

NEWS IN brief

EU extends Russia sanctions again

REUTERS, Moscow

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov yesterday said that Russia regretted a decision by European Union leaders to extend economic sanctions on Moscow. EU leaders agreed on Thursday to prolong for another six months the bloc's economic sanctions on Russia, imposed over the annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula and Moscow's support for rebels in eastern Ukraine.

Israel PM quizzed again in graft probe

AFP, Jerusalem

Fraud squad detectives questioned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at his Jerusalem residence yesterday, the seventh time in a nearly year-long corruption probe, police said. Public radio said an investigation into suspicions Netanyahu received luxury gifts from wealthy supporters, including Israeli businessman and Hollywood producer Arnon Milchan and Australian tycoon James Packer, was nearing completion.



Prince Harry, Meghan to marry on May 19

AFP, London

Britain's Prince Harry and actress Meghan Markle will marry on May 19 at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle near London, Kensington Palace said yesterday. "His Royal Highness Prince Henry of Wales and Ms Meghan Markle will marry on 19th May, 2018," the couple's official London residence said in a statement.



An Israeli soldier shouts as he aims his weapon during clashes with Palestinian demonstrators in the West Bank city of Hebron, yesterday; A Palestinian protester runs past a burning tire during clashes with Israeli security forces near the West Bank checkpoint of Qalandia; and a protesters scuffle with security official at Damascus Gate after Friday prayers in Jerusalem's Old City.



PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

JERUSALEM ROW

3 Palestinians shot dead by Israeli forces

AFP, Gaza City

Two Palestinians were shot dead by Israeli forces in clashes along the Gaza border yesterday, as tens of thousands of people joined new protests against Washington's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

US President Donald Trump's December 6 announcement that he would break with decades of American policy and move his embassy to Jerusalem has stirred international condemnation, as well as protests across the Palestinian territories and Arab world.

Demonstrators have burned American and Israeli flags and trampled on pictures of Trump amid concerns his announcement would lead to major bloodshed.

On Friday, two men were killed in clashes east of Gaza City, the Palestinian health ministry said. It later said another Palestinian was killed in northeast of Jerusalem.

With their death 7 Palestinians now died in clashes and air strikes since Trump announced his controversial move.

Protests and clashes broke out across the Palestinian territories for the second Friday in a row after the end of weekly Muslim prayers, often a catalyst for clashes between young Palestinians and Israeli soldiers.

At least 56 people were hospitalised across the West Bank, the Palestinian health ministry said.

Over the border in neighbouring Jordan, thousands of people also demonstrated in the latest round of protests called by the Muslim Brotherhood, burning Israeli and American flags.

Rallies against Trump's decision also took place in the Indian city of Mumbai, the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, and the Japanese capital, Tokyo.

The status of Jerusalem is one of the most controversial issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

EU opens next Brexit phase

Warns of tough talks as leaders give formal green light

REUTERS, Brussels

The European Union yesterday agreed to move Brexit talks onto trade and a transition pact but some leaders cautioned that the final year of Britain's divorce negotiations could be fraught with peril.

On the second day of a Brussels summit, EU leaders agreed "sufficient progress" was made after a deal on citizens' rights, the Irish border and Britain's outstanding payments, giving negotiators a mandate to move on to the main phase of talks.

"EU leaders agree to move on to the second phase of Brexit talks. Congratulations PM Theresa May," European Council President Donald Tusk, who chairs EU summits, said on Twitter.

Discussion of a transition period to calm nerves among businesses is due to start in the new year, although talks on a future free trade pact will not begin until after March -- a date underlined by "guidelines" that set out how to proceed as Britain seeks to unravel more than 40 years of membership.

May replied via Twitter, thanking Tusk and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker: "Today is an important step on the road to delivering a smooth and orderly Brexit and forging our deep and special future partnership," May said.

"We will deliver on the will of the British people and get the best Brexit deal for our country - securing the greatest possible access to European markets, boosting free trade with countries across the world, and delivering control over our borders, laws and money," she added.

