

Suu Kyi defends first year in power

Says her party, NLD, inherits a host of complications from military past

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi defended her civilian government's first year in power in a rare public address on Thursday night, saying her party was dedicated to rebuilding a nation ravaged by decades of army rule.

The democracy icon was swept into office after her party's euphoric victory in the first free polls in a generation.

But her first twelve months in power have been rocky. Fresh unrest in Myanmar's ethnic minority borderlands and disappointing economic growth in particular have cast a pall over Suu Kyi's two top policy promises: peace and development.

While many in Myanmar still revere the former activist as a saint, criticism of her administration has grown in some international circles, particularly over her tepid response to a bloody military crackdown on the Muslim Rohingya.

In her speech on Thursday, which was broadcast on national television to mark the government's one year anniversary, Suu Kyi stressed that her party, NLD, had inherited a host of complications from the country's military past.

"We are now trying to change a system which existed for over 50 years," she said.

"We can see our goals clearly and we are marching to reach them. The goals are national reconciliation and peace," she added.



Malaysia's Foreign Minister Anifah Anan (3rd R) walks with the nine Malaysian citizens who were previously stranded in Pyongyang as they return home, at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport yesterday. Three North Koreans wanted for questioning over the murder of the estranged half-brother of their country's leader returned home along with the body of victim Kim Jong Nam after Malaysia agreed a swap deal.

US secy of state demands Nato allies pay up

AFP, Brussels

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson yesterday pressed Nato allies to ramp up military spending and denounced Russia's "aggression" in Ukraine, toughening the Trump administration's tone toward Moscow.

Tillerson delivered the message as he met fellow Nato foreign ministers for the first time ahead of a May 25 summit to be attended by leaders including President Donald Trump.

"As President Trump has made clear, it is no longer sustainable for the US to maintain a disproportionate share of Nato's defence expenditures," Tillerson said in Brussels. He urged his fellow foreign ministers to agree at the May summit to produce plans by the end of the year to meet the spending pledge.

Nato countries originally agreed at a summit in Wales in 2014 to contribute the equivalent of two percent of their gross domestic product to defence.

EU offers 'phased' strategy

Draft negotiating guidelines say other 27 countries are ready for a transitional deal after Britain's exit in 2019

REUTERS, Brussels

The European Union offered Britain talks this year on a future free trade pact but made clear in negotiating guidelines issued yesterday that London must first agree to EU demands on the terms of Brexit.

Those include paying tens of billions of euros and giving residence rights to some 3 million EU citizens in Britain, the proposed negotiating objectives distributed by EU summit chair Donald Tusk to Britain's 27 EU partners showed. Tusk's draft negotiating guidelines say that other 27 countries are ready for a transitional deal after Britain's exit in 2019.

The document, seen by Reuters, also sets tough conditions for any transition period, insisting Britain must accept many EU rules after any such partial withdrawal. It also spelled out EU resistance to Britain scrapping swathes of tax, environmental and labour laws if it wants to have an eventual free trade pact.

The guidelines, which may be revised before the EU27 leaders

endorse them at a summit on April 29, came two days after Prime Minister Theresa May triggered a two-year countdown to Britain's withdrawal in a letter to Tusk that included a request for a rapid start to negotiations on a post-Brexit free trade deal.

"Once, and only once we have achieved sufficient progress on the

BREXIT TRANSITION

London must first agree to EU demands

If UK shows progress on divorce, trade talks can start: Tusk

Spain must have say over Gibraltar after Brexit

withdrawal, can we discuss the framework for our future relationship," Tusk told reporters in Malta -- a compromise between EU hardliners who want no trade talks until the full Brexit deal is agreed and British calls for an immediate start.

"Starting parallel talks on all issues at the same time, as suggested by some

in the UK, will not happen," Tusk said, while adding that the EU could assess as early as this autumn that Britain had made "sufficient progress" on the exit terms in order to open the second phase of negotiations, on future trade.

Brussels has estimated that Britain might owe it something of the order of 60 billion euros on departure, although it says the actual number cannot be calculated until it actually leaves.

Spain must have a say over whether any deal after Brexit applies to the British territory of Gibraltar, over which London and Madrid have rowed for 300 years, the EU guidelines said.

