

Hand over Gulen for jailed pastor

Erdogan tells US

AFP, Ankara

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told the United States yesterday that Turkey could release a jailed American pastor if Washington handed over the Pennsylvania-based Muslim cleric Fetullah Gulen who Ankara blames for last year's failed coup.

The US pastor, Andrew Brunson, has been held by Turkish authorities since October 2016 on charges of being a member of Gulen's group.

Ankara has repeatedly called for Gulen to be extradited to Turkey to face charges of ordering the failed coup bid.

Gulen, who has been living in self-imposed exile since 1999, strongly denies the accusations of involvement.

"They say 'give us the preacher (Gulen) there. Give him to us, and we will try (Brunson) and give him back'," Erdogan said in a televised speech.

The evangelical pastor was initially detained with his wife, suspected of activities "against national security".

Norine Brunson was freed shortly after her detention, but her husband was charged with being a member of the Gulen movement in December.

They ran a Christian church in the Aegean city of Izmir.

Erdogan hit back at criticism of the Turkish judicial system after some American officials urged Ankara not to mix the cases of Gulen and Brunson.

"What does that mean? That you are a judiciary, but that we do not have a judiciary?" Erdogan asked with heavy irony.



Members of the Syrian Democratic Forces fire their arms during a battle against Islamic State (IS) group jihadists to retake the central hospital of Raqa on the western frontline of the city yesterday. Syrian fighters backed by US special forces are battling to clear the last remaining Islamic State group jihadists holed up in their crumbling stronghold of Raqa.

PHOTO: AFP

'The old lunatic Trump'

Pyongyang accuses US president of exploiting Warmbier death; China shuts down North Korean companies

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday accused Donald Trump of exploiting Otto Warmbier's death, calling the US president an "old lunatic" for alleging that the American student was tortured while in Pyongyang's custody.

In a statement issued by the official KCNA news agency, North Korea's foreign minister attacked the US for "luring and pushing" the 22-year-old student into breaking the country's laws.

"Trump and his clique, for their anti-DPRK propaganda, are again exploiting the death of Otto Warmbier, an American college student who had been under reform through labour for the criminal act he committed against the DPRK and died after returning to the US," it said, using the acronym for the North's official name.

Warmbier, who was visiting the North as a tourist in January 2016 when he was arrested and imprisoned by the regime, died in a mysterious case, just days after he was released from custody and sent home in a June 2015 coma.

In the statement, the North accused "an

anti-DPRK conspiracy organisation in the US" of sending Warmbier to the country on a "criminal mission".

"The fact that the old lunatic Trump and his riff-riff slandered the sacred dignity of our supreme leadership, using bogus data full of falsehood and fabrications, only serves to redouble the surging hatred of our army and people towards the US and their will to retaliate thousand-fold," it said.

North Korea said he had suffered no torture during his 17-month detention, a day after an Ohio coroner said he died from lack of oxygen and blood to the brain caused by an unknown injury.

Meanwhile, China said yesterday North Korean companies operating in the country will have to shut down by January as Beijing applies UN sanctions imposed following Pyongyang's sixth nuclear test.

The commerce ministry said the companies, including joint ventures with Chinese firms, have 120 days to close from the date the United Nations resolution was adopted, September 11.

Adding women drivers will reduce crashes

Says Saudi minister

REUTERS, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia's lifting of a much criticised ban on women drivers will reduce the number of car crashes in a country with one of the world's worst traffic-related death rates, its interior minister said yesterday.

King Salman announced the historic change on Tuesday, ending a conservative tradition which limited women's mobility.

Prince Abdulaziz bin Saud bin Nayef, the interior minister who took over from his uncle in June, said security forces were ready to apply traffic laws to men and women.

"Women driving cars will transform traffic safety into a pedagogical practice which will reduce human and economic losses caused by accidents," he was quoted as saying on the ministry's official Twitter feed. He did not elaborate.

Top tech companies asked to testify in Russia probe

Zuckerberg fires back at Trump over Facebook barb

AFP, Washington

The Senate Intelligence Committee has asked top tech companies Google, Facebook and Twitter to testify about Russian interference in US politics, a Senate aide confirmed Wednesday.

The three internet and online social media giants are expected to appear on November 1 in an open hearing on the rising evidence that they were covertly manipulated in a campaign to help Donald Trump win the presidency.

Before that they could also testify in the House Intelligence Committee: Representatives Mike Conaway and Adam Schiff, who lead the committee's Russia probe, announced late Wednesday they too had invited representatives of technology firms to testify on Russian manipulation.

"Congress and the American people need to hear this important information directly from these companies," they said.

Facebook recently revealed that for just \$300,000, apparent Russia-linked buyers placed some 3,000 advertisements on its pages last year that appeared aimed at influ-

encing the election.

Facebook has turned the details of those ads over to investigators. According to reports, the ads sought to boost the Democratic and Republican rivals of then-election frontrunner Hillary Clinton, as well as to sow discord among Americans in ways that would damage Clinton's vote base.

Meanwhile, Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg fired back at US President Donald Trump on Wednesday after he accused the leading social network of being "always anti-Trump."

"Zuckerberg rejected the notion, countering that Facebook is working to ensure 'free and fair elections' with an 'online platform that does not favor one side over another."

Zuckerberg's post at Facebook came after Trump accused the social network of bias in a morning tweet that read:

"Facebook was always anti-Trump. Fake News were always anti-Trump because Fake News. @mytimes(apologized) & @WaPo were anti-Trump. Collusion!"

Trump said Facebook is against him. Liberals say he helped Trump, Zuckerberg said in his post.



