



People react to results in Catalonia's regional elections at a gathering of the Catalan National Assembly in Barcelona Thursday night. PHOTO: REUTERS

# Catalans deal a blow to Madrid

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regional president Carles Puigdemont called on Rajoy to hold talks in Brussels, where he has sought self-imposed exile, or anywhere else in Europe -- barring Spain, where he faces arrest.

He also called on the European Union, which has so far sided with Rajoy in the crisis, to hear out the independence camp.

"I only demand to the European Commission or other European institutions, to listen, to listen to the Catalan people, not only the Spanish state," he told reporters in Brussels.

In making this appeal, he was pursuing a strategy he has followed throughout the crisis, by positioning himself as an equal to the Spanish prime minister, and seeking recognition from the international community.

Rajoy yesterday rejected a call by Puigdemont to meet after separatists won majority in crucial regional polls.

"The person I should be meeting with is with the one who won the elections, and that is Mrs Arrimadas,"

Rajoy said, replying to a journalist who asked whether he would respond to Puigdemont's invitation for a meeting.

Rajoy was referring to centrist, anti-independence candidate Ines Arrimadas, whose Ciudadanos party won the best individual result in Thursday's poll -- even as the bloc of separatist parties maintained its absolute majority.

**NOISY PROCESS**  
Puigdemont's Together for Catalonia list secured the best result of the three separatist groupings.

"The biggest loser of election night was the People's Party (PP) of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, which obtained only three seats," said Antonio Barroso, a political risk analyst at Teneo Intelligence in London.

How the independence camp intends to rule remains a mystery, however -- and should its leaders fail to put their house in order, Catalans may even have to return to the polls.

"It is unclear whether Puigdemont will be able to be re-appointed... as he will be arrested if he comes back to

Spain," Barroso said.

"As a result, the investiture process will be far from straightforward, and the risk of new elections in 2018 remains high," he added.

"The investiture of a new first minister is likely to be a protracted and noisy process," he said.

Puigdemont faces charges of rebellion, sedition and misuse of funds in Spain.

Other independence leaders, including Puigdemont's former deputy Oriol Junqueras, are behind bars pending trial.

And a Spanish judge yesterday expanded a probe into the secessionist bid to include another six independence leaders, including former regional president Artur Mas, according to a court decision seen by AFP.

**SIT DOWN AND TALK**  
Meanwhile, in a clear indicator of the gulf over independence afflicting Catalan society, anti-secessionist centrist party Ciudadanos won the biggest individual result with 37 of the 135 seats in the regional parliament.

Unless the three pro-independence lists fail to clinch a deal to work together in the coming months, however, they will govern Catalonia with 70 seats -- two less than their previous tally.

Ciudadanos's candidate Ines Arrimadas saw the glass half-full for the anti-independence side.

The fragmented vote result shows Spain and the world "that here in Catalonia there has never been a secessionist majority", she told reporters.

The Catalan business elite, some of whose members have close links with Puigdemont's party, "know that they have to give a fresh boost to tourism and the economy", sociologist Narciso Michavila told AFP.

At stake in the crisis is the economy of a region that has seen its tourism sector suffer and more than 3,100 companies -- including the largest banks, utilities and insurers -- move their legal headquarters out of Catalonia.

# "It could've been me"

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After further strikes by insurgents on Aug. 25, the military campaign intensified, touching off a mass exodus of Rohingya to Bangladesh, where more than 800,000 now live in refugee camps.

Some local journalists say they cannot report independently from Rakhine State due to harassment and threats from both the authorities and local people, while foreign reporters are denied access to the conflict zone.

When Moe Myint, a 29-year-old journalist for the online news site Irrawaddy heard about their arrest, his first thought was: "It could've been me."

"What if the police found out that I carry any controversial document?" he said. "It's a deliberate arrest in order to muzzle media coverage on conflicts in northern Rakhine."

Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director for New York-based Human Rights Watch, said Suu Kyi has "shown scant understanding of the role an independent press plays in a democracy".

"The ethnic cleansing in Rakhine

state has made the government even more intolerant," he said.

