

'You need a miracle'

EU warns Britain over October Brexit deadline

AFP, Tallinn
The EU yesterday warned that Britain needs a miracle to unlock the next phase of Brexit talks by next month as it hopes, as leaders debated the post-Brexit future at a summit in Estonia.

The talks in Tallinn were supposed to be devoted to the digital future of Europe, but Britain's departure from the bloc and discussions of French President Emmanuel Macron's plans to reboot the union hijacked the agenda.

The youthful Macron has given new impetus to a year of European soul-searching after the Brexit vote, even as the bloc tries to sort out the nitty-gritty of a divorce deal before Britain departs in March 2019.

European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker warned that there was next to no chance that the divorce talks would get far enough by the end of October to move on to discussions on a future trade deal, a crucial demand of Britain.

"By the end of October we will not have sufficient progress," Juncker said as he arrived for the second day of the summit. "I'm saying there will be no sufficient progress from now until October unless miracles will happen."

EU leaders are set to decide at a summit on October 19-20 whether there has been "sufficient progress" on three key issues: Britain's exit bill, the fate of Northern Ireland, and the rights of EU citizens living in Britain.

However UK Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday told British troops stationed with Nato in Estonia that Britain is "unconditionally committed" to European security



Merkel, Macron pledge to lead EU forward post-Brexit

Britain 'unconditionally' committed to EU security: May

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EU negotiator Barnier and his British counterpart Davis wrapped up a fourth round of Brexit negotiations in Brussels on Thursday saying there had been progress following May's speech.

Macron won backing from Angela Merkel for plans to reform the European Union after Brexit, founded on what the German chancellor called "intense" cooperation between Paris and Berlin.

But many leaders remained wary of ambitious new projects, doubting the appetite of voters for giving up national control and fearing the continued strength of anti-EU sentiment that is taking Britain out of the bloc and saw the far-right win dozens of seats in the German parliament in Sunday's election.

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Israel 'occupying 2pc of West Bank'

Says US ambassador to Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

The US ambassador in Tel Aviv has angered Palestinians with a comment downplaying Israel's 50-year occupation of the West Bank, the second such spat in a month.

In a video interview with Israeli news site Walla, broadcast in full yesterday, ambassador David Friedman said the Jewish state is "only occupying two percent of the West Bank".

It brought an angry response from Palestine Liberation Organisation secretary general Saeb Erekat after an excerpt from the interview was aired on Thursday evening.

"Israel is internationally recognised as the occupying power over 100 percent of Palestine, including in and around occupied east Jerusalem," Erekat said.

He said Friedman's latest comment was "not only false and misleading but contradicts international law, United Nations resolutions and also the historical US position".

"It is not the first time that Mr David Friedman has exploited his position to advocate and validate the Israeli government's policies of occupation and annexation," Erekat added.

Early in September, Friedman caused a stir when in an interview with the Jerusalem Post he referred to the "alleged occupation".

A US official told AFP then that the ambassador's comment "does not represent a shift in US policy".

This time too, the State Department appeared to distance itself from its envoy.

"His comments... should not be read as a way to prejudge the outcome of any negotiation that the US would have with Israel and the Palestinians," spokeswoman Heather Nauert told reporters in Washington on Thursday.

Israel occupied the West Bank in the Six-Day War of 1967 and later annexed east Jerusalem in a move never recognised by the international community. More than 600,000 Israelis now live in settlements in the territory which are regarded as illegal by most of the international community.

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Bodies of Rohingya children who died after their boat capsized as they were fleeing Myanmar, are prepared for the funeral near Cox's Bazar, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

NOBEL'S SHINING STARS WHO LOST THEIR LUSTRE



Shimon Peres Barack Obama Henry Kissinger Lech Walesa

Praised to the skies and bearing great hopes, they went on to disappoint the world: as the case of Aung San Suu Kyi shows, Nobel Peace Prize winners have not always lived up to expectations.

The Norwegian Nobel committee's announcement every October is usually followed by some protest and occasionally a heated debate. Rare are the laureates who are unanimously embraced.

Aung San Suu Kyi was one of those. Honoured in 1991 for her pro-democracy resistance to Myanmar's junta, the wisp "Lady of Rangoon" was long hailed as a saint.

But now, as Myanmar's figurehead leader, she has been broadly criticised for failing to protect the Muslim Rohingya minority from what some world leaders are calling "ethnic cleansing".

"I'm disappointed," said Geir Lundestad, the influential Nobel committee secretary from 1990 to 2014.

