



Demonstrators clash with police during a protest against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, in Caracas, Wednesday. Anti-government protests raged on in Venezuela yesterday after a day of clashes brought the death toll to 32.

PHOTO: AFP

US'S DIPLOMATIC PRIORITIES

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson laid out his plans Wednesday for tackling world issues including the standoff with North Korea, which he called the most urgent challenge the United States has to deal with. Three months after taking over the State Department, Washington's top diplomat gave a wide-ranging pep talk to his staff around the globe on the work ahead. Tillerson's address didn't address that.

NORTH KOREA: Tillerson told the diplomats that he had advised Trump to "test" China's commitment to reining in its neighbor by "leaning in hard" on leader Xi Jinping. If Beijing fails to enforce existing UN sanctions, he warned, then Washington could take action against Chinese banks or companies that deal with Pyongyang. "So it's a pressure campaign that has a knob on it. I'd say we're at about dial setting 5 or 6 right now," he said, without saying how high the dial goes.

CHINA: China's role in North Korea may be the most pressing issue, but Tillerson senses an opening to reset the basis of China-US ties for the next 50 years. Tillerson wants the bilateral dialogue to intensify. Differences remain over freedom of navigation in waters claimed by China in the South China Sea and the trans-Pacific trade imbalance. But Tillerson said ties were at a "point of inflection" and ripe for review. "Let's kind of revisit this relationship, and what is it going to be over the next half century. I think it's a tremendous opportunity we have to define that, and there seems to be a great interest on the part of the Chinese leadership to do that as well."



THE ISLAMIC STATE: Before North Korea's latest weapons tests, Trump had made the battle to eradicate "radical Islamic terrorism" the focus of his foreign policy. It remains a key goal, and Tillerson said the State Department would be part of the effort. He described the threat as emanating in "concentric circles" from the battlefields of Iraq and Syria through the Middle East to Africa and Central Asia.

RUSSIA: Russia clearly hoped that Trump's election victory and Tillerson's appointment would lead to warmer ties with Washington — that has not happened. Tillerson told his colleagues that, on a visit to Moscow last month, he had told Putin that relations are as bad as they have been since the Cold War. Washington hopes to work with Russia to develop ceasefire zones in Syria, but the former foes are still divided over Russia's intervention in Ukraine. So the secretary, who meets Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Alaska next week, said he would work on "some small things" to build a level of trust.

THE REST: Tillerson cited work in Africa to alleviate health crises and disrupt terror networks, and in Latin America to combat trafficking and extremist finance. But his list of priorities included no reference to Europe, beyond repeating Trump's call for Nato members to spend more on collective defense.

PHOTO: AFP

Forces mistakenly kill Somali minister

AFP, Mogadishu

Somalia's minister of public works and reconstruction Abbas Abdullahi Siraji, 31, was killed in Mogadishu on Wednesday in what was apparently an accidental shooting, government and police sources said.

In a statement, the government said it was "deeply saddened" by the death of Siraji, the youngest member of the Somali cabinet, who grew up in a Kenyan refugee camp before winning election in 2016 and being named a minister by President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed.



Siraji's vehicle was mistakenly shot at by government security guards outside the presidential palace, a senator, Ilyas Abdulahi, told AFP.

Sources said the gunmen were security guards for another government official, many of whom are escorted around the capital by armed guards in pick-up trucks.

"Armed men on board a pick-up truck in front opened fire on the minister's car as he followed, it seems it was a mistake but it is being investigated," said Ibrahim Mohamed, a police officer.

Russia, Turkey, Iran ink deal

AFP, Astana

Syrian regime allies Russia and Iran and rebel supporter Turkey yesterday signed a memorandum on a Moscow-backed plan to create safe zones in Syria to bolster a fragile truce.

An AFP reporter at peace talks in the Kazakh capital Astana saw the heads of the delegations, representing the three countries sponsoring the negotiations, sign the document.

The Syrian government and rebel delegations are not signatories.

The Kremlin has been touting a plan to create safe zones in Syria that is aimed to "further pacification and cessation of hostilities."

An Arabic-language version of the Russian draft proposal seen by AFP calls for the creation of "de-escalation zones" in rebel-held territory in the northwestern province of Idlib, in parts of Homs province in the centre, in the south, and in the opposition enclave of Eastern Ghouta near Damascus.

