

Hamas to skip meeting over Jerusalem

AFP, Gaza City, Palestinian

Islamist movement Hamas yesterday said it would not participate in a meeting of Palestinian leaders to debate responses to the controversial US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

The decision not to take part in the meeting to begin late Sunday is a further setback to failing reconciliation efforts between leading Palestinian factions.

"We have taken the decision not to participate in the meeting of the (Palestinian) Central Council in Ramallah," Hamas said in a statement, however stressing its "commitment to the unity of our people".

"The conditions under which the committee will be held will not enable it to carry out a comprehensive and responsible political review, and will prevent decisions that reach the level of our aspirations."

The two-day meeting will bring together the heads of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the internationally recognised representative of the Palestinian people.

2 bodies found in tanker

AFP, Beijing

Chinese rescuers yesterday recovered two bodies and the "black box" from a stricken Iranian oil tanker which has been ablaze for the past week off the east coast of China, the transport ministry said.

The Sanchi, carrying 136,000 tonnes of light crude oil from Iran, has been in flames since colliding with the CF Crystal, a Hong Kong-registered bulk freighter, 160 nautical miles east of Shanghai last Saturday.

It had a crew of 32 -- 30 Iranians and two Bangladeshis. With the latest find a total of three bodies have now been recovered. The remaining sailors are still missing.

"At 0837 (0037 GMT), four rescuers equipped with masks and bottles of oxygen were placed at the deck at the back of the Sanchi with the help of a crane," the Chinese transport ministry said in a statement.



Palestinian demonstrators run as tear gas is fired by Israeli troops during clashes at a protest calling for the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails, in the West Bank village of Nabi Saleh, near Ramallah yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Zeman leads in Czech polls

REUTERS, Prague

Incumbent east-looking Milos Zeman led the first round of the Czech Republic's presidential election yesterday by a wide margin but short of winning outright, partial results showed.

Eight candidates are seeking to oust Zeman, whose inclination toward far-right groups and warm relations with Russia and China have split public opinion.

With 30.6 percent of voting districts counted, Zeman led the race with 42.9 percent of votes, while Jiri Drahos, 68, a pro-western academic, won 24.7 percent.

Unless the winner takes more than 50 percent in the first round, the two highest-scoring candidates will go head to head in a run-off planned for Jan. 26-27.

The vote is seen as a referendum on the 73-year-old Zeman, in office since 2013, who has criticised migration from Muslim countries and Germany's decision to accept many migrants.

Czech presidents have limited executive powers but Zeman and his predecessors have had a strong influ-

ence on public debate. They are also pivotal in forming governments -- which the European Union and NATO member country is now trying to do.

Zeman's lead does not mean an easy win in the second round in which the two strongest candidates go head to head. Many voters may switch from their losing candidates to support the



runner-up against Zeman.

Final first-round results were expected by Saturday evening.

The outcome may influence Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis's chances of forming a cabinet. His first attempt to rule in a minority administration is likely to be rejected by parliament next week.

Zeman has backed Babis and said

he would give him another chance even though the billionaire businessman has struggled to get support from other parties while he battles police allegations that he illegally obtained EU subsidies a decade ago. Babis denies wrongdoing.

A win by any of Zeman's main rivals could mean that voices from the Czech leadership may shift closer to the EU mainstream.

Public opinion, the most eurosceptic in the EU, may also be affected by a change of tone from the top.

"I voted for professor Drahos because I want that someone who will not push us to the East and who will not be a disgrace," said lawyer Matej Gredl, 30, after he voted in Prague.

POLICY SHIFT

A former centre-left prime minister and backer of a federal Europe, Zeman has gradually shifted to positions criticising the EU, echoing and reinforcing public sentiment.

He has won endorsements from some mainstream groups as well as the Communist Party and the main far-right anti-EU and anti-NATO SPD party.

Merkel risks leading weak coalition

AFP, Berlin

Germany's veteran chancellor Angela Merkel, often called the world's most powerful woman, will embark on a fourth term with diminished influence and little vision for shaping Europe's future, analysts say.

After wrapping up more than 24 hours of talks Friday between her conservatives and the Social Democrats on forming a new "grand coalition" government, Merkel insisted the preliminary deal would break the deadlock in Germany and pave the way to a "fresh start" for Europe.

But before the ink was even dry on the roadmap for her new administration, observers branded Merkel and the team she's likely to lead a "losers" coalition with little ambition or power to tackle the major challenges facing the country and the continent.

"In fact this 'grand coalition' is only a mini-coalition with just 53 percent" of seats in parliament following the September election that saw both parties cede millions

of voters to the far-right, anti-immigration AfD party, political scientist Karl-Rudolf Korte of Duisburg-Essen University said.

This compares with the lavish, nearly 80-percent majority the parties enjoyed during Merkel's previous term, he told public broadcaster ZDF.

'PALEO-COALITION'

Merkel insisted the accord with the Social Democrats, which must still be approved by the party's rank and file, would ensure Germany's enduring stability and prosperity.