Suu Kyi's spokesman, Zaw Htay, declined to comment on Myanmar's press freedom, but he told Reuters on Sunday: "Your reporters are protected by the rule of the law."

**FAKE NEWS**  
Myanmar has denied most allegations against its security forces in Rakhine, rejecting charges by the United Nations, the United States and others that a campaign of "ethnic cleansing" was waged against the Rohingya.

The authorities have accused international media of putting out "fake news" about rights abuses in Rakhine and of "working hand-in-glove" with insurgents.

In October last year, spokesman Zaw Htay singled out English-language newspaper Myanmar Times special investigations editor Fiona MacGregor for criticism on his Facebook page.

Days later MacGregor, who had written a report about alleged gang rape by soldiers, was sacked by the paper.

When contacted this week, MacGregor declined to add to the comment she made in an interview with Reuters last year, when she said it was "unacceptable that representatives of the democratically elected government would use social media and bullying tactics to suppress stories".

Zaw Htay said at the time that he was sorry she had been fired. He said he had "just highlighted she didn't reach other reliable sources and it led to a one-sided news article based on unreliable sources".

Rights monitors say the erosion of press freedoms has not been limited to coverage of the Rakhine crisis.

Since April 2016, 21 journalists have been charged or arrested under a telecommunications law that broadly prohibits the use of telecommunications networks to "extort, defame, disturb or intimidate". Critics say it is used to curb criticism of the authorities and reporting of corruption.

Suu Kyi's spokesman did not respond to further Reuters requests for comment.

# SYRIA PEACE PLAN Major powers scramble to agree

AFP, Astana  
Key powerbrokers were scrambling yesterday over plans to speed up a political settlement in Syria, with UN envoy Staffan de Mistura joining a second day of talks after negotiations in Moscow.

A new round of peace talks backed by Russia, Iran and Turkey began in the Kazakh capital Astana on Thursday in an attempt to revive a hobbled peace process.

The second day of the talks coincides with the anniversary of a devastating and strategically crucial victory by Syrian forces in Aleppo, the country's second-largest city and once a rebel stronghold, after a blistering Russian-backed offensive.

The Kremlin is hoping to convert its game-changing military intervention in Syria into a political settlement on its terms, and wants to bring together regime officials and the opposition for a "peace congress" at the Black Sea resort of Sochi.

The Kremlin's chief negotiator Aleksandr Lavrentyev said Thursday that "quite a lot of time" at the talks had been spent on Moscow's proposal for a "Congress of National Dialogue", and the issue is likely to feature high on the agenda yesterday as well.

The plenary session was scheduled to begin at around 1000 GMT, the Kazakh foreign ministry said.

But while both Russian officials and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad have spoken enthusiastically of the plan, rebel delegates are wary and the UN has yet to endorse the plan.

De Mistura, who held talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu in Moscow on Thursday, had said that negotiations over a political settlement should proceed "one step at a time".

He acknowledged that the most recent round of talks chaired by the UN in Geneva this month -- the eighth -- "was not a good meeting" as tensions between government and rebel delegations boiled over.

# Two Gazans killed

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The clashes broke out after the weekly Muslim prayers, with minor scuffles in Jerusalem.

**ABBAS SNUBS US PEACE PLANS**  
Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas said yesterday that he would "no longer accept" any peace plan proposed by the United States, dealing a preemptive blow to a fresh initiative expected by Washington next year.

The comments in Paris came hours after 128 members of the United Nations voted to condemn US President Donald Trump's decision on December 6 to unilaterally recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

That move continues to reverberate in the Middle East and European diplomats are pessimistic about the Trump administration's peace plan which is being prepared behind closed doors and will be presented to both sides in 2018.

US Vice President Mike Pence postponed a trip he was due to make to the region this week, after Palestinian and Arab Christian leaders expressed reluctance to meet him.

"The United States has proven to be a dishonest mediator in the peace process and we will no longer accept any plan from it," Abbas told a joint

press conference with French President Emmanuel Macron.

Macron repeated his earlier condemnations of the US decision on Jerusalem, but he also ruled out recognising Palestine as a state unilaterally, which France has mooted previously.