But issues including which countries could police any safe zones remain unclear. Russian President Vladimir Putin said Wednesday that ways to monitor the zones would be an issue for separate talks.

Syrian rebels said earlier yesterday that they had resumed participation in the talks after having suspended their involvement a day earlier over air strikes against civilians.

SYRIA SAFE ZONES

After talks with Turkey counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the proposed zones would also be no-fly areas if fighting on the ground there stopped entirely.

The Kremlin's plan echoes calls by US leader Donald Trump to establish safe zones in Syria.

Putin said Wednesday that "as far I could tell" the US leader broadly supported the idea in a phone call they

held on Tuesday.

Erdogan said in comments published Thursday that Moscow's plan to set up these zones in Syria would "50 percent" solve the six-year conflict.

Damascus supports the Russian plan, Syrian state news agency SANA reported.

More than 320,000 people have been killed in Syria since the country's war began with anti-government protests in March 2011.

FORCES LAUNCH NEW MOSUL PUSH Iraqi forces thrust into west Mosul from the north yesterday, opening a new front in the more than six-month-old offensive to dislodge the Islamic State group from the country's second city.

The assault is aimed at sealing the siege of the Old City, where die-hard jihadists holding huge numbers of civilians hostage are preparing for a bloody last stand. The operation opens a new front in the effort to wrest back west Mosul from IS which started in mid-February and saw thousands of Iraqi forces retake most southern and western neighbourhoods.



Trump vows to broker Israel-Palestine peace

Offers no new policies, time frame

REUTERS, Washington

President Donald Trump vowed on Wednesday to do "whatever is necessary" to broker peace between Israel and the Palestinians as he hosted Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at the White House, but gave no sign of how he could revive long-stalled negotiations.

In their first meeting, Trump pressed Abbas to do more to stop "incitement to violence" against Israelis and, according to the White House, urged him in private to halt payments to families of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, a demand long pressed by Israel.

Even as Trump boldly predicted he would achieve peace where other presidents had failed, he stopped short of explicitly committing his administration to a two-state solution to the decades-old conflict, a long-standing foundation of US policy. Some Palestinians said they were disappointed by the omission.

Despite what many experts see as a long-shot bid, Trump told Abbas: "I will do whatever is necessary. ... I would love to be a mediator or an arbitrator or a facilitator, and we will get this done."

Abbas reassured the goal of a Palestinian state, saying it must have East Jerusalem as its capital with the borders that existed before the 1967 Middle East war. Most Israelis want all of Jerusalem as their capital and reject a full return to 1967 borderlines as a threat to their security.

Trump has faced deep skepticism at home and abroad over the chances for him to achieve any quick breakthrough, not least because his administration has yet to articulate a cohesive strategy for restarting the moribund peace process.

Abbas' White House talks followed a February visit by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who moved to reset ties after a combative relationship with the Republican president's predecessor, Democrat Barack Obama.

Trump sparked international criticism at the time, when he appeared to back away from a two-state solution, saying he would leave it up to the parties to decide. Palestinian statehood has been the objective of successive US administrations and the international community.



Prince Philip to retire from royal duties

REUTERS, London

Prince Philip, the 95-year-old husband of Britain's Queen Elizabeth, will retire from carrying out royal engagements from the autumn, Buckingham Palace said yesterday, ending more than six decades of active public life.

Philip, who is also known as the Duke of Edinburgh and has sometimes drawn attention with headline-grabbing gaffes, has been by the queen's side throughout her 65 years on the throne and she has described him as "my strength and stay".

"Prince Philip will attend previously scheduled engagements between now and August, both individually and accompanying The Queen," the palace said in a statement. "Thereafter, The Duke will not be accepting new invitations for visits and engagements, although he may still choose to attend certain public events from time to time."

The queen, the world's longest-reigning living monarch who celebrated her 91st birthday in April, will continue to carry out a full programme of official engagements, the statement added.

The announcement of Philip's retirement was made following a meeting of all senior royal staff at Buckingham Palace, news of which prompted media speculation about the health of the royals.

