

Pressure mounts for UN action on Syria

Assad-led govt sets terms for any inquiry into 'chemical attack'

AGENCIES

Syria's regime and Russia hit back yesterday at accusations that Damascus was behind a deadly chemical weapons attack, as pressure built for international action over what Washington called an "affront to humanity".

France said it was determined to pursue a UN Security Council resolution to investigate dozens of civilian deaths in a northwestern Syria town, which Turkey blamed on a "chemical attack" by the Damascus government.

Trump described the alleged attack as an "affront to humanity" and warned it had changed his view of Assad.

"I will tell you, it's already happened, that my attitude towards Syria and Assad has changed very much," he told reporters at a joint White House news conference with Jordan's King Abdullah.

At least 86 people were killed early on Tuesday in rebel-held Khan Sheikhun, and dozens more have received treatment for convulsions, breathing problems and foaming at the mouth, reported AFP.

The Syrian government set conditions yesterday for any international inquiry into a suspected chemical attack that killed scores of people, saying it must not be "politicised" and should set out from Damascus and not Turkey, reported Reuters.

Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem said Syria's past experience with international inquiries had not been encouraging. The government would only decide on the idea once its concerns were addressed, he said.



US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley holds photographs of victims during a meeting at the United Nations Security Council on Syria at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City, NY, US on Wednesday night. PHOTO: REUTERS

RUSSIA PROBE

Trump ally in Congress steps aside

AP, Washington

The chairman of the House intelligence committee announced yesterday he was temporarily stepping aside from the panel's probe into Russian meddling in last year's presidential election.

The decision by Rep Devin Nunes, R-Calif., comes amid partisan turmoil on the committee. Democrats have alleged that Nunes, who was on President Donald Trump's transition team, is too close to the White House and cannot lead an impartial inquiry.

"Several leftwing activist groups have filed accusations against me with the Office of Congressional Ethics," Nunes said in a statement. "The charges are entirely false and politically motivated, and are being leveled just as the American people are beginning to learn the truth about the improper unmasking of the identities of U.S. citizens and other abuses of power."

Nunes did not disclose details of the allegations.

RUSSIA BLAST PROBE

Cops detain accomplices of bomber after raid

Find explosives similar to device used on metro

REUTERS, St Petersburg

Russian authorities raided a residential building in St Petersburg yesterday and found explosives similar to those used by a suicide bomber who this week blew up a metro carriage killing 14 people, two security sources said.

The discovery of the explosives raises the possibility that a string of bomb attacks was being planned in the city involving a group of plotters.

The explosives were discovered when security officials raided an apartment building in the city. They detained several people, according to a neighbour who saw the detentions taking place.

Russian investigators said they had detained several suspected accomplices of Akbarzhon Jalilov, born in mainly Muslim Kyrgyzstan, who is the suspected bomber in Monday's metro blast.

It was not immediately clear if the suspected accomplices were the same people detained at the apartment building.

Security officials searching the apartment complex where the men were detained also found an explosive device there. Bomb disposal experts made the device safe after evacuating people living in apartments on two stairwells.

"We were told: the house is mined, get out quickly," one woman, who only gave her name as Tatiana and lives in the building, told Reuters.



People place flowers at the grave of Irina Medyantseva, 50, a victim of April 3 blast in the Saint Petersburg metro. PHOTO: AFP

Another resident, who gave his name only as Anatoly, said he had seen police detain four young men occupying an eighth floor apartment next to his own. Vasily, another neighbour, said that "many people" had lived in the apartment and the detainees looked to be around 30.

Thai king signs new charter

Critics say changes in constitution will give generals a powerful role over politics before next election

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn signed a new constitution at a glittering palace ceremony yesterday, an essential step towards holding an election that the military government has promised to restore democracy after a 2014 coup.

The constitution is Thailand's 20th since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932 and critics say it will still give the generals a powerful say over Thai politics for years, if not decades.

