor's mother said yesterday.

The PNG Post Courier newspaper, quoting local police, said a fishing vessel found Rolando Omongos, 21, adrift and without food on a boat on March 9.

Weak and distressed, he was examined by doctors and held on the boat on the island of New Britain while arrangements are being made for his return home, it said, adding his ordeal lasted 56 days.

A January storm separated him and his uncle Reniel Omongos from their main fishing vessel, leaving the two stranded on a tiny boat without fuel, food or fishing tools, said Rosalie Omongos, the mother of the survivor and brother of the deceased.

A newspaper, citing local police, said the pair had no food and the survivor's uncle died. It said Omongos kept his body for as long as possible but was forced to throw it overboard when it started to decompose.

She said her son and her brother sailed off from General Santos on December 21 along with other fishermen aboard the bigger vessel.

But when the fishing boat and crew returned to port after the storm without the two men, the family feared the worst.

The family and the Filipino coast guard both said they did not know when the survivor would return home.



A Syrian man carries two injured children after a reported air strike in the rebel-controlled town of Hamouria, in the eastern Ghouta region on the outskirts of the capital Damascus, yesterday. At least 16 civilians were killed and dozens wounded yesterday in an air strike in the rebel-held area, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said, although it was not immediately clear who was responsible for the strike. PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

27 killed in south Yemen clashes
AFP, Aden

At least 20 rebels and seven soldiers were killed over the past 24 hours in ongoing fighting in southern Yemen, a military source said Friday. Clashes erupted Thursday between government loyalists and Shia Huthi rebels in Shabwa province, the scene of intense fighting earlier this year, the source said. The United Nations estimates more than 7,700 people have been killed in the past two years and over 40,000 wounded, and the impoverished country faces a serious risk of famine this year.

50 killed by armed men in Central Africa
AFP, Bangui

At least 50 people have been killed and dozens more injured since Tuesday after armed men attacked three villages in the central Bambari region of the Central African Republic, local residents who fled their homes told AFP. A source said the attacks were staged by members of the UPC, a faction of the former rebel and mainly Muslim Seleka movement.

11 killed in two mine accidents in China
AFP, Beijing

Accidents at two neighbouring gold mines in central China's Henan province killed 11 people on Friday, the official Xinhua news agency reported, citing local authorities. 9 were killed at Qinling gold mine of China National Gold Group in Lingbao City. A similar accident was reported in a neighbouring gold mine on Friday afternoon, Xinhua said, killing two.

Israel ignores resolution against settlements: UN

Israel has ignored a United Nations resolution demanding it halt settlement building in the occupied Palestinian territory that was criticized by the Trump administration, the world body's Middle East envoy said Friday.

Although the UN Security Council resolution passed December 23 demanded that Israel immediately cease all settlement activities, "no such steps have been taken," envoy Nickolay Mladenov said in his first report to the council since the resolution was adopted.

"The January spike in illegal settlement announcements by Israel is deeply concerning," he said.

In January, Israel made five announcements on settlement building that together totaled more than 6,000 homes in the occupied West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem.

In early February, Israel declared its intention to build what would anti-settlement group Peace Now says would be the first new settlement by an Israeli government since 1992.

Mladenov also expressed concern about

the Israeli parliament's approval of a new settlement law on February 6 that retroactively legalizes dozens of Jewish outposts and thousands of settler homes built on private Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank.

The new law will allow Israel to legally seize Palestinian private land on which Israelis carried out construction without knowing it was private property or because the state allowed them to do so.

Palestinian owners will be compensated financially or with different land.

Mladenov said the law represents a major change in Israel's position on the question of legality in the Palestinian occupied territories.

Settlements in both the West Bank and east Jerusalem are viewed as illegal under international law and major stumbling blocks to peace as they are built on land the Palestinians want for their own state.

The Middle East envoy's report came before the 15-nation Security Council held a closed-door session to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

TERROR ATTACK NEAR BRITISH PARLIAMENT Attacker 'was not lone wolf'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The terrorist Khalid Masood was not a "lone wolf" and others had played a key part in indoctrinating him and helping to carry out Wednesday's deadly attacks in London, security officials believe.

The disclosure that the British-born Muslim convert was likely to have been part of a wider conspiracy came as armed police detained 11 people in raids across the country with two of the arrests, including that of a woman, described as "significant" in the investigation.

Three cars were also taken away for forensic examination. Police are still hunting associates of Masood who are believed to be linked to the Westminster attack.

It has also emerged that 52-year-old Masood used the Whatsapp messaging service just minutes before he smashed his hired Hyundai car into the railings at the Houses of Parliament.

There is no evidence that anyone else accompanied Masood during the rampage in which he murdered four people and injured 50 others. But the timing and sequence of the radicalisation of Masood, born Adrian Elms, will, the law agencies believe, provide important pointers towards what unfolded.

Masood had come to the notice of MI5 and Scotland Yard's Special Branch in the past for associating with known extremists, but, security officials insist, had not been involved in plotting terrorist acts.

