



Muslims attend a demonstration in Granada on August 23, 2017 in protest against a surge in anti-Islamic hate crimes following last week's deadly attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils. The protest was called after the city's main mosque was attacked with flares on August 19, 2017 by a handful of members from a far-right group. One week on from two vehicle rampages in Spain, police Thursday probed the international connections of a terror cell after a suspect admitted the jihadists were targeting monuments in an even bigger attack. PHOTO: AFP

Raqa civilians face 'deadly labyrinth'

Says Amnesty; UN urges halt in fighting

AFP, Beirut

Civilians fleeing the battle to oust the Islamic State group from the Syrian city of Raqa face a "deadly labyrinth", coming under fire from all sides, rights group Amnesty warned yesterday.

Meanwhile, the United Nations called for pauses in fighting against the Islamic State group Raqa to help civilians escape increasingly deadly battles.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters backed by US-led coalition warplanes, has retaken 60 percent of Raqa from the jihadists.

"Now is the time to think of possibilities, pauses or otherwise that might facilitate the escape of civilians," Jan Egeland, head of the UN's humanitarian taskforce for Syria, told reporters in Geneva.

Egeland said any humanitarian pause would of course not involve IS, which is doing its "absolute best to use (civilians) as human shields."

The fighting has proved increasingly bloody for civilians still trapped in Raqa, with one monitor reporting 167 civilians have been killed in coalition strikes in and around the city since August 14.

The UN estimates that up to 25,000 civilians may remain in the city but tens of thousands of others have already fled, risking IS sniper fire and mines.

The US-led coalition says it takes all possible precautions to avoid civilian casualties.

The coalition earlier this month acknowledged the deaths of 624 civilians in its strikes in Syria and Iraq since 2014.



Stay home

Thai ex-PM Yingluck tells supporters ahead of verdict

AFP, Bangkok

Ousted Thai prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra told supporters not to gather outside the country's top court today when it rules whether she is guilty of negligence.

Thailand's first female prime minister, toppled by a military coup in 2014, faces up to 10 years in prison if convicted and a life ban from politics under the new military-drafted constitution.

Thousands of supporters were expected to turn up outside the Supreme Court in northern Bangkok for the ruling, raising the spectre of confrontations with the police.

The junta said it would mobilise more than 4,000 police and army officers to surround the court and warned against mass demonstrations.

In a Facebook post on Thursday, Yingluck told supporters to stay home, fearing people with "ill-intentions" might try and cause trouble for their movement.

"I want all of you to give me support by staying home and monitoring the news to avoid any risk of an unexpected incident by people with ill-intention against the country and us," she wrote.

Yingluck is on trial over her administration's rice subsidy scheme which paid farmers nearly twice the market rate for their crop.

The subsidy scheme handed billions of dollars to her rural voter base but also allegedly led to massive graft and huge stockpiles of unsold rice.

The policy helped spark months of street protests in 2013-14 that called for and eventually secured the overthrow of her government.



Pessimism as Kushner push for ME peace

AFP, Jerusalem

White House aide Jared Kushner yesterday held talks on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the aim of restarting long-stalled peace efforts, but pessimism was high over President Donald Trump's pledge to reach the "ultimate deal".

The visit comes with both Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu not in position to make major concessions, some analysts say, and no details have emerged of how Trump's team would overcome that.

Trump also faces a range of crises in addition to controversies at home that may make it difficult for him to focus on the complexities of a major Israeli-Palestinian peace push.

"We have a lot of things to talk about -- how to advance peace, stability and security in our region, prosperity too," Netanyahu said in brief public remarks as he met Kushner in Jerusalem.

"And I think all of them are within our reach."

Kushner, who is also Trump's son-in-law, said: "The president is very committed to achieving a solution here that will be able to bring prosperity and peace to all people in this area."

The US delegation was to meet Abbas in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday evening.

The visit is part of a regional tour by Kushner, Trump aide Jason Greenblatt and Deputy National Security Adviser Dina Powell. They have also held talks with Egyptian, Saudi, Emirati, Qatari and Jordanian officials.

