

CATALONIA'S LONG TUSSLE WITH SPAIN

1714: BARCELONA FALLS: The region of Catalonia sides with Austria and its allies in the War of Succession but its capital Barcelona falls to Spanish and French forces in 1714 after months of siege. Its autonomous institutions are dissolved. The defeat is on September 11 which becomes Catalonia's National Day, enduring today as an enthusiastic and nationalistic celebration honouring the defenders of the city.

1932: FIRST AUTONOMY STATUTE: The Second Spanish Republic is declared in 1931 and the king goes into exile. The following year Spain's parliament grants Catalonia a statute of autonomy for the first time, allowing broad powers over its internal affairs. Both Spanish and Catalan are recognised as official languages.

1934: A STATE FOR A FEW HOURS: On October 6, 1934 left-wing republican Lluís Companys declares the region "a Catalan state in the federal republic of Spain". The Spanish army cracks down immediately; just 10 hours later, and after dozens of deaths, Companys surrenders.

1939-1975: SUPPRESSION UNDER FRANCO: In January 1939 General Francisco Franco's forces take control of Barcelona after a three-year civil war in Spain. Catalan autonomy is suppressed and the speaking of Catalan in public is banned across Spain until Franco's death in 1975.

1978: AUTONOMY RESTORED: Spain's new constitution in 1978 recognises Catalonia among various distinct communities in the country but lays down the "indissoluble unity" of the Spanish nation. In a referendum the following year, Catalans approve a new autonomy statute for greater powers in areas such as healthcare, education and culture.

2006: AUTONOMY EXPANDED: A new version of statute is approved, increasing Catalonia's fiscal and judicial powers and describing the region as a "nation".

2010: NO 'NATION': After an appeal, Spain's Constitutional Court rules that the word nation in the statute has "no legal value", even though it approves other parts of the 2006 autonomy charter. It also rejects the "preferential" use of the Catalan language in municipal services. The following month, hundreds of thousands of people protest in Barcelona.

2014: SYMBOLIC REFERENDUM: In defiance of Madrid, Catalonia presses ahead with a symbolic referendum on independence in November. Turnout is just 37 percent, of which over 80 percent vote in favour.

2015: PRO-INDEPENDENCE MAJORITY: In September the pro-independence Together For Yes alliance secures 62 seats in the regional assembly and the radical left-wing separatist group CUP wins 10, giving them together an absolute majority. In November all 72 pro-independence lawmakers vote to start the process to secede. The resolution is struck down by Spain's Constitutional Court.

2017: INDEPENDENCE VOTE: A new independence referendum, deemed illegal by the central government, is held on October 1. Turnout is about 43 percent, of which 90 percent back independence. Madrid moves to assert control but Catalan lawmakers vote on October 27 to declare independence from Spain.

SOURCE: AFP



(From top, anti-clockwise) People celebrate after the Catalan regional parliament passes the vote of independence; Catalan president Carles Puigdemont applauds after the parliament decision in Barcelona; and Spain's Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy acknowledges applause after Senate in Madrid decided to impose direct rule over Catalonia.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

'Our goal is not war'

Mattis talks diplomacy in South Korea ahead of Trump's Asia tour

REUTERS, Panmunjom

US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis emphasized diplomatic efforts to resolve the North Korean missile and nuclear crisis as he stood at the tense and heavily fortified border between North and South yesterday, saying: "Our goal is not war."

His remarks came before US President Donald Trump - who has threatened to destroy the North if necessary - leaves on his first trip to Asia next week, including a stop in South Korea to meet President Moon Jae-in.

For his part, Moon, after talks with Mattis, said the "aggressive deployment" of US strategic assets in the region, which have included overflights by US bombers, had been effective in deterring the North Korean threat.

Tension between North Korea and the United States has been building after a series of nuclear and missile tests by Pyongyang and bellicose verbal exchanges between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, stoking fears any miscalculation could lead to an armed confrontation.

"North Korean provocations continue to threaten regional and global security despite unanimous condemnation by the United Nations Security Council," Mattis said in prepared remarks as he visited the demilitarized zone (DMZ).

