



An aerial view shows houses that were destroyed by a wildfire in Santa Rosa, California. Picture was taken on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

US withdraws from Unesco

AFP, Paris

The United States yesterday said that it was pulling out of the UN's culture and education body, accusing it of "anti-Israel bias" in a move criticised by the head of the Paris-based organisation.

Following years of tension at Unesco, which is in the process of electing a new director-general, US State Department spokesman Heather Nauert announced that Washington planned to withdraw.

"This decision was not taken lightly, and reflects US concerns with mounting arrears at Unesco, the need for fundamental reform in the organisation, and continuing anti-Israel bias at Unesco," she said in a statement.

The United States - one of the body's founding members - has withdrawn once before under president Ronald Reagan, who quit in 1984 over alleged financial mismanagement and anti-US bias in some of its policies.

President George W Bush announced America's return in 2002, but relations soured again in 2011 when Washington pulled the plug on funding to the body after its members voted to admit Palestine as a full member.

Washington opposes any move by UN bodies to recognise the Palestinians as a state, believing that this must await a negotiated Middle East peace deal.

The head of Unesco, Irina Bokova, voiced "profound regret" over the decision, calling it a "loss to multilateralism".

In May this year, Israel was infuriated by a resolution identifying Israel as "the occupying power" in the divide of city of Jerusalem and calling on it to rescind any move changing "its character and status".

The text denounced "all legislative and administrative measures and actions taken by Israel, the occupying power, which have altered or purport to alter the character and status of the Holy City of Jerusalem."

In July, the agency again deflected Palestinians when it declared the Old City of Hebron in the occupied West Bank an endangered World Heritage site.

Tensions soar in Iraq

PM Abadi denies attack plan after Kurdish peshmerga fighters sealed off road links to rest of the country fearing imminent assault

AFP, Abid

Iraq's prime minister yesterday denied an attack on the Kurds was imminent, in a bid to defuse tensions that had prompted Kurdish peshmerga fighters to temporarily seal off road links with the rest of the country.

"We are not going to use our army to fight our people or to make war on our Kurdish citizens or others," Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said.

"Our duty is to preserve the unity of our country, to implement the constitution, and to protect citizens and national forces," he told a meeting of tribal leaders from the western province of Anbar.

The rise in tensions came two weeks after Kurdish voters overwhelmingly backed independence in a non-binding referendum that the central government condemned as illegal.

Iraqi Kurdish forces closed the two main roads connecting Abid and Dohuk with the northern city of Mosul for several hours, a Kurdish military official said.

Kurdish authorities said late Wednesday they

feared Iraqi government forces and allied paramilitary units were gearing up to launch an assault on the autonomous region.

"We're receiving dangerous messages that the Hashed al-Shaabi (paramilitary forces) and federal police are preparing a major attack from

peshmerga positions around Rashad, a village some 65 kilometres (40 miles) southwest of Kirkuk city, a disputed area between the Kurds and Baghdad.

Iraq's Joint Operations Command, which groups all pro-government forces, played down the tensions, expressing confidence that dialogue would resolve the problem.

Asked if there had been movements of Iraqi forces close to peshmerga positions, Colonel Ryan Dillon, spokesman for the US-led coalition battling IS in Syria and Iraq, said: "We don't see that."

Central authorities severed ties between the Kurdish autonomous region and the outside world after the referendum by cutting international air links.

Neighbouring Turkey and Iran, which fear that Iraq's Kurdish moves towards independence could fuel demands from their own sizeable Kurdish communities, have also threatened to close their borders to oil exports.



the southwest of Kirkuk and north of Mosul against Kurdistan," the Kurdistan Regional Government's Security Council said.

Security sources yesterday said that Iraq's elite Counter Terrorism Service and Rapid Response Force had deployed more forces near

IRAN NUKE DEAL

TRUMP'S DECISION LOOMS

REUTERS, Washington

President Donald Trump finds himself under immense pressure as he considers de-certifying the international nuclear deal with Iran, a move that would ignore warnings from inside and outside his administration that it would risk undermining US credibility.

Trump is expected to unveil a broad strategy on confronting Iran this week, likely today. There was always the chance he could still have a last-minute change of heart and certify Iran's compliance with the 2015 accord, which he has called an "embarrassment" and the "worst deal ever negotiated."

Senior US officials, European allies and prominent US lawmakers have told Trump that refusing to certify the deal would leave the US isolated, concede the diplomatic high ground to Tehran, and ultimately risk the unraveling of the agreement. Iran has said it may exit the deal if the US withdraws.

China, signed by the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Russia, China, the European Union and Iran, the deal relieved sanctions on Tehran in exchange for curbing its disputed nuclear program.

The official said Trump has been telling foreign leaders and US lawmakers that his refusal to certify the deal would not slow it up.

De-certifying would not withdraw the United States from the deal but it would give the US Congress 60 days to decide whether to reimpose the sanctions on Tehran that were suspended under the agreement.

White House officials said Trump is expected to announce a broad, more confrontational policy toward Iran directed at curbing its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and financial and military support for Hezbollah and other extremist groups.

Trump has said he believes the nuclear deal is too generous toward Iran and would not stop it from trying to develop a nuclear weapon. He has criticized the agreement's "sunset clauses," under which some restrictions on Iran's nuclear program would expire over time. He also wants to toughen language on ballistic missiles and inspections. IAEA says Iran is complying with the agreement.

