



INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM

(From top, clockwise) People wave "Estelada" flags during the closing meeting of the Catalan pro-independence groups and political parties in Barcelona on Friday; People shout and hold up Spanish flags during a demonstration in favor of a unified Spain in Barcelona, yesterday; and Catalan regional police enter a school, one of the designated polling stations.



PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

Catalonia votes today

Police seal off 1,300 polling stations; 'Yes' voters defiant; counter rallies ahead of today's vote raise tensions

AFP, Barcelona

Police in Catalonia had already sealed off half of the 2,315 polling stations in the region mid-yesterday to stop an independence referendum from taking place, the Spanish government said, as separatists remained determined to fight for their right to vote.

Teachers, parents, students and activists in this wealthy northeastern region have leapt into action to defend the vote slated for today, defying Madrid's warnings of repercussions by occupying more than 160 schools designated as polling stations, it said.

Enric Millo, the central government representative in Catalonia, told reporters 1,300 polling stations had already been sealed off.

He said that 163 of those had already been occupied when they were sealed off, which meant those inside were allowed to leave but no one could go in.

AFP reporters, however, visited

several schools occupied by parents, students and locals where people could go in and out freely, indicating there may be more occupied buildings that have yet to be sealed off.

The standoff between the central government and Catalan leaders over an independence referendum opposed by Madrid has morphed into one of the biggest crises to hit Spain since democracy was restored after the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975.

As such, it has Spaniards the country over worried.

In Spain's major cities, Madrid, Barcelona, Sevilla, Santander, Alicante, Valencia and Malaga, thousands protested for Spanish unity.

"We shouldn't have got to this point. We've arrived at a point of no return," said Fernando Cepeda, a 58-year-old engineer, a Spanish flag tied around his waist in front of Madrid's city hall.

Catalan separatist leaders and organisers of 'committees to protect

the referendum" stressed that everyone must remain peaceful.

The referendum has sown divisions among Catalans themselves, with the region deeply split on independence, even if a large majority want to be allowed to settle the matter in a legal vote.

Authorities in Madrid have instructed police to ensure no votes are cast in a referendum that the courts have ruled unconstitutional.

For days, they have been seizing electoral items such as ballot papers while prosecutors have ordered the closure of websites linked to the vote and the detention of key members of the team organising the referendum.

But those for the vote have mobilised.

On Friday, tractors paraded through Barcelona, some decked with the "Estelada", the separatists' flag of red-and-yellow stripes with a white star on a blue chevron.

US slashing of embassy staff will affect ties Says Cuba

AFP, Havana

Cuba on Friday slammed as "hasty" a US decision to withdraw more than half of its embassy staff from Havana due to mysterious "attacks," and warned the move would affect ties.

"We consider the decision announced by the US government today, through the State Department, to be hasty, and it will affect bilateral relations," said the head of North American affairs at Cuba's foreign ministry, Josefina Vidal, quoted on state television.

The attacks of an unknown nature have targeted at least 21 US embassy staff in Havana over the past few months.



Oxford college removes Suu Kyi portrait

AFP, London

The Oxford University college where Aung San Suu Kyi studied yesterday said it had taken down a portrait of the Myanmar leader, a decision that follows widespread criticism of her over the Rohingya crisis.

The portrait, which was on display in the main entrance of St Hugh's College, has been placed in storage and was replaced on Thursday with a new painting gifted by Japanese artist Yoshihiro Takada.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Suu Kyi studied at St Hugh's, graduating in philosophy, politics and economics in 1967 before completing a masters in politics in 1968.

"We received a new painting earlier this month which will be exhibited at the main entrance for a period," the college said in a statement.

"The painting of Aung San Suu Kyi has meanwhile been moved to a secure location."

The university did not say whether the removal was linked to the ongoing crisis in Myanmar's western Rakhine State.

Communal violence has torn through the state since Muslim minority Rohingya militants staged deadly attacks on police posts on August 25.

An army-led fightback has left scores dead and sent around half a million Rohingya fleeing the mainly Buddhist country into neighbouring Bangladesh.

US in direct contact with North Korea

Tillerson, in China, says communication channels open, urges calm

AFP, Reuters

Washington has opened channels to North Korea to find out if the regime is ready to talk about giving up its nuclear weapons, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said yesterday.

Speaking after a day of talks with China's President Xi Jinping and top diplomats, Tillerson told reporters that US officials are in touch with Pyongyang.

