

UK sets out Brexit bill to end EU membership

AFP, London

The British government yesterday published a draft law that would formally put an end to Britain's membership of the European Union, as a top official warned the country was unprepared for Brexit in less than two years' time.

The new bill will repeal the 1972 law in which Britain became an EU member and convert an estimated 12,000 existing EU regulations into British law, ending the supremacy of EU law in Britain.

"This bill means that we will be able to exit the European Union with maximum certainty, continuity and control," Brexit Secretary David Davis said in a statement.

But Prime Minister Theresa May is braced for a battle over the bill, which also gives ministers powers to amend the EU laws as they are transferred without full parliamentary scrutiny.

These so-called "Henry VIII" powers will be limited for two years, but opposition parties have warned they will not allow the government to use the bill to push through policy changes.

May's Conservative Party lost its majority in the June 8 election, leaving it dependent on the small Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party to win votes in parliament.

The prime minister, who yesterday marked one year since taking office after last year's referendum to leave the EU, remains vulnerable and questions remain over how long she can stay.

As the bill was published, opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was in Brussels to offer his own Brexit vision to EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier.

May's government began the two-year withdrawal process on March 29, setting Britain on an uncharted journey.

Extricating Britain from four decades of membership of the bloc is no small task: the new European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is one of eight Brexit bills the government will introduce.

NEWS IN brief

CBS, BBC announce newsgathering tie-up

AFP, Washington

CBS News and the BBC yesterday announced a new editorial and newsgathering partnership that aims to boost their global strength against rivals such as CNN. The US and British television news giants will share video, editorial content, and other resources in New York, London, Washington and around the world, according to a joint statement.

