



JERUSALEM ROW

(From top left, clockwise) Protesters hold signs during a rally to condemn US President Donald Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital in Jakarta, Indonesia, yesterday; Indian Muslims hold placards during a protest rally in New Delhi; Bosnian protesters demonstrate in Sarajevo; and Pakistani supporters hold Palestinian flags as they attend a rally in Karachi, Pakistan.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



SPECIAL PROBE INTO RUSSIAN MEDDLING IN US POLLS

Trump camp steps up Mueller attacks

Accuses him of obtaining thousands of emails unlawfully
REUTERS, Washington

An organization established for US President Donald Trump's transition to the White House said on Saturday the special counsel investigating allegations of Russian meddling in the 2016 election had obtained tens of thousands of emails unlawfully. Kory Langhofer, counsel to the transition team known as Trump for America, Inc. (TFA), wrote a letter to congressional committees to say Special Counsel Robert Mueller's team had improperly received the emails from the General Services Administration (GSA), a government agency. Career staff members at the agency "unlawfully produced TFA's private materials, including privileged communications, to the Special Counsel's Office," according to the letter, a copy of which was seen by Reuters. It said the materials included "tens of thousands of emails." Trump's transition team used facilities of the GSA, which helps manage the US government bureaucracy, in the period between the Republican's November presidential election victory and his inauguration in January. The Trump team's accusation adds to the growing friction between the president's supporters and Mueller's office as it investigates whether Russia interfered in the election and if Trump or anyone on his team colluded with Moscow. Asked for comment, White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders said: "We continue to cooperate fully with the special counsel and expect this process to wrap up soon." The special counsel's office waved off the transition team's complaint. "When we have obtained emails in the course of our



Brexit deal proves critics wrong

Says Britain PM May

British Prime Minister Theresa May has hit back at critics of her handling of Brexit, writing in the Sunday Telegraph that she had "proven the doubters wrong" after securing an interim deal. Pressure lifted on the embattled leader after she struck a deal with the European Union over Britain's divorce terms last Friday, enabling talks to turn to the country's future trading relationship after months of fraught negotiations. "We have proven the doubters wrong and are making progress towards a successful exit from the EU," she wrote in the centre-right broadsheet, calling the agreement "a watershed" in negotiations. "Amid all the noise, we are getting on with the job," she added. "We will not be derailed from this fundamental duty to deliver the democratic will of the British people." She also played down fears of Brexit voters that Britain would end up being bound by EU rules, insisting that the country would regain "control of our borders, and set our own laws". A BMG Research poll for The Independent newspaper on Sunday found 51 percent of Britons now favoured staying in the EU compared with 41 percent who backed Brexit, the widest margin since the June 2106 vote.

Turkey embassy in E Jerusalem!

Erdogan steps up pressure as UNSC mulls call for US decision to be withdrawn

REUTERS, Istanbul

Turkey intends to open an embassy in East Jerusalem, President Tayyip Erdogan said yesterday, days after leading calls at a summit of Muslim leaders for the world to recognise it as the capital of Palestine. It was not clear how he would carry out the move, as Israel controls all of Jerusalem and calls the city its indivisible capital. Palestinians want the capital of a future state they seek to be in East Jerusalem, which Israel took in a 1967 war and later annexed in a move not recognised internationally. The Muslim nation summit was a response to US President Donald Trump's Dec 6 decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital. His move broke with decades of US policy and international consensus that the city's status must be left to Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Erdogan said in a speech to members of his AK Party in the southern province of Karaman that Turkey's consulate general in Jerusalem was already represented by an ambassador. "God willing, the day is close when officially, with God's permission, we will open our embassy there," Erdogan said. Jerusalem, revered by Jews, Christians and

Muslims alike, is home to Islam's third holiest shrine as well as Judaism's Western Wall - both in the eastern sector - and has been at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for decades. Foreign embassies in Israel, including Turkey's, are located in Tel Aviv, reflecting Jerusalem's unresolved status. A communique issued after Wednesday's sum-



mit of more than 50 Muslim countries, including US allies, said they considered Trump's move to be a declaration that Washington was withdrawing from its role "as sponsor of peace" in the Middle East. The United Nations Security Council is considering a draft resolution that would insist any decisions on the status of Jerusalem have no legal

effect and must be rescinded after US President Donald Trump recognized the city as Israel's capital. The one-page Egyptian-drafted text, which was circulated to the 15-member council on Saturday and seen by Reuters, does not specifically mention the United States or Trump. Diplomats say it has broad support but will likely be vetoed by Washington. The council could vote early next week, diplomats said. A resolution needs nine votes in favor and no vetoes by the United States, France, Britain, Russia or China to pass. Trump abruptly reversed decades of US policy this month when he recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, generating outrage from Palestinians. Trump also plans to move the US embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv. After the decision, Arab foreign ministers agreed to seek a UN Security Council resolution. While the draft is unlikely to be adopted, it would further isolate Trump over the Jerusalem issue. The US mission to the United Nations declined to comment on the draft. US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley has praised Trump's decision as "the just and right thing to do."



ongoing criminal investigation, we have secured either the account owner's consent or appropriate criminal process," said Peter Carr, spokesman for the special counsel's office. The GSA did not respond immediately to a request for comment. Democrats say there is a wide-ranging effort by the president's allies in Capitol Hill and in some media outlets to discredit Mueller's investigation. Trump himself has loudly declared Mueller's effort a waste of time. "There is absolutely no collusion. That has been proven," Trump told reporters on Friday. On Friday, Representative Adam Schiff, the top Democrat on the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee, said he fears the committee's Republican majority intends to close its investigation of the topic prematurely. Some Republicans have argued that Mueller is biased against Trump and should be fired. On the transition team were a number of aides who were later caught up in Mueller's investigation, such as former national security adviser Michael Flynn. Flynn pleaded guilty this month to lying to the FBI about his contacts with Russia.

