



Iraqi rapid response members fire a missile against Islamic State militants during a battle with the militants in Mosul, Iraq on Wednesday. Inset, displaced Iraqis who had fled their homes study inside a tent at Hammam al-Alil camp south of the city.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Brexit wrangling begins

Britain downplays security row; French president says no trade deal with UK before divorce

AFP, London

Britain sought to downplay a row over future security ties with the EU yesterday, as London and Brussels drew up the first battle lines at the start of their two-year divorce.

France and Germany also put up a common front against Prime Minister Theresa May's call to negotiate the exit and the new relationship at the same time, setting up a major stumbling block before negotiations even begin.

But a day after May formally notified the EU of Britain's intention to leave, it was her warning that failure to clinch a deal on trade would weaken the fight against terrorism that raked.

"It's not a threat," Brexit minister David Davis told BBC radio after warnings from Brussels against using security as a bargaining chip in the talks.

He said the "simple truth" was that without a "parallel deal" with the EU, Britain would no longer be a member of the Europol crime-fighting agency or take part in the European Arrest Warrant system.

Interior minister Amber Rudd said: "If we left Europol, then we would take our information... with us".

Guy Verhofstadt, the European Parliament's chief Brexit negotiator, hit back saying that "citizens' security was far too

serious a subject" to be held hostage to negotiations.

French President Francois Hollande yesterday followed German Chancellor Angela Merkel in snubbing May's proposed structure for the negotiations, saying the exit agreement should come first.

"First we must begin discussions on the modalities of the withdrawal, especially on the rights of citizens and the obligations



arising from the commitments that the United Kingdom has made," Hollande said.

The fate of three million EU citizens living in Britain and one million British people within the bloc's nations is at the top of leaders' agenda.

Also looming large is the so-called "exit bill" Britain will have to pay, estimated to be as much as 60 billion euros (\$64 billion, £52 billion).

'Absolute priority'

UN chief calls for protection of civilians during Iraq visit; 14 dead in IS truck bomb at Baghdad checkpoint

AFP, Baghdad

UN chief Antonio Guterres yesterday called for protection of civilians to be the "absolute priority" as he visited Iraq, where hundreds of thousands are caught up in the battle for Mosul.

More than 200,000 people have fled west Mosul since the operation to oust the Islamic State group began last month, and officials and witnesses say that air strikes have taken a devastating toll on civilians who remained in the city.

"Just arrived in Iraq to focus on the dire humanitarian situation on the ground. Protection of civilians must be the absolute priority," the UN chief said on his official Twitter account.

After his arrival in Baghdad, Guterres met President Fuad Masum, parliament speaker Salim al-Juburi and Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari.

He was also due to hold talks with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi before flying to Arbil, the capital of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region.

Guterres's visit comes at a critical time for Iraq, which is fighting to retake Mosul in a battle that has sparked myriad humanitarian concerns.

Jaafari highlighted the issue of recon-

struction in talks with Guterres -- a major challenge in areas that have been devastated by heavy fighting to retake them from IS.

"Iraq needs a plan similar to the Marshall Plan... to present assistance to Iraqis and support development and overcome the effect of war against (IS) terrorist gangs," Jaafari said, according to his office.

Meanwhile, at least 14 people were killed when a suicide bomber detonated an explo-



WAR ON IS IN MOSUL

Syria campaign over

Says Turkey as US Secretary of State visits Ankara to turn around rocky relations between Nato allies

AFP, Ankara

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met Turkish leaders yesterday for talks clouded by differences over Syria, a day after Ankara announced the end of its military offensive there.

Tillerson, the most senior US official to visit Turkey since President Donald Trump took office in January, is seeking to turn around recently rocky relations between the Nato allies.

He met with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for over two hours, after talks with Prime Minister Binali Yildirim and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu.

The trip comes after Turkey announced "Euphrates Shield", its operation in northern Syria, had ended but did not say if troops had been withdrawn from the war-torn country.

Ties between Ankara and Washington were strained during Barack Obama's administration, particularly over US cooperation with Syrian Kurdish militia fighting against the Islamic State group.