However, the future partnership discussion is set to be difficult, leaders including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Juncker and Italy's Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni warned.

Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern went further, saying even a primary school student could see that the "first phase" deal on the Irish border would come back to haunt the talks because it was impossible for Britain to leave the bloc's single market while avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland.

"There cannot be any border controls between Northern and southern Ireland, there cannot be border controls between Northern Ireland and the UK, but there can be between UK and the EU," he said.

"So our primary school students can see that there is a riddle to be solved."

In more formal language, leaders used the nine-point guidelines they agreed at the summit to support May's call for a two-year transition out of the bloc, which aims to help British business and citizens adjust to life after the European Union.



PM thanks leaders after securing new phase

Austria warns "riddles remain" on Irish border

EU leaders clash over refugees

AFP, Brussels

Two years after the Mediterranean migrant crisis shook the European Union, a tentative effort by the bloc to patch up differences over refugee policy has stumbled, revealing enduring rifts among the bloc's leaders over the contentious question.

A candid discussion over a Brussels summit dinner that began on Thursday night and spilled into the wee hours of Friday was intended to clear the air and see if there was a way to reconcile opposing views on how to reform defunct asylum rules.

But leaders emerging from nearly three hours of talks made clear that while there was little of the angry passion of 2015, when a million people flooded into Greece and headed for Germany, the "frank and sober" exchanges failed to blunt sharp rifts pitting some eastern states against many of the rest.

"We have a lot of work to do," German Chancellor Angela Merkel told reporters. "The positions have not changed."

Divisions over how to share out relatively small numbers of refugees have poisoned relations in the EU, complicating efforts to present a united front in talks with London on Brexit and to agree an EU budget out to 2028.

New Polish and Czech leaders stuck to lines shared with Hungary and Slovakia that their ex-communist societies cannot accept significant immigration, especially of Muslims.

Merkel and Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni were among those who demanded that all countries take in a mandatory share of people requiring asylum, who have been concentrated on the Mediterranean coast, or after chaotic movements across Europe, in the richer northwest of the bloc.

Putin, Trump agree to exchange information

Says Kremlin after leaders discuss N Korea in phone call

AGENCIES

The Kremlin yesterday said that President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart Donald Trump had agreed in a phone call to exchange information about North Korea and cooperate on possible initiatives to resolve a crisis around the Asian nation.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on a conference call that Putin and Trump had also spoken about establishing contacts with North Korea.

The two men had also talked about improving dialogue between Russia and the United States, Peskov said.

The two heads of state discussed "the situation in several crisis zones, with a focus on solving the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula," the Kremlin said in a statement, without elaborating.

Washington this week said it was ready to talk to North Korea -- which has launched several intercontinental ballistic missiles in recent months -- "without preconditions."

Putin, in his annual press conference with hundreds of journalists in Moscow, welcomed the United States' "awareness of reality" in the crisis.

However, he called on all sides to "stop aggravating the situation" and said Moscow did not recognize North Korea's status as a nuclear power.

Meanwhile, Japan yesterday said it had added 19 more entities to its list of organisations and individuals targeted by asset-freeze sanctions on North Korea. The sanctions list now comprises 103 entities and 108 individuals in total, including seven Chinese entities, five Chinese individuals, one Singaporean entity and two Namibian entities, it said.

Japan expands sanctions aimed at N Korea

China says stalled projects with S Korea to resume, hails "springtime" in ties



A picture taken from Vodno Mountain shows the tops of some of the city's highest buildings above clouds in Skopje, yesterday. Skopje was affected for the second day in a row yesterday by air pollution that almost paralyzed the Macedonian capital.

PHOTO: AFP

Ex-minister jailed over graft in Russia

REUTERS, Moscow

Former Russian economy minister Alexei Ulyukayev was found guilty of soliciting a \$2 million bribe from Rosneft chief executive Igor Sechin and sentenced to eight years in jail yesterday.

The high-profile court case shone a rare light on infighting among the Russian elite ahead of a presidential election in March which incumbent Vladimir Putin is expected to win and was widely seen as a test of how powerful Sechin, a Putin ally, is.