Palestinian leaders note that the White House has not even said clearly whether its focus will be a two-state solution to the conflict, which has been longstanding US policy.

The two-state solution envisions an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, a concept which has been the focus of international diplomacy for years.

Qatar to restore full ties with Iran

AFP, Doha

Qatar is to restore full diplomatic relations with regional power Iran, its foreign ministry announced Thursday, in a significant move at a time of diplomatic friction within the Gulf.

A statement from the ministry said Qatar aimed to bolster relations between the two countries, which share the world's largest natural gas field.

"The State of Qatar announced today that its ambassador to Tehran will return to exercise its diplomatic duties," read the statement.

Qatar was also seeking to "strengthen bilateral relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran in all fields", it added.

Doha pulled its ambassador from Tehran in January 2016 following attacks on the Saudi Arabian embassy, spurred by Riyadh's decision to execute a Shia cleric in the kingdom.

The decision to restore ties comes as Qatar is locked in a diplomatic impasse with Iran's great regional rival, Saudi Arabia, which has accused Doha of ties to Shiite Iran and support for Sunni Islamist extremist groups.

Qatar denies the accusations.

On June 5, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates severed all diplomatic and trade ties with Qatar in what has become the worst political crisis to grip the Gulf region in decades.

Ironically, the crisis may have pushed Iran and Qatar closer together.

Qatar's move may be seen as provocative among those countries which have cut ties, but Saudi Arabia and its allies had not yet responded.

Dutch 'foil terror attack'

Police say they acted on 'concrete' info to halt concert car plot

AFP, Rotterdam

Dutch police yesterday stepped up a probe into a planned terror attack against a Rotterdam concert by a US rock band, having received a "concrete" tip-off from Spanish authorities.

"There was concrete information from the Spanish police that an attack would be committed on that date, at this place and against this rock band," the port city's police chief Frank Paauw told reporters.

Spain was rocked last week by twin vehicle attacks which killed 15 people and wounded 120, but it remained unclear whether the tip-off to the Dutch came before or after Spanish police began investigating the incidents.

After cancelling a planned concert by the Californian band Allah-Las in Rotterdam, Dutch police swooped on a house in the southern Brabant region before dawn Thursday "and arrested a 22-year-old man regarding the terror threat Wednesday evening in Rotterdam".

They also carried out "an extensive search" of the premises, police said in a statement.

But there were growing doubts that another man, arrested late Wednesday in the port driving a van with Spanish licence plates and carrying gas canisters close to the Maassilo concert hall, was linked to the terror threat.



Top Trump aide's email draws new scrutiny in Russia inquiry

CNN ONLINE

Congressional investigators have unearthed an email from a top Trump aide that referenced a previously unreported effort to arrange a meeting last year between Trump campaign officials and Russian President Vladimir Putin, according to sources with direct knowledge of the matter.

The aide, Rick Dearborn, who is now Trump's deputy chief of staff, sent a brief email to campaign officials last year relaying information about an individual who was seeking to connect top Trump officials with Putin, the sources said.

The person was only identified in the email as being from "WV," which one source said was a reference to West Virginia. It's unclear who the individual is, what he or she was seeking, or whether Dearborn even acted on the request. One source said that the individual was believed to have had political connections in West Virginia, but details about the request and who initiated it remain vague.

The same source said Dearborn in the email appeared skeptical of the requested meeting.

Sources said the email occurred in June 2016 around the time of the recently revealed Trump Tower meeting where Russians with Kremlin ties met with the president's eldest son, Donald Trump Jr, his son-in-law Jared Kushner as well as then-campaign chairman, Paul Manafort.

While many details around the Dearborn email are

unclear, its existence suggests the Russians may have been looking for another entry point into the Trump campaign to see if there were any willing partners as part of their effort to discredit Hillary Clinton.

Dearborn's name has not been mentioned much as part of the Russia probe. But he served as then-Sen Jeff Sessions' chief of staff, as well as a top policy aide on the campaign. And investigators have questions about whether he played a role in potentially arranging two meetings that occurred between the then-Russia ambassador to the US, Sergey Kislyak, and Sessions, who has downplayed the significance of those encounters.