"The Americans have marginalised themselves and I am trying to not do the same thing," Macron said, conscious that any move to recognise Palestine would antagonise the Israelis.

**MASSIVE SETBACK**  
On Thursday evening in New York, the 193-member General Assembly adopted a resolution by 128 to nine with 35 abstentions that rejected the US decision on Jerusalem.

The defeat for the US -- despite threats that it might cut off funding for the UN or to countries that voted against it -- was called a "massive setback" by Palestinian UN envoy Riyad Mansour.

Speaking at the emergency session, US Ambassador Nikki Haley warned that Washington "will remember this day".

"America will put our embassy in Jerusalem," Haley said in defence of the US move, which broke with international consensus and unleashed protests across the Muslim world.

"No vote in the United Nations will

make any difference on that," Haley said. "But this vote will make a difference on how Americans look at the UN and on how we look at countries who disrespect us in the UN."

Abbas hit out at efforts by the US to intimidate countries ahead of the vote.

"I hope that the others will learn the lesson and understand that you cannot impose solutions by using money and trying to buy off countries," he added in Paris.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said the UN vote showed the "illegality" of Trump's decision, urging the United States to withdraw it.

# Pakistan

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draconian laws have found a powerful new platform online, rights activists say.

The result is often self-censorship, and in the wake of the allegations, a number of liberal commentators shut down their accounts completely.

Ahmad Waqas Goraya, one of the activists who was released and lives in the Netherlands, told AFP the court should now investigate why Pakistan's mainstream media repeated the dangerous claims against him without proof.

# UN Security Council imposes new sanctions on North Korea

UNITED NATIONS, Seoul, Reuters

The UN Security Council yesterday unanimously imposed new sanctions on North Korea following its latest intercontinental ballistic missile test, a move that analysts said could have a significant impact on the isolated country's struggling economy.

The resolution seeks to ban nearly 90 percent of refined petroleum product exports to North Korea by capping them at 500,000 barrels a year and, in what diplomats said was a last-minute change, demands the repatriation of North Koreans working abroad within 24 months, instead of 12 months as first proposed.

The US-drafted resolution would also cap crude oil supplies to North Korea at 4 million barrels a year. The United States has been calling on China to limit its oil supply to its neighbour and ally.

The resolution passed by a vote of 15 to 0, said Japan's ambassador to the United Nations. Japan holds the presidency of the Security Council this month.

North Korea on November 29 said it successfully tested a new intercontinental ballistic missile in a "breakthrough" that puts the US mainland within range of its nuclear weapons whose warheads could withstand re-entry to the Earth's atmosphere.

"It [the resolution] sends the unambiguous message to Pyongyang that further defiance will invite further punishments and isolation," Nikki

Haley, the US ambassador to the United Nations, said following the vote.

Tensions have been rising over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, which it pursues in defiance of years of UN Security Council resolutions, with bellicose rhetoric coming from both Pyongyang and the White House.

In November, North Korea called for a halt to what it called "brutal sanctions," saying a previous round imposed after its sixth and most powerful nuclear test on September 3 constituted genocide.

US diplomats have made clear they are seeking a diplomatic solution but have proposed new, tougher sanctions to ratchet up pressure on North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

North Korea regularly threatens to destroy South Korea, the United States and Japan, and says its weapons programs are necessary to counter US aggression. The United States stations 28,500 troops in the South, a legacy of the 1950-53 Korean War.

Yesterday, a spokesperson for North Korea's foreign ministry called US President Donald Trump's recently released national security strategy the latest American policy seeking to "stifle our country and turn the entire Korean peninsula" into an outpost of American hegemony.

He said Trump was seeking "total subordination of the whole world".

# Cops blamed

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days when the state minister instructed them to do so."

Police arrested two people but did not seek remand for them, he said, adding, "Locals apprehend that the police might be trying to protect the culprits."

OC Syedul Mostafa denied the allegations and claimed that the victims' family mentioned incorrect name of their village, leading them to think the crime scene was under Patiya police's jurisdiction.

"When they came back the second time and mentioned the correct name, we recorded the case," he claimed.

