

Brexit battle returns to UK House

British lawmaker yesterday began debating a landmark bill to end Britain's membership of the European Union, with Prime Minister Theresa May gearing up for a major battle.

The bill provides for the repeal on Brexit day of the 1972 European Communities Act that conferred Britain's membership, and also converts estimated 12,000 existing European regulations into British law. Ministers say it is the first step in implementing this year's referendum vote for Brexit, and will provide legal continuity to ensure no "cliff-edge" when Britain leaves the bloc in March 2019.

But critics warn it represents an unprecedented "power-grab" by giving the government broad powers to amend the EU laws as they are transferred without proper parliamentary scrutiny.

A House of Lords committee said it "weaves a tapestry of delegated powers that are breath-taking in their scope and breadth," and the opposition Labour party has vowed to vote against it.

May's Conservative party lost its majority in the House of Commons in a snap election in June, but her alliance with Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party means the first stage of the bill should pass.

However, she is vulnerable to rebellions on her own side as the legislation comes under intense scrutiny in the coming weeks, while at least seven more Brexit-related bills are expected before Britain leaves the EU.

Cabinet divisions over one of the most contentious issues of Brexit, immigration, emerged this week following the publication of a leaked report proposing restrictions on EU workers once Britain ends its membership of labour.

Foreign minister Amber Rudd said she has seen newspapers to be unhappy with the plans, which have been condemned by several business groups as too tough.



An aerial photograph taken and released by the Dutch department of Defense on Wednesday shows the damage of Hurricane Irma in Philipsburg, on the Dutch Caribbean island of Saint Martin. Hurricane Irma showed a trail of deadly devastation through the Caribbean, reducing to rubble the tropical islands of Barbuda and St Martin. Story on page 16.

RUSSIA PROBE Trump Jr grilled by Senate investigators

President Donald Trump's eldest son was questioned behind closed doors yesterday by Senate investigators over possible connections between his father's 2016 campaign and Russia.

Donald Trump Jr, who serves as executive director of the Trump Organization, avoided news cameras and reporters and entered a meeting in the US Capitol complex with investigators of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

He gave an opening statement lasting 10 to 15 minutes, Senate Democrat Dick Durbin told reporters. Trump Jr, 39, became a key figure in the Russia probe after he agreed to a meeting with a lawyer linked to the Kremlin in June 2016.

The meeting at Trump Tower in New York, in which the campaign team was promised dirt on Donald Trump's rival Hillary Clinton, was also attended by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and then-campaign manager Paul Manafort.

TENSION OVER NORTH KOREA'S H-BOMB TEST

Military action 'not inevitable'

Says Trump; China agrees more UN measures against Pyongyang

US President Donald Trump yesterday said that military action against a defiant North Korea after its recent powerful nuclear test was "not inevitable."

Speaking in a White House news conference along with the premier of Kuwait, the president said, "Military action would certainly be an option. Is it inevitable? Nothing's inevitable."

"It would be great if something else could be worked out," he said, while adding that if it comes to military action, "It will be a very sad day for North Korea."

Meanwhile, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi yesterday said that China would support the United Nations taking further measures against North Korea following its recent nuclear test.

However, it remained unclear whether Beijing, the North's key ally, would be willing to back, or enforce, new sanctions at the UN Security Council, where it is a veto-wielding permanent member.

"The development came as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his South Korean counterpart struggled to grind down Russian resistance to a cabinet

"We believe that sanctions and pressure are only half of the key to resolving the issue. The other half is dialogue and negotiation," Wang added.

The comments came after Pyongyang on Sunday triggered global alarm with its most powerful nuclear blast to date, claiming to have successfully tested a hydrogen bomb.

China, which is the North's biggest diplomatic and economic support, is seen as key to efforts to convince Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons programme.

Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang clarified later that China would support the consensus of the UN Security Council.

"We support the Security Council in making further reactions and taking necessary measures," he said, adding "we hope to resolve this issue through dialogue and consultation."



sanctions on Pyongyang. "Given the new developments on the Korean peninsula, China agrees that the UN Security Council should respond further by taking necessary measures," Wang told a press conference in Beijing.

Tillerson with a 'bad crowd'

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday said that US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had "fallen in with a bad crowd" and was pressuring Moscow's diplomats, four years after the Kremlin gave him an honorary award.

"We have given... Rex Tillerson an Order of Friendship some time ago. But it seems he has fallen in with the wrong crowd and is now steering in a different direction," Putin quipped while speaking at an economic forum in the far-eastern city of Vladivostok.

Putin made the comments after awarding the Order of Friendship to Chinese Vice Premier Wang Yang, remarking on the growth of Chinese investment in Russia.

Tillerson bestowed the same award on Putin in 2013, when he was the chief executive of ExxonMobil. That year the company signed an agreement with Russia's Rosneft to explore for oil and gas in the Russian Arctic.

But that deal was later compromised as US sanctions on Moscow prevented ExxonMobil from moving forward, and the company was slapped with a fine this year for continuing to do business with Rosneft in 2014.

"I hope that the winds of cooperation and friendship will bring him back on the right track in the end," Putin said in Tillerson's presence.