Pope turns 81

REUTERS, Vatican City

Tens of thousands of people, many of them children, serenaded Pope Francis on his 81st birthday on Sunday, as the pontiff appealed for the release of Catholic nuns kidnapped last month in Nigeria. The crowd sang Happy Birthday in Italian as the pontiff appeared at the window of the Apostolic Palace overlooking St Peter's Square for his weekly message and blessing. The first Latin American pope was born Jorge Mario Bergoglio on Dec 17, 1936 in Buenos Aires. The former cardinal of the Argentine capital became leader of the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics in 2013. In keeping with a long-standing tradition in Rome, the children faced the pope's window and held up small statues of the baby Jesus for him to bless. The statues are placed in home nativity scenes, a custom still practised in many Italian families. Francis, who has often warned against excessive materialism during the holiday season, departed from his address to say: "This is the real Christmas. If we remove Jesus, what is left? An empty feast."



Firefighters keep watch on the Thomas wildfire in the hills and canyons outside Montecito, California, US, on Saturday. Strong winds that have powered the third-largest wildfire in California's history were expected to further fuel a blaze that has burned 267,500 acres.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

US TAX OVERHAUL

'Christmas gift' for middle class from Trump

President Donald Trump said Saturday that the sweeping tax overhaul set to be adopted next week in Congress would be a "great" gift for the middle class. Passage of the measure would mark a massive win for a leader who has yet to notch any major legislative victory after nearly a year in office. The Democratic minority has repeatedly denounced the measure as benefiting companies and the wealthiest Americans, including Trump himself, the most. Trump has promised Americans that the legislation would pass before Christmas, so that it would take effect from the beginning of 2018. "The Democrats have their soundbite, the standard soundbite before they even know what the bill is all about. They talk about 'for the wealthy,'" Trump told reporters as he left the White House for the Camp David presidential retreat for the weekend. "But this is going to be one of the greatest gifts for the middle income people of this country that they've ever gotten for Christmas." The president said the changes would boost employment, adding that it was essential for US growth. "The economy now has hit three percent (growth). Nobody thought it would be anywhere close. I think we could go to four, five or even six percent, ultimately," Trump said. Asked about the increase in the national debt that the reform will trigger, Trump stressed that the measure would also generate extra revenues as growth increases.

Mystery that remains mystery

How Australia's PM went swimming 50 years ago and vanished

CNN ONLINE

"Australia's Prime Minister Mr Harold Holt is missing." They were the words that echoed from television sets and radios across Australia on December 17, 1967 -- the day Holt stepped into the surf at Cheviot Beach near Melbourne and was never to be seen again. The Australian leader was presumed drowned and a memorial service was held in his honor, attended by world leaders including UK Prime Minister Harold Wilson and US President Lyndon Johnson. But his body was never found, leading to a range of ever-more ridiculous conspiracy theories, including one book which claimed he had been taken by a Chinese submarine. Holt became Australia's Prime Minister in January 1966, only two years before he vanished. The day Holt vanished was hot and humid Sunday, perfect for a swim. Before lunch on December 17, 1967, Holt decided to head to the local beach, close to the holiday house he owned at Portsea on the Victorian coast. But the Prime Minister wasn't in perfect health. He'd just had shoulder surgery and on Friday had been told by his

doctor to "take it easy" after the operation. Witnesses on the beach told police the tide was unusually high with a strong undercurrent that day. Some said it was the highest they'd ever seen it. Despite that, Holt began to swim farther from the beach, into deeper water, a 1968 police report said. He never returned. Australia was stunned at the news of their missing prime minister. His disappearance made Holt's death part of Australian folklore, and provoked furious debate. There was wild speculation in the media that Holt had committed suicide, distraught over an allegedly fractious marriage or worn out from his job. Police in their 1968 report found this was highly unlikely. Other theories had a more international flavor. "(Some claimed) there was some sort of foreign power involved, that he'd been picked up by a Russian or Chinese mission and been whisked away against his will," he said. There was even a widely scorned book, titled "The Prime Minister Was A Spy" by British journalist Anthony Grey, which alleged Holt had been a Chinese spy, and had evacuated to a Chinese submarine from Cheviot Beach at the end of his mission.



South Africa's ANC wrestles to elect new party leader

AFP, Johannesburg

Thousands of delegates from South Africa's ruling ANC party yesterday prepared to elect their next leader in a vote widely seen as a decisive moment in the country's post-apartheid history. The front-runners in the tight race are Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, a wealthy businessman, and former minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who is President Jacob Zuma's ex-wife. With public support for the ANC falling sharply, the party which has ruled since 1994 when Nelson Mandela won the first multi-racial vote, could struggle to retain its grip on power in the 2019 general elections. "We hope to start voting at some point this afternoon and the results will be out possibly tomorrow morning," ANC deputy secretary-general Jessie Duarte told reporters. Ramaphosa received a significant boost late Saturday when he was publicly endorsed by influential ANC chairwoman Baleka Mbete. There are more than 4,700 delegates attending the conference just outside Johannesburg which got off to a late start due to disputes over which delegates are qualified to vote, and further challenges may be lodged. Zuma, whose reign has been marred by graft scandals, will step down as ANC chief at the meeting but will remain as head of state ahead of the 2019 vote. The ANC is still South Africa's biggest party by far, but the 54 percent it won in local elections last year was its worst poll result since 1994. In opposition, the Democratic Alliance and the Economic Freedom Fighters are hoping to exploit the ANC's woes in the 2019 election, with one possible outcome being a coalition government.

