



British PM to change govt ministers soon

REUTERS, London

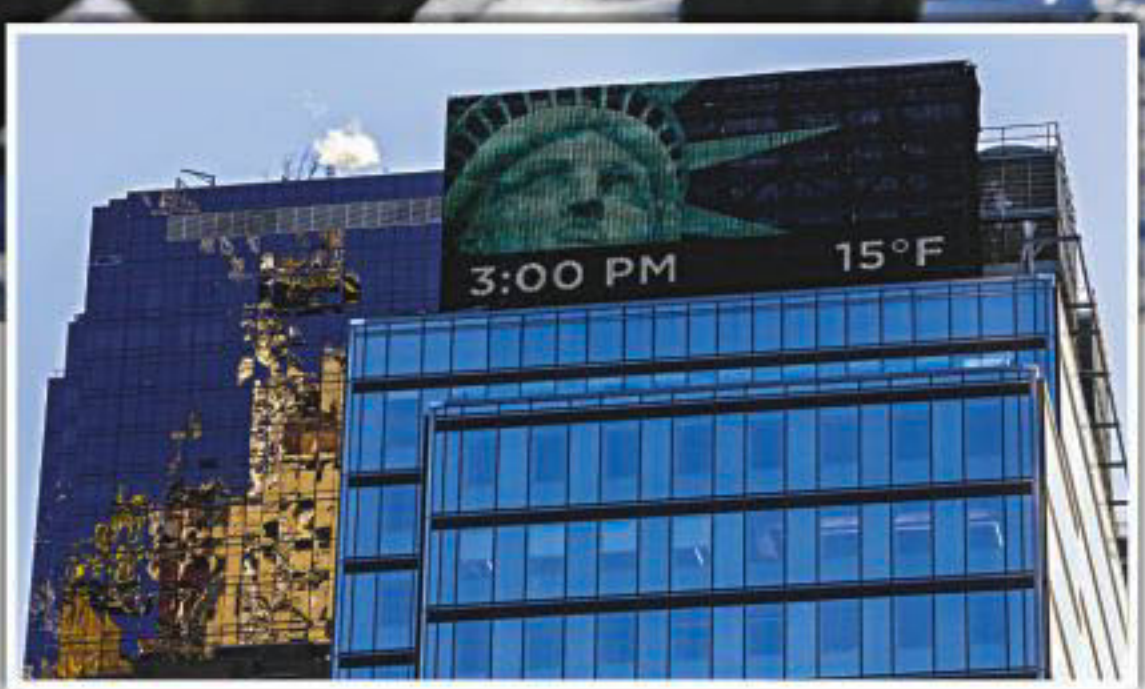
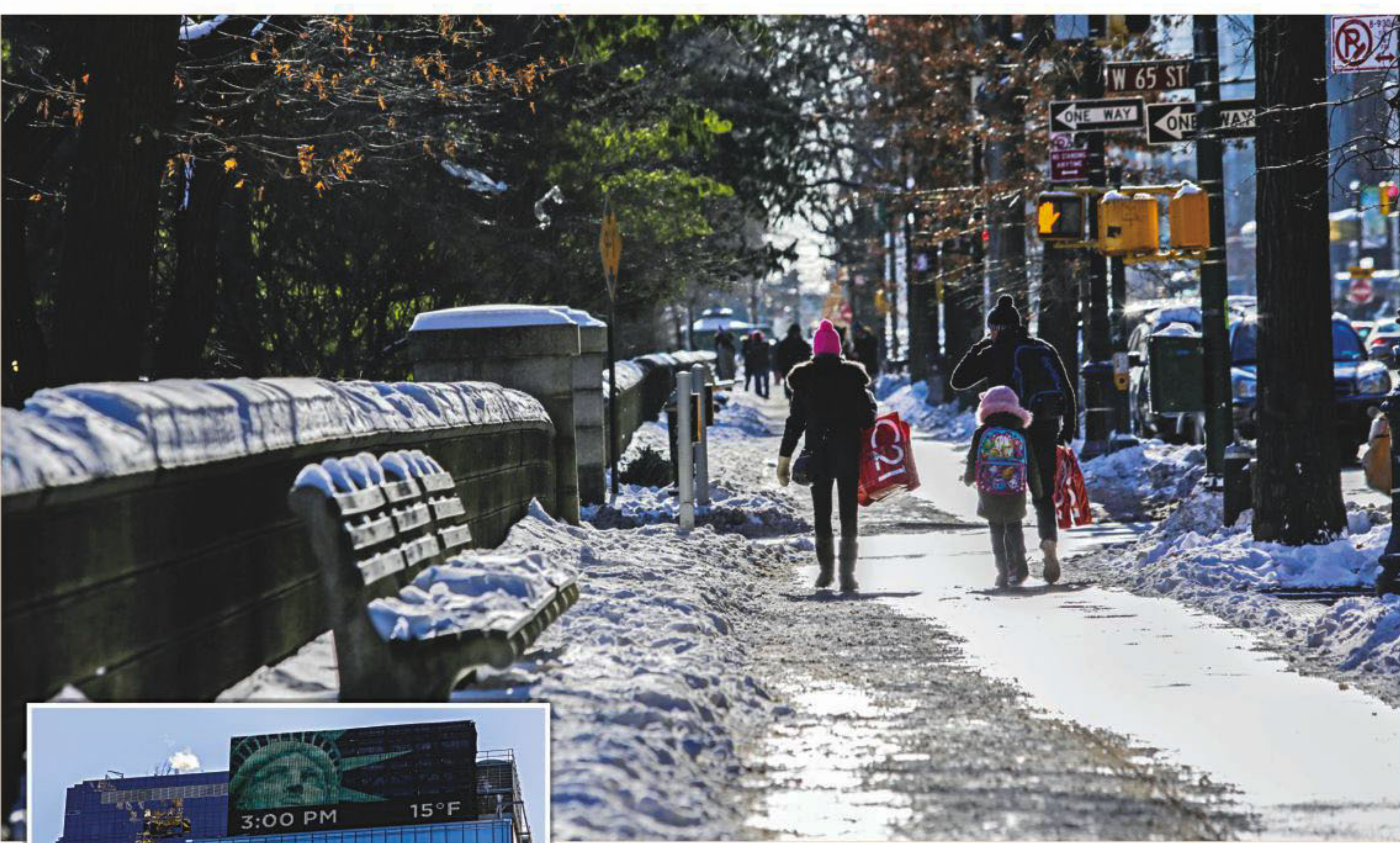
British Prime Minister Theresa May said yesterday she would announce changes to her ministerial team soon, with media reports saying her foreign, finance, interior and Brexit ministers would keep their jobs in a reshuffle starting today.