Japan flood death toll rises to 30

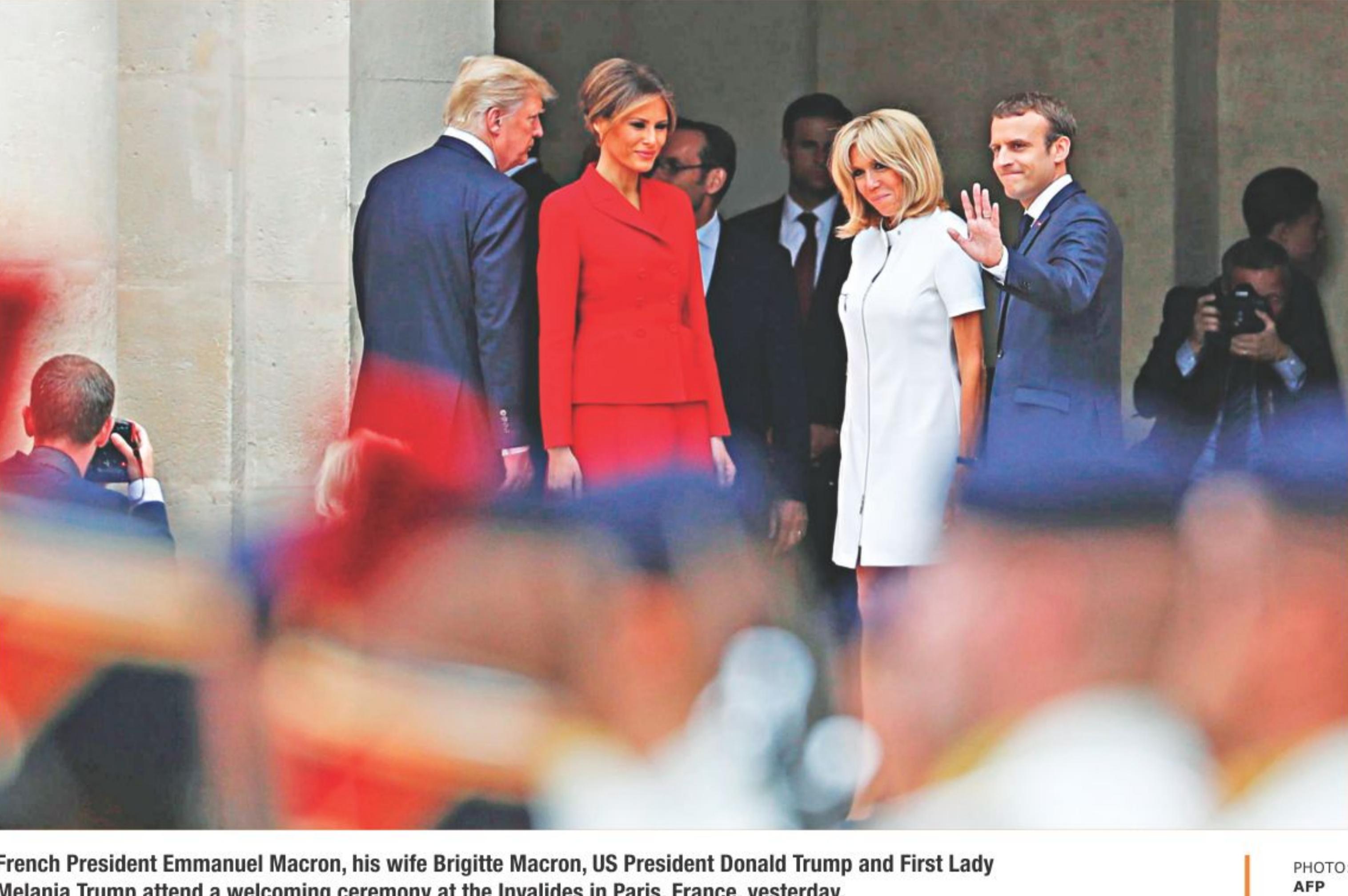
AFP, Tokyo

The death toll from heavy rains and flooding in Japan's south has risen to 30, officials said yesterday, while rescue workers continued their efforts to find survivors. Heavy seasonal rains last week caused severe flooding that tore up roads and destroyed houses on the southern island of Kyushu, with hundreds of thousands of people forced to flee their homes.

14 dead in twin Cameroon blasts

AFP, Yaounde

Two bombers blew themselves up in northeastern Cameroon killing 14 people and injuring 30 people in an attack likely staged by Boko Haram jihadis, security sources said yesterday. The bombings, which took place on Wednesday evening in Waza near the Nigerian border, targeted a busy area in the market town, the sources said. Though Boko Haram was born in Nigeria, the Islamic State-affiliated group has carried out frequent attacks in Cameroon, Chad and Niger, prompting the formation of a regional force to back.



French President Emmanuel Macron, his wife Brigitte Macron, US President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump attend a welcoming ceremony at the Invalides in Paris, France, yesterday.

200 green activists murdered in 2016

AFP, Paris

At least 200 environmental campaigners and protectors -- 40 percent from indigenous tribes -- were murdered around the world in 2016, the deadliest year on record, the watchdog organisation Global Witness said yesterday.

The grim tally, double the number slain two years earlier, is the largest since the NGO began tracking such violence in 2002, it reported.

The real number is probably higher as some killings go undocumented.

Fatal attacks against activists have become more widespread, occurring in 24 countries in 2016, compared to 16 the year before.

Brazil, Colombia, and the Philippines accounted for more than half of the confirmed deaths, followed by India, Honduras, Nicaragua, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Bangladesh.

Sixty percent of those murdered were from Latin America.

Of the 100 killings that could be traced to specific industrial sectors, a third were linked to mining and oil operations, and a fifth each to logging and agribusiness.

Hydroelectric dams can also be a source of tension. On March 2, 2016, gunmen burst into the home of Honduran activist Berta Caceres and shot her dead.

"The mother of four lost her life because she opposed the construction of the Agua Zarca hydropower dam on her community's land," said the report. The UN Environment Programme posthumously made Caceres one of its "Champions of the Earth" in recognition of her advocacy of sustainable development.

PHOTO:

AFP

TRUMP IN FRANCE

Russia clouds Paris trip

AFP, Paris

France yesterday rolled out the red carpet to welcome Donald Trump on a presidential visit laden with military pomp that the White House hopes will offer respite from a growing scandal back home.

The US president's brief 24-hour trip to the French capital coincides with celebrations for Bastille Day, France's national day which is marked on Friday, and the 100th anniversary of US involvement in World War I.

Accompanied by First Lady Melania Trump, the 71-year-old stepped onto French soil for the first time as president hoping the visit will distract from weighty allegations that his family and inner circle colluded with Russia to win the 2016 US election.

The scandal has put his son and top aides in legal jeopardy, cast a pall over his efforts to remake the political agenda and may imperil his presidency.

During the brief visit, Trump -- who sees himself as a transformative figure in US history -- will be the guest of honour for today's Bastille Day festivities that mark a pivotal point in the French Revolution.