PHOTO: AFP

KURDS' POST-REFERENDUM CRISIS

'Collective punishment'

Kurds reject Baghdad moves; Turkey seeks summit with Iraq, Iran; UN offers to help resolve crisis

AFP, Reuters

The Iraqi Kurdish regional government yesterday rejected a measure adopted by Baghdad in the wake of its independence vote as illegal and nothing more than "collective punishment".

"The Kurdistan Regional Government believes all the decisions taken by the Iraqi government and parliament and regards them as collective punishment against the Kurds," it said after a cabinet meeting in the region's capital Arbil.

"These decisions are illegal and unconstitutional... that deny the constitutional rights of the Kurds," it said, reiterating its demand that the KRG was "ready for dialogue to resolve problems" with Baghdad.

In a first concrete move by the central government in retaliation for the non-binding referendum, which delivered a resounding 92.7 percent "yes" for independence, all foreign flights to and from Arbil are to be suspended from Friday.

Iraqi lawmakers on Wednesday passed a resolution calling on Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to "take all necessary measures to maintain Iraq's unity" including by deploying security forces to disputed areas.

They also called for the closure of border posts with Turkey and Iran that are outside central government control.

Meanwhile, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim yesterday said he wants to hold a summit with Iranian and Iraqi leaders to coordinate how to respond to the controversial Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum.

Turkey also said it had stopped training peshmerga forces in northern Iraq in response to the independence vote there.

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The Kurdish peshmerga have been at the forefront of the campaign against Islamic State and been trained by Nato-member Turkey's military since late 2014.



At least 10,000 striking high school and university students rally in Barcelona yesterday to defend Catalonia's right to hold an independence referendum which has been banned by Madrid. "We will vote" and "Independence!" they chanted as they marched along the Gran Via, one of Barcelona's main avenues, blocking traffic.

DNA surgery on embryos removes disease

AFP, Paris

Chinese scientists used an adapted version of a controversial gene-editing technique to correct a disease-causing mutation in human embryos, a medical first cautiously hailed by other experts yesterday.

"The team used a so-called 'base editor' — an adaptation of the CRISPR-Cas9 DNA snipping tool — to correct a single, mutated 'letter' among the three billion in the intricate code of the human genome."

The targeted mutation can cause humans to be born with Tay-Sachs disease, a potentially fatal genetic blood disorder.

"This study demonstrated the feasibility of curing genetic diseases in human embryos by base editor system," the team wrote in the specialist journal Protein & Cell.

The journal sparked controversy when it published a paper in 2015 in which the same authors reported on experiments with CRISPR-Cas9 to modify the haemoglobin gene.

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Progress made in Brexit talks: EU

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Britain has not made "sufficient progress" in Brexit talks with the EU for trade or transition discussions to begin, the EU has said — despite Theresa May's Florence speech having created a "new dynamic" in negotiations.

Speaking at the end of the latest round, EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier told reporters in Brussels that "clarity" had been reached on a number of issues — but warned that the EU-imposed starting line to move to trade talks could still be "months away".

The main stumbling block for the talks appears to still be Britain's divorce bill, which Barnier is insisting on settling before trade talks, or discussions about a transition period, can begin.

David Davis at the start of the week insisted that talks on the divorce bill would be held alongside the negotiation period, but Barnier hit back at the suggestion yesterday, arguing that there was no "logical and coherent link" between the two issues that meant they had to be discussed together.

Striking an optimistic tone but delivering a disappointing message for the UK, Barnier said: "The Prime Minister's speech in Florence has created a new dynamic in our negotiations."

Trump proposes to cut refugee cap to 45,000

Democrats, humanitarian groups blast the decision

REUTERS, Washington

The Trump administration on Wednesday proposed admitting a maximum of 45,000 refugees next year, the lowest cap in decades, which officials said was necessary to ensure US security, although Democrats and humanitarian groups blasted the decision as an abandonment of American moral authority.

"That figure is the lowest cap since the modern US refugee admissions system was established in 1980, and the administration's decision was harshly criticized by refugee advocates who say it ignores growing humanitarian crises around the world. The report also projects slashing funding to the refugee resettlement program by 25 per cent."

"The security and safety of the American people is our chief concern," a US official said in a call with reporters on Wednesday, speaking on condition of anonymity. "We

have every reason to believe that we can ever plan this ceiling."

A second US official said the administration is considering a "wide range of potential measures and enhancements" to refugee vetting, in accordance with a January executive order from President Donald Trump.

The lower refugee cap is a continuation of Trump's hard-line stance on immigration. He made the issue a focus during the presidential campaign, advocating for a wall along the US border with Mexico and the deportation of immigrants in the country illegally, and saying that Syrian refugees fleeing their country's civil war should be sent to the United States.

The proposed refugee limit represents a cut of more than half from the refugee ceiling set last year by former President Barack Obama, and is much lower than the 75,000 limit suggested by refugee advocates this year.



PHOTO: AFP

WORLD CUP WORKERS' SAFETY

Qatar rebuts rights groups' concerns

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Qatar has rebutted a human rights group's report that expressed concern about the safety of workers building stadiums for the 2022 FIFA World Cup amid the scorching summer heat.

The Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy (SC), which is overseeing the organisation of the football tournament in the Gulf state, issued a statement on Wednesday responding to concerns raised by US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW).

The organisation said on Wednesday that Qatar will do more to protect construction workers from intense heat and humidity that often reach levels that are potentially fatal.

Summertime temperatures in Qatar regularly approach 50 degrees Celsius.

While acknowledging the constructive feedback the committee said: "We wholeheartedly refute the suggestion the SC has said 'abdicated responsibility' or that the SC has failed to protect the lives of workers on our projects."

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