After running a poorly-received campaign at a national election last year that badly damaged her authority, May is leading a delicately balanced minority government tasked with delivering Britain's exit from the European Union. She is also under pressure to tackle a range of domestic policy problems.

May said ministerial changes were necessary following the departure of her long-standing ally and de-facto deputy prime minister Damian Green, who she forced to resign in December after he made misleading statements about pornography found on an office computer. "Obviously, Damian Green's departure before Christmas means that some changes do have to be made, and I will be making some changes," she told the BBC in an interview filmed on Saturday for broadcast yesterday.

May said the reshuffle would come soon, but did not give any further details. The Sunday Times said foreign minister Boris Johnson, finance minister Philip Hammond, interior minister Amber Rudd and Brexit minister David Davis would not lose their jobs in the reshuffle. The report did not cite its sources.

May is also expected to announce a new first secretary of state to replace Green - an important post with responsibility for maintaining unity in a cabinet still divided over the best approach to Brexit.



People walk around Central Park during freezing temperatures in New York City on Saturday. Inset, a screen shows the temperature around Central Park. Eastern US and Canada froze under record-breaking low temperatures following a deadly winter storm as New York's flagship airport descended into chaos, battling to contain flight backlog. PHOTO: AFP

NORTH KOREA CRISIS Trump: 'I always believe in talking'

AFP, Camp David

US President Donald Trump said Saturday he would be willing to speak directly with Kim Jong-Un, voicing hope that rare talks between North and South Korea could help deescalate the crisis over Pyongyang's nuclear drive.

Trump's remarks were a further pivot from his often-belligerent rhetoric on North Korea and Kim, with whom he has engaged in a war of words that raised fears of nuclear war as Pyongyang carried out missile and nuclear tests.

"I always believe in talking," Trump said at the Camp David presidential retreat when asked if he would speak to Kim by phone.

"Absolutely I would do that, no problem with that at all," Trump said, while making clear this did not mean he would do so without preconditions.

North and South Korea have agreed to hold their first official talks in more than two years, and Trump expressed hopes that they would go beyond discussions of Pyongyang's participation in the upcoming Winter Olympics in the South, which a North Korean Olympic official said Saturday was "likely."

"I would love to see them take it beyond the Olympics," Trump said. "And at the appropriate time, we'll get involved."

He added that if something could come out of the talks, that would be a great thing for all of humanity.

Kim said in a New Year speech that his country wished success for the Olympics, to be held from February 9-25, and would consider sending a delegation -- remarks that set off a tentative rapprochement after weeks of high tensions.

