

Macron hosts Putin

Vows reprisals if chemical weapons used in Syria

France's President Emmanuel Macron and Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin yesterday held their first meeting since the French leader came to office, with differences on Ukraine and Syria in full view. Macron welcomed Putin to the splendour of the Versailles palace outside Paris with a perfunctory handshake. Macron said the use of chemical weapons in Syria would be a "red line" that would draw an "immediate response" from France.

He added that "failed states in the region are a threat to our democracies, and we have seen each time they have enabled terrorist groups to advance."

Putin's visit is the latest test of Macron's diplomatic mettle after the G7 talks in Sicily last week and the Nato summit in Brussels where he turned the tables on Trump by refusing to release the American leader's hand for several seconds during the handshake for the cameras.

"It is essential to talk to Russia because there are many international issues that will not be resolved without a tough exchange with the Russians," Macron said in Sicily.

Russia's powerful ambassador to France, Alexander Orlov, said he hoped the meeting could help turn the page on the fraught relationship between Putin and Macron's predecessor Francois Hollande.

"Many things in the future will depend on the first meeting," Orlov told Europe 1 radio.

"It is very important that we begin to dissipate the mistrust that has built up in recent years."

DIPLOMATIC TEST



Nepal delays key local polls amid crisis

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal yesterday postponed local elections for a second time after failing to appease ethnic minority groups who threatened to boycott the polls.

The elections were seen as a key step in a drawn-out peace process after a decade-long civil war which ended in 2006. They were the first local polls in 20 years.

"The government has decided to postpone the second phase of the local polls for 10 days, hoping the agitating parties will also take part," senior government minister Ramesh Lekhak told AFP.

The elections were originally supposed to be held on one day. They were split into two rounds following threats of a boycott from the Madhesi, a minority group living along the border with India.

The first round was held in mid-May in three of Nepal's seven provinces, with the remaining round scheduled for June 14.

The Madhesi have long been demanding that Nepal's provincial boundaries be redrawn through an amendment to the constitution, and wanted the change pushed through before the local elections.

The lowland people, seen by some in Nepal as more closely aligned to India, say the existing federal borders deprive them of fair political representation.

"Our main demand was constitution amendment, not the postponement of the poll date," Laxman Lal Karna, the head of one of the largest Madhesi parties, told AFP.

"We cannot assure our participation in the polls unless the government amends the new constitution."

Trump 'weakened' West

Says German foreign minister, slams his 'short-sighted' policies that hurt EU interests

AFP, Berlin

Germany yesterday unleashed a volley of criticism against US President Donald Trump, slamming his "short-sighted" policies that have "weakened the West" and hurt European interests.

The sharp words from Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel came after Trump concluded his first official tour abroad which took him to Saudi Arabia, Israel, Brussels and then Italy for a G7 summit.

They also followed Chancellor Angela Merkel's warning on Sunday that the US and Britain may no longer be reliable partners.

Germany's exasperation was laid bare after the G7 summit which wrapped up on Saturday with the US refusing to sign up to upholding the 2015 Paris climate accord.

Days earlier, in Saudi Arabia, Trump had presided over the signing of the single largest US arms deal in American history, worth \$110 billion over the next decade and including ships, tanks and anti-missile systems.

Gabriel said yesterday that "anyone who accelerates climate change by weakening

environmental protection, who sells more weapons in conflict zones and who does not want to politically resolve religious conflicts is putting peace in Europe at risk."

"The short-sighted policies of the American government stand against the interests of the European Union," he said, adding that "the West has become smaller, at least it has become weaker."

"We Europeans must fight for more climate protection, fewer weapons and against religious (fanaticism), otherwise the Middle East and Africa will be further destabilised," Gabriel said.

Germany's harsh words for Washington, traditionally a close ally, were highly unusual and came as relations have grown increasingly frosty.

When Trump was inaugurated in January, Merkel had told the billionaire and social media star that cooperation would be on the basis of shared democratic values.

The relationship between Merkel and Trump contrasts with the warm ties between her and former US president Barack Obama -- who last week travelled to Berlin to attend a key Protestant conference.



