



Clothes and other supplies are stored near a tower block which was destroyed in a fire disaster, in north Kensington, West London, Britain yesterday. Firefighters searched for bodies in the tower block gutted by a blaze that has already left 17 dead, as questions grew over whether a recent refurbishment contributed to the fire.

PHOTO: REUTERS

UK PM eyes deal to prop up minority government

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May's Conservatives have reached a "broad agreement" with the ultra-conservative Democratic Unionist Party to prop up her minority government, a source told AFP yesterday after her election fiasco.

The Conservative source said talks with the small Northern Irish party were progressing well ahead of meetings in Downing Street with all of the British province's main political leaders.

Both parties are committed to a strengthening British unity, delivering Brexit, combating terrorism, and delivering prosperity, the source said, adding however that "at the moment there isn't a deal".

The government meanwhile said the state opening of the British parliament -- when May's government presents its legislation programme -- will take place on June 21, two days later than planned.

A Conservative source said this meant the party was "confident" it had enough votes for the programme to be approved, after May suffered a disastrous setback in snap elections a week ago that saw her lose her majority in the 650-seat House of

Commons, just ahead of crucial Brexit negotiations with Brussels.

The Conservatives, who have 317 MPs, are looking to strike a deal with the DUP, who have 10.

The prospect of a deal between the two parties has caused disquiet, with the DUP's anti-abortion and gay rights stance in the crosshairs.

Though on the surface, yesterday's meeting with Northern Irish parties is aimed at breaking the logjam in forming a new cross-party regional government in the province, May needs broader acceptance of Conservative-DUP deal.

And some fear the viability of Northern Ireland's fragile peace -- which has held since 1998 after decades of inter-community violence known as The Troubles -- could rest on the arrangement, with doubts around the UK government's neutrality.

"The main concern is going to be that if there is a Conservative-DUP deal, then can the British government continue to play the role of a honest broker in the restoration of a Northern Ireland executive?" said Simon Usherwood, senior politics lecturer at Surrey University.



'Corporate manslaughter'

Labour MP calls for arrests to be made over the disaster

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Labour MP David Lammy has labelled the Grenfell Tower fire as "corporate manslaughter" and called for arrests to be made over the disaster.

The Tottenham MP described the fire as an "outrage", stating: "This is the richest borough in our country treating its citizens in this way.

"We should call it what it is, it's corporate manslaughter, that's what it is and there should be arrests made, frankly," he added, without referring to any individuals specifically.

Lammy, who was speaking to BBC Radio 4's Today programme, also said he had heard nothing from family friend Khadija Saye, 24, since the fire. The photographer lived on the 20th floor of the Tower bloc with her mother, Mary Mendy.

"As the seconds pass we grow more sad and bleak every second," he said.

He added: "Many of us across the country have been caught up in an election, knocking on housing estate doors right across the country, travelling up to the top floors of tower blocks and we know as politicians that the conditions in this country are unacceptable. We built buildings in the 70s, those 70s buildings -- many of them should be demolished.

"They haven't got easy fire escapes, they've got no sprinklers, it's totally, totally unacceptable in Britain that this is allowed to happen and people lose their lives in this way. People should be held to account."

Speaking about his "dear friend", Ms Saye, who worked for his artist wife for a number of years, Lammy added that she was a "beautiful young woman with an amazing career ahead of her, wonderful artist, her work is on show in Venice at the moment, and we've heard nothing".

"We hope and pray that she is amongst them [in hospital] and not perished in that building as I suspect hundreds will have done by the end of this count."

It is expected that Theresa May was set to visit the scene of the tragedy later yesterday to speak with emergency services and ensure that they have the resources they need to deal with the situation.

There are still "unknown numbers" of bodies in the tower bloc following the inferno, London fire commissioner Dany Cotton said yesterday. But at least 12 have already been confirmed dead after the fire ripped through the building in north Kensington, where the flames could still be seen burning more than a day after the disaster.

The commissioner told Sky News: "Tragically now we are not expecting to find anyone else alive. The severity and the heat of the fire would mean it is an absolute miracle for anyone to be left alive."

LONDON TOWER BLOCK FIRE



US moves to reassure Qatar with arms sale

AFP, Doha

The United States agreed a major warplane sale to Qatar and began manoeuvres with the emirate's navy yesterday, underscoring its commitment to their military alliance despite Doha's rift with other Gulf allies.

