



People leave the beach with their belongings as a fire burns a forest behind them in Bormes-les-Mimosas, southeastern France, yesterday. At least 10,000 people, including thousands of holidaymakers, were evacuated overnight after a new wildfire broke out in southern France, which was already battling massive blazes, authorities said. PHOTO: AFP

MIGRANT RELOCATION PLAN

EU ups pressure on rebel east block

AFP, Luxembourg

The European Union yesterday stepped up pressure on rebellious eastern states to take in their fair share of refugees under mandatory quotas adopted at the height of the migrant crisis.

Hungary and Slovakia looked set to see their appeal against the plan rejected after the advisor to the EU's top court said the quotas were a fair way of easing the pressure on Greece and Italy.

The European Commission meanwhile took its landmark legal action against Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to the next level over their refusal to take in any asylum-seekers under the system.

Judges also upheld the bloc's rules saying that asylum claims must be dealt with by the country where refugees first land. They said Croatia must accept migrants deported back from Austria and Slovenia.

A wave of people fleeing the war in Syria and conflict and poverty in other Middle Eastern and African countries in 2015 triggered Europe's biggest migration crisis since World War II.

EU Migration Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos called on the bloc to complete the plan to relocate 160,000 refugees from frontline Mediterranean states. But only 24,000 have been taken in by other member states for processing since the plan was agreed in 2015.

He said Brussels was now taking forward legal steps against the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland "for failing to meet their legal obligations on relocation" after they failed to meet a one-month deadline to respond to the EU's concerns.

Floods kill 25 more in Gujarat

AFP, Ahmedabad

The bodies of 25 people, including 17 members of a single family, were pulled from the mud yesterday as the death toll from major flooding in Gujarat climbed towards 120, an official said.

Authorities found the bodies in two villages in hard-hit Banaskantha district, Gujarat, as floodwaters receded, said assistant superintendent of police Aksharaj Makwana.

Gujarat's state emergency authority said Wednesday at least 12 other bodies were found overnight as rescue crews sifted through communities devastated by heavy monsoon flooding.

Apart from Gujarat, the northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam have been hard-hit by monsoon flooding, while pockets of the eastern states of Odisha and Bihar have also been affected.

Taliban attack on Afghan army base kills 26 troops

AFP, Kandahar

At least 26 Afghan soldiers have been killed in a Taliban attack on a military base in southern Kandahar province, the defence ministry said yesterday, the latest blow to the country's struggling security forces.

The Afghan air force said it carried out strikes backing up soldiers on the ground during the hours-long attack on the base, which began late Tuesday and ended in the early hours of Wednesday.

At least 13 soldiers were also wounded in the attack, MOD spokesman General Dawlat Waziri said. The Afghan forces "bravely resisted", he added, killing more than 80 insurgents.

The camp was located in the remote Karzali area of Kharrez district, near the border with restive Helmand, where the Taliban hold vast swathes of territory.

"We conducted multiple airstrikes killing dozens of them. Our helicopters transported wounded soldiers to hospitals in Kandahar," said General Raziq Shirzai, the provincial air force commander.

One senior army source said up to 12 soldiers are still missing following the assault, which he described as a "very heavy attack".

The insurgents stole guns and vehicles as

they retreated, he said.

Residents described hearing the airstrikes, and said the attack was launched by a 30-strong convoy carrying "hundreds" of Taliban who assaulted the base from multiple directions.

The resurgent Taliban have been ramping up their campaign against beleaguered government forces, underscoring rising insecurity in the war-torn country during the summer fighting season when the warmer weather tends to spur an increase in militant attacks.

Afghan security forces -- beset by a high death toll, desertions and non-existent "ghost soldiers" on the payroll -- have been struggling to beat back the insurgents since US-led NATO troops ended their combat mission in December 2014.

Casualties among Afghan security forces soared by 35 percent in 2016, with 6,800 soldiers and police killed, according to US watchdog SIGAR.

The insurgents have carried out more complex attacks against security forces in 2017, with SIGAR describing troop casualties in the early part of the year as "shockingly high".

In April at least 135 soldiers are believed to have been killed on a base outside the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, one of the deadliest ever Taliban attacks on a military installation. Some sources put the toll as high as 200.

Is US top diplomat mulling to resign?

State Dept denies report as unrest bubbles among Trump's key aides

AGENCIES

Frustration is mounting among leading foreign policy officials in President Donald Trump's administration as they chafe at some policy and bureaucratic defeats and complain they lack independence to do their jobs, officials say.

