



Spain to dismiss Catalonia's govt

Madrid's actions don't respect rule of law: Catalan leader

AFP, Madrid

Spain yesterday announced that it will move to dismiss Catalonia's separatist government and call fresh elections in the semi-autonomous region in a bid to stop its leaders from declaring independence.

The drastic escalation of Spain's worst political crisis in decades will see separatist leader Carles Puigdemont and his administration stripped of their jobs, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy told reporters after a crisis meeting of his cabinet.

Puigdemont's threat to declare independence "has been unilateral, contrary to the law, and seeking confrontation," said Rajoy, adding that he will seek approval from the Senate -- where his conservatives hold an absolute majority -- for permission to dissolve the Catalan parliament and call elections within six months.

In the meantime, the jobs of Puigdemont and his team will be carried out by Spain's national ministers, Rajoy said. Puigdemont was due to respond at 9:00pm. In Barcelona, independence supporters took to their balconies banging their pots and pans in protest at Rajoy's decision.

Home to 7.5 million people, the northeastern region fiercely defends its language and culture and enjoys control over its policing, education and healthcare.

In a crisis that has rattled stock markets and worried a European Union that is already struggling with Brexit, Catalonia held a banned independence referendum on October 1, with Puigdemont threatening to declare a breakaway state based on its results.

Under Article 155 of Spain's constitution, Madrid enjoys powers to wrest back control of rebellious regions, but it has never used them before.

Rajoy said, "We are applying Article 155 because the government of a democratic country cannot accept that the law is ignored."

The Spanish government's actions do not respect the rule of law, Catalonia's leader said yesterday.

They are "incompatible with a democratic attitude and do not respect the rule of law," Carles Puigdemont said in a televised announcement, calling on the Catalan parliament to meet over the crisis.

VICTORY OVER IS IN RAQA AND ELSEWHERE

The bigger battles ahead

The last IS fighters in Raqa have been killed or surrendered, and the terror group that once held territory the size of the United Kingdom and ruled over ten million people has been pushed back to a few dusty towns straddling the Syrian border with Iraq.

The campaign to eradicate the Islamic State has taken three years and nearly 25,000 coalition airstrikes, in addition to thousands by Russian, Iraqi and Syrian aircraft.

In the process, dozens of towns and cities in Syria and Iraq have been pulverised.

The cost of reconstruction -- running into hundreds of billions of dollars -- is far beyond the capacity of whoever rules either Syria or Iraq. The cost to humanity is worse still.



The picture, taken on Friday, shows a general view of heavily damaged buildings in Raqa. PHOTO: AFP

RETREAT OF THE ISLAMIC STATE GROUP



In Iraq, the advance of IS -- followed by the operation to destroy it -- displaced more than three million people, according to the UN. Nearly 600,000 Iraqi children have missed an entire year of education or more; thousands have been warped by IS indoctrination.

In Syria, the results of the country's brutal civil war are more shocking: 6.5 million people, including 2.8 million children, have been displaced, according to the UN. A further 5 million have left the country altogether.

The caliphate is gone and IS's totalitarian ideology is stained, even among Sunni Muslims who first welcomed it. But extremism will find new breeding grounds in countries where sectarian loyalties dominate, where there is no work, where distrust is endemic and the "middle ground" doesn't exist.

ISIS began as an insurgency, now it's returning to its roots, which are spread deep across the region. And it goes far beyond the Iraq and Syria. The recent attacks in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the world prove that. Experts are fearing more IS-inspired attacks in Europe and elsewhere.

As IS loses ground, al-Qaeda is eyeing opportunities in Syria. Within the last few weeks a new group has emerged from among jihadi factions in the northwest

Syrian province of Idlib: Ansar al Furqan. Brett McGurk, the US envoy for the anti-IS coalition, has dubbed Idlib as the largest al-Qaeda haven since the days of Osama bin Laden.

Al-Qaeda also has a new flag-bearer: Hamza bin Laden, son of Osama, whose appeal to a new generation of jihadis is growing.

Sunni militants have long seen the western democracies -- and, by extension, the Gulf monarchies -- as their adversaries. But they have a new enemy: the Shia coalition powered by Iran, which has recruited militias from Lebanon, Iraq, even Afghanistan to fight in Syria.

These contests for recruits and resources play out against the background of a region in turmoil, where alliances are shifting amid overlapping disputes.