The latest changes, made public for the first time when the constitution was published in the Royal Gazette to become law, also underlined the king's power in the event of a crisis, analysts said.

"May the Thai people be united in following and protecting the constitution to maintain democracy and their sovereignty," an officer with the Royal Scribes Bureau said at the ceremony, on behalf of the king.

The long-awaited constitution replaces an interim document put in place after the 2014 coup.

Thais approved the outline of the new constitution in a referendum last August but the palace requested changes in January after King Vajiralongkorn took over from his revered late father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who had ruled for more than seven decades.

One change allows the king to travel abroad without appointing a regent. The king has spent much of the past few years in Germany, where he has a son in school.

Another change was the removal of a clause giving power to the constitutional court and other institutions in the event of an unforeseen crisis. Removing it underlined the king's role.

"In practice, the king will have more say, more power," Kan Yuenyong, executive director of think-tank Siam Intelligence Unit, told Reuters.

There are still many steps before a general election can be held, or even until a ban is lifted on party politics. According to the timeline set out in the constitution, it could be late 2018 before a ballot and unforeseen delays are still possible.

The army initially promised an election in 2015, after seizing power, in the name of ending political turmoil, from a government run by Yingluck Shinawatra, sister of Thaksin Shinawatra, a populist leader ousted in 2006.

Thailand's main political division remains between a Bangkok-based strongly royalist and pro-army elite and poorer supporters of the Shinawatras' movement, particularly from the rural north and northeast.

Yingluck's Pheu Thai Party said it was more optimistic about election prospects. "With the constitution in place, an election seems more a reality," Chavalit Vichayasuthi, its acting deputy secretary-general, told Reuters.

General election expected late next year

Key step towards democracy after 2014 coup

Constitution is Thailand's 20th since 1932



House Speaker Paul Ryan said he supported Nunes' decision and said the congressman is eager to talk to the ethics panel.

"It is clear that this process would be a distraction for the House Intelligence Committee's investigation into Russian interference in our election," Ryan said.

He said he believes it is in the best interests of the committee and Congress to have GOP Reps. Mike Conaway of Texas, with help from Rep. Trey Gowdy of South Carolina and Rep. Tom Rooney of Florida, temporarily take charge of the investigation while the House Ethics Committee looks into the issue.

Nunes said he is confident that Conaway will oversee a professional investigation into Russia's actions and follow the facts wherever they lead.

NEWS IN brief

EU parliament urges Russia to free Navalny

AFP, Strasbourg

The European Parliament yesterday urged Russia to release top Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny and others arrested during nationwide anti-corruption protests last month. The parliament in Strasbourg also called on the European Commission and the 28 member states to send a "strong message" to Russia to end its crackdown on freedom of expression and assembly.

Democrats block Trump Supreme Court pick

AFP, Washington

A political earthquake rocked the US Senate yesterday as Democrats blocked President Trump's Supreme Court pick, triggering a Republican move to change longstanding rules in order to ram the nomination through. A procedural vote on Judge Neil Gorsuch failed when 44 Democrats opposed the nomination in the 100 member chamber, leaving Republicans shy of the 60 needed to end the debate.

Germany probes 20 for 'spying' for Turkey

AFP, Berlin

Germany is investigating 20 people for allegedly spying on followers of an exiled preacher targeted by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government. Erdogan blames US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen for a failed coup last July, and has launched a sweeping crackdown against his followers. More than 41,000 people in Turkey have been arrested over suspected links to Gulen's movement.



Israeli policemen stand guard at the scene of a Palestinian car-ramming attack near the Jewish settlement of Ofra in Ramallah yesterday. One Israeli soldier was killed and another wounded in the attack. The alleged attacker was arrested, army said. PHOTO: REUTERS

Duterte orders troops to occupy islands

AFP, Manila

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said yesterday he has ordered troops to deploy on unoccupied South China Sea islands, boosting the military presence on remote reefs claimed by Manila in a move that could provoke rival claimants including Beijing.