A view of the Maute group stronghold with an IS flag in Marawi City in southern Philippines yesterday. Inset, a Philippine Air Force attack helicopter fires a rocket as they continue to assault the Maute group in the city.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Fears of infiltration grow

Military says close to defeating Islamist rebels in Marawi

REUTERS, Marawi

The Philippine city of Iligan was overflowing with evacuees and on lockdown yesterday over fears Islamist militants had sneaked out of nearby Marawi, where troops were battling to drive out gunmen holed up in buildings for a seventh day.

The fighting in the city of Marawi with pro-Islamic State militants of the Maute group is the biggest security challenge of Rodrigo Duterte's 11-month presidency, with gunmen still holding parts of the city and fending off helicopter air strikes and ground attacks by commandos.

Most of Marawi's 200,000 people have left, many pouring into Iligan, some 38 km (24 miles) away, where authorities said they were stretched to the limit and worried that Maute fighters were blending in with the displaced and could launch attacks.

"We don't want what's happening in Marawi to spill over in Iligan," said Colonel Alex Aduca, chief of the Fourth Mechanized Infantry Battalion.

"We want to ensure the safety of people here, to prevent elements from

entering and conducting terroristic activities," he told DZMM radio.

He said some rebels had been caught trying to get into Iligan, but did not give details.

Sixty-one militants, 20 members of the security forces and 19 civilians have been killed since Tuesday, when Maute rebels went on the rampage in Marawi after a botched attempt by the military to arrest

getting help from "sympathetic elements" and fighters they had freed from jail during the rampage that started on Tuesday and caught the military by surprise.

"Our ground commanders have assured that the end is almost there," military spokesman, Restituto Padilla told reporters.

"We can control who comes in and who comes out, who moves around and who doesn't. And we're trying to isolate all these pockets of resistance."

The military said thousands of people were stranded, worried they could be intercepted by militants that have set up checkpoints on routes out of the city.

Civilians stuck in Marawi were without food and were as anxious about rocket strikes as much as they were the militants, said Zia Alonto Adiong, a politician coordinating efforts to evacuate civilians. Alonto said civilians stuck in Marawi wanted air strikes to stop.

"The anticipation of death is worse than death itself," he told news channel ANC. "We appeal to our military forces to do a different approach."

The military said the rebels may be

IS IN PHILIPPINES

Troops put city of Iligan on lockdown

Several thousand civilians stuck in Marawi

SITUATION IN EAST, S CHINA SEAS

China rebukes G7 over statement

AFP, Beijing

China has urged the Group of Seven leading economies to "stop making irresponsible remarks" after the G7 summit expressed concern about the situation in the East and South China Seas.

China has a dispute with Japan over small uninhabited islands in the East China Sea, while its claim to most of the South China Sea is challenged by the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan.

In their closing communique in Italy on Saturday, G7 leaders said they "remain concerned about the situation" in the two seas and are "strongly opposed to any unilateral actions that could increase tensions".

The text also urges "all parties to pursue demilitarisation of disputed features".

A Chinese foreign ministry statement quoted by state media yesterday said China was "strongly dissatisfied at the G7 summit gesticulating over the issues of the East and South China seas under the guise of international law".

Sunday's statement by ministry spokesman Lu Kang said Beijing hopes the G7 and countries outside the region will "stop making irresponsible remarks and play a constructive role for regional peace and stability".

Pak terror groups pose threat to US interests

Say spy chiefs during Congressional hearing

ANI, New Delhi

The US intelligence community is believed to have informed Congress that Pakistan has failed to stop terror activities operating from its soil, a Pakistan-based newspaper Dawn reported.

"...And because of its failure, these (terror) groups will (continue to) present a sustained threat to American interests in the region, and continue to plan and conduct attacks in India and Afghanistan," the report citing US intelligence said.

"During a Congressional hearing on Afghanistan and the ongoing war against terror elements there, the intelligence chiefs reportedly gave a candid assessment of the situation in war-torn Afghanistan to the Senate Armed Services Committee," the newspapers said.