The North and South agreed to the talks on Friday, and Seoul has proposed sending a five-member delegation to the talks.

Mahathir faces uphill task

Veteran ex-leader named as opposition's PM candidate as battle looms against premier Najib Razak and his long-ruling coalition

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's opposition alliance yesterday named former premier Mahathir Mohamad as its prime ministerial candidate for a general election this year, although the authoritarian who ran the country for two decades and is now 92 years old faces an uphill task.

With the country's most popular opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim in jail, Mahathir is seen as the biggest threat to premier Najib Razak, who must call an election by August but is engulfed in a corruption scandal.

Still, an independent survey showed the opposition would have difficulty beating Najib, due to divisions within its own camp and unfavourable electoral boundary changes.

Mahathir and former foe Anwar have joined up to oust Najib, and an election victory by their alliance could also potentially pave the way for Anwar to return and take over as prime minister.

If the opposition wins, it would immediately start the process to obtain a royal pardon for Anwar so that he can be eligible to become prime minister, secretary general Saifuddin Abdullah said at the alliance's convention.

Anwar's wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail will be the coal-

ition's candidate for deputy prime minister.

Mahathir, who during his 22-year tenure as prime minister earned a reputation of being a no-nonsense authoritarian with little time for dissenters promoting liberal values, stands to become the world's oldest leader if the opposition wins.

The Mahathir-led opposition, however, looks unlikely to unseat the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, according to a survey conducted by independent polling firm Merdeka Center in December.

The survey showed that although BN's share of the popular vote will shrink further, it can potentially regain a two-thirds majority in parliament, The Malaysian Insight reported yesterday.

Merdeka Centre's director Ibrahim Suffian said the Mahathir-led group was at a disadvantage due to a split in the opposition and the redrawing of

electoral boundaries that critics say favour the ruling government.

The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which was part of the opposition group in 2013, is no longer part of the pact. "We are highly sceptical of the opposition's prospects if they continue to be split as things are now," Ibrahim said. Malaysia's political landscape has been shaped for nearly two decades by a bitter feud between Anwar and Mahathir.

MALAYSIA GENERAL ELECTION

Mahathir and former foe Anwar have joined up to oust Najib, who must call an election by August



Merkel courts SPD in bid to end political impasse

AFP, Berlin

Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday voiced optimism as she opened talks with Germany's second biggest party on renewing their alliance, in a new attempt at shaking Europe's biggest economy out of paralysis after September's inconclusive elections.

The week of meetings between Merkel's conservative alliance and the Social Democrats (SPD) will examine whether both sides have enough common ground to begin formal coalition negotiations towards a new government by March or April.

"I am going into these talks with optimism. At the same time it is clear to me that we will have an enormous amount of work in front of us over the next few days but we are willing to take it on and to bring a good result," Merkel told journalists as she arrived at the SPD's headquarters for the

meeting.

"I think that it can be done. We will work very swiftly and very intensively," she added.

The talks are not without pitfalls -- including tricky questions surrounding the more than a million asylum seekers who have arrived in Germany since 2015.

The far-right anti-immigration AfD capitalised on growing misgivings in Germany over the new arrivals, winning more than 90 parliamentary seats in the watershed election.

Merkel was left without a majority, while the centre-left SPD found itself with its worst post-war score.

Anxious to stem the haemorrhage to the far right, the conservative wing of Merkel's party as well as her Bavarian allies CSU are championing a tougher stance on immigration -- including demands that are unpalatable to the SPD.

GERMANY COALITION



SHELLING ON INDIA-PAKISTAN BORDER

14,000 bunkers to be built to protect J&K residents

PTI, Jammu

Over 14,000 community and individual bunkers would be constructed along the Line of Control (LoC) and the International Border (IB) for border residents facing Pakistani shelling in Jammu division, Indian officials said yesterday.

While 7298 bunkers would be constructed along the LoC in the twin districts of Poonch and Rajouri, 7162 underground bunkers would be constructed along the IB in Jammu, Kathua and Samba districts, the officials said here.

The Centre recently sanctioned the construction of 14,460 individual and community bunkers at a cost of Rs 415.73 crore for people living along the LoC and IB.

A total of 13,029 individual bunkers and 1431 community bunkers were being constructed, the officials said, adding that the capacity of the 160 square feet individual

bunker was eight people, and that of the 800 square feet community bunker was 40 people.

The officials said 4918 individual and 372 community bunkers would be constructed in Rajouri, and 3076 individual and 243 community bunkers would come up in Kathua district.

A total of 688 community and 1320 individual bunkers would be constructed in Poonch, Jammu would get 1200 individual and 120 community bunkers, and 2515 individual and eight community bunkers would be constructed in Samba district, they said.

