



A Palestinian demonstrator kicks a tear gas canister fired by Israeli troops as a poster depicting US President Donald Trump and US Vice President Mike Pence is seen on the ground during clashes at a protest against Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, in the West Bank city of Bethlehem yesterday. Inset, Israeli forces stand behind a barrier as Palestinians throw a molotov cocktail towards them at the Qalandia checkpoint in the occupied West Bank. PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP



Trump nears tax victory

US Senate approves most drastic changes to tax code in 30 years amid opposition from Democrats

But with senators Marco Rubio and Bob Corker backing off their threats to oppose the bill, it ultimately carried through, and Pence pronounced to loud cheers, "the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act is passed."

In the House, 12 Republicans had joined all Democrats in opposition as the bill passed 227 to 203.

"Today we are giving the people of this country their money back," said House Speaker Paul Ryan, who forcefully banged the gavel down as he proclaimed victory.

Trump, who has pushed hard to get the measure across the finish line, tweeted his congratulations to Ryan and all other "great House Republicans who voted in favor of cutting your taxes!"

The procedural snafu only became apparent afterward.

Senate Democrats said they demanded that three provisions in the bill -- including one allowing the use of savings accounts for home-schooling expenses -- be stripped out because they violate the Senate's so-called Byrd Rule, guidelines on the kinds of legislation that can pass the Senate with just a simple majority.

Democrats seized on the hiccup as proof that Republicans were rushing to jam the tax cuts through Congress without enough study.



Huthi missile on Riyadh 'bears hallmarks' of Iran

Says US envoy to UN; Tehran denies allegation

US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said a missile fired by Yemen's Houthi group toward Saudi Arabia on Tuesday "bears all the hallmarks of previous attacks using Iranian-provided weapons" as she pushed the UN Security Council to act.

Saudi air defenses shot down the ballistic missile and there were no reports of casualties or damage. In contrast, a UN human rights spokesman said coalition air strikes had killed at least 136 non-combatants in war-torn Yemen since Dec 6.

Saudi-led forces, backing Yemen's government, have fought the Iran-allied Houthis in Yemen's more than two-year-long war. Iran has denied supplying the Houthis with weapons, saying the US and Saudi allegations are "baseless and unfounded."

"We must all act cooperatively to expose the crimes of the Tehran regime and do what ever is needed to make sure they get the message. If we do not, then Iran will bring the world deeper into a broadening regional conflict," Haley told the council.

Haley said she was exploring, with some council colleagues, several options for pressuring Iran to "adjust their behavior." However, Haley is likely to struggle to convince some members, like veto powers Russia and China, that UN action is needed.

Meanwhile, Tehran strongly denied that it had supplied weapons to Yemeni rebels which they used in attacks on its archfoe Saudi Arabia as alleged by both Riyadh and Washington.

"We have no arms link with Yemen," foreign ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi told the ISNA news agency yesterday.

The Saudi-led coalition targeted rebel positions near Yemen's capital with air strikes yesterday, witnesses said, a day after Riyadh said it intercepted a missile fired by the Huthi insurgents.

YEMEN CONFLICT
Saudi-led coalition raids hit rebel positions in Yemen



EU says Brexit transition to end by 2021

The European Commission said yesterday that a Brexit transition period during which Britain must obey EU rules should last until the end of 2020.

The development comes after EU leaders last week signed off on the first stage of Brexit negotiations, ending more than a year of stalemate over Britain's bill for leaving the bloc, as well the fate of the Irish border and EU expatriates.

Unveiling the EU executive branch's new negotiating guidelines, chief negotiator Michel Barnier said that during the transition period Britain would remain part of the bloc's single market, which includes freedom of immigration for EU nationals.

India, China to hold talks on disputed borders

India yesterday announced it would host China for another round of talks on long-running border disputes, the first since they defused one of their worst deadlocks in decades.

The foreign ministry said China's special representative on borders would meet his counterpart in New Delhi on Friday for the 20th meeting on the unresolved "boundary question".

The regional giants have been arguing over their border since the 1960s when they went to war over the Himalayan territory of Arunachal Pradesh.