Ankara views the Syrian Kurdish

People's Protection Units (YPG) as a "terror group" linked to Kurdish separatists waging an insurgency inside Turkey since 1984, but Washington regards them as the best force fighting IS.

Turkey has suggested it wants to join any operation to capture the IS bastion of Raqa but without involvement of Kurdish militia.

Speaking to NTV television on the eve of Tillerson's visit, Yildirim said the US had not yet informed Turkey if Ankara would take part in a planned Raqa campaign.

"The developments give an impression that the (Trump administration) is following the path of the past administration," he said, referring to the same tensions of the Obama years over the Syrian Kurdish

militia role.

The United Nations said yesterday the tally of refugees who have fled the war in Syria now exceeds five million.

"As the number of men, women and children fleeing six years of war in Syria passes the five million mark, the international community needs to do more to help them," the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) said in a statement.

NGOs helping Syrian refugees have regularly sounded the alarm about the crisis, appealing for more funds and international action to end Syria's war.

Meanwhile, Iran strongly denied any meddling yesterday after Arab leaders condemned "foreign interference" in their affairs in a clear reference to the Islamic republic.

Iran has "said repeatedly it does not need to intervene in the domestic affairs of other countries and always abides by the principles of good neighbourliness and respect for the sovereignty of governments," foreign ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi said.

Number of Syrian refugees passes five million: UN

Iran denies meddling in Arab world

TRUMP TRAVEL BAN

US judge places indefinite hold

AFP, Los Angeles

The judge who halted President Donald Trump's revised travel ban on refugees and arrivals from six mainly Muslim countries has extended his order, dealing another blow to the White House.

After a hearing lasting several hours, US District Judge Derrick Watson in Hawaii said Wednesday he had turned his original temporary restraining order into a preliminary injunction.

Such an injunction generally has no set expiration date, said Hawaii state Attorney General Doug Chin, meaning Trump will be barred from enforcing the ban while it is contested in court.

The US Justice Department is expected to appeal to the US 9th Circuit Court of Appeals.

Hawaii was the first of several US states to sue over the amended ban.

Trump has said his proposed travel ban is needed to preserve US national security and keep out terrorists intent on doing harm to Americans.

The government had asked Watson to limit his first ruling to just the part of the order involving the six Muslim countries -- Somalia, Iran, Syria, Sudan, Libya and Yemen, the New York Times reported.

Justice Department attorney Chad Readler argued before the judge that the refugee resettlement restriction had no effect on far-flung Hawaii, the paper said.

But Watson rejected the argument. He said 20 refugees had been accepted in Hawaii since 2010, the Times said.

Watson's first order suspending enforcement of Trump's amended ban was issued March 15 -- a day before it was to go into effect.

Trump's first ban and the revised one have both been criticized as amounting to a ban on entry of Muslims into the US.

Hawaii's attorney general Chin praised the new court ruling.

Kim body to be sent to N Korea: Malaysia PM

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The body of Kim Jong-Nam will be returned to North Korea and nine Malaysians in Pyongyang allowed to leave under a deal struck between the two countries, Malaysia Prime Minister Najib Razak said yesterday.

North Korean citizens in Kuala Lumpur will also be allowed to return home, Najib said in a statement, which was confirmed by North Korean state media.

"... following the completion of the autopsy on the deceased and receipt of a letter from his family requesting the remains be returned to North Korea, the coroner has approved the release of the body," said Najib.

The half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un was poisoned with the lethal nerve agent VX in a brazen Cold War-style assassination on February 13 in Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

The killing triggered a bitter row between Malaysia and North Korea, which expelled each other's ambassadors and barred their citizens from leaving.

Najib said the nine Malaysians prevented from leaving North Korea "have now been allowed to return to Malaysia".

"They took off from Pyongyang today at 7:45 pm (1145 GMT) Malaysian time, and will land in Kuala Lumpur tomorrow around 5:00 am," he said in the statement that referred to Kim Jong-Nam as "the deceased" rather than by name.