"It looks like everybody is making a grab for the islands there, so we better live on those that are still vacant," he told reporters during a televised visit to a military camp on the western island of Palawan, near the disputed Spratly group.

China asserts sovereignty over almost all of the resource-rich South China Sea despite rival claims from Southeast Asian neighbours and has rapidly built reefs into artificial islands capable of hosting military planes.

Duterte has previously sought to improve his nation's relations with Beijing by adopting a non-confrontational approach over their competing claims in the strategically vital waters.

But the president appeared to alter his tone with his announcement yesterday, saying it was time to "erect structures there and raise the Philippine flag".

"I have ordered the armed forces to occupy all," Duterte said.

"At least, let us get what is ours now and make a strong point there that it is ours," he said, adding Manila was claiming "nine or 10" Spratly islands, reefs and cays.

The defence department later said that nine outcrops "are already in our possession" and occupied by marines, including Thitu island where the Philippine military maintains an airstrip.

Its statement suggested that Duterte's plan was to beef up contingents on the reefs.



S CHINA SEA ROW

Smoking causes one in 10 deaths

AFP, Paris

The percentage of men and women who use tobacco every day has dropped in most nations since 1990, but the total number of smokers and tobacco-related deaths has increased, a consortium of researchers reported yesterday.

"Sadly, all those deaths were preventable," senior author Emmanuela Gakidou from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington told AFP.

Smoking causes one in ten deaths worldwide, half of them in just four countries: China, India, the United States and Russia.

Together with Indonesia, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Japan, Brazil, and Germany, they account for fully two-thirds of global tobacco use.

US to boost defenses against North Korea

Trump tells Abe; S Korea test fires 800km-range missile

AFP, Washington

The United States will continue to build its military defenses against North Korea, Donald Trump told Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Wednesday, pledging all options are on the table.

The pair spoke by phone a day after Pyongyang fired a ballistic missile into the Sea of Japan, in what analysts said was a warning ahead of Trump's summit with China's Xi Jinping at which North Korea is set to dominate the agenda.

Trump "made clear that the United States will continue to strengthen its ability to deter and defend itself and its allies with the full range of its military capabilities," the White House said in a statement about the call.

"The president emphasised that the United States stands with its allies Japan and South Korea in the face of the serious threat that North Korea continues to pose."

Though the White House has previously made similar statements, the call came hours before Trump hosts Chinese President Xi for a two-day summit at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida.

Trump has said the United States is prepared to go it alone in bringing Pyongyang to heel if China -- North Korea's top ally -- does not step in.

Meanwhile, South Korea has successfully test-fired a home-developed ballistic missile with a range long enough to hit any part of North Korea, Yonhap news agency reported yesterday.



Silent walking protest over right to drive

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Women campaigners in Saudi Arabia have filmed themselves silently walking in the street without male companions as part of their fight for the right to drive.

The campaign is part of a growing protest against sweeping restrictions which prevent women from doing everyday activities unless they are accompanied by a male guardian.

Prime Minister Theresa May has been urged to address human rights abuses including the oppression of women during her visit to the deeply conservative Islamic kingdom, which comes as part of a Government bid to secure post-Brexit trade deals.

She said she hopes to be seen as a "role model" for women there and met the country's crown prince without wearing a head scarf, eschewing sharia law's strict dress code.

Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world where women are banned from driving under its strict interpretation of Islamic law. The Interior Ministry strictly enforces the ban, which came into effect in 1957.

The silent footage of the women carries the hashtag #resistancebywalking on social media.

Campaign organiser Mariam Alhubail said on Twitter where she uses the handle @ms_freespeech: "We want to encourage women to go out alone for a walk or to do their daily tasks and reject the idea men take care of these tasks."

She added: "I walk alone. Until we have the streets again."