Special representatives from both sides have been holding regular talks since 2003, but disputes remain.

This week's meeting on borders is the first since India and China resolved a summer standoff in a different Himalayan region.

The area known as the Doklam plateau, or Donglang in Chinese, is claimed by both China and by Bhutan, which is an ally of India.

The dispute began in mid-June after Chinese troops started building a road on the plateau, and India deployed troops to stop the project.

The confrontation escalated until August when the two nuclear-armed nations pulled back their troops, averting a full-blown crisis.

India and China have a long history of mistrust as they jostle for regional supremacy.

China has fostered closer ties with India's arch-rival Pakistan in recent years. India meanwhile is revamping its military and bolstering its partnership with the United States.

Both nations say they are committed to solving longstanding border disagreements through dialogue, but progress has been glacial.

India and China went to war in 1962 over Arunachal Pradesh, with Chinese troops temporarily capturing part of the Himalayan territory.

The dispute remains unresolved, with India considering Arunachal Pradesh one of its northeastern states while China stakes claims to about 90,000 square kilometres of the state.

The regional giants have been arguing over their border since the 1960s. Beijing has fostered closer ties with India's arch-rival Pakistan in recent years

NEWS IN brief

Netanyahu says he will avoid graft charges
AFP, Jerusalem
Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Tuesday he would avoid corruption charges after he was questioned in two graft probes. At a rally near Tel Aviv, he implied police would recommend he be indicted but that there would be no follow-up.

Chinese jets carry out drills around Taiwan
AFP, Taipei
Chinese jets yesterday conducted drills near Taiwan's airspace for the sixth time this month, as relations between the two rivals worsen. China sees self-governed Taiwan as part of its territory to be reunified at some point -- by military force, if necessary. The two sides split after a civil war in 1949. Although Taiwan is a self-ruling democracy, it has never formally declared independence.

Libya in grip of chaos 2 yrs after unity deal
AFP, Tripoli
Two years after a deal to form a unity government aimed at ending deep divisions between Libya's opposing sides, the country remains mired in crisis with no solution in sight. The UN-brokered agreement signed in Morocco in December 2015 establishing a Government of National Accord brought hopes of an easing of chaos that followed the 2011 revolution.

S'pore govt employee fined for media leak
AFP, Singapore
A Singapore civil servant was yesterday fined but escaped jail for leaking confidential information to a journalist, a prosecution that a rights group described as an attempt to spread a "culture of fear". Government housing agency employee Ng Han Yuan was fined for passing details about a still confidential public housing resale portal to Janice Tai of the Straits Times daily.

EU tells Poland to reverse judicial reforms

Poland yesterday denounced the EU's decision to initiate unprecedented disciplinary proceedings against it over planned judicial reforms, which Brussels says threaten the rule of law.

Poland decries the European Commission's launch of the procedure foreseen in Article 7, which is essentially political, not "legal" in nature, the foreign ministry said in a statement, adding that it risks undermining "mutual trust".

The Article 7 disciplinary procedure, which has never been used before, could ultimately lead to Poland losing its voting rights in the EU.

Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans told reporters in Brussels that 13 laws adopted by Poland in the space of two years had created a situation where the government "can systematically politically interfere with the composition, powers, the administration and the functioning" of judicial authorities.

Poland's rightwing Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki shot back on Twitter that "Poland is as devoted to the rule of law as the rest of the EU."

He said that the "current judiciary reform is deeply needed", echoing the governing Law and Justice party (PiS), which says the reforms are needed to banish the last traces of communism from public life nearly three decades after its collapse.

"The dialogue between the Commission and Warsaw needs to be both open and honest. I believe that Poland's sovereignty and the idea of United Europe can be reconciled," Morawiecki said.

Case against Reuters journos would begin

Says Myanmar as probe almost finished

REUTERS, Yangon

A spokesman for Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi said yesterday he had been informed that the police had almost completed their investigation of two Reuters journalists arrested over a week ago, after which a court case against them would begin.

