

German MPs
approve
partial burqa ban

AFP, Berlin

German lawmakers on Thursday approved a partial ban on the full-face burqa Islamic veil and a package of security measures aimed at preventing extremist attacks. The prohibition will apply to public servants -- including election officials, military and judicial staff -- performing their duties.

Pope in Egypt as
'pilgrim of peace'

AFP, Cairo

Pope Francis began a visit to Egypt yesterday aimed at fostering reconciliation with the Muslim world against the backdrop of recent jihadist attacks on the Middle East's biggest Christian community. The 80-year-old pontiff's 27 hours on Egyptian soil will include a meeting with the grand imam of the Al-Azhar mosque, sealing a recent improvement in relations between Catholicism and the Sunni branch of Islam.

Macedonia parlia-
ment
violence injures 100

AFP, Skopje

Scores of people were injured as violence erupted in Macedonia's parliament after nationalist protesters stormed the building in anger over a vote for a new speaker, the interior ministry said yesterday. The chaos in Skopje broke out on Thursday evening, with dozens of demonstrators breaking a police cordon and entered parliament.

El Nino likely to
return this year:
WMO

REUTERS, Geneva

El Nino weather conditions associated with droughts and flooding have a 50-60 percent probability of returning this year, the UN World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said yesterday. The last El Nino was in 2015-2016. The phenomenon has been linked to exacerbating droughts in the Horn of Africa, coral bleaching the spread of the mosquito-borne Zika virus in South America two years ago.

Asean urges calm over N Korea

Malaysia PM warns inequality fuelling extremism in the region

REUTERS, Manila

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak warned yesterday that Southeast Asian countries needed to ensure their economic growth was inclusive, or risk marginalized people turning to violent extremism or even overturning political systems.

"We know that those who see no hope in their own societies are more prone to the siren calls of terrorists who can exploit their vulnerability and fill them with their lies," Najib told an entrepreneurship event during an Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean) summit in Manila.

Islamist extremism is expected to be on the agenda, with fears for Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines about piracy, the rising threat of Islamic State

DEVELOPMENTS

Bloc urges no aggravation of Korea tensions

Asean chief says S China Sea code with Beijing must be binding

and the ease with which militants can acquire weapons and move between countries.

But the first order of the summit addressed a more pressing threat, as Asean called for calm from all involved in tensions on the Korean



Demonstrators chant slogans and display placards against US, Japan, China and Asean during a rally ahead of the Asean summit in Manila, Philippines, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

peninsula.

US President Donald Trump in an interview with Reuters said a "major, major conflict" was possible with North Korea over its missile programmes and China said the situation could slip out of control.

In a rare, stand-alone statement, Asean urged North Korea and all parties concerned "to exercise self-restraint in order to de-escalate the tension and refrain from actions that may aggravate the situation".

Indonesian Foreign Minister

Retno Marsudi said all countries were worried.

"The Korean peninsula is not that far from Southeast Asia. So whatever happens in the Korean peninsula, for sure it will affect us," she told Reuters.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte will chair meetings of the Asean leaders today. He made it clear on Thursday that Beijing's contentious activities in the South China Sea - a divisive topic that figures at most Asean meetings - would not be

discussed, because it would achieve nothing.

Indonesia's Marsudi said the South China Sea issue was discussed among her counterparts but the focus was on completing guidelines for negotiating an Asean-China maritime code of conduct.

Asean Secretary General, Le Luong Minh, said the code needed to be legally binding to put a stop to "unilateral actions", because a previous commitment to play fair had been ignored.

"It's important ... because of the complex developments in the South China Sea, especially the reclamation and militarization activities and all those unilateral actions," Minh told Reuters in an interview.

"In that context, the need for an instrument which is legally binding."

Critics are sceptical and say China is trying to buy time while it develops islands it built from scratch, adding missiles and, according to some experts, the capability to deploy combat aircraft in disputed waters deep into Southeast Asia.

Asean has 10 members: Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

S Korea rejects Trump demand

AFP, Seoul

Seoul yesterday brushed aside US President Donald Trump's suggestion it should pay for a \$1 billion missile defence system the two allies are installing in South Korea to guard against threats from the North.