European officials have categorically ruled out renegotiating the deal, but have said they share Trump's concerns over Iran's stabilizing influence in the Middle East.

One US official involved in administration said that declining to certify Iran's compliance would probably leave all of the parties to the deal on one side and the United States on the other.

Senior US officials, European allies told Trump that refusing to certify the deal would leave the US isolated

Protesters wave Spanish and Catalan flags during a demonstration called by Catalan Civil Society under the motto "Catalonia yes, Spain too" in Barcelona, yesterday. Spain marked its national day yesterday with a show of unity in the face of Catalan independence efforts, a day after the central government gave the region's separatist leader a deadline to abandon his secessionist bid.



PHOTO: AFP

Truth prevails, 46 years on

In a historic ruling, South Africa court says police murdered anti-apartheid activist in custody

AFP, Pretoria

An anti-apartheid activist who died in police custody 46 years ago did not commit suicide but was murdered by officers, a South African court said yesterday in a historic ruling for campaigners.

The court called for an officer involved in covering up the circumstances of the 1971 death to be investigated as an accessory to murder.

The packed courtroom in Pretoria burst into applause after the judge delivered a damning indictment of how police treated those who opposed white-minority rule.

Ahmed Timol, a 29-year-old campaigner against apartheid, was arrested in Johannesburg in October 1971.

After five days in detention, he died after plummeting from the city's police headquarters.

Officers from the feared security branch that held Timol said at the time he took his own life - a verdict endorsed by an inquest in 1972.

But his family fought the ruling for decades and campaigned



to secure the legal review, which finally began in June.

"Timol did not jump out of the window but was pushed out of the window or off the roof," said judge Billy Mofhele, reading a summary of his 129-page judgement.

"Members of the security branch... murdered Timol." The judge called for security branch officer Ileo Rodrigues, who admitted helping cover up the murder, to be prosecuted.

But he acknowledged that the men who were directly responsible have since died.

Members of the South African Communist Party to which Timol belonged who were present in court shouted "Viva Ahmed Timol!" as the judge adjourned the hearing and the public gallery burst into applause.

Mofhele called for families who lost relatives in circumstances similar to Timol's to be assisted in reopening their cases - especially where suicide was recorded as the cause of death.

Between 1963 and 1990, human rights activists say 73 people died in police detention, sometimes in circumstances strikingly similar to Timol's.

CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES

23 dead, scores remain missing

REUTERS, Sonoma, Calif

Firefighters struggled overnight to halt the spread of wildfires known to have killed 23 people in North California, preparing for winds to shift after one town threatened by flames evacuated all residents.

The edge of the deadly Tubbs fire was less than two miles (3km) from Callistoga, a Napa Valley community whose 5,000 residents left their homes on Wednesday.

"Whether the town burns "is going to depend on the wind," its Fire Chief Steve Campbell told Reuters early yesterday. "High winds are predicted, but we have not received them yet."

Tubbs is one of nearly two dozen fires spanning eight counties that, raging largely unchecked since igniting on Sunday, have left hundreds of residents unaccounted for.

They have all cleared around 170,000 acres of land and destroyed some 3,500 buildings since.

While their cause has not been conclusively determined, they are thought to have been sparked by power lines blown by gale force winds, and fanned by hot, dry "Diablo" winds that blew into northern California toward the Pacific.

The 23 recorded deaths make the fires the deadliest in the state since 1991.



N Korea says 'lit fuse of war'

AFP, Moscow

President Donald Trump "lit the fuse of war" against North Korea with his provocative comments to the United Nations last month.

North Korea's foreign minister has told the Russian TASS news agency.

Escalating war of words with North Korean strongman Kim Jong-un, trading insults amid rising tensions between the two nuclear-armed rivals.

"With his belligerent and mad address to the UN, it can be said that Trump has lit the fuse of war against us," Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho told TASS during an interview on Wednesday.

"Oscar supreme leader Kim Jong-un had already sternly warned the US must act in a reasonable manner and cease attacking us if it does not want to be humiliated in front of the whole world," Ri added.

The minister also lashed out at a tough new package of US sanctions brought in last month. He added that North Korea would not rule out "the use of the most extreme measures in response."

Trump used his maiden speech to the UN in September to threaten to "destroy" the nuclear-armed nation if Kim did not back down, referring to him as "Rocket Man".

He said in October that "only one thing will work" in relation to North Korea.

Brexit negotiations 'deadlocked': EU

AFP, Brussels

Brexit negotiations are deadlocked on the crucial issue of Britain's exit bill but a breakthrough remains possible in the next two months, the EU's chief negotiator Michel Barnier said yesterday.

Wrapping up a fifth round of talks with David Davis, Britain's Brexit minister, Barnier said there was not enough progress to recommend that negotiations should move from divorce issues to trade.

But Davis said he still hoped that the 27 other EU leaders could decide to shift to the next phase when they meet for a summit in Brussels next week.

"This week we have worked in a constructive spirit, we have clarified some points, but we have not taken great steps forward," Barnier said at a joint news conference at EU headquarters.

Barnier reserved his grimmest assessment for the issue of financial commitments, saying that Britain had still not spelled out what Prime Minister Theresa May promised in a key speech in Florence, Italy, last month.

"We are at a deadlock on this question which is extremely disturbing," Barnier said.

But he added: "I remain convinced that with political will, decisive breakthroughs are within reach in the coming two months."