

# Spain urges return of 'free' Catalonia

AFP, Barcelona

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy yesterday said he wanted to return to a "democratic and free" Catalonia as he aimed to rally support for a unified Spain on his first visit to the turbulent region since it declared independence.

A day after hundreds of thousands of people marched in Barcelona to demand the release of separatist officials detained over their independence drive, Rajoy also urged businesses not to flee the wealthy northern region.

"We have to recover the sensible, practical, enterprising and dynamic Catalonia... that has contributed so much to the progress of Spain and Europe," Rajoy told members of his Popular Party in Barcelona.

"We want to regain a Catalonia for everyone, democratic and free," he added.

The Catalonia crisis has caused concern in the European Union as the bloc deals with Brexit and uncertainty over the fate of the region's 7.5 million people. More than 2,400 businesses have moved their legal headquarters elsewhere.

Rajoy yesterday urged those businesses "not to go".

Separatist lawmakers, who were dismissed by Madrid after declaring their region independence from Spain last month, insist that they were given a mandate for secession by a banned October 1 referendum.

However, pro-unity camps say that the vote was deeply flawed and largely boycotted by opponents of independence, though more than 90 percent of those who turned out backed a breakaway. Several officials have been detained over their role in pushing for independence, which is outlawed under Spain's post-civil-war constitution.

The region -- which accounts for a fifth of Spanish GDP -- remains deeply divided on independence and Barcelona's mayor on Saturday slammed separatist lawmakers for dragging Catalonia into chaos.

EU Brexit chief preparing for 'possible' failure

PARIS, AFP

EU Brexit chief Michel Barnier yesterday said he is making contingency plans for the "possible" failure of divorce talks with Britain, which he has given two weeks to reach preliminary agreement on key issues.

"It's not my (preferred) option," he told French weekly Le Journal du Dimanche (JDD). "But it's a possibility. Everyone needs to plan for it, member states and businesses alike. We too are preparing for it technically."

He recalled that without a deal on post-Brexit trade terms the EU and Britain would revert to World Trade Organization (WTO) tariffs, with trade ties "like those we have with China".

On Friday Barnier gave Britain a two-week ultimatum to make concessions on a divorce agreement if it wants to unlock the next phase of talks in December.



Protesters hold the lights of their mobile phones as they wave Estelada flags during a demonstration called by pro-independence associations asking for the release of jailed Catalan activists and leaders, in Barcelona on Saturday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# US offers to mediate in South China Sea row

AFP, Manila

US President Donald Trump offered yesterday to mediate in a territorial dispute over the resource-rich South China Sea, after years of Chinese island-building in the contested waters.

Trump's surprise proposal to insert himself into the decades-long row risked a backlash from China, which has repeatedly said the United States has no role to play in what it insists is a series of bilateral issues.

"If I can help mediate or arbitrate, please let me know... I am a very good mediator," Trump told Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang in Hanoi during an official state visit.

Trump's comments came shortly before Chinese President Xi Jinping began his own state visit to Vietnam, in the capital Hanoi.

China claims nearly all of the strategically vital sea, through which \$5 trillion in shipping trade passes annually. It is also believed to sit atop vast oil and gas deposits.



Satellite photo shows Chinese-controlled North Island in the South China Sea.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan also have claims in the sea, and the dispute has long been seen as a potential trigger for conflict in Asia.

Vietnam has courted support from Washington in the row, as it and other claimants have been powerless to stop China's efforts in recent years to cement its claims by building artificial islands in disputed areas.

Those islands are capable of serving as military bases, and some of the rival claimants are concerned that China will soon establish de facto control of the waters.

Tensions over the sea spiked this year when Vietnam suspended an oil exploration project in an area from its powerhouse communist neighbour.

In 2014, China moved an oil rig into waters off Vietnam's coast, sparking violent protests in several Vietnamese cities.

Trump's offer came just before he flew to the Philippine capital of Manila for another regional summit.

# Unique support for PM who resigned

BEIRUT, AFP

Participants in Beirut's annual marathon usually run to support medical research or human rights. But this year, Lebanese racers opted for another cause: their missing prime minister.

Saad Hariri has yet to return to Lebanon since his shock resignation in a televised announcement from Saudi Arabia eight days ago.

Rumours have since swirled that he is being held in Riyadh against his will -- and energetic Lebanese literally raced to show him support yesterday morning.

A bright red billboard welcomed runners to the marathon's starting line in downtown Beirut with a picture of sprinting Hariri and the Arabic caption, "We are all waiting for you."

Young men and women distributed water bottles labelled with the same slogan, as well as caps and t-shirts that read, "Running for you."

"I needed a cap and I like Lebanon, so I took a hat," said 30-year-old Nisrine Chamseddine, who had just completed an eight-kilometre (five-mile) race.



# NEWS IN brief

## Iraq helicopter crash kills three

AFP, Kout, Iraq

An Iraqi army helicopter crashed yesterday south of Baghdad during a training exercise killing all three crew members due to a technical problem, military officials said. "A Mi-17 military helicopter crashed during a training exercise and its crew was killed," the army said in a statement. Three air force officers were killed in the crash in the province of Wasit, southeast of Baghdad, an air force official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

## Bahrain accuses Iran over pipeline fire

AFP, Dubai

Gulf kingdom Bahrain has accused Iran of being behind a pipeline fire that temporarily halted oil supplies from Saudi Arabia, but Tehran rejected the allegation as "childish".

On Saturday, Bahrain's foreign minister blamed Iran for the fire near the capital Manama. "The attempt to blow up the Saudi-Bahraini pipeline is a dangerous escalation on Iran's part that aims to terrorise citizens and to harm the world oil industry," Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa wrote on Twitter.