"Despite the fact that he is organising raids on our diplomatic institutions, we are resolving critical issues with his former company... in work on the Sakhalin 1 project."

ExxonMobil owns 30 percent in the Sakhalin offshore project and has had a long-running dispute with Moscow over taxes on profits from the project.

"With these scandals in the background, we have agreed how we are going to resolve the situation... the government will announce this soon," Putin said.

Relations between Moscow and Washington have plunged after Putin ordered the US to sharply pare the number of US diplomats in Russia, while Washington responded by closing the Russian consulate in San Francisco.

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EXTENDING DEBT LIMIT IN BIPARTISAN DEAL

Trump sides with Democrats

President Donald Trump forged a surprising deal with Democrats in Congress on Wednesday to extend the US debt limit and provide government funding until Dec 15, embracing his political adversaries and blindsiding fellow Republicans in a rare bipartisan accord.

Trump, living up to his reputation for unpredictability, met at the White House with congressional leaders from both parties and covered Republicans and US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, who wanted a longer-term debt-limit extension rather than the three-month Democratic proposal the president embraced.

"We could have done a one-year deal today," Mnuchin told reporters aboard Air Force One later in the day en route back to Washington from an event in North Dakota where Trump spoke about taxes.

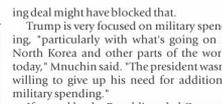
Mnuchin said Trump chose a short-term deal to keep his options open on possibly raising military funding later this year, suggesting a longer-term government fund-

ing deal might have blocked that. Trump is very focused on military spending, "particularly with what's going on in North Korea and other parts of the world today," Mnuchin said. "The president wasn't willing to give up his need for additional military spending."

If passed by the Republican-led Congress, the three-month agreement would avert an unprecedented default on US government debt, keep the government funded at the outset of the fiscal year beginning Oct 1 and provide aid to victims of Hurricane Harvey.

Less than an hour before the meeting, Republican House of Representatives Speaker Paul Ryan had called the Democratic proposal that Trump later embraced a "ridiculous and disgraceful" idea that would "play politics with the debt ceiling."

Even with the three-month extension of the debt limit, a Senate Republican aide told reporters that nothing in the tentative deal would stop the Treasury Department from using its powers to extend the deadline, depending on revenue flow.



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Syria government forces fire artillery shells as they advance in Al-Shula on the southwestern outskirts of Deir Ezzor yesterday, during the ongoing battle against Islamic State (IS) group jihadists. Syria's army are continuing their battle to expel IS from their key stronghold of Deir Ezzor after breaking a years-long siege of a government enclave in the city.

Your tap water may contain plastic: study

People may be ingesting between 3,000 and 4,000 microparticles of plastic from tap water every year, according to a study published Wednesday based on samples from 15 countries.

While the health risks are unknown, the researchers pointed to previous findings that plastic particles can absorb, and release, potentially harmful chemicals and bacteria.

For the survey, 159 tap water samples were analysed, of which 83 per cent were found to contain plastic particles," according to the report compiled by Orb Media, based on texts conducted by researchers from the University of Minnesota and the State University of New York.

While much research has focused on plastic pollution of lakes, rivers, the ocean, beaches, even the air we breathe, less attention has been paid to its presence in human consumables, the team said.

Israel hits Syrian 'chem facility'

Two killed; Damascus warns of dangerous repercussions

Syrian town of Khan Sheikhun in April. President Bashar al-Assad's government has blasted such accusations as "fabrications," and Syria's army yesterday did not mention the SSRC in its statement on the Israeli strikes.

"Israeli warplanes at 2:42 am today fired a number of missiles from the site reportedly used by Syria's allies Iran, Hezbollah and al-Nusra after three-year siege

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group also said the strikes hit "fabrications," and Syria's army yesterday did not mention the SSRC in its statement on the Israeli strikes.

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The site near the Syrian town of Masayaf, between the central city of Hama and a port used by the Russian navy, is reportedly used by forces from Syria's allies Iran and the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah.

Israel has previously carried out strikes believed to be targeting the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah, which fought a devastating war with the Jewish state in 2006.

Yesterday's strike hit a training camp and a branch of the Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC), an institution that Washington has accused of helping develop the sarin gas used in a deadly attack on the

CATALONIA'S INDEPENDENCE BID

Madrid moves to block referendum

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy yesterday vowed to take legal action to block an independence referendum in Catalonia which he branded an "intolerable act of disobedience."

Rajoy gathered his cabinet for an emergency meeting to formally ask Spain's Constitutional Court to once again rule against the plebiscite called for October 1.

He also said all municipalities in Catalonia would be warned over their "obligation to impede or paralyse" efforts to carry out the vote which he said is unconstitutional.

Catalonia's regional parliament, which is controlled by separatists, voted late on Wednesday to push ahead with the referendum in the wealthy northeastern region which includes Barcelona, sparking the country's deepest political crisis in 40 years.

Spain's top prosecutor meanwhile said "criminal charges are being prepared" against the leaders of the Catalan parliament as well as officials in the regional government who prepared the referendum decree and that voting materials would be seized.

The warnings were brushed aside by a Catalan government spokesman, who insisted the referendum would take place despite a "covert state of siege" being imposed by the central government in Madrid.