Asked about the state minister's instruction, the OC said it was a "coincidence". "When we were recording the case, the honourable state minister called me and enquired about it."

On the remand prayers, the OC said they were not sure about the arrestees' involvement and prayed to the court for a test identification parade so that the victims could identify them.

"If the victims identify the arrestees, we will submit a remand prayer before

the court," he added.

The plaintiff, however, said he had correctly mentioned the name of the village and UP chairman Didarul said, "The victims have already identified one of the arrestees."

Meanwhile, Nari Unnayan Forum yesterday formed a human chain in front of Chittagong Press Club where Banoja Begum, vice-chairman of Karnaphuli Upazila Parishad, expressed her suspicion that evidence might have been destroyed.

"Police did not cooperate with the victims' family when they went to file a case," said Purabi Chakraborty, general secretary of Chittagong district unit Bangladesh Nari Mukti Kendra.

Rehana Begum Ranu, president of Fight for Women's Right, said it is the duty of the police to send a rape victim for medical test within 20 hours.

"If the police take four days only to file a case, it must be negligence of duty," she added.

State Minister Javed said he was following the developments.

# Forging a future

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he says, "but my teacher Kamrun Afroza was supportive. It was a great relief!"

Nonetheless, to study was not without challenges. In particular, he recalls, sudden changes to his syllabus would impact him, as it was not easy to obtain revised study materials in Braille. Yet, he persevered.

Amzad proved to be a capable student. In 2013, he completed his high school at Comilla Victoria Collegiate School. Two years later he achieved a GPA of 4.58 in humanities in his HSC at Victoria College.

"When I visited Amzad in Comilla," says his father, "I felt so proud! Everybody knew my son as a good human being. For him, they even honoured me."

Amzad is now in his fourth semester at Dhaka University. Life at Mohsin Hall took some adjustment but Amzad found people helpful, particularly Bangla lecturer Jashim Uddin, one of several to tell Amzad to call for any problem. The organisation "Aponjon" assists with his living costs.

"I'll not forget," he says, "my classmate Sayma Afsana Atul onde day gave me a recording of her class notes in her own voice to help me study. She often does that."

But the day he really felt a part of the Bangla department was Pahela Baishakh, the Bengali New Year, last April when his public recital of the folksong "Manush Dhoro Manush Bojho" was warmly received.

He lists Atul, Arif and Rizas as university friends who, along with Sayma, are particularly helpful; and effectively it was not only him they help.

Amzad has become an inspiration to others. Parvez Hossain, from Brahmanbaria and an SSC examinee, Yeasin Hossain, from Noakhali and a year away from completing HSC, are two of the at least 10 visually-impaired students Amzad knows who find in his achievement a gateway to their own.

For other blind students Amzad has advice: "Focus on your own enthusiasm. Don't make sudden decisions

based on what others say. Be flexible and ready to interact with everybody."

As for families, Amzad says blind children learn in the same way as any child, from the environment around them. He suggests that families with visually-impaired children create a good learning environment at home and encourage whatever activity most interests their child.

"I realise now that every family with a blind child should send them to school," says Rafiqul, "Education for visually-impaired people is essential."

Amzad believes that if the government took steps to make optical character recognition software for reading online documents more affordable, it would go a long way in helping visually-impaired students complete their studies.

"After graduation, I plan to return to Comilla to start a business," Amzad says, "perhaps a boutique." If the past is any measure, few can doubt his ability to build whatever future he wants.

# BB must act

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a cheque despite having money in the bank," he said.

He also pointed out that the entire banking sector depends on trust. "Every single transaction is done based on trust," he added.

Atiur, who chaired a session of three-day conference, made the remarks apparently over a recent incident involving Farmers Bank. The BB has sacked Farmers Bank Managing Director AKM Shameem for his failure to protect the depositors' interests and manage liquidity.

Muhammad Mahaboob Ali, professor of finance, economics and management at Dhaka School of Economics, said it is not at all acceptable that four directors of a bank would be from the same family.

He also said laundered money could not be returned to the country as "no measures were taken in connection with the Bangladesh Bank reserve heist".