And, even though the IS ideology is weakened significantly, its appeal among frustrated and disillusioned youths has not diminished. And realizing the importance, G7 countries and tech agreed to work together to block the dissemination

of Islamist extremism over the internet.

Iran, Shia militias are playing a big part in wars in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Despite a hostile administration in US, the Iranian dream of linking Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut in an arc of Shia influence has come a few steps nearer.

The deepening rift among Gulf monarchies and their conflicting aims in the region won't help the situation either.

Wherever one looks, from the Gulf to the Mediterranean, governments and the multitude of groups they support or oppose are jockeying for advantage as IS shrinks.

At its zenith in 2015, IS was the common enemy. Two years later, the face of terror and the places it inhabits have changed. But across the Middle East, and among the great powers, there's little sign of the political will needed to turn swords into plowshares.

As long as the void created by economic crisis and political rifts in the region, insurgency and turmoil are very much likely to remain.

Mugabe a goodwill envoy!

Critics urge WHO to reverse choice

REUTERS, Geneva/London

The World Health Organisation should overturn its decision to appoint Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe as a goodwill ambassador, global health leaders said yesterday.

Britain said Mugabe's appointment risked overshadowing the WHO's global work. The US, which has imposed sanctions on Mugabe for alleged rights violations, said it was "disappointed."

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus announced the appointment at a high-level meeting on



non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in Uruguay on Wednesday.

The NCD Alliance, which represents 28 health groups, said it was "shocked" to hear of the appointment.

Jeremy Farrar, director of the Wellcome Trust charity, called on Tedros to reverse it.

Rights activists also criticised the move.

Hillel Neuer, executive director of UN Watch, described it as "sickening".

He noted that Mugabe himself had travelled to Singapore for medical treatment three times this year rather than in his homeland.

NEWS IN brief

Somalia truck bomb toll jumps to 358

AFP, Mogadishu

Somalia's deadliest ever attack, a truck bomb in the capital Mogadishu, has now killed 358 people with 228 more injured, the government said late Friday. A truck packed with explosives blew up in Hodan on October 14, destroying some 20 buildings in the bustling commercial district, leaving scores of victims.

4 lightly injured in Munich knife attack

AFP, Berlin

Four people were lightly injured yesterday morning in the southern German city of Munich by a man wielding a knife who fled the scene, said police, adding possible motives were unknown. Local police described the perpetrator of the attack as a man in his forties, wearing grey pants and a running jacket, who fled on a black bicycle. He was also carrying a backpack and a camping bed roll.

Israel hits Syria after Golan fire: army

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army attacked Syrian government artillery yesterday after fire across the armistice line hit the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and warned it would step up such retaliation in the future. The Syrian defence ministry said that rebels had deliberately fired the rounds into Israeli-held territory to provoke the response against its forces.

'Czech Trump' poised for victory in polls

AFP, Prague

With voters upset over traditional parties and orders from Brussels, a billionaire populist dubbed the "Czech Trump" has taken a huge lead in the Czech Republic's election followed by an anti-EU and anti-Islam party. Election officials citing results from nearly 73 percent of polling stations said Babis's anti-corruption and anti-euro ANO (Yes) movement was ahead with 30.87 percent support with the far-right Freedom and Democracy (SPD) in second place on 11.19 percent.



The USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier arrives in the South Korean port city of Busan, yesterday. US President Donald Trump is expected to pressure China's president when they meet next month in Beijing to do more to rein in North Korea, said reports. PHOTO: AFP

Cancer didn't kill Neruda: probe

AFP, Santiago

International experts announced Friday that Chilean Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda did not die of cancer, but could not conclusively determine if he was assassinated by late dictator Augusto Pinochet's regime.

Neruda, a celebrated poet, politician, diplomat and bohemian, died in 1973 aged 69, just days after Pinochet, then the head of the Chilean army, overthrew Socialist president Salvador Allende in a bloody coup.

The writer, who was also a prominent member of the Chilean Communist party, had been preparing to flee into exile in Mexico to lead the resistance against Pinochet's regime.

He died in a Santiago clinic where he was being treated for prostate cancer.

The subsequent death of former president Eduardo Frei at the same clinic, where he had come for a routine operation, reinforced the thesis that Neruda was murdered.

"The (death) certificate does not reflect the real cause of death," Aurelio Luna said at a news conference on behalf of a panel of experts, referring to the official explanation that cancer killed the famed writer.