The disclosure follows an escalating war of words between US President Donald Trump and North Korean strongman Kim Jong-Un, and Tillerson issued a call for calm.

Asked how he could know whether the North would even contemplate responding to new sanctions by coming to the table, the US envoy said: "We are probing, so stay tuned."

Washington has no diplomatic ties with Kim's autocratic regime, and has been lean-



US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

ing on Beijing to rein in its neighbour's behaviour through tougher sanctions.

But Tillerson said US diplomats do not rely on China as a go-between in overtures to North Korea, and have themselves talked directly through "our own channels."

"We ask," he said. "We have lines of com-

munication with Pyongyang. We're not in a dark situation, a blackout, we have a couple, three channels open to Pyongyang."

"We can talk to them, we do talk to them," he said.

The US has not ruled out the use of force to compel Pyongyang to halt missile and

nuclear tests, and last week Trump threatened to "totally destroy" the country.

But privately senior figures admit the military options do not look promising, with ally South Korea's densely populated capital Seoul in range of the North's artillery.

Tillerson, meanwhile, has been a proponent of a campaign of "peaceful pressure", using US and UN sanctions and working with China to turn the screw on the regime.

But his efforts have been overshadowed by an extraordinary war of words, with Trump mocking Kim as "little Rocket Man" and Kim branding the US leader a "dotard". Several North Korean missiles were recently spotted moved from a rocket facility in the capital Pyongyang, South Korea's Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) reported late Friday amid speculation that the North was preparing to take more provocative actions.

The report cited an unnamed intelligence source saying South Korean and U.S. intelligence officials detected missiles being transported away from North Korea's Missile Research and Development Facility at Sanum-dong in the northern part of Pyongyang.

SYRIA WAR

Air strikes kill 28 civilians in safe zone

AFP, Beirut

At least 28 civilians were killed in air strikes on north-western Syria where a planned safe zone has been overshadowed by a bombing campaign against jihadists, a monitor said yesterday.

Four children were among the dead in the overnight strikes on the town of Armanaz, in Idlib province near the Turkish border, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The Britain-based watchdog had earlier reported 12 dead in the strikes on the town in Harem district around 20 kilometres northwest of the provincial capital Idlib.

It was not clear who was

Respect all, or get out

US general tells cadets after racist campus graffiti

AFP, Washington

The head of the US Air Force Academy has delivered an unequivocal rebuke to bigots after the discovery of racist graffiti on campus, telling them: "You need to get out."

"If you're outraged by those words, then you're in the right place," Lieutenant General Jay Silveria said in an address to cadets, faculty and staff at the academy in Colorado Springs, footage of which has since gone viral.

"You should be outraged not only as an airman, but as a human being," the academy's superintendent said.

Five African-American students at the Academy's Preparatory School found racist comments on dormitory message boards earlier this week.

One posted an image on Facebook showing a whiteboard with "Go home,

nigger" written on it, and parents then alerted faculty.

"That kind of behavior has no place at the Prep School, has no place at USAFA (US Air Force Academy) and it has no place in the United States Air Force," Silveria said.

"If you can't treat someone from another race or different color skin with dignity and respect, then you need to get out," he said.

At the close of his remarks, the general invited those gathered to take out their phones and record his message. If "you need my words, then you keep these words, and you use them and you remember them and you share them and you talk about them: If you can't treat someone with dignity and respect, then get out."

The graffiti -- and Silveria's reply -- came at a time of heightened focus on racism in the United States, a context he noted in his speech.



MILITARY PLANE CRASH IN DR CONGO

30 feared dead

AFP, Kinshasa

A military transport plane belonging to the Congolese army crashed near Kinshasa on Saturday, killing "several dozen" people, military and airport sources told AFP.

The Antonov transport plane had just taken off and had "several dozen people" on board, an airport source told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The plane went down in Nsele, about 100 kilometres (60 miles) to the east of Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the source said.

A local official in the area of the crash told AFP there were "no survivors".

The plane, which had a Russian crew, was carrying "two vehicles and weapons" and military personnel, a source at the army's headquarters told AFP, also speaking on condition of anonymity.

He said there were "between 20 and 30 people" on board when it took off from Ndolo airport in Kinshasa.

A witness at the crash site told AFP he had seen the plane "falling" out the sky shortly before 9:00 am but said there was no sign of any smoke coming from the aircraft.

Referendum 'lacks legitimacy'

US says it supports a united, democratic Iraq

REUTERS, Independent.co.uk

The Trump administration has said it does not recognise the independence referendum in Iraq's Kurdish region -- as tensions flare between the regional government and Baghdad.