The clash between internationalists urging the traditional US leadership role in the world and advocates of an "America First" approach has worn down foreign policy and intelligence professionals inside the government, according to the officials.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has told friends he will be lucky to last a year in his job, according to a friend, while two officials said national security adviser HR McMaster was frustrated by what he sees as disorganization and indiscipline on key policy issues inside the White House.

A source familiar with the situation told Reuters that Tillerson was "very upset at not having autonomy, independence and control over his own department and the ability to do the job the way the job... is traditionally done."

But the State Department on Tuesday said Tillerson does not plan to step down, quashing reports citing differences with the White House.

CNN reported that Tillerson planned to leave by year's end, which spokeswoman Heather Nauert flatly denied.

Pressed about Tillerson's light schedule in recent days, Nauert said the secretary was "just taking a little time off."

CNN said that among Tillerson's growing differences with the White House were fresh debates over Iran policy and personnel, as well as President Donald Trump's chaotic



and confusing foreign policy approach.

Many US ambassadorial and management posts have not been filled, with diplomats and experts fretting they could be next on the budget chopping block.

Tillerson scored a policy win last week when the administration certified, albeit reluctantly, that Iran was complying with the 2015 nuclear deal. He was upset, however, by fierce internal criticism from Trump, as well as his chief strategist, Steve Bannon, and White House aide Sebastian Gorka, over the decision, said another US official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Following last month's move by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt to boycott Qatar, Tillerson publicly asked the nations to ease their blockade, and put the onus on both sides to end the crisis.

Less than 90 minutes later, Trump accused Qatar of being a "high level" sponsor of terrorism and suggested he had helped plan the Qatar action with Arab leaders.

While circumspect, Tillerson talked about the challenges of his new job earlier this month, telling reporters that it differed from his former role as chief executive of Exxon Mobil Corp, where "I was the ultimate decision-maker. That always makes life easier."

"I knew what to expect and we had very long-standing disciplined processes and decision-making," he said. "Those are not the characteristics of the United States government."

INDIA-CHINA STANDOFF OVER DOKLAM PLATEAU



Risks of conflict remain

AGENCIES

China has warned India it is willing to defend territory "at all costs" and it should not harbour any "unrealistic illusions" over a border dispute that threatens to boil over into an open conflict.

This week China's Ministry of National Defense spokesman Wu Quian said Chinese border troops would step up "targeted deployment and training" in a remote region between the two countries.

He said India "should not leave things to luck and not harbour any unrealistic illusions" about China's commitment to defending its territory or push it with the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

"Shaking a mountain is easy but shaking the PLA is hard," he said.

The two countries remain locked in a bitter stand-off over the Doklam Plateau, known as Donglang in China which is run by Bhutan.

India supports Bhutan's claim over the land, however Chinese soldiers recently arrived to build a mountain road in the area that India fears could leave it vulnerable.

After Chinese bulldozers moved in, India sent troops to evict them, leading to video leaked online of soldiers shoving one another. The US is now urging both sides to work together to prevent what could become a major regional dispute.

Beijing has made virtually daily warnings to its neighbour over the deadlock on a remote Himalayan plateau, where Indian and Chinese troops have been locked in a tense face off.

Indian Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar said last week that China is being unusually aggressive in the month-old border dispute with India that shows no sign of easing.

The dispute concerns land near where the boundaries of China, India and Bhutan meet. China has alleged that Indian troops are on its territory. Bhutan and India say the area -- known as the Doklam plateau in India and Donglang to China -- is Bhutanese.

And Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj praised tiny Bhutan for standing up to China

in the row. Swaraj reaffirmed that India's security could be jeopardised if China takes over the zone. Bhutan has no diplomatic relations with China and coordinates its relations with Beijing through New Delhi.

The Doklam Plateau is a strategic area for India, essential to maintaining its control over a land corridor known as the "chicken's neck" that connects India's mainland with its remote northeastern states.

India has said the Chinese road project threatens its access to the corridor, while China has questioned why India should even have a say in a matter that concerns only Beijing and Bhutan.

India's army chief warned earlier this month that India's army was capable of fighting "2 1/2 wars" if needed to secure its borders. China has said it will hold talks with India only after Indian troops are withdrawn from the disputed territory.

China and India have a number of border disputes, although the section currently in question is generally regarded as stable.

The two fought a border war in 1962 over Arunachal Pradesh. China refers the 90,000 square

kilometres area as "Southern Tibet". In 2014, hundreds of Indian and Chinese troops faced off on the de facto border known as the Line of Actual Control that runs along the north-west Indian region of Ladakh.