The first parts of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system have already been delivered to a former golf course in the South -- infuriating China -- at a time of heightened tensions over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programmes.

Top US officials have said THAAD will be operational "within days".

"I informed South Korea it would be appropriate if they paid. It's a billion-dollar system," Trump was quoted as saying by the Reuters news agency. "It's phenomenal, shoots missiles right out of the sky."

The two countries have been in a security alliance since the 1950-53 Korean war, and more than 28,000 US troops are stationed in the South.

Seoul retorted that under the Status of Forces Agreement that governs the US military presence in the country, the South would provide the THAAD site and infrastructure while the US would pay to deploy and operate it.

"There is no change to this basic position," South Korea's

defence ministry said in a statement.

The row comes with tensions high on the Korean peninsula following a series of missile launches by the North and warnings from the Trump administration that military action was an "option on the table".

Trump said there was "a chance" of "a major, major conflict" with the North -- which would put the South, whose capital is within range of Pyongyang's artillery, at risk of horrific casualties.

THAAD MISSILE SYSTEM P



But earlier this week Washington said it would seek stronger sanctions against Pyongyang and held open the possibility of negotiations, with US Pacific Command chief Admiral Harry Harris saying it wanted to bring leader Kim Jong-Un "to his senses, not to his knees".

The White House also wants China to do more to rein in the North, with Trump saying he believed leader Xi Jinping was "trying very hard".

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told reporters that the two presidents had been "in constant touch with each other", which was "good for the two countries and also for the whole world".

But Beijing has been infuriated by the THAAD deployment, which it fears weakens its own ballistic capabilities and says upsets the regional security balance.



A woman cries during a march paying homage to student Juan Pablo Pernaletto - killed on the eve by impact of a gas grenade during a protest against President Nicolas Maduro - in Caracas, on Thursday. Nearly a month of clashes at anti-government protests have left 28 people dead, according to prosecutors. PHOTO: REUTERS

Hamid Mir to return award to Bangladesh

AGENCIES

Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir on Thursday announced that he will be returning an award given to his father, Waris Mir, in 2013, by Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Speaking on a private TV channel, Mir said the award was given under false pretense that the Bangladeshi government wanted better relations with Pakistan, adding that PM Sheikh Hasina deceived the recipients of the award.

The awards were presented by the Bangladeshi premiere to honour those who had spoken against the military operation in 1971 that led to the creation of East Pakistan.

"Instead of improving relations, as promised to us, she has deteriorated them further. With these awards she has deceived us."

"The awards given to the Pakistanis, who because of their own conviction opposed the 1971 military operation, now seem like symbols of deceit."

"I am left with no choice but



This photo taken April 27, 2017 shows people allegedly kept inside a hidden room at the Drug Enforcement Unit of the Manila Police Department's Police Station 1 in the Tondo area of Manila. A dozen people have been found stuffed inside a closet-sized cell hidden behind a book shelf in a Philippine police station, triggering further alarm about abuse under President Rodrigo Duterte's deadly war on drugs.

PHOTO: AFP

Brexit talks must settle 'people, money, Ireland' first: Tusk

AFP, Brussels

EU President Donald Tusk yesterday said that Britain must first settle the divorce issues of "people, money and Ireland" before any talks on a post-Brexit trade deal.

In a letter to the other 27 European Union leaders ahead of a key summit today, Tusk said that "before discussing our future, we must first sort out our past."

The EU 27 are set to adopt guidelines for the negotiations on Brexit at the summit, following British Prime Minister Theresa May's formal triggering of the two-year divorce process last month.

Former Polish premier Tusk said the "only possible approach" was phased talks, in which Britain must make "sufficient progress" on the divorce issues before negotiations on future ties.

May wants to discuss the divorce settlement and a trade deal at the same time ahead of Britain's exit from the bloc in March 2019.

The EU says the key issues are the fate of three million EU citizens living in Britain

and one million Britons resident in the EU as well as Britain's exit bill estimated at around 60 billion euros (\$65 million).

Tusk also called for action to avoid a "hard border" between the Republic of Ireland and the British province of Northern Ireland.

A senior EU official said a key part of the summit would involve defining what "sufficient progress" means, with some states wanting to move on to the trade talks phase more quickly than others.