## 'Aid enters devastated rebel town in Syria'

AFP, Beirut

Desperately needed humanitarian assistance entered a rebel-held town near Syria's capital yesterday, the Red Cross said, in the first aid deliveries there in nearly three months. A joint operation with the UN had brought in 24 trucks full of humanitarian relief to Douma.



Activists scuffle with policemen during an anti-Trump protest near the US embassy in Manila yesterday, before the start of the 31st Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) Summit. World leaders arrive in the Philippines' capital for two days of summits beginning today.

PHOTO: AFP

# Trump takes verbal jousting to 'new level'

AFP, Hanoi

US President Donald Trump took his verbal jousting with Kim Jong-Un to a new level yesterday, taunting the North Korean leader over his height and weight before musing over the idea of them eventually becoming friends.

While they have never met, Trump and Kim have form when it comes to name-calling, with the US president a more than willing match for the highly rhetorical flourishes deployed by his adversary in Pyongyang.

Trump referred to Kim as a "madman" and "Rocket Man" while the 33-year-old responded by calling the 71-year-old former reality TV star a "mentally deranged dotard".

Yesterday, Trump got down to basics, with a sarcastic tweet prompted by recent descriptions of him in the North's state media as a "lunatic old man".

"Why would Kim Jong-Un insult me by calling me 'old,' when I would NEVER call him 'short and fat?'" the president tweeted from Hanoi -- the latest leg of a lengthy Asia tour that had, until then, appeared to have moderated his Twitter habit.

"Oh well, I try so hard to be his friend - and maybe someday that will happen!" he wrote.

Sarcastic or not, the dig about Kim's weight, which has increased significantly since he came to power following the death of his father Kim Jong-Il in 2011, is unlikely to go down well in Pyongyang.

The members of the ruling Kim dynasty -- past and present -- enjoy near god-like status in North Korea, which has demonstrated extreme sensitivity to any remark that might be seen as mocking or disrespectful of the leadership.

Foreign tourists to Pyongyang are generally obliged to pay homage -- laying flowers and bowing deeply -- before giant statues of Kim's father and his grandfather -- founding leader Kim Il-Sung -- at some point during their visit.



Questioned later about his tweet, Trump insisted he had not been entirely joking about one day befriending the man he described just last week as a dictator with "twisted fantasies".

"That might be a strange thing to happen but it's certainly a possibility," he told reporters at a press conference in the Vietnamese capital.

"If that did happen, it would be a good thing, I can tell you, for North Korea... I don't know that it will, but it would be very, very nice if it did," he added.

Trump has played hawk and dove with the North during his sweep of five Asian countries -- denouncing it as a "cruel dictatorship," while offering Kim Jong-Un a diplomatic way out of the crisis over Pyongyang's growing nuclear arsenal.

# Israel threatens Gaza 'militants'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday warned Palestinian militants against carrying out attacks in revenge for the blowing up of a tunnel stretching from the Gaza Strip into the Jewish state last month.

The Islamic Jihad militant group meanwhile threatened to hit back at Israel over the destruction of the tunnel it says it dug.

Israel's operation on October 30 resulted in the deaths of 12 Palestinian militants from Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

"There are still those who toy with trying new attacks on Israel," Netanyahu said at the opening of his weekly cabinet meeting.

"We will react forcefully to whoever tries to attack us or attacks us from any arena. I mean anyone -- rebel factions, organisations, anyone," he said in an apparent reference to Islamic Jihad.

"In any case, we hold Hamas responsible for any attack against us originating from Gaza or

organised there," he said of the Islamist group that runs the Gaza Strip.

Netanyahu's remarks came on the heels of a Saturday night Arabic-language video issued by Major General Yoav Mordechai, head of a defence ministry unit responsible for activities in the Palestinian territories.

Referring to the Israeli operation on October 30, he said that Israel "destroyed a terror tunnel in Israeli sovereign territory".

"We are aware of the plot that the Palestinian Islamic Jihad terror group is planning against Israel," said Mordechai, whose defence ministry unit is known as COGAT.

"They are playing with fire at the expense of Gazans residents, the Palestinian reconciliation efforts and the stability of the entire region."

"Let it be clear: Any attack by Islamic Jihad will be met with a harsh and determined Israeli response."

"This will not only apply to Islamic Jihad but also to Hamas."

Mordechai also addressed the Damascus-based Islamic Jihad leadership, mentioning Ramadan Shalah and Ziad Nakhaleh by name.

He called on them to "take control over the situation," as they are the ones "who will be held accountable" for any attack.

Islamic Jihad rejected Mordechai's message, saying "the enemy's threat to target the leaders of the movement" was "a declaration of war".

"We will respond to it," the militant movement said in a statement, stressing it had "the right to respond" to the blowing up of the tunnel.

Israel has said it is holding the bodies of five militants retrieved from the tunnel and implied it would try to use them as bargaining chips to retrieve the remains of two Israeli soldiers believed to be held by Hamas.

Two Israeli civilians, said to be mentally unstable, are also believed to have entered Gaza and to be held by Hamas.

# Bahrain Shia leader to face trial for spying

DUBAI, AFP

Bahraini Shia opposition leader Sheikh Ali Salman will face trial later this month for "spying" for Qatar, the state prosecution said yesterday.

Salman will be tried alongside two of his colleagues, Hassan Sultan and Ali Mehdi, from November 27 after they were charged earlier this month of espionage.

"The prosecution has referred the case in which Ali Salman, Hassan Sultan and Ali Mehdi are accused of spying for the state of Qatar to the High Criminal Court," the state prosecution said in a tweet.

Salman has been behind bars since 2014 serving a nine-year sentence for allegedly inciting hatred.

On November 1 the state prosecution charged him with "spying on behalf of a foreign country ... with the aim of carrying out subversive acts against Bahrain and harming its national interests".