Zaw Htay said the two reporters, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, would then have access to a lawyer and be able to meet members of their families. "It will not be long. The investigation is almost done," he said by phone.

The spokesman said the Ministry of Home Affairs and police told him on Tuesday that the two men were being detained in Yangon, were "in good condition" and had not been subject to "illegal questioning."

A number of governments and human rights and journalist groups have criticised Myanmar's authorities for holding the pair incommunicado since their arrest, with no access to a lawyer, colleagues and family members.

Asked if the police were respecting their human rights, Zaw Htay replied: "Yes, yes, I have told them not to do those things."

"I told them to act according to the law. They guaranteed that they will act only according to the law," said Zaw Htay, who wasn't more specific.



A woman looks at a street art poster representing Catalan Socialist Party - PSC candidate Miquel Iceta kissing center-right party Ciudadanos (Citizens) candidate for the upcoming Catalan regional election Ines Arrimadas in Barcelona, Spain yesterday. Catalan voters will decide today whether to return the separatists to power or to bring in a pro-unity government. PHOTO: AFP

Schoolboy punished for 'long hug'

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian school principal yesterday defended suspending a male student for embracing a female classmate in "a long hug", vowing to uphold "decorum" even as his decision is challenged in court.

A furore has engulfed the school in southern Kerala state after the 16-year-old was suspended in August for hugging a female friend and posting images of the pair on social media.

The teenager appealed the decision and state authorities ordered he be allowed to finish his final year of high school.

But last week St Thomas Central School successfully blocked that ruling in court -- prompting a counter-challenge from the boy's parents who have accused school leaders of overstepping boundaries.

"Why can't my son go out with his girlfriend? The girl or her parents don't have any complaint," the boy's father told the Indian Express newspaper.

But school principal Sebastian T Joseph defended his decision, saying the pair's behaviour was "the tip of the iceberg."

"It was not only a hug. They posted compromising pictures (of themselves) on Instagram which had 800-900 likes from the school students," Joseph told AFP.

4,500 Russians joined militants abroad: FSB

AFP, Moscow

At least 4,500 Russians have left the country to fight with "terrorists" in the Middle East, North Africa and other regions, the head of the FSB security service, Alexander Bortnikov, said on Tuesday.

Speaking in an interview with government newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta, Bortnikov said that "as of today, some 4,500 Russians had been identified to have gone abroad to take part in fighting on the side of terrorists."

Bortnikov said the security service worked to prevent militants from the Middle East, North Africa, Pakistan and Afghanistan from coming to Russia and stopping Russians from going there.

Canada, US to host North Korea crisis talks in Jan

AFP, Ottawa

Canada and the United States announced Tuesday they will host a summit of foreign ministers in Vancouver on January 16, including envoys from Japan and South Korea, to seek progress on the North Korean nuclear crisis.

"We believe a diplomatic solution to the crisis is essential and possible," Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland told a joint press conference with visiting US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

Tillerson said the meeting would seek to further increase pressure on North Korea to come to the table to negotiate an end to its nuclear program.

This could include "other steps that could be taken to put additional pressure on the regime in North Korea," as well as preparing for the prospects of talks, he said.

"We (will) continue to find ways to advance the pressure campaign against North Korea," Tillerson said, "to send North Korea a unified message from the international community that we will not accept you as... a nuclear weapons nation, and that all of us share one policy and one goal -- the full complete verifiable denuclearization of the Korean peninsula."

The United States has asked the UN Security Council to blacklist ten ships for carrying banned cargo from North Korea, according to the request obtained by AFP on Tuesday.

The vessels including two Hong Kong-flagged ships and two North Korean tankers will be barred from entry into ports worldwide if the council approves the request.

Meanwhile, South Korean President Moon Jae-In has proposed delaying major joint military exercises with the US that always infuriate Pyongyang until after the Olympics, he said.

It was the first confirmation that Seoul is seeking to postpone the annual Key Resolve and Foal Eagle drills, which usually start in late February or early March and run until the end of April.

US seeks ship ban over Pyongyang's violations
S Korea seeks drill delay ahead of Winter Olympics