The verdict and the harsher-than-expected sentence -- Ulyukayev was widely forecast to get a suspended sentence -- is likely to be interpreted as a sign that Sechin's place at Putin's side is safe and that Sechin, who advocates strong state control over the economy, is increasingly influential.

India criminalises instant triple talaq

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The Indian cabinet yesterday cleared a Bill which makes giving instant 'talaq' a punishable offence and gives Muslim women the right to seek maintenance in case of triple talaq.

The proposed legislation is likely to be tabled in the ongoing winter session of parliament which began today.

The draft law provides for three years in prison and a fine for a Muslim man trying to divorce his wife by uttering "talaq" three times.

As per the draft, triple talaq or talaq-e-biddat will be a "cognisable and non-bailable" offence punishable with three years imprisonment and the wife will be entitled to maintenance and the custody of children if they are minor.

The Indian Supreme Court had on August 22 this year struck down triple talaq, calling the practice unconstitutional and in violation of Article 14 of the Constitution which provides for equality before the law.

The Bill would only be applicable to instant triple talaq or talaq-e-biddat and it would give power to the victim to approach a magistrate seeking "subsistence allowance" for herself and minor children.

US moves to roll back 'net neutrality' rules

AFP, Washington

US regulators voted Thursday to roll back so-called "net neutrality" rules which required internet providers to treat all traffic equally, a move opponents say would curb online freedom.

The Federal Communications Commission, in a three-to-two vote, adopted a proposal by Republican-appointed chairman Ajit Pai, who said his plan would scrap "heavy-handed" rules adopted in 2015 which he argued discouraged investment and innovation.

The vote capped a heated partisan debate and is just the latest in a battle over more than a decade on rules governing internet service providers in the courts and the FCC.

Democratic member Mignon Clyburn, one of the two dissenters, charged that the agency was "handing the keys to the internet" to "a handful of multibillion dollar corporations."

from two states and others vowed to challenge the FCC action in court.

Net neutrality activists have staged a series of protests in cities around the US and online, amid fears that dominant broadband providers could change how the internet works.

Net neutrality backers have argued that clear rules are needed to prevent internet service providers from blocking or throttling services or websites for competitive reasons.

Some activists fear internet service providers will seek to extract higher fees from services that are heavy data users, like Netflix or other streaming services, with these costs passed on to consumers, but new startups without the resources of major companies would be more likely to feel the pain.

Critics of the 2015 net neutrality rule counter that it was based on utility-style regulation designed for 1930s telephone companies, not a dynamic internet market.



My role is now to retire: Sonia Gandhi

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

A day before her son Rahul Gandhi takes over as President of India's main opposition Congress party, Sonia Gandhi yesterday said that "my role is to retire", fuelling speculations about her future role in the party.

She did not elaborate on her one-line comment to the media outside parliament here as the winter session began. But it was enough to set the political circles here abuzz.

However, Congress chief spokesperson Randeep Singh Surjewala took to Twitter to set at rest speculations by saying that Sonia Gandhi has retired from the post of party president and not from politics.

"Smt Sonia Gandhi has retired as President of Indian National Congress and not from politics. Her blessings, wisdom and innate commitment to Congress ideology shall always be our guiding light," Surjewala said in his post.

Sonia, who turned 71 last week, has been the longest-serving president of the party after she was elected to the post in 1998.

Congress on Monday named 47-year-old Rahul as its new president, more than four years after he took over as the party's vice-president in January 2013. Ends



A court in Moscow found Ulyukayev guilty of demanding and accepting the bribe on Nov 14 last year. Ulyukayev had denied the charges, saying he'd thought the bag holding the bribe was a gift of expensive alcohol.

The former minister, who before his arrest was one of the leading figures in a faction of economic liberals who argued for less state control over the economy, says he was set up.

Sechin is widely seen as the main champion of the opposite view, that the state should consolidate its grip, particularly over the energy sector that provides a large share of Russia's state revenue through its two biggest companies, Rosneft and Gazprom.