Iraqi Kurds overwhelmingly voted in favour of independence in a vote earlier this week. However, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said in a statement "the vote and the results lack legitimacy" and that the US will "continue to support a united, federal, democratic and prosperous Iraq".

The Trump administration maintains that a fractured Iraq could further destabilise the region and make it more difficult to fight terrorism.

Massoud Barzani, the president of Iraq's Kurdish region, is said to have warned that the Kurds may be forced to retaliate if the central government continues to aggressively respond to its referendum.

"We want this to be a peaceful transition but if Baghdad decides not, there is a lot we can also do," said Barzani's spokesperson, Vahal Ali, according to The New York Times.

So far, Iraq's central government has mandated that all international flights to and from Erbil in the Kurdistan Region be suspended and has warned that land borders might also be closed.

Meanwhile, Iranian and Iraqi central government forces are to hold joint military exercises near their borders, Iran's state television reported yesterday, as part of Tehran's effort to support Baghdad after the Kurdish independence referendum.

State television quoted a military spokesman as saying the decision to hold the war games in the next few days was taken at a meeting of top Iranian military commanders which also "agreed on measures to establish border security and receive Iraqi forces that are to be stationed at border posts".

Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan yesterday said Iraqi Kurdish authorities would pay the price for an independence referendum which was widely opposed by foreign powers.

"They are not forming an independent state, they are opening a wound in the region to twist the knife in," Erdogan told members of his ruling AK Party in the eastern Turkish city of Erzurum.

WHY CATALONIA MEANS SO MUCH TO SPAIN

Catalonia, whose leaders are pushing for secession from Spain, is one of the powerhouses of the Spanish economy, buoyed by industry, research and tourism but burdened with a heavy debt.

ECONOMIC HEAVYWEIGHT

Contributing 19 percent of Spain's GDP in 2016, Catalonia rivals Madrid for the distinction of being the richest region in the country. It is fourth in terms of GDP per capita with 28,600 euros (\$33,600), after Madrid, the northern Basque Country and neighbouring Navarra. GDP per capita in Spain overall is 24,000 euros. Like in Madrid, unemployment is also lower than in the rest of the country: 13.2 percent in the second quarter of 2017 compared to 17.2 percent nationally.

TOP EXPORTING REGION

Catalonia is by far Spain's top exporting region, with a quarter of all goods produced there sold abroad in 2016 and in the first quarter of 2017. It attracted some 14 percent of foreign investment in Spain in 2015, in second place after Madrid, which received a huge 64 percent, but far ahead of all the other regions, according to the economy ministry's latest data.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

Since the 1990s Catalonia has invested in research, particularly in bioscience -- genetics, neurosciences, cell biology -- and the sector now represents 7 percent of its GDP. With many cutting-edge hospitals and research centres, including in the nuclear sector with a particle accelerator, the region says it is number one in Europe for pharmaceutical companies per capita. New technology is also very present in Barcelona, which every year hosts the Mobile World Congress. Catalan universities are among the best in the country: of the top five Spanish universities in the widely-watched annual ranking compiled by the independent Shanghai Ranking Consultancy, three are Catalan.

SPAIN'S TOP TOURISM DESTINATION

With its capital Barcelona and Costa Brava beaches, Catalonia is the Spanish region that most attracts foreign tourists and the trend is on the rise. More than 18 million visitors went in 2016, or a quarter of all foreigners who came to Spain. Its airport is the country's second biggest after Madrid.



DEBT THE WEAK LINK

Catalonia's debt represents 35.4 percent of its GDP, which made it the third most indebted region in Spain in the first quarter of 2017, after Valencia and Castilla La Mancha. At the end of June, it stood at 76.7 billion euros. Ratings agencies have given it a low, speculative grade, which means Catalonia is not able to borrow directly on financial markets. So it depends on loans emitted by the Spanish state.

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF INDEPENDENCE

The issue is much debated among both camps, who generally present widely different figures, often based on different methodologies and hypotheses. If independence were to happen, Spain's economy ministry claims that Catalonia would leave the European Union, its GDP would fall 25 to 30 percent and unemployment would double. But some economists believe that the newly-formed republic would stay in the EU, predicting its GDP would remain stable in the short term and rise 7 percent long term. Catalonia's government also says the region would no longer suffer from what it calls a "fiscal deficit", given that the region pays more in taxes to Madrid than it gets back.

PHOTO: AFP