"After the United Kingdom leaves the union, no agreement between the EU and the United Kingdom may apply to the territory of Gibraltar without the agreement between the Kingdom of Spain and the United Kingdom," it said.

The tiny British overseas territory on Spain's southern tip has long been the subject of an acrimonious sovereignty row between London and Madrid, which wants Gibraltar back after it was ceded to Britain in 1713.

INDEPENDENCE VOTE: Scotland makes formal request to UK

AFP, Edinburgh

The Scottish government yesterday formally asked British Prime Minister Theresa May for a second referendum on independence, deepening a crisis sparked by the Brexit vote.

"I am... writing to begin early discussions between our governments to agree an Order under section 30 of the Scotland Act 1998 that would enable a referendum to be legislated for by the Scottish Parliament," First Minister Nicola Sturgeon wrote in a letter to May.

Sturgeon, leader of the ruling Scottish National Party (SNP), said: "The people of Scotland must have the right to choose our own future -- in short, to exercise our right of self determination."

The Scottish Parliament voted by 69 votes to 59 on Tuesday for another referendum, but it cannot hold a legally-binding vote without London's approval.

Israel okays first WB settlement in 25 yrs

Palestinians, UN condemn; White House cautions Israel on 'unrestrained' expansion plan

AFP, Jerusalem

The Palestinians and the United Nations yesterday condemned the Israeli cabinet's approval of the first officially sanctioned new settlement in the occupied West Bank in more than 25 years.

The security cabinet gave its unanimous backing to the new settlement late on Thursday as what is widely seen as the most right-wing government in Israeli history presses ahead with settlement expansion in defiance of international concern.

It will be the first entirely new settlement that an Israeli government has approved since 1991, the anti-settlement NGO Peace Now said.

Senior Palestinian official Hanan Ashrawi said the move showed the government was pushing ahead with "their systematic policies of settler colonialism, apartheid and ethnic cleansing, showing a total and blatant disre-

gard for Palestinian human rights."

A spokesman for UN chief Antonio Guterres, expressed "disappointment and alarm" at the announcement.

"The secretary general has consistently stressed that there is no Plan B for Israelis and Palestinians to live together in peace and security. He condemns all unilateral actions that, like the present one, threaten peace and undermine the two-state solution," Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

The White House yesterday cautioned

refraining from criticism of a major project just approved but warning further expansion could block peace efforts.

"While the existence of settlements is not in itself an impediment to peace, further unrestrained settlement activity does not help advance peace," a White House official said.



Federal police members take cover during a battle with Islamic State fighters at Bab al Beed district in the old city of Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. UN chief Antonio Guterres appealed for more aid for the people of Mosul, as he visited a camp for Iraqis displaced by the battle to retake the second city from jihadists.

Ex-US adviser Flynn offers testimony for immunity

AFP, Washington

Michael Flynn has "a story to tell," his lawyer said Thursday, amid reports that the ousted US national security advisor has offered to testify in exchange for immunity about potential ties between Donald Trump's presidential campaign and Russia.

Flynn proposed his deal to the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the House and Senate intelligence committees, The Wall Street Journal reported late Thursday.

A close advisor of Trump's 2016 campaign, Flynn was forced to step down just weeks into the security job last month.

His resignation came after it emerged that he made misleading statements about talks he held with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak during the presidential transition concerning Washington's sanctions on Moscow.

Trump himself appeared to offer legal advice on the issue, tweeting: "Mike Flynn should ask for immunity in that this is a witch hunt (excuse for big election loss), by media & Dems, of historic proportion!"

The Journal said it wasn't clear what exactly Flynn had offered to discuss.

But it quoted one unnamed official as saying the retired army general's bid for immunity suggested potential "legal jeopardy" for him.

Robert Kelner, a lawyer for Flynn, said in a statement tweeted late Thursday that "General Flynn certainly has a story to tell, and he very much wants to tell it, should the circumstances permit."

"Out of respect for the committees, we will not comment right now on the details of discussions between counsel for General Flynn and the House and Senate intelligence committees, other than to confirm that those discussions have taken place," the lawyer added.