This year's event -- featuring 63 planes, 29 helicopters, 241 horses and 3,720 soldiers -- also coincides with the centenary of America entering World War I.



More than 50,000 Americans died in what then-president Woodrow Wilson described as the "war to end all wars," a conflict that forged the trans-Atlantic alliance in steel.

On the eve of the parade, Trump will visit Napoleon's tomb, hold talks with French President Emmanuel Macron and share a Michelin-starred dinner atop the Eiffel Tower.

Talks between the two leaders are expected to focus on joint efforts to combat the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria, where American and French troops are in action side-by-side.

Macron, 39, is hoping to use the weight of history and French grandeur to charm the unpredictable Trump.

But it remains to be seen whether the all the frills and delicate cuisine of acclaimed chef Alain Ducasse will woo this steak-and-ketchup president.

Trump may struggle to stop his mind wandering back to explosive emails in which his oldest son Donald Trump junior appeared to embrace the offer of dirt on Hillary Clinton from Russian interlocutors.

Shortly before leaving Washington, he had to parry criticisms that his administration was in disarray and his legislative agenda on the rocks.

Trump and Macron appear to have little in common, with their views at odds on everything from globalisation to immigration.

Liu Xiaobo dies in custody

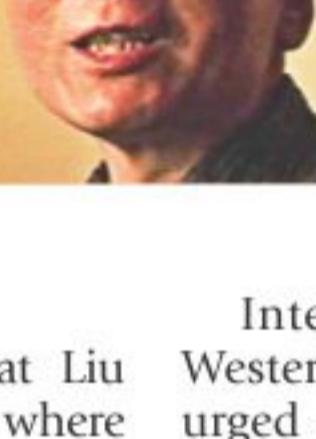
Becomes first Nobel Peace laureate to die such death since 1938

AFP, Shenyang

China's Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo died yesterday after a battle with cancer, remaining in custody until the end as officials ignored international pleas to let him spend his final days free and abroad.

The prominent democracy advocate died aged 61, more than a month after he was transferred from prison to a heavily-guarded hospital to be treated for late-stage liver cancer.

Liu's death puts China in dubious company as he became the first Nobel Peace Prize laureate to die in custody since German pacifist Carl von Ossietzky, who passed away in a hospital while held by the Nazis in 1938.



International tributes poured in for a "hero" of democracy while human rights groups accused the government of "cruelty".

"We find it deeply disturbing that Liu Xiaobo was not transferred to a facility where he could receive adequate medical treatment before he became terminally ill," the Nobel committee said in a statement.

"The Chinese government bears a heavy responsibility for his premature death."

The legal bureau in the northeastern city of Shenyang said on its website that Liu

succumbed to multiple organ failure, three days after being taken into intensive care at the First Hospital of China Medical University. The official Xinhua news agency, which had not mentioned his hospitalisation, reported his death in English.

Shortly after the announcement, the street in front of the hospital was nearly empty, with a dozen plainclothes men standing guard just outside a gate.

The writer's death silences a government critic who had been a thorn in the side of the authorities for decades and became a symbol of Beijing's growing crackdown on dissenting voices. Liu was detained in 2008 after calling for democratic reforms and he was sentenced to 11 years in prison for "subversion" a year later.

At the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo in 2010 he was represented by an empty chair.

International human rights groups, Western governments and local activists had urged authorities to free Liu and grant his final wish to be treated abroad.

"The Chinese government's arrogance, cruelty, and callousness are shocking -- but Liu's struggle for a rights-respecting, democratic China will live on," said Human Rights Watch's China director Sophie Richardson.

Iraq punishing IS families: HRW

REUTERS, Erbil

Human Rights Watch has accused Iraqi security forces of forcibly relocating at least 170 families of alleged Islamic State members to a closed "rehabilitation camp" as a form of collective punishment.

"Iraqi authorities shouldn't punish entire families because of their relatives' actions," said Lama Fakih, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch.

"These abusive acts are war crimes and are sabotaging efforts to promote reconciliation in areas retaken from ISIS."

Islamic State is also known as ISIS. An Iraqi military spokesman was not immediately available for comment.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has announced victory over Islamic State in Mosul, ending three years of jihadist rule in the stronghold of their self-proclaimed caliphate.

Iraq's government now faces the task of preventing revenge attacks against people associated with Islamic State that could, along with sectarian tensions, undermine efforts to create long-term stability in the country.

