

Catalans vote amid Spain stand-off

AFP, Barcelona

Catalans voted yesterday in a crucial election that could mark a turning point for their region, just two months after a failed secession bid triggered Spain's worst political crisis in decades.

High turnout was expected in a vote pitting leaders of the wealthy northeastern region's separatist movement against parties that want to remain in Spain.

Will voters again hand victory to pro-independence parties that tried to break Catalonia from Spain, one of whose candidates is in jail and the other in self-imposed exile in Belgium?

Or will they lose the absolute parliamentary majority of 72 seats they won in 2015?

Catalans on both sides of the divide saw the day as a potential moment of truth for their region, following weeks of upheaval and protests unseen since democracy was reinstated following the death in 1975 of dictator Franco.

"Today's vote is about whether we say yes or no to independence in Catalonia," said Gloria Garcia, a telephone operator in Santa Coloma de Gramenet, a working class suburb of Barcelona.

While the independence question is far from new, it was the banned referendum on October 1 -- and a heavy police crackdown on voters -- that focused the world's attention on the region.

Some 5.5 million people are registered to vote in yesterday's election which is likely to see seven parties winning mandates in the 135-seat regional parliament.



A man wearing a Catalan barretina hat kisses his ballot before casting his vote for the Catalan regional election at a polling station in Barcelona, Spain yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Trump hails tax cut triumph in Congress

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump celebrated a "historic" victory Wednesday as the US Congress passed a massive Republican tax cut plan, handing the president his first major legislative achievement since taking office nearly a year ago.

The House of Representatives voted along party lines to greenlight a \$1.5 trillion overhaul that will impact every corner of the US economy through dramatic tax cuts for corporations and temporary reductions for individuals.

Opposition Democrats have branded the tax plan a giveaway to the wealthiest that risks blowing a hole in the national debt, but the revamp fulfills a core Trump campaign pledge to redirect money from government coffers into the pockets of working Americans.

"We broke every record," a jubilant Trump told scores of elated Republicans gathered at the White House for a victory lap, thanking them for driving through "the largest tax cut in the history of our country."

"We are making America great again," he declared, in a melee of smiles and handshakes with lawmakers -- who took turns to sing the president's praises.

"Something this big, something this generational, something this profound could not have been done without exquisite presidential leadership," gushed House Speaker Paul Ryan, as fellow lawmakers applauded.

The most sweeping rewrite of the US tax code in decades, the bill represents Trump's most important legislative victory in the 11 months since his inauguration, until now marked by the stinging failure to repeal his predecessor's health care law.

Blow to May amid Brexit crisis

UK senior minister Damian Green sacked from cabinet after inquiry found he breached ministerial code

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May was left weakened by the resignation Wednesday of her deputy Damian Green, the latest crack in her government as she faces tough Brexit talks.

Green agreed to step down as first secretary of state after a probe into his conduct found he had acted dishonestly.

"It is therefore with deep regret, and enduring gratitude for the contribution you have made over many years, that I asked you to resign from the government and have accepted your resignation," the prime minister wrote in a letter addressed to Green.

May said she was "extremely sad" to ask her deputy to step down, describing him as a friend since their time at university and throughout their political careers.

The departure of one of her closest aides is the result of an investigation into Green's conduct following newspaper allegations published last month.

The Sunday Times reported that pornography was found on his parliamentary computer in 2008, while a journalist claimed Green acted inappropriately towards her in 2015.

In its report the Cabinet Office said Green had breached the ministerial code when he made "inaccurate and misleading" statements, by falsely claiming he was unaware that indecent material had been found on his computer.

London's Metropolitan Police had told Green about the pornography found, the Cabinet Office noted, without drawing conclusions on whether he had viewed the material.

In a summary of the report findings published by May's Downing Street office, the investigation did not draw definite conclusions on Green's behaviour towards the journalist Kate Malloy.

In his resignation letter Green apologised for breaching the ministerial code, while denying that he downloaded or viewed pornography in parliament.

He also expressed his regret at the "distress caused" to Malloy, who claimed Green touched her knee and later sent her a suggestive text message.



Push pressure on regime

Syria opposition urges Russia towards political settlement as new peace talks kick off in Astana

AFP, Astana

Syria's opposition yesterday said it was more important "than ever before" that Russia push Bashar al-Assad's government towards a political settlement, as new peace talks kicked off in Kazakhstan.