"Aung San Suu Kyi was an extremely popular and deserving laureate, heroic under the circumstances, but I can't condone her behaviour toward the Rohingyas," he told AFP.

Suu Kyi's supporters and many observers say she lacks the authority to rein in the military, which ran the country for 50 years and only recently ceded limited powers to her civilian government.

Nevertheless, almost 430,000 people have signed an online petition calling for her Nobel to be withdrawn, and several other well-respected Peace Prize laureates -- Desmond Tutu, Malala and the Dalai Lama -- have urged her to take action to end the violence.

"It's dramatic," admitted Nobel historian Asle Sveen. "For a person who fought so hard for democracy and was so popular for so long to find herself in such a situation, it's unusual."

Unusual, but not completely unprecedented. While Suu Kyi may be in a league of her own, other Nobel stars have also seen their lustre fade over time.

For starters, there's former US president Barack Obama -- "the most similar case," according to Sveen.

His 2009 Peace Prize, awarded just nine months after he took office, was met by many with incredulity but at

the time, he was still at the peak of his popularity.

Eight years later, there are still calls for his prize to be withdrawn, especially on social media, because of his failure to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and his intensive use of drone strikes.

Lech Walesa -- the founder of the Soviet bloc's first independent trade union Solidarity and who won the 1983 Peace Prize -- has repeatedly been accused of collaborating with Communist secret services.

Rejecting the allegations in 2009, he threatened to leave Poland and return his awards.

Long before him, Italian pacifist Ernesto Moneta was criticised for having supported his country's decision to go to war against the Ottoman Empire in 1911, four years after receiving his Nobel.

Twice during the post-war period, the choice of Nobel Peace Prize laureate has been so explosive that some committee members have resigned.

One quit in 1994 to protest against the choice of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat alongside Israeli Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin, a year after the signing of the Oslo Accords.

"He won the Nobel but he dishonoured it. Whether he returns it or not doesn't matter, it must burn his hand when he touches it," fumed former Nobel committee member Berge Furre in 2009 about Peres.

The career politician, who was Israel's president at the time, had defended an Israeli attack on a Gaza school that left more than 40 people dead.

Two others stepped down in 1973 when US secretary of state Henry Kissinger and Vietnamese peace negotiator Le Duc Tho were honoured for reaching a ceasefire -- albeit short-lived -- in Vietnam.

While Le Duc Tho immediately declined his prize, Kissinger accepted his but chose not to go to Oslo to pick it up.

"None of the Nobel laureates is perfect," Lundestad said. "Many of them probably feel an extra responsibility to act in an exemplary fashion, but once the prize has been awarded, the committee can't do anything anyway."

This year's prize will be announced on October 6. SOURCE: AFP



Policemen inspect the site of a stampede at a railway station's pedestrian overbridge in Mumbai, yesterday. Inset, Mother of a stampede victim grieves. The incident killed 22 people and injured dozens more. Story on page 16. PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS IN brief

Trump to attend Asean summit in Philippines

AFP, Washington
President Donald Trump has backed away from a threat to skip the summit with South East Asian leaders in the Philippines later this year. In a statement yesterday, the White House said that Trump will visit Manila as part of a November 3-14 tour that will also include stops in China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and the US state of Hawaii.

Yingluck eyes UK asylum

CNN ONLINE
Thailand's former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra is in London and seeking political asylum in the United Kingdom, a source in her Pheu Thai Party told CNN on Thursday. Thailand's Supreme Court convicted Yingluck on Wednesday of dereliction of duty over a controversial rice subsidy program and sentenced her to five years in prison. She fled country before the verdict.

Navalny detained

AFP, Moscow
Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who aims to unseat Vladimir Putin in presidential elections next year, was detained ahead of a rally yesterday, raising the possibility of a month in jail. In what is the latest attempt to thwart the 41-year-old Kremlin critic's campaign, Navalny was held in his building's entrance hall as he was leaving to get a train to Nizhny Novgorod, a provincial city.

Flight ban takes effect

REUTERS, Erbil /ankara

The last international flight left Erbil airport yesterday as the Baghdad government imposed an air ban in retaliation for an independence vote by Iraqi Kurds that has drawn widespread opposition from foreign powers.

Iraq's Kurds overwhelmingly backed independence in a referendum on Monday, defying neighbouring countries which fear the vote could lead to renewed conflict in the region.

Foreign airlines suspended flights to Erbil and Sulaimaniya in the Kurdish region, obeying a notice from the government in Baghdad, which controls Iraqi air space.

Erbil airport was busier than usual as passengers scrambled to catch the last flights out before the ban went into force at 6.00pm (1500 GMT) yesterday.