Like his boss, who was a top Trump surrogate on the presidential campaign trail, Dearborn played dual roles last year. He ran Sessions' Senate office and also led the Trump campaign's Virginia-based policy shop, handling congressional relations and crafting policy proposals.

The Trump campaign paid Dearborn more than \$28,000 last year, mostly for "policy consulting" but also to reimburse travel expenses, according to Federal Election Commission filings.

Shortly after Trump's victory, Dearborn emerged as executive director of the Trump transition.

Dearborn was later appointed Trump's deputy chief of staff for legislative, intergovernmental affairs and implementation, cementing his position in the White House as a senior policy aide. He is among the handful of Sessions aides who landed plum jobs in the administration.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (R) shakes hands with his Nepali counterpart Sher Bahadur Deuba prior to a meeting and agreement signing ceremony in New Delhi, yesterday. The Nepali PM is on a five-day state visit to India. PHOTO: AFP



Brazil strips Amazon reserve of its status to allow mining

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Brazil stripped a vast Amazon nature reserve of its protected status in a move that could expand mining in the region, in a decree published Wednesday.

The four million-hectare reserve is home to indigenous people but also rich in gold and manganese.

Established in 1984 under the then military dictatorship, the reserve's protected status restricted mining activities to state companies.

Wednesday's decree stressed that it does not override other existing environmental

protection laws.

But campaign groups such as the World Wildlife Fund have expressed concern about the environmental threat to the reserve from potential mining projects.

A report by the mining ministry in April said that lifting the protected status could provide "access to minerals potentially existing in the region" by letting private companies operate there.

The mining department in Amapa, one of the states home to the reserve, said environmental institutions were supervising the plans.

Where students don't want to be journos

AFP, Veracruz

When Mexican student Carlos David Chavez told his father he wanted to be a journalist, the reaction was dramatic: "They're going to murder you!" he said.

It is an understandable response. Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, with more than 100 murdered since 2006.

The most recent killing was Tuesday, when a small-town investigative reporter named Candido Rios was gunned down with two other victims in the violent state of Veracruz.

The eastern state, which has a nasty history of drug cartel wars and corrupt politics, is the deadliest for journalists: at least 20 have been murdered here since 2010.

Asking questions about multi-billion-dollar mafias or government graft can be a deadly job in Mexico.

That, together with salaries as low as \$300 a month and scarce job opportunities, has made journalism an unpopular career.

"The appetite to be a real reporter, the kind that goes into the field to chase down information, has diminished enormously. Especially for crime reporting," said Marco Malpica, head of the communications department at Veracruz University.

Just 20 percent of his 200 students want to be actual journalists.

"And most of those want to cover sports or finance or be TV anchors," he said.

The university's 63-year-old journalism school has the oldest public program in Mexico,



A woman stays by the coffin with the remains of Mexican journalist Candido Rios during his wake in Hueyapan de Ocampo, Veracruz state, Mexico on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

and has seen applications fall by 35 percent in the past five years.

The country's premier private journalism school, Carlos Septien Garcia, in Mexico City, has seen enrolment drop by nearly 32 percent in the past decade.

The declining number of journalists will have a damaging long-term effect on Mexico's development as a democracy, warns the media watchdog Article 19.

"The absence of a new generation of journalists will leave a void in our history. Official truths will no longer be challenged by other truths," said Ana Ruelas, the group's Mexico director.

Estefani Gamez, an 18-year-old photography student in Veracruz, is one of those enrolled in the state university's communications department. But the last thing she wants to be is a photojournalist.

"I'd end up in a pit, in some mass grave," she said, explaining why she has opted for art photography instead.

Others are still willing to take the risk to chase the truth, give a voice to the voiceless and hold the powerful to account.

Angel Antunez, 18, comes from the Pacific resort town of Acapulco, which has become one of the most violent in Mexico.

He recently arrived at Carlos Septien Garcia Journalism School, dreaming of having his own TV news show some day -- despite the risk in his hometown.

"It's just the way it is. It's like asking a doctor if he's afraid of having a patient die. It eases a bit with experience," he said. "But, obviously, there will always be some fear."