India shares a 3,323km long border with Pakistan, of which 221km of the IB and 740km of the LoC fall in Jammu and Kashmir.

As many as 35 people -- 19 Army personnel, 12 civilians and four BSF personnel -- were killed in ceasefire violations by Pakistan last year alone.

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A Palestinian woman stands by a fence during a protest calling on Egypt to open Rafah border crossing, in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWSIN brief

Syrian army presses offensive in Idlib
REUTERS, Beirut

Syria's army and its allies pressed further into the country's largest remaining rebel stronghold yesterday, capturing a town and several villages as they approached a military airport, a pro-Damascus media unit and a war monitor reported.

5.5 magnitude quake hits North-East India
REUTERS, New Delhi

An earthquake of magnitude 5.5 struck east of Imphal, capital of India's northeastern state of Manipur, yesterday, the US Geological Survey said. There were no immediate reports of injuries or damage from the quake, which was 22.8 km (14 miles) deep and hit 101 km (63 miles) east of Imphal.

Hundreds evacuated as PNG volcano erupts
AFP, Sydney

Some 600 residents on a tiny island off Papua New Guinea have been evacuated after a volcano previously believed to be dormant erupted and spewed a "continuous plume" of ash, officials and reports said yesterday.

Peru's Fujimori calls for unity after pardon
REUTERS, Lima

Recently pardoned former president Alberto Fujimori called for Peruvians on Saturday to set aside their "grudges" in order to unite against violence and crime, appealing to his right-wing political base two days after being freed from prison by a presidential pardon.

Rumours rife Imran married a third time

TNN, Islamabad

Cricketer-turned politician and chief of the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), Imran Khan has secretly married a woman he used to visit for spiritual guidance, a local newspaper reported on Saturday. Mufti Saeed, a PTI core committee member, performed the wedlock on January 1, according to report.

The report claimed that Imran came in touch with the woman a couple of years ago.

"The PTI chairperson began 2018 by tying the knot with the woman on the night of January 1 in Lahore and came straight from there the next day to appear before the anti-terrorism court in Islamabad that granted him bail," reported English daily The News.

Saeed had also performed Khan's nikah when he entered into his second marriage with Reham Khan, a TV anchorperson, on January 8, 2015.

Monday's ceremony took place at the residence of a close confidante of the bride who is said to be Khan's friend. The bride reportedly had filed for the dissolution of her first marriage with a government servant few months ago. Her former husband said that they opted for separation "for spiritual reasons". He, however, denied his ex-wife has married Khan.



2,300 EU academics resign from universities: report

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

More than 2,300 EU academics have resigned from British universities over the past year amid concerns over a "Brexodus" of top talent in higher education.

New figures show a 19 percent increase in departures of European staff from universities last year compared to before the EU referendum, and a 10 percent rise from some 2130 resignations in 2015-16.

Theresa May has urged EU citizens to stay in the UK after Britain leaves the bloc but prolonged uncertainty over post-Brexit rights has made some academics fearful for the future, critics warn.

It comes after a report from the British Academy warned that the UK's world-leading university sector could be under threat due to prospective changes to immigration rules after Brexit, with subjects such as modern languages and economics facing the greatest threat. The institution reporting the highest number of resignations was the University of Oxford, which saw 230 departures of EU

academics last year compared to 171 in 2014-15, according to freedom of information requests by the Liberal Democrats to 105 universities.

However the university pointed out that it has also recruited a large number of EU staff so the overall numbers were largely similar.

A spokesman said: "The status of colleagues from other parts of the EU has been a major concern for the university and we have called for clear commitments on this issue to reassure staff and students who are already here or hoping to join us."



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Israeli PM calls for closure of UNRWA

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday called for the closure of the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, days after US President Donald Trump threatened to cut Palestinian aid.

Israel has long viewed the UN agency, known as UNRWA, as biased against it, an allegation the agency strongly denies, saying it is only providing necessary services to Palestinians.

Israeli officials also criticise the agency's method of classifying refugees, with descendants also eligible to register.

"UNRWA is an organisation that perpetuates the Palestinian refugee problem," Netanyahu said at the beginning of his weekly cabinet meeting.

He said that while millions of other refugees around the world were cared for by the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Palestinians have their own body which also treats "great-grandchildren of refugees -- who aren't refugees."

"This absurd situation must be ended," Netanyahu said. In June, Netanyahu said he had raised the issue with Washington's UN envoy Nikki Haley. On Wednesday, Trump threatened to cut aid worth more than \$300 million annually to the Palestinians in a bid to force them to negotiate.