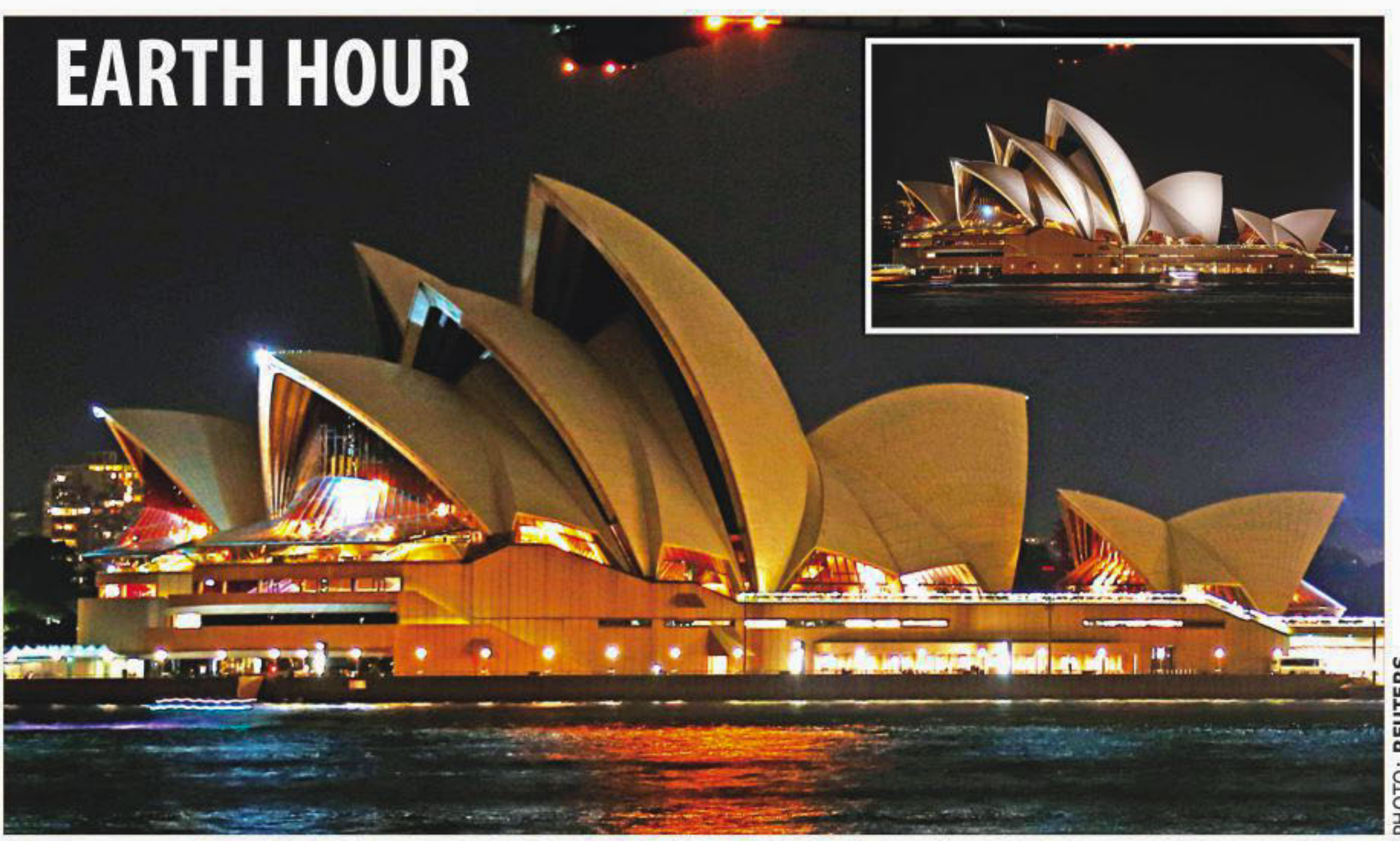
There has been speculation that the radicalisation process began when he went to work as an English teacher in Saudi Arabia in 2005.

The indications, however, are that it is more likely to have taken place while he served sentences in prison for violent offences. After being freed in 2003 from his second time in jail he married Farzana Malik, a Muslim woman following conversion.

It was his increasing interest in fundamentalist Islam which is said to have taken him to Saudi Arabia. The security agencies are, however, examining whether he met with extremists there and had maintained contact with them since.

Whether he was steered towards terrorism online is a major part of the inquiry with a number of computers and tablets, of the killer and those detained, being examined by police.

A series of attacks which had been previously written off as being the work of "lone wolves" were later found to have been orchestrated by IS "handlers" on the Internet.



The Sydney Opera House seen before (inset) and during the tenth anniversary of Earth Hour in Sydney, Australia, yesterday. The lights are being switched off around the world at 8:30pm yesterday evening, to mark the Earth Hour, and to draw attention to climate change. The initiative began in Australia in 2007 as a grass roots gesture by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Australia against man-made carbon dioxide emissions linked to a warming planet.

ELECTRONICS BAN FROM ME FLIGHTS Ban comes into force

AGENCIES

The US and British ban on laptops and tablets in carry-on luggage on some flights from the Middle East and North Africa has come into force, immediately drawing complaints from passengers at several airports.

The ban requires that personal devices larger than a mobile phone - such as tablets, laptops and cameras - be placed in checked baggage for US and Britain-bound flights.

The US restrictions apply to flights originating from 10 airports in countries including Turkey, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

The British restrictions do not include the UAE or Qatar but do affect Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia.

The affected airports had until yesterday to implement the new rules.

US and British officials said the decision to implement the security measures was a result of intelligence showing an increased risk for "terrorist activity" involving commercial aviation.

However, many observers in the Middle

East and North Africa said the ban amounted to discrimination, while others questioned the basis for the electronics ban, saying they were a ploy to undermine the aviation industry of the countries affected.

"If you say it like this, you are saying everybody can be a terrorist. It's not respect-



ful. I think it's not good," said one passenger at Turkey's Ataturk International Airport.

Turkey's foreign ministry said on Thursday that talks were underway to try to persuade the US and Britain to exclude Turkish Airlines and Istanbul airport from the bans.