The Doklam stand-off is the latest of many irritants dogging relations between the world's two most populous nations.

For years, India has watched uneasily as China vigorously woos Bhutan and other, smaller countries in India's traditional sphere of influence, including Nepal, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

China, meanwhile, has been frustrated with India's refusal to sign onto a massive effort to build railways, ports and roads reaching from Asia to Europe and the Middle East.

The project includes a China-Pakistan economic development program aimed at absorbing as much as \$46 billion in investment, most of it from Chinese banks.

And Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj praised tiny Bhutan for standing up to China



Israeli police officers scuffle with Palestinians as the police try to detain them in the West Bank city of Hebron, yesterday. A tense standoff was underway between Israel and Muslim worshippers at a Jerusalem holy site yesterday despite the removal of metal detectors.

PHOTO: REUTERS

UK to ban sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2040

AFP, London

Britain yesterday said it will outlaw the sale of new diesel and petrol cars and vans from 2040 in a bid to cut air pollution but environmental groups said the proposals did not go far enough.

Environment minister Michael Gove announced the move as part of the government's keenly-awaited £3 billion (\$3.9 billion, 3.4 billion euro) air pollution plan, which will demand that councils propose measures by March next year to reduce nitrogen dioxide (NO2) levels.

The ban on petrol and diesel cars as well as vans follows a similar proposal by the French government, and will also include hybrid vehicles that have an electric motor and a petrol or diesel engine.

Britain's High Court demanded that the government produce plans to tackle illegal NO2 pollution, largely caused by diesel emissions, and a draft report was published in May, but the full report was delayed by last month's snap general election.

They want Qatar to cut back ties with Iran, close down a Turkish military base in Qatar and shut the Al Jazeera TV channel, which they view as critical of their governments.

Disappointing surprise

Qatar reacts to Saudi terror list amid row

REUTERS, Doha

Qatar yesterday said a decision by four Arab states to add 18 groups and individuals allegedly linked to Doha to their "terrorist" lists was "a disappointing surprise" and that it was doing all it could to fight extremism.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain put further nine entities based in Yemen and Libya and nine people from several Arab countries on the blacklist, saying all were associated with Qatar.

"(The new list) comes as a disappointing surprise that the blockading countries are still pursuing this story as part of their smear campaign against Qatar," Sheikh Saif Bin Ahmed al-Thani, director of the Gulf kingdom's Government Communications Office, said in a statement sent to Reuters.

"This latest list provides further evidence that the blockading countries are not committed to the fight against terrorism. As we have previously stated, all individuals with links to terrorism in Qatar have been prosecuted."

Sheikh Saif said Qatar constantly reviews its anti-terror laws to "remain on the front foot in the fight against extremism and terror financing".

The four countries severed relations with Qatar on June 5, accusing the major gas-exporting Gulf state of financing terrorism, meddling in the affairs of Arab countries and cozying up to their arch-rival Iran.

They want Qatar to cut back ties with Iran, close down a Turkish military base in Qatar and shut the Al Jazeera TV channel, which they view as critical of their governments.

Qatar and Turkey have been important backers of the Muslim Brotherhood movement that has challenged entrenched Arab rulers. Qatar, however, said last month that charges of support for Islamist militancy "hold no foundation in fact".

Nitish Kumar resigns as Bihar CM

May forge new alliance with Modi

REUTERS, New Delhi

Nitish Kumar, the chief minister of India's big northern state Bihar and once seen as a potential challenger to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, quit yesterday in a move that could shake up national politics.

The abrupt resignation followed a falling out with Kumar's coalition partner, Lalu Prasad Yadav, and torpedoed a state alliance that dealt Modi's nationalist party a rare regional defeat in an election less than two years ago.

"The situation is such that it is impossible to work any more," Kumar said into a scrum of TV cameras after tendering his resignation to the regional governor in the state capital, Patna.

The row centred around the role of Yadav's son as a



regional minister, but its political ramifications could be far broader.

Kumar's grand alliance was seen by some leaders of India's political opposition as a possible template to challenge Modi at the 2019 national vote.

It was not immediately clear whether Kumar's resignation would trigger an election in the northern state or whether indeed he might team up with Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which is the main opposition party in the state legislature.

In a volley of tweets, Modi praised Kumar for fighting corruption, saying that India's 1.25 billion people "welcome and support his honesty."