A transcript, released this weekend, shows that though much of the debate

focused on Pakistan, there was a concern expressed that despite increased military efforts to defeat the Taliban, these militants would continue to make gains, especially in the rural areas of Afghanistan.

"Afghan security forces' performance will probably worsen due to a combination of Taliban operations, combat casualties, desertions, poor logistics support and weak leadership," warned National Intelligence Director Dan Coats.

Coats leads a team of more than a dozen spy agencies, including the CIA and FBI.

Illinois Republican Senator Joni Kay Ernst asked the intelligence chiefs to spell out the measures that Washington would like Kabul's neighbours to take to help stabilise the region.

"I think certainly an evaluation of how we work with Pakistan to address the situation of the harbouring of terrorist groups would be essential to a strategy that affects Afghanistan," Coats replied.

'Terror groups will continue to plan and conduct attacks in India and Afghanistan': US intel

MANCHESTER ATTACK WARNINGS

Britain's MI5 begins internal probe

AFP, Manchester

Britain's MI5 intelligence service has launched an internal probe into whether vital clues were missed ahead of the Manchester attack, as the city yesterday marked a week since the carnage that claimed 22 lives.

Manchester City Council called a vigil in the centre of the northwest English city at 2131 GMT -- the exact moment that 22-year-old Salman Abedi detonated his bomb outside a pop concert by teen idol Ariana Grande in one of Europe's biggest indoor arenas.

The names of the victims, including six children, were read out in front of the city's town hall earlier yesterday in front of hundreds of people at an annual religious ceremony.

A nearby square that has been the focus of remembrance was packed with floral tributes and heart-shaped balloons, as well as runners' bibs left by participants in a half-marathon on Sunday.

"You tried to destroy us but you've brought us closer together," read one message of defiance.

Investigators meanwhile pushed ahead with their probe of the attack, which was claimed by the Islamic State group.

Authorities arrested a 23-year-old man in the southern coastal town of Shoreham-by-Sea, more than 400 kilometres (250 miles) from Manchester.

Great white shark leaps into boat

AFP, Sydney

An elderly Australian fisherman has lived to tell the tale after a great white shark leapt into his boat, surviving with only an injured arm after he was sent flying by the thrashing beast.

Terry Selwood, 73, was enjoying some quiet time on the water off Evans Head in northern New South Wales state when he was given the fright of his life.

"I caught a blur of something coming over the boat ... and the pectoral fin of the shark hit me on the forearm and spun me round, knocked me down on the ground to my hands and knees," he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on Saturday.

"He came right over the top of the motor and then dropped onto the floor."

The shark was 2.7 metres (8.8 feet) in length and with the boat 1.4 metres across and 4.5 metres long, it was a tight squeeze.

"There I was on all fours and he's looking at me and I'm looking at him and then he started to do the dance around and shake and I couldn't get out quick enough onto the gunwale," Selwood said, referring to the upper edge of the boat.

NEWS IN brief

South Africa's Zuma survives calls to resign

AFP, Johannesburg

South African President Jacob Zuma survived fresh calls within the ruling ANC party for him to resign, party officials said yesterday, as they acknowledged support was "drifting away" from the movement. Senior figures in ANC met over the weekend after Zuma endured months of criticism over his sacking of respected finance minister.

Ailing Buhari absent from Nigeria party

AFP, Abuja

Nigeria's ailing president was glaringly absent yesterday as his deputy marked their two years in power, with no word on the head of state's health three weeks after he went on indefinite medical leave. Muhammadu Buhari and his deputy Yemi Osinbajo were sworn into office on May 29, 2015.

Tunisia security forces kill IS fugitive

AFP, Tunis

Tunisian security forces have killed a leader of the Islamic State group who was plotting attacks during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, authorities said yesterday. The interior ministry did not identify the suspect, but said he was a leading member of IS.

Rio musicians stage protest concert

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Several hundred people attended a concert by top Brazilian musicians in Rio de Janeiro on Sunday in the latest protest demanding the resignation of President Michel Temer. Caught up in serious corruption allegations, Temer is refusing to step down, hanging onto his office in the face of mounting popular pressure.