"As Secretary of State Tillerson has made clear, our goal is not war, but rather the complete, verifiable, and irreversible

denuclearization of the Korean peninsula."

Standing alongside Mattis, South Korean Defense Minister Song Young-moo said: "We together will continue to defend peace through strong will and strong might."

Ahead of Trump's visit to Asia, Mattis has emphasized diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful solution to the crisis during his week-long trip to the region.

"That's really what it was all about - to keep the (North Korea) effort firmly in the diplomatic lane for resolution," Mattis said earlier this week after three days of meetings with Asian defense chiefs in the Philippines.

The United States on Thursday imposed sanctions on seven North Korean individuals and three entities for "flagrant" human rights abuses, including killings, torture, forced labor and the hunting down of asylum seekers abroad.

In a speech last month at the United Nations, Trump threatened to destroy North Korea if necessary to defend the United States and allies.

Kim has blasted Trump as "mentally deranged."

Separately, North Korea released a South Korean fishing boat which had been found to be in North Korean waters illegally, state media said. The crew of 10 were released yesterday evening, a spokesman for South Korea's coastguard told Reuters. The return of the boat, which had been reported as missing from Saturday, may have eased already strained relations between North and South.

N KOREA CRISIS

US sanctions more North Koreans over human rights abuses

North releases a South Korean fishing boat

Billionaires' number jumps 10%: study

AFP, Geneva

The number of billionaires worldwide rose above 1,500 last year, a 10 percent jump from 2015, due largely to a surge in Asia, Swiss banking giant UBS and auditors PwC said Thursday.

In an annual report, UBS and PwC said that last year marked the first time it recorded more billionaires in Asia (637) than in the United States (563), crediting the rise of China's entrepreneurs.

Europe took third spot in the report's billionaire database with 342.

The total wealth controlled by the ultra-rich group also shot up to \$6 trillion (5.1 trillion euros), marking a 17 percent rise on the previous year when billionaire wealth actually shrank, the report said.

The group of 1,542 billionaires either owns or partly controls companies that employ 27.7 million people, it added.

While the chasm between the world's rich and poor remains a burning political issue across the continents, UBS and PwC said that billionaire assets are increasingly likely to benefit the needy.

"Looking further forward, we estimate that \$2.4 trillion (2.1 trillion euros) of billionaire wealth will be transferred in the next two decades as billionaires age, with a significant amount going to philanthropic causes," the report said.



A royal chariot carrying the ashes of the late Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej is escorted towards the gates of the Grand Palace during the funeral procession to transport his ashes from the Royal Crematorium to the Grand Palace in Bangkok, yesterday. Inset, A woman cries as she shows respect to the late king.

PHOTO: AFP

UN REPORT ON APRIL SARIN ATTACK

Syria regime to blame

AGENCIES

United Nations investigators on Thursday blamed a sarin gas massacre on Bashar al-Assad's regime, as the United States renewed its warning that he has no role in Syria's future.

The expert panel's report and tough remarks by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson overshadowed the announcement that UN-sponsored peace talks will resume next month.

More than 80 people died on April 4 this year when sarin gas projectiles were fired into Khan Sheikhoun, a rebel-held town in the Idlib province of northwestern Syria.

Images of dead and dying victims, including young children, in the aftermath of the attack provoked global outrage and a US cruise missile strike on a regime air base.

The UN placed the death toll at 83 while the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said it was 87.

Syria and its ally Russia had sug-

gested that a rebel weapon may have detonated on the ground but the UN panel confirmed Western intelligence reports that blamed the regime.

"The panel is confident that the Syrian Arab Republic is responsible for the release of sarin at Khan Sheikhoun

UN human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein said yesterday the humanitarian

UN rights chief decries hunger in Syrian siege

on April 4, 2017," the report, seen by AFP, says.

Russia yesterday criticised the UN report with deputy foreign minister saying it contained inconsistencies and unverified evidence.

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Many inconsistencies in UN report: Russia

No role for Assad in Syria's future: US

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The tightening siege has pushed people to the verge of famine in the rebel enclave, residents said.

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