It makes me mildly nauseous: Comey

FBI chief defends himself as Clinton blames him for polls defeat

REUTERS, Washington

FBI Director James Comey said on Wednesday it made him "mildly nauseous" to think his announcement of the reopening of an investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails affected the 2016 presidential election, but he had no regrets and would make the same decision again.

Clinton said on Tuesday her election bid was derailed in part by Comey's announcement about the renewed probe of her use of a private email server while she was secretary of state.

In four hours of testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Comey delivered his most impassioned defense yet of a decision that many Democrats believe cost them the White House: telling Congress 11 days before the Nov 8 election that the FBI had uncovered a new trove of Clinton-related emails.

Comey said he felt he had to speak out at that time because he had repeatedly told lawmakers the Clinton email probe was over. "To not speak about it would require an act of concealment in my view," Comey said. "Concealing, in my view, would be catastrophic."

EU seeking to affect result of British polls: UK PM

Survey puts Conservatives ahead by 19-point

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May accused European politicians and officials on Wednesday of seeking to affect the outcome of the June 8 national election by issuing threats over Brexit.

May, whose Conservative Party has a double-digit lead over the main opposition Labour Party in the polls, has framed the early election as an opportunity to strengthen her hand in upcoming negotiations on Britain's exit from the European Union.

Speaking in front of her Downing Street office after visiting Queen Elizabeth to mark the dissolution of parliament, the formal start of the election campaign, May said there were some in Brussels who did not want to see Brexit talks succeed. Over the weekend a German newspaper

gave a damning account of a dinner last week between May and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, reporting that he had told May that Brexit could not be a success.

"Britain's negotiating position in Europe has been misrepresented in the continental press, the European Commission's negotiating stance has hardened, threats against Britain have been issued by European politicians and officials," May said. "All of these acts have been deliberately timed to affect the result of the general election."

There was no immediate EU comment on her accusations.

A YouGov poll for The Times on Wednesday put the Conservatives on 48 percent, up four percentage points on a week earlier, while support for Labour was at 29 percent.



Rivals trade fresh blows

Polls before Sunday's runoff suggest Macron easily won TV debate

AFP, Paris

France's presidential candidates traded fresh blows yesterday after one of the fiercest TV debates in the nation's history, with frontrunner Emmanuel Macron holding on to his status as favourite for the weekend's decisive runoff.

The centrist Macron and his far-right rival Marine Le Pen clashed repeatedly over terrorism, the economy and Europe in Wednesday's hot-tempered debate watched by 16.5 million people.

Le Pen branded the 39-year-old former economy minister and investment banker "the candidate of the elite" while he called her "the high priestess of fear".

After the bruising contest, a snap poll by French broadcaster BFMTV found that 63 percent of viewers thought Macron was the "most convincing" of the two, broadly mirroring forecasts for the decisive election on Sunday.

Former US president Barack Obama threw his support behind the pro-EU Macron, dubbing him as a "liberal



FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Macron dubs Le Pen as 'high priestess of fear', accuses her of spreading lies over secret offshore account allegation

Le Pen says Macron 'candidate of elite'

candidate.

The rivals were at each other's throats again on Thursday, with Le Pen defending the aggressive tone of the debate by arguing that she had tried to "lift the veil... on who Mister Macron is" and he again accused her of lying constantly. Macron told France Inter radio: "You can't choke off all of the lies but

you can kill off some of them."

He filed a legal complaint after Le Pen implied during the debate that he had an "offshore account in the Bahamas".

With just two days of campaigning left, Le Pen received a rowdy welcome in the Brittany town of Dol-de-Bretagne, where protesters threw eggs at her entourage, although she was not hit.