Domestic flights are still allowed, so travellers are expected to travel to Kurdistan mostly via Baghdad's airport, which will come under strain

from the extra traffic.

Maintaining the travel curbs is likely to discourage visits by businessmen and Kurdish expatriates, and affect industries including hotels, financial services, transport and real estate.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), meanwhile, refused to hand over control of its border crossings to the Iraqi government, as demanded by Iraq, Iran and Turkey in retaliation for the independence referendum.

As the crisis unfolded, Iraq's top Shia cleric intervened to oppose the secession of the Kurdistan region, adding to pressure on the Kurds in his first directly political sermon since early last year.

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani asked the KRG "to return to the constitutional path" in pursuing self-determination for the Kurdish people, a representative said in a sermon on his behalf.

Turkey, which has already threatened economic sanctions and a military response to any security challenges posed by the referendum result in neighbouring northern Iraq, has maintained a drumbeat of opposition to the Kurdish vote.

After talks in Ankara with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said the referendum was illegitimate and Russia and Turkey agreed that the territorial integrity of Iraq must be preserved.

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KURDISH INDEPENDENCE VOTE

Kurdistan refuses to hand over border crossings to Iraqi govt

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Iraq's top Shia cleric Sistani opposes secession

US cuts embassy staff in Cuba

Warns citizens not to visit

REUTERS, Washington

The United States is cutting its diplomatic presence in Havana by more than a half and will warn US citizens not to visit Cuba because of targeted attacks that have injured at least 21 US personnel, a senior official said yesterday.

"Until the government of Cuba can assure the United States of the safety of US government personnel in Cuba, our embassy will be reduced to emergency personnel so as to minimize the number of US government personnel at risk of exposure," a senior State Department official told reporters.

"Routine visa operations are suspended indefinitely," said the official.

US and congressional officials told Reuters on Thursday Washington was crafting a plan for a drawdown of staff from the Havana embassy in response to unexplained incidents that have harmed the health of some US diplomats there.

The Cuban government has denied any role. But it has so far said it has been unable to determine the cause.

The symptoms of the 21 US embassy personnel harmed included "hearing loss, dizziness, tinnitus, balance problems, visual complaints, headache, fatigue, cognitive issues and difficulty sleeping," the senior State Department official said.

58 Syria govt fighters killed in IS attacks

AFP, Beirut

The Islamic State group killed at least 58 Syrian government troops and militia as the jihadists put up fierce resistance to a Russian-backed offensive against some of its last bastions, a monitor said yesterday.

Most of Thursday's dead came south of the desert town of Sukhna, east of the ancient city of Palmyra, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

IS put out a statement claiming to have killed scores of regime fighters in the area and also released what it said was an audio recording of its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi urging resistance, the first such intervention in nearly a year.

Syrian troops pushed through the vast desert that separates the main cities of the west from the Euphrates Valley this summer and broke a three-year IS siege of government enclaves in the eastern city of Deir Ezzor earlier this month.

Thursday's attacks targeted government forces around Deir Ezzor and on their supply lines through the Sukhna area from the west, the Observatory said.

IRAQ ATTACKS HAWIJA Iraqi forces yesterday launched an assault on the northern town of Hawija, one of the last bastions in the country still held by the Islamic State group.

"A huge military operation has begun to liberate Hawija and its surrounding areas," the operation's commander, Lieutenant General Abdel Amir Yarallah, said in a statement

IS SUICIDE ATTACK IN KABUL

Blast kills 6 near Shia mosque

AFP, Kabul

Six people were killed when a suicide bomber posing as a shepherd blew himself up near a Shia mosque in Kabul on Friday, police said, as Muslims prepared to commemorate a key Islamic event.

At least 20 people were wounded in the Islamic State-claimed attack, which happened in the north of the Afghan capital as worshippers were inside Hussainia mosque, one of the biggest Shia centres in the city, for Friday prayers.

The bomber was grazing a herd of sheep and before reaching his target he detonated himself 140 metres from Hussainia mosque, "General Salim Almas, Kabul's criminal investigative director, told AFP.

Following the attack the Taliban were quick to distance themselves from the bombing. "Today's Kabul attack has nothing to do with us," Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, told AFP.



Farmers are applauded yesterday as they drive their tractors past a university in a protest to show support for the banned referendum on independence from Spain in Barcelona, Spain. More than 2,300 polling stations are ready for the Catalan independence referendum slated for tomorrow but banned by Madrid, the regional separatist government said. PHOTO: REUTERS