Palestinians try to prevent Israeli troops from detaining a protester during a protest marking Land Day in the West Bank village of Madama, near Nablus, yesterday. Land Day marks the killing of six Arab Israelis during 1976 demonstrations against Israeli confiscations of Arab land.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Ivanka takes unpaid White House job

AFP, Washington

First daughter Ivanka Trump is about to take on another title as an unpaid adviser to her father President Donald Trump, the White House announced on Wednesday.

Ivanka, whose husband Jared Kushner also works as a senior aide to the president, will not receive a salary for her work as a federal employee. Kushner, a real estate developer, is also unpaid.

"We are pleased that Ivanka Trump has chosen to take this step in her unprecedented role as first daughter and in support of the president," a White House statement said.

"Ivanka's service as an unpaid employee furthers our commitment to ethics, transparency, and compliance and affords her increased opportunities to lead initiatives driving real policy benefits for the American public that would not have been available to her previously."

In the couple of months since her father became president Ivanka, 35, has been a regular presence at the White House, where she already has an office.

She was present when her father received Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in January, and earlier this month took part in a round-table discussion with President Trump and Chancellor Angela Merkel during the German leader's visit to the White House.

Russia 'tried to hijack US election': US senator

Putin rejects claims of election meddling

AGENCIES

The top Democrat on the US Senate Intelligence Committee accused Russia yesterday of mounting a campaign of "propaganda on steroids" seeking to influence the 2016 US presidential election, and listed several areas of concern about possible links to Republican Donald Trump's campaign.

"I will not prejudice the outcome of our investigation," Senator Mark Warner told a rare public intelligence committee hearing on alleged Russian efforts to influence elections. "We are seeking to determine if there is an actual fire, but so far there is a great, great deal of smoke."

Moscow denies attempting to influence the election, and Trump has dismissed suggestions of links with Moscow as Democratic sour grapes about his surprise November defeat of Hillary Clinton.

The lawmakers warned of the seriousness

of Russian efforts, and experts at the hearing detailed what they described as the dissemination of disinformation and cyber attacks on both Democratic political operatives and Republicans, reported Reuters.

They also warned of the potential for Russian influence on upcoming elections in France and Germany, and said Britain's "Brexit" vote last year on leaving the European Union should also be examined.

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin has described allegations that his country meddled in the 2016 US election as "fictional, illusory provocations and lies."

Asked directly yesterday whether Russia interfered in the election, Putin said: "Read my lips: No."

Putin's comments are the President's most emphatic denial of the accusations yet, and are the first he has directly made since Trump took office in January, reported CNN.



US diplomat arrested over China contact

AFP, Washington

A US diplomat who allegedly took tens of thousands of dollars in cash and gifts from Chinese intelligence agents was charged Wednesday with lying to investigators over those contacts.

The Department of Justice said Candace Marie Claiborne, 60, knew that the two Chinese men she had regular contact with while working for the US State Department in China and other countries were from the Chinese security services, and that the money they gave her was in exchange for US secrets.

She took cash and an iPhone for herself, but most of the funds went to an unidentified man half her age with whom she lived in Beijing and Shanghai.

Oldest spacewoman sets spacewalking record

AP, Cape Canaveral

The world's oldest and most experienced spacewoman, Peggy Whitson, broke another record yesterday as she floated out of the International Space Station to set up a new parking spot.

It was the eighth spacewalk of her career, the most ever performed by a woman.

Whitson and her spacewalking partner, station commander Shane Kimbrough, ventured out to complete prep work on a docking port. Kimbrough disconnected the port during a spacewalk last Friday and then flight controllers in Houston moved it to a new location Sunday. It will serve as a parking spot for commercial crew capsules under development by SpaceX and Boeing.

The spacewalkers needed to hook up vital heater cables to the docking port and install shields to protect against strikes by micrometeorites.

"You guys be safe and enjoy your time out," French astronaut Thomas Pesquet radioed from inside the space station.

This will serve as the second of two docking ports for the future SpaceX and Boeing crew capsules. SpaceX will launch the final piece of this particular port later this year or early next year.

Midway through yesterday's spacewalk, Whitson will surpass the current record for women of 50 hours and 40 minutes of total accumulated spacewalking time, held by former space station resident Sunita Williams.