Leaders will also discuss the relocation of two EU agencies currently based in Britain -- the European Banking Authority and European Medicines Agency -- which several EU states are bidding to host.

Tusk's comments come a day after a war of words between British premier May and German Chancellor Angela Merkel over the two years of negotiations.

Merkel said Britain should not have "illusions" about getting favourable treatment. But May hit back by accusing the EU 27 of planning to "line up to oppose us."

UK on heightened alert

AFP, London

British police warned yesterday they were facing an "increased level of terrorist activity", the day after a knifeman was arrested near parliament and a woman was shot in a separate police raid.

Just weeks after the attack on the Houses of Parliament that left five people dead and scores injured, London is once again on high alert as Britain prepares for a snap election on June 8.

"Yesterday was an extraordinary day in London," Deputy Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu said, after confirming six arrests overnight.

"I wanted to reassure the public that this increased level of terrorist activity is being matched by our action... We are making arrests on a near daily basis."

A 27-year-old man remains in custody after being arrested near parliament on suspicion of terrorism offences and possession of knives, in what police confirmed had been an ongoing investigation.

Just hours later, armed police raided a

property in north London as part of an unrelated counter-terrorism investigation, firing CS gas as they entered and shooting a woman in her 20s.

Six people have been arrested as part of the probe, while the woman -- who is also suspected of involvement -- remains in a serious but stable condition in hospital.

"Due to these arrests that have been made yesterday, in both cases I believe we have contained the threats that they posed," Basu said.

Britain's national terror threat level has been at "severe", meaning an attack is highly likely,

since August 2014 -- and remained unchanged after the attack on parliament on March 22.

Khalid Masood drove a car through pedestrians on Westminster Bridge before crashing into the gates of parliament. He ran inside and knifed to death a policeman, before being shot.

Police have said they may never know why he did it.

El Salvador bans metal mining in world first

AFP, San Salvador

El Salvador on Thursday became the first country in the world to ban the mining of metals in what campaigners called a landmark move for environmental protection.

The law bans "prospection, exploration, exploitation, extraction or processing of metallic minerals in El Salvador," according to the text published Thursday in the official journal.

"This is more than just a novelty," the president of the Salvadoran Ecological Unit, Mauricio Sermenio, told AFP.

"It is a law that is necessary in the face of an industry which, far from bringing any benefit to communities, brings serious pollution to water sources and the environment."

When lawmakers approved the bill in March, non-government campaign group MiningWatch Canada said El Salvador had "made history, becoming the first country to ban metal mining outright."

Some Latin American countries thrive on mineral exports but local communities complain of environmental risks from toxic metals used in the process.

The new law entered into force after being signed by President Salvador Sanchez Ceren.

El Salvador says it will protect poor rural communities threatened by proposed mining projects. The country has had disputes with powerful foreign mining firms in the past.

'Spring offensive' starts

AFP, Kabul

The Afghan Taliban launched their "spring offensive" yesterday, heralding fresh fighting in the drawn-out conflict as embattled security forces struggle to recover from a devastating attack on a military base one week ago.

Operation Mansouri -- named after the group's former leader, killed in a US drone strike in 2016 -- will target foreign forces with "conventional attacks, guerrilla warfare, complex martyrdom attacks, insider attacks", an insurgent statement said.

"The enemy will be targeted, harassed, killed or captured until they abandon their last posts," it continued.

The annual spring offensive normally marks the start of the "fighting season", though this winter the Taliban continued to battle government forces, most successfully in last week's attack on the military base

outside the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, which killed at least 135 young recruits.

With more than one third of Afghanistan outside of government control, civilians also continue to bear a heavy brunt, with thousands killed and wounded each year with children paying an increasingly disproportionate price, according to UN figures.

Afghanistan's Interior Ministry shrugged off the Taliban threats yesterday, saying the offensive was "not something new".

The Taliban statement claimed this year will be different, however, vowing a political approach in areas it controls that will focus on state-building and "establishing mechanisms for social justice and development".

The Taliban announcement comes days after Pentagon chief Jim Mattis visited Kabul as the Trump administration seeks to craft a new strategy in Afghanistan.