The group of 16 experts from Canada, Denmark, the US, Spain and Chile, 12 of whom worked in Santiago while the rest worked from abroad, could neither confirm nor rule out the hypothesis that Neruda was murdered.

The investigation began in 2011 after Manuel Araya Neruda's former driver and personal assistant, claimed that he was given a mysterious injection in his chest just before he died.



Abe eyes big win as Japan votes today

AFP, Tokyo

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday vowed to protect the Japanese people as he wrapped up an election campaign dominated by threats from North Korea.

Polls show Abe and his conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) are clear favourites to win today's election, handing him a fresh mandate for his hard-line stance on North Korea and "Abenomics" growth strategy.

Abe's coalition is on track to win around 300 seats in the 465-seat lower house of parliament, according to a projection published by the Nikkei daily.

If the polls are correct, 63-year-old Abe is on course to be the longest-serving premier in post-war Japan, the world's third-biggest economy and key US ally in Asia.

"It has been a very tough election," Abe told crowds that braved the rain in central Japan, as a typhoon barreled towards the country.

North Korea, which has threatened to "sink" Japan into the sea and fired two missiles over the country.

Abe has stuck to a hawkish stance on North Korea, stressing that maximum pressure should be exerted on the regime and backing the US line that "all options" are on the table.

Abe enjoys only lukewarm public support but the weak and fragmented opposition has been unable to make inroads into his poll lead during the short 12-day campaign.

The two main opposition parties -- the "Party of Hope" created by the media-savvy Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike and the new centre-left Constitutional Democratic Party -- are trailing far behind, predicted to win around 50 seats each.

"You must not stick to the status quo of flaccid politics, which has failed to carry out drastic and necessary reforms," Koike said in a last-ditch appeal to voters on Saturday.

"If we do not use this opportunity (to oust Abe), major reforms that are truly needed will be delayed," she said.



Supporters react to Abe at a campaign rally in Tokyo. PHOTO: REUTERS

Journalist shot dead in India

AFP, New Delhi

A journalist was shot dead by three gunmen in northern India yesterday, police said, the latest attack on media in one of Asia's deadliest countries for reporters.

Rajesh Mishra, a 40-year-old reporter at the Hindi-language daily Dainik Jagran -- one of India's largest newspapers -- was shot in the head by three gunmen on a motorcycle in Uttar Pradesh state, additional director general of police Anand Kumar said.

"Three thugs fired the shots. Two of the three have been identified. ... We are confident that we will arrest all three by tonight," he said, adding police were yet to ascertain the motive behind the killing.

Mishra was a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

The killing comes a month after a reporter covering political unrest in India's northeast was beaten to death during violent clashes.

ATTACK ON KABUL MILITARY SCHOOL

15 army cadets killed

IS claims responsibility of Shia mosque attack, toll hits 56

AFP, Kabul

A suicide bomber killed 15 Afghan army trainees yesterday as they were leaving their base in Kabul, the defence ministry said, as militants step up their deadly attacks across the war-torn country.

It was the second suicide bombing in the Afghan capital in 24 hours and the seventh major assault in Afghanistan since Tuesday, taking the total death toll to more than 200, with hundreds more wounded.

The attack comes after a suicide bomber blew himself up in a mosque in Kabul on Friday, killing 56 people and wounding 55 others in an assault claimed by the Islamic State group.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the ambush but the Taliban has been involved in the previous four attacks on police and military bases this week.

Kabul Crime Branch chief General Mohammad Salim Almas said police have launched an investigation into the attack which happened in the west of the city.

deteriorating security across Afghanistan as the resurgent Taliban step up their attacks on security installations with devastating effect and Islamic State continue to target Shia mosques.

Nato's Resolute Support mission tweeted that the latest incident was an "attack on the future" of Afghanistan and its security forces.

It was the fifth time since Tuesday that militants have launched a major attack against Afghanistan's beleaguered security forces already badly demoralised by high casualties and desertions.

The university, on the western outskirts of Kabul, is home to the Afghan military's officer training school and other training academies.

On Thursday, the Taliban stormed a military base in the southern province of Kandahar, killing at least 43 of the 60 soldiers manning the base, which was left in ruins.

Two days earlier, at least 36 security personnel were killed and scores wounded in Taliban attacks on government compounds in Paktia and Ghazni provinces, with a senior provincial police commander among the dead.



A man walks inside the blast-hit Shia mosque in Kabul. PHOTO: REUTERS