A new round of Syria peace talks backed by powerbrokers Russia, Iran and Turkey began earlier yesterday in the Kazakh capital Astana as major powers seek to revive a hobbled peace process.

Delegations from Russia, Iran and Turkey along with Syrian regime representatives and a 20-strong opposition delegation had all arrived in the Kazakh capital Astana for two days of talks, a Kazakh foreign ministry spokesman said.

The UN's envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, is expected to attend the second day of talks today, the ministry added.

Yesterday, de Mistura will meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow.

In Astana, the Syrian delegation urged Russia to push Assad's government towards a peace settlement.

"We are asking the Russian side, now more than ever before, to put pressure on the regime to push it towards a political settlement," the Syrian opposition delegation said in a statement after meeting with a United Nations team.

"The detainees are the priority for the military delegation. We will focus on this cause with the Russian delegation," the statement added.

The Syrian negotiators will also focus on the reinforcement of the ceasefire, especially in the de-escalation zones, as well as the lifting of sieges on all towns and villages and the delivery of assistance to those in need, the statement said.

Syria's SANA state news agency reported that Russia's delegation had "met separately with the Iranian and Turkish delegations."



Police sit in front of a crashed vehicle after a driver was arrested after ploughing into pedestrians at a crowded intersection near the Flinders Street train station in central Melbourne, Australia yesterday.

19 hurt as car hits Melbourne crowds

Driver arrested; no evidence of terror link: Australia police

AFP, Melbourne

A car ploughed into a crowd in Australia's second-largest city yesterday injuring 19 people in what police said was a "deliberate act" but one they did not believe was terror related.

Witnesses said people were thrown through the air after being hit by the vehicle, which did not appear to be trying to stop as it "mowed everybody down" at a busy intersection in downtown Melbourne.

Victoria state police said the 32-year-old driver, an Australian of Afghan descent, was known to authorities for traffic and "minor assault" offences and had mental health issues.

The car was driven "intentionally" through the intersection and collided with a "large number" of pedestrians, Acting Chief Commissioner Shane Patton told reporters in Melbourne.

The driver "has a history of drug use and mental health issues... At this time we do not have any evidence or intelligence to indicate a connection with terrorism" or extremism, he said.

The man was arrested after a tussle with an off-duty police officer.

Investigators were waiting to interview the driver, who was in hospital under police guard.

Victoria state Premier Daniel Andrews, called the incident an "evil, deliberate, cowardly act" that left 19 people hurt -- four of them critically.

In a tweet, police appealed to members of the public to upload any images they might have of the incident to help assist with their investigation.

A witness, named only as Sue, told Melbourne radio station 3AW that she heard screams and saw "people flying everywhere".

"We could hear this noise, as we looked left, we saw this white car, it just mowed everybody down," she said.

"People are flying everywhere. We heard thump, thump. People are running everywhere."

Another witness, John, told ABC Radio Melbourne that he saw an "SUV coming at high speed".

"(I) really just heard the collision with people with bags and what must be shopping trolleys -- and I hope not prams," he said.

"I've really never seen anything like this before and I haven't stopped shaking."

Reporters passed no info: UN

REUTERS, Yangon

Two Reuters reporters arrested in Myanmar had not passed any information to the United Nations, the world body said, rejecting a report published in domestic media which suggested that could be the reason for their detention.

A report published online by the Irrawaddy magazine on Tuesday had cited an unnamed source "who has close ties with military intelligence" as saying that the two men had passed photographs obtained during their reporting on violence in the western state of Rakhine to the UN.

Asked about the report, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday: "We can confirm that Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo do not work for the United Nations and have not contacted the United Nations regarding the situation in Rakhine State."

Reuters also denied that Wa Lone, 31, and Kyaw Soe Oo, 27, who have been in detention since Dec 12, had worked with the UN or any other organisation.

"We reject the assertion that Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were working with any organization other than Reuters," said a spokeswoman for the news agency, when asked about the Irrawaddy report.

"They were engaged only in independent, unbiased reporting consistent with the Thomson Reuters Trust Principles."

A government spokesman was not immediately available for comment.

Myanmar authorities have said the two journalists are being investigated over whether they violated the country's colonial-era Official Secrets Act. The act carries a maximum prison sentence of 14 years.



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We are delighted & proud of this recognition for special contribution to the development of The National Economy. Our heartiest gratitude to all concerned along with National Board of Revenue, Govt. of The People's Republic of Bangladesh.

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