The camps for so-called ISIS families have nothing to do with rehabilitation and are instead de facto detention centers for adults and children who have not been accused of any wrongdoing," Fakih said. "These families should be freely permitted to go where they can live safely."



Wounded Syrians rest on the front line in eastern Raqa yesterday, during an offensive to retake the city from Islamic State (IS) group fighters. The US-backed coalition has captured around 30 percent of Raqa city since it entered the IS bastion in June after a months-long operation to capture territory in the surrounding province.

CORRUPTION PROBE

Brazil's Lula gets 10 years in jail

AFP, Brasilia

Brazil's former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva was sentenced to nearly 10 years in prison for graft in a stark fall from grace for the iconic leftist leader.

Lula, who ruled Brazil from 2003-2010, was convicted and handed a 9.5-year prison term on Wednesday for accepting a luxury seaside apartment and \$1.1 million, the latest twist in a giant corruption probe engulfing Latin America's largest economy.

But anti-corruption judge Sergio Moro said the 71-year-old Lula would remain free pending an appeal -- something his lawyers immediately said they would lodge.

"We are appealing and will prove his innocence," the lawyers said in a statement sent to AFP.

The conviction nevertheless landed a heavy blow on the prospect of Lula making a political comeback in presidential elections due in October next year.

The verdict also sent a dramatic message to much of Brazil's political class that they, too, risked falling afoul of the anti-graft drive.

Even the current president, Michel Temer, has been charged with taking bribes and several of his ministers have resigned after corruption claims were made.

The sea change has come about because of Operation "Car Wash," a sweeping probe looking into a giant embezzlement and kickbacks scheme involving state-owned oil group Petrobras, construction firms and several political parties -- Lula's Workers' Party chief among them.

But while many Brazilians welcome the long-overdue clean-up, the uncertainty is hobbling their country's struggle to exit from a historic recession.

EU hauls Poland to top court over ancient forest logging

AFP, Brussels

The EU yesterday took Poland to the bloc's top court over logging in the ancient Bialowieza forest, a UNESCO World Heritage site covering some of Europe's last remaining primeval woodland.

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, "refers Poland to the Court of Justice of the EU and requests interim measures to stop logging operations in one of Europe's last remaining primeval forests," a statement said.

Bialowieza, straddling Poland's eastern border with Belarus, includes one of the largest surviving parts of the ancient forest that covered the European plain 10,000 years ago.

It also boasts unique plant and animal life, including the continent's largest mammal, the European bison.

The Polish government has said it authorised the logging, which began in May last year, to contain damage caused by a spruce bark beetle infestation and to fight the risk of forest fires.

But scientists, ecologists and the European Union have protested and activists allege the logging is a cover for commercial cutting of old-growth forests.

Poland's environment ministry said it was "glad that the case will go to the European Union's Court of Justice" where it will show that the logging activity "is in line with the law."

Europe's executive branch gave Polish authorities one month rather than the usual two to address its concerns about the forest, citing the "urgency of the situation".

Pak gripped by 'fontgate' scam

PM's daughter accused of document forgery in graft case

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

A typeface is at the heart of a Pakistani scandal after investigators accused Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's daughter of presenting forged documents to a corruption probe against the Sharif family.

Microsoft's Calibri font was used to type certified papers naming Maryam Nawaz as a trustee of several high-end flats in central London.

But the papers were dated a year before Calibri was in widespread commercial use.

The properties, bought using offshore companies, are at the centre of a case against the Sharif family, with authorities and the opposition questioning the legitimacy of funds used to buy the apartments.

Maryam Nawaz, Sharif's political heir, claimed she did not own the flats.

In a report issued earlier this week, investigators tasked by Pakistan's Supreme Court to look into the allegations said the documents she submitted were "falsified" as they were dated February 2006 and the font in which they were typed in was not released until 2007.

The controversy over the flats erupted last year with the Panama Papers leaks and could unseat Sharif.

The joint investigative team (JIT) based its conclusion on an assessment by London's Radley Forensic Document Laboratory.



"[In] my opinion the document in question was produced much later," he said.

De Groot said he began designing Calibri in 2002 and sent the finalised version to Microsoft in 2004. After that, he said, it was used in beta versions that would have required "serious effort" to obtain.

Maryam Nawaz, herself a regular Twitter user, has not yet commented publicly on the Calibri claim, though she vowed the JIT report itself would be "decimated" in court.