The New York Times quoted a congressional official as saying investigators are wary of cutting a deal with Flynn until they are further along in their probe and have a better idea of what information Flynn might offer.

The Times also quoted an expert as urging caution over Flynn's offer of testimony.

NEWS IN brief

Trump predicts 'very difficult' China summit

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump has predicted an upcoming meeting with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping would be "very difficult", staking out an adversarial position ahead of the high profile first summit between the leaders. Trump's comments Thursday appeared to herald a return to a tougher line from the president, who took a hawkish tone on the Asian giant in the weeks after his election before softening his rhetoric.

Venezuela rejects coup accusations

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela yesterday rejected accusations that a Supreme Court move to seize the powers of the opposition-majority legislature amounted to a coup, lashing out at its critics as "imperialists." International condemnation poured in after the high court's decision late Wednesday, which effectively dissolved the legislature and tightened socialist President Nicolas Maduro's grip on power.

Five killed in E Ukraine as tensions simmer

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine's army said yesterday it has suffered more losses in the fight against pro-Russian insurgents in the east as tensions in the three-year conflict simmered. Two Ukrainian servicemen were killed and 13 others injured over the past 24 hours when their positions came under rebel fire, the Ukrainian military said in a statement.

Assad's overthrow no longer a priority: US

AFP, United Nations

The United States admitted Thursday that it is no longer focused on ousting Bashar al-Assad as it seeks a new strategy to end Syria's civil war.

American officials have been shifting away from their former insistence that he must go for some time, but now they have made it explicit.

In New York, the US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley condemned Assad's history of human rights abuses against his own people.

But she said Washington would focus on working with powers like Turkey and Russia to seek a political settlement, rather than focusing on Assad.

"You pick and choose your battles," Haley told reporters.

"And when we're looking at this, it's about changing up priorities and our priority is no longer to sit and focus on getting Assad out."

group of journalists, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson sent a similar signal at a news conference in Turkey.

"I think the... longer term status of President Assad will be decided by the Syrian people," Tillerson said, standing alongside Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu.

Meanwhile, Syria's army and allied fighters have regained most of the territory they lost during an assault launched by rebels and jihadists earlier this month in the country's centre, a monitor said yesterday.

"The regime has recaptured 75 percent of the territory it lost in the north of Hama province," said Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor.

An array of factions, including an alliance headed by a former al-Qaeda affiliate, launched an assault on government positions in Hama province on March 21, seizing several strategic areas.

TRIAL OVER LYNCHING: Pak prosecutor asks Christians to convert

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Christian defendants facing trial over an alleged lynching were reportedly promised acquittal by a public official if they converted to Islam.

The 42 men were charged with killing two Muslims after the suicide bombing of two churches in Youhanabad, Lahore.

At least 15 people died in the 2015 attack, one of a number carried out by the Taliban on Pakistan's minority Christian community.

"Public Prosecutor Syed Anees Shah gathered the accused outside the courtroom and asked them to embrace Islam," legal activist Joseph Franci told the Express Tribune.

'Hand over Jinnah House'

Pakistan tells India after a Mumbai MP demanded its demolition last week

TNN, New Delhi

After a Mumbai lawmaker last week demanded that Jinnah House in Mumbai be demolished, Pakistan on Thursday said India "should respect the ownership rights of the government of Pakistan" on the property, The Express Tribune reported.

Pakistan's foreign office said that Jinnah House was a historic property for Pakistan, belonged to the country's founding father and should therefore "be handed over" to Pakistan.

That's not what how BJP MLA Mangal Prabhat Lodha sees the building.

"The Jinnah residence in south Mumbai was the place from where the conspiracy of the Partition was hatched. Jinnah House is a symbol of the partition. The structure should be demolished," Lodha said on Saturday.

The Express Tribune said that people in Pakistan consider Lodha's demand

"absurd".

"The Jinnah House in Mumbai was the residence with ownership of the father of the nation, Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah," said Pakistan's foreign office spokesman Nafees Zakria.



"The government of India should respect the ownership rights of the government of Pakistan in this regard. We also expect that the Indian government will fulfil its obligation of protecting that property and its upkeep," he added.