Washington has sent conflicting signals to its longtime ally about its position on the diplomatic crisis which has seen Saudi Arabia and its allies impose sweeping sanctions on the emirate.

Last week, US President Donald Trump expressed support for the Saudi-led allegations against Qatar, charging that it had "historically been a funder of terrorism at a very high level".

But Pentagon and State Department officials have since scrambled to reassure the emirate, which houses the largest US airbase in the Middle East and the command headquarters for US military operations in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis welcomed his Qatari counterpart Khalid al-Attiyah to Washington on Wednesday for

the signing of the agreement for the sale of F-15 fighters.

"The \$12-billion sale will give Qatar a state-of-the-art capability and increase security cooperation and interoperability between the United States and Qatar," the Pentagon said.

It did not provide additional details on the sale but Bloomberg reported it could involve as many as 36 warplanes.

Attiyah told the official Qatar News Agency the agreement would boost the emirate's defences and create 60,000 jobs in the United States.

"We believe that this agreement will propel Qatar's ability to provide for its own security, while also reducing the burden placed upon the United States military in conducting operations against violent extremism," he said.

The Pentagon meanwhile deployed two warships to carry out joint manoeuvres with the Qatari navy in the Gulf.

The vessels docked in Hamad Port, south of the capital Doha, on Wednesday, the Qatari defence ministry said.

GULF DIPLOMATIC CRISIS

Pentagon deploys warships to carry out joint manoeuvres with Qatari navy

Mattis, his Qatari counterpart discuss US-led military campaign against IS



Putin slams latest US sanctions

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday slammed fresh sanctions approved by the US Senate as coming "out of nowhere" and motivated by domestic politics and historical efforts by the West to "contain" Russia.

"We know that currently there is a bill in the US Senate regarding toughening sanctions. Why? Nothing extraordinary is happening. Why did they start to talk about sanctions again out of nowhere?" Putin said at his annual phone-in with Russian citizens.

"Of course this is evidence of the continuing domestic political battle in the US, but it is completely out of nowhere. If it wasn't for Crimea, if it wasn't for other problems, they would think of other reasons to contain Russia," he said.

The US Senate voted to approve further sanctions against Russia over alleged election meddling Wednesday.

The bill would also bar President Donald Trump from unilaterally easing existing sanctions imposed since 2014 over Moscow's annexation of Crimea and meddling in Ukraine.

Putin however said Crimea was merely an excuse for the West to hurt an economic competitor.

"Whenever our partners in the world have felt that Russia is a serious competitor, they have used various pretexts to impose limitations," he argued.

"There were various pretexts in the Soviet era and even before the October Revolution," he said. "This has happened throughout all of our history."

AFGHAN CONFLICT

Mattis vows not to repeat past mistakes

AFP, Washington

US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has vowed that the Trump administration will not repeat the "mistakes of the past" in Afghanistan, after the president signaled a desire to give the Pentagon wide latitude in setting warfighting policy.

But given Afghanistan's violent history and the fate of successive presidents' efforts to score some sort of victory there, analysts are not confident of Mattis's chances of long-term success.

Unlike his predecessor Barack Obama, who kept battlefield commanders on a tight leash and scrutinized each deployment, President Donald Trump has deferred to top brass -- the men he likes to call "my generals."

Though Trump has said little about Afghanistan, this week he gave Mattis authority to set troop numbers there at whatever level he sees fit, a decision finalized as the Pentagon chief told lawmakers America is still "not winning" against the Taliban.

The Pentagon is reportedly considering deploying an extra 3,000 to 5,000 troops -- some of whom would come from Nato allies -- in Afghanistan to help train and advise local forces fighting the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

"This administration will not repeat the mistakes of the past," Mattis declared Wednesday.

"We cannot allow Afghanistan to once again become a launching point for attacks on our homeland or on our allies," he said, alluding to the former Taliban government's granting haven to Al-Qaeda before the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in the US.

'TERRORISM' CHARGES

Turkey sentences UN war crimes judge

REUTERS, Amsterdam

Turkey has sentenced a UN war crimes judge to 7 years and six months in prison on charges of "membership in a terrorist organization", an international court in the Hague said yesterday.

Judge Aydin Sedat Akay has been held in Turkey since September, one of tens of thousands of Turkish officials arrested in a crackdown on people and organisations after a foiled coup in which hundreds died.