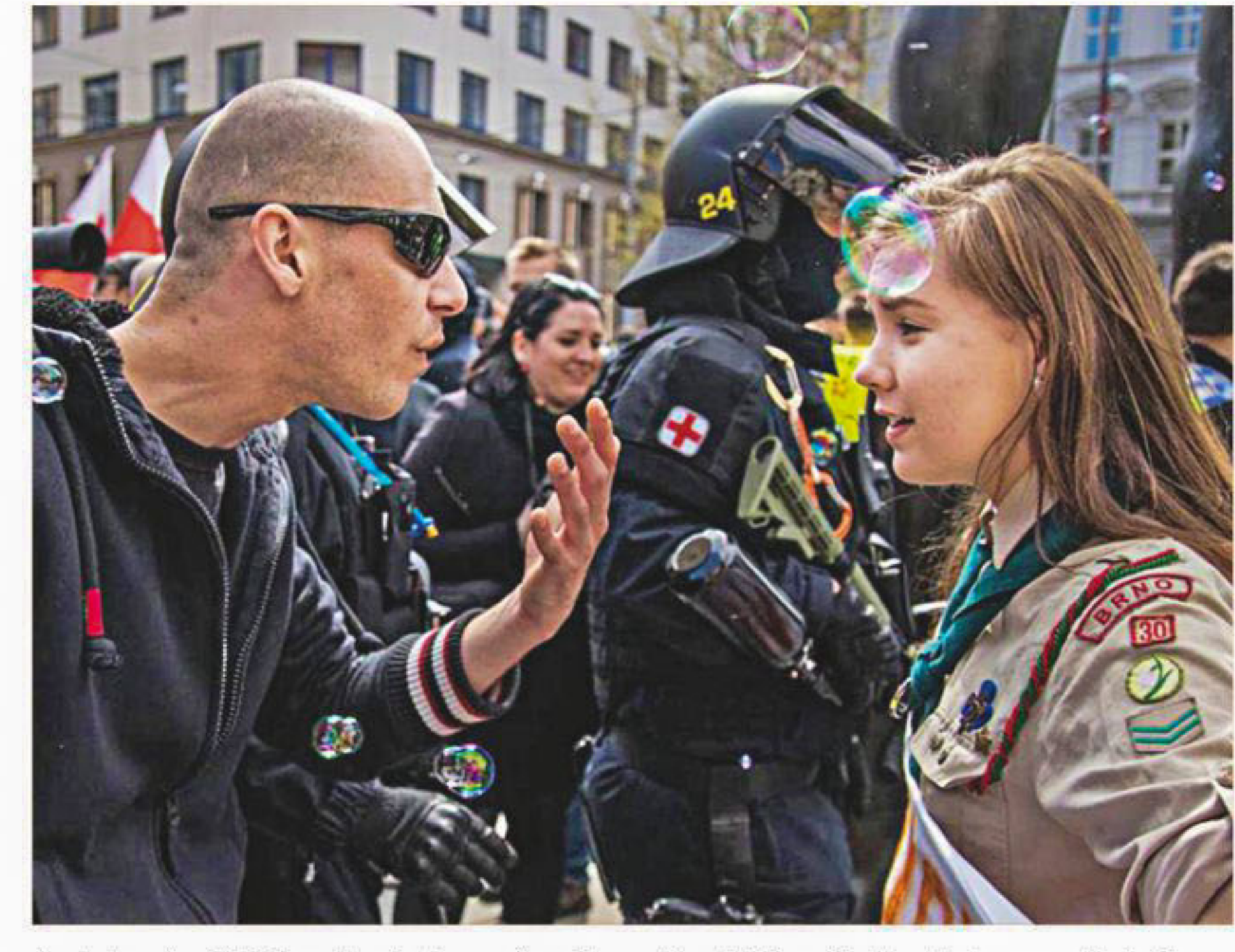
Macron headed to the southwestern town of Albi to meet supporters.

The aggressive and often unruly debate shocked many observers. Le Monde said it had been "brutal" and "violent from start to finish".

The debate was probably Le Pen's last chance to change the dynamics of the race ahead of the final weekend of a long and unpredictable campaign.

But the poll by Elabe for BFMTV showing that Macron had convinced 63 percent of viewers compared to 34 percent for Le Pen suggests she did little to win over new support.

Macron would win around 60 percent to Le Pen's 40 percent if the vote were held now, surveys suggest.



A photo of a Girl Scout calmly confronting a far-right protester during a rally in the Czech Republic has been shared thousands of times as a powerful symbol of peaceful defiance in the face of hate. The image, of teenager Lucie talking to a demonstrator during a May Day rally, was shared by the World Organisation of the Scout Movement. The picture became a viral hit with many applauding the youngster's courage and composure against hate.

PHOTO: INDEPENDENT.CO.UK