"We will work earnestly, today and during the next term, to create the conditions so that we can also live well in Germany in the next 10 years and 15 years," she told reporters, flanked by SPD leader Martin Schulz and the head of Bavaria's Christian Social Union, Horst Seehofer.

However influential news magazine Der Spiegel branded the alliance led by Merkel, who has been in power since 2005, a "paleo-coalition" of political dinosaurs bereft of fresh blood to propel renewal.



Facebook's News Feed move to be costly

AFP, New York

Facebook's move to highlight posts from friends and family over those from brands and publications follows months of turmoil for the social network and will result in lower advertising revenue, at least in the short-term, analysts said.

Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced the shift in the configuration of the News Feed on Thursday, saying it would reduce engagement by users at first but would lead to their improved "well-being."

While Zuckerberg described the move as being designed to bring people closer together and foster more "meaningful social interactions," analysts noted that it comes amid criticism of the world's leading social network on various fronts.

Facebook has been under fire for months for the proliferation of Russian-created

"fake news" on the platform that may have impacted the 2016 presidential election.

Zuckerberg initially scoffed at the suggestion Facebook had been used as a Russian propaganda tool, before acknowledging that mistakes had been made and promising to do better in 2018.

Facebook revealed in September that "inauthentic" accounts created in Russia had purchased advertising on the site designed to increase tensions during the election campaign.

A USA Today/Suffolk University poll published in October found that Americans believed by a two-to-one margin that Facebook should have done more to identify and reveal the Russian ads.

In September, in another blow for the social network, ProPublica reported that Facebook's ad-buying platform could be used to deliver ads to users who identify as anti-Semites.



FDA approves first drug for inherited breast cancer

CBS NEWS

US regulators have approved the first drug aimed at women with advanced breast cancer caused by an inherited flawed gene.

The Food and Drug Administration on Friday approved AstraZeneca PLC's Lynparza for patients with inherited BRCA gene mutations who have undergone chemotherapy.

The drug has been on the market since 2014 for ovarian cancer, and is the first in a new class of medicines called PARP inhibitors to be approved for breast cancer. PARP inhibitors prevent cancer cells from fixing problems in their DNA.

Lynparza will cost \$13,886 per month without insurance, according to AstraZeneca. The company is offering patients financial assistance.



ANC leader calls for unity

AFP, East London

The new head of South Africa's ruling ANC, Cyril Ramaphosa, pledged yesterday to "restore the credibility" of the party after a spate of corruption scandals involving President Jacob Zuma.

Zuma was replaced as party chief by his deputy Ramaphosa in December, with the new leader facing an uphill task to recover public support for Africa's oldest liberation movement ahead of elections in 2019.

"We must restore the integrity and credibility of the ANC," said Ramaphosa, 65, in his first major address to the party at a rally for the African National Congress's 106th anniversary celebrations.

"The movement has become deeply divided through factionalism, patronage, corruption and competition for resources," said the former trade unionist who led talks to end white-minority rule in the early 1990s and then became a multi-millionaire businessman before returning to politics.

"We are going to confront corruption,"

he said, pledging that "the investigation and prosecution of those responsible (for manipulating the state machinery for their own ends) will be given top priority."

The graft-tainted Zuma also attended the meeting and drew whistles from the crowd.

PARTY DIVISIONS DEEPEN

This week Zuma announced a probe into top-level corruption after parliament said it would deliberate on procedures for impeachment.

Corruption allegations have tarnished Zuma's image and eroded his support base, with the beleaguered leader facing growing pressure to resign before his presidential term ends next year.

Back in 2014, Zuma failed to abide by recommendations made by the anti-corruption watchdog over \$15 million (12.5 million euros) of taxpayer-funded refurbishments at his home in the eastern KwaZulu-Natal province.

He eventually reimbursed the equivalent of around \$500,000 for non-security-related work at his homestead, a sum set by the treasury.



Two migrants from Ivory Coast walk in the snow on their way to the Colle della scalla (Col de l'Echelle) a snow-covered pass to cross the border between Italy and France yesterday near Bardonecchia, Italian Alps.

PHOTO: AFP



US ambassador to Panama resigns

Says cannot serve Trump

AFP, Washington

US Ambassador to Panama John Feeley, a career diplomat and former Marine Corps helicopter pilot, has resigned, saying he no longer felt able to serve President Donald Trump.

Feeley's departure had been communicated to State Department officials on December 27 and was not a response to Trump's alleged use of the word "shithole" to describe Haiti and African countries at a meeting on Thursday, US officials said.

Trump denies using the term.

Feeley, one of the department's Latin America specialists and among its senior most officers, made clear that he had come to a place where he no longer felt able to serve under Trump.

"As a junior foreign service officer, I signed an oath to serve faithfully the president and his administration in an apolitical fashion, even when I might not agree with certain policies," Feeley said, according to an excerpt of a resignation letter read to Reuters on Friday.

"My instructors made clear that if I believed I could not do that, I would be honour bound to resign. That time has come."

A State Department spokeswoman confirmed Feeley's departure, saying that he "has informed the White House, the Department of State, and the Government of Panama of his decision to retire for personal reasons, as of March 9 of this year."