The UN court said in a statement that Turkey's actions constituted a "further breach of Judge Akay's protected status", as UN judges have diplomatic immunity under international law.

Akay is a judge at the MICT, the Hague court set up to handle final appeals and other remaining cases from the Yugoslav and Rwanda war crimes tribunals, which are being wound down.

At the time of his arrest, Akay was part of a panel assembled to determine if new evidence showed Rwandan Augustin Ndirabatware had been wrongfully convicted of genocide and jailed for 35 years.

That proceeding has been delayed by Akay's absence. According to a statement by the MICT, Akay was convicted on Tuesday on a single charge of membership in "FETO" -- which Turkey says is a terrorist organization that supports US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen whom Ankara accuses of backing the coup.



Somali men carry away the body of a civilian who was killed in an attack at the Pizza House restaurant in Mogadishu yesterday. A suicide car bombing and assault by Shabaab militants on two neighbouring restaurants in the Somalia's capital ended in the morning with 18 dead.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Turnbull pokes fun at Trump

AFP, Sydney

Australia's prime minister has taken a comical swipe at Donald Trump, mimicking his mannerisms and making reference to the Russia scandal, in comments he said were intended as "affectionately light-hearted".

In a leaked audio recording that comes just months after a tetchy phone call between the two leaders, Malcolm Turnbull is heard making fun of the US president's idiosyncratic speaking style.

"The Donald and I, we are winning and winning in the polls," Turnbull said in a closed event for journalists in Canberra on Wednesday.

"We are winning so much. We are winning like we have never won before.

"We are. We are. Not the fake polls. Not the fake polls. They're the ones we are not winning in," he said to laughs from the audience at the Mid-Winter Ball, where politicians and Canberra journalists let their hair down.

"We are winning in the real polls. You

know, the online polls. They are so easy to win."

Typically, the event is off-the-record, meaning journalists would not report on what was said, but a recording was leaked to the political editor at commercial broadcaster Channel Nine, who did not attend the soiree and decided to report it.

Turnbull played down the speech late yesterday, saying that he was the butt of the jokes rather than Trump.

"My speech was light-hearted, affectionately light-hearted," he told Melbourne's 3AW radio.

"It's a breach of protocol, it's a breach of faith," he added of the leaked recording. "But it's light-hearted, it's affectionate and the butt of my jokes, was myself."

In a statement cited by Channel 9, the US Embassy in Canberra said they saw the lighter-side of the address.

"We understand that last night's event is equivalent to our own White House Correspondents' Dinner," it read.



UN opening new aid route to reach Raqa

AFP, Geneva

The UN expects to open a new Syria aid corridor, which may help get supplies to desperate people fleeing the Islamic State (IS) group stronghold of Raqa.

"Courageous humanitarian workers have been now travelling for days to open a new corridor from Aleppo in the west to Qamishli," Jan Egeland, head of the UN-backed aid taskforce for Syria, told reporters in Geneva yesterday.

"We are hopeful that we will be able to reach that place very soon now, within hours hopefully," he added.

Humanitarian workers have faced daunting challenges in responding to the crisis in Raqa, where the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces are battling to oust IS.

UNICEF REPORT ON DEVELOPED WORLD

One in five children lives in relative poverty

AFP, Paris

One in five children in rich countries lives in relative poverty, according to a Unicef report published yesterday that put the US and New Zealand among the world's worst performers for youth well-being.

Nearly 13 percent of children in those countries lack access to sufficient safe and nutritious food, the report said, with that number rising to 20 percent in the US and Britain.

"Higher incomes do not automatically lead to improved outcomes for all children, and may indeed deepen inequalities," said Sarah Cook, director of the Unicef Innocenti research office that published the study.

"Governments in all countries need to

take action to ensure the gaps are reduced and progress is made," she said.

The "Report Card" took into account factors such as education, mental health, alcohol abuse, economic opportunities and the environment to rank 41 high-income countries for overall youth well-being.

Germany and the Nordic countries topped the list while Romania, Bulgaria and Chile came in at the bottom, with New Zealand and the US in 34th and 37th place respectively.

The US had relatively low scores in terms of poverty, hunger, health, education and inequality.

New Zealand performed particularly badly in terms of adolescent mental health, with the highest suicide rate in the world for people aged 15 to 19 -- almost three times the average for the countries surveyed.

