



GERMAN COALITION TALKS Merkel ready for 'painful compromises'

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said she was prepared to make "painful compromises" as she headed in a final round of talks yesterday to seal a coalition deal for her fourth term and end months of political limbo in Europe's top economy.

As negotiators for Merkel's CDU party, her Bavarian CSU ally and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) gathered for one last push to clinch an agreement on a renewed "grand coalition", Merkel said it was time to end the political uncertainty.

"We live in turbulent times," she said, pointing to heavy losses in recent days on global stock markets.

"We need a government that offers dependability in the interests of the people."

Merkel said all sides would "still need to make painful compromises" to get a deal. "I am ready to if we can ensure that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages in the end," she said.

Despite the protracted haggling, the parties sounded upbeat on meeting yesterday's self-imposed deadline.

SPD chief Martin Schulz said there was "good reason to believe that we'll reach the end today".

"I think that today will be the decisive day as to whether the three parties -- CDU, CSU and SPD -- will finish a joint coalition agreement on whose basis a stable government for Germany can be built," he said.

Party sources said the main sticking points were disagreements over healthcare, labour policy and defence spending.

Merkel has pinned her hopes on a repeat alliance with the SPD after September's inconclusive election left her without a ruling majority.

Deadly air raids hit Syria

35 civilians killed in rebel-held enclave near Damascus; UN calls for one-month truce to allow aid, probes alleged gas attacks

AGENCIES

Fresh regime strikes on a besieged rebel-held enclave near Damascus killed 35 civilians yesterday despite mounting Western pressure on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The bloodshed came a day after another 31 civilians were killed in Eastern Ghouta and as the United Nations pleaded for one-month truce in the seven-year-old conflict to allow for aid deliveries.

Fighting also raged in the north-western province of Idlib, where the UN said the violence "made a mockery" of the de-escalation zones agreed last year in a bid to pave the way for an end to the war.

The latest casualties in Ghouta, on paper also a de-escalation zone, came as Washington threatened military action over the reported use of chemical weapons in the enclave, which regime and allied forces have



Syrian rescuers evacuate injured people following regime strikes on the rebel-held enclave of Kafr Batna near Damascus, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

besieged since 2013.

The death toll rose from an initial report of 16 "because the strikes are continuing -- some new victims died in Douma and some critically wounded people died of their wounds," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman added that few rebels were among the dead because they rarely left their tunnels and had better protection from air strikes than civilians, estimated to number around 400,000 in Ghouta.

In apparent retaliation, rockets were fired on Damascus's Bab al-Touma neighbourhood, killing three civilians, the state news agency SANA reported.

Although less deadly, regime attacks involving suspected chlorine-filled munitions on Ghouta have also been on the up in recent weeks.

The US State Department said on Monday it had recorded six suspected chemical attacks in Syria in the past 30 days, reported AFP.

Washington, which last year launched cruise missiles on a regime

airfield in retaliation for a nerve agent attack in Khan Sheikhun that killed scores of people, has threatened more military action.

Meanwhile, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan ramped up his verbal assault on the US role in Syria yesterday, saying US forces should leave Manbij, a Syrian city held by YPG-allied forces with support from the US-led coalition.

He said the United States was working against the interests of Turkey, Iran and maybe Russia in northern Syria, reported Reuters.

The UN said it was looking into the reports of chemical attacks and condemned what it described as an escalation in violence in Ghouta and Idlib.

"Over the last 48 hours, the scale and ferocity of attacks has increased dramatically," the UN-mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry said in a statement.

In Idlib, the last province in the country to largely escape government control, daily fighting is also claiming an growing human toll and displacing thousands.

The UN commission said at least three hospitals were hit in recent strikes and shelling.

UN chief warns of 'one-state reality'

Modi to meet Palestinian leader

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that recent developments in the Middle East could create "an irreversible one-state reality" that would bury the two-state solution of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

"Negative trends on the ground have the potential to create an irreversible one-state reality that is incompatible with realizing the legitimate national, historic and democratic aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians," Guterres on Monday told a UN meeting of a committee on Palestinian rights.

The Middle East peace process was upended when US President Donald Trump recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The General Assembly adopted a resolution last month rejecting the US decision by a vote of 128 to nine with 35 abstentions.

The United States has also cut back its funding to the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), prompting Guterres to appeal to countries to step in to fill the gap.

Israel's ongoing construction of settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, violent attacks and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza are dimming prospects for a long-term peace, said the UN chief.

"There is no Plan B," Guterres told the meeting.

Meanwhile, Indian foreign ministry said on Monday Prime Minister Narendra Modi will meet the Palestinian leader during a brief tour of the Middle East just weeks after hosting Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Indian premier will visit Ramallah first on his three-day tour of the region between February 9 and 12, which will also take in Oman and the United Arab Emirates.



US falls short of being a full democracy again

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

North America has been classed as a "flawed democracy", falling short of the threshold of a fully democratic society for the second year running, according to a comprehensive new report.

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) produces an annual review ranking countries on their adherence to 60 distinct democratic values, including electoral processes and press freedom.

The US scored of 7.98 out of 10 last year, dropping into the flawed democracy category for the first time. The change reflected what the report said was "a sharp fall in popular confidence in the functioning of public institutions". This predated and aided the election of Donald Trump, according to the think-tank.

Meanwhile, major political events such as the Iraq wars, the financial crisis of 2008/09 and repeated federal government shutdowns had had eroded confidence in government over decades, according to the report.

A growing wealth divide was further fuelling public dissatisfaction with the government, the report said.

The EIU, which is part of the same company as The Economist magazine, predicted Trump's tax bill, which favours those on high incomes, would further fuel income inequality.

The US' poor democracy rating comes amid a global regression of democratic principles, the report said, with the average score sliding from 5.52 in 2016 to 5.48 last year.

Some 89 countries experienced a decline in their total score compared with 2016, more than three times as many as the countries that recorded an improvement.



Palestinian youths clash with Israeli forces in the village of al-Yamun, on the outskirts of Jenin, in the occupied West Bank yesterday following an operation by the Israeli army. Israeli forces yesterday shot dead a Hamas member suspected of killing a rabbi as two deadly attacks against Israeli settlers in a month increased tensions in the occupied West Bank.

PHOTO: AFP

Blair warned Cameron about a 'deep state' conspiracy

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Tony Blair warned David Cameron about a "deep state" conspiracy, the Conservative prime minister's former director of strategy has said.

In the months before the general election of 2010, Steve Hilton was given the task of preparing for the Cameron's first few months in government.

He met with Blair to discuss the machinery of government, during which the former prime minister warned about the civil service.

"You cannot underestimate how much they believe it's their job to actually run the country and to resist the changes put forward by people they dismiss as 'here today, gone tomorrow' politicians," Blair apparently said, according to Hilton, who was writing for Fox News.



"They genuinely see themselves as the true guardians of the national interest, and think that their job is simply to wear you down and wait you out."

Hilton went on to add that ahead of the election, alongside Cameron, he met with Gus O'Donnell the cabinet secretary and the head of the civil service.

They had discussed a Conservative government policy on transparency in which they wanted to publish details of everything the British government spent money on.

O'Donnell apparently responded to the proposals by saying: "Of course you don't really mean all this government transparency stuff, do you?"

When he was told they were serious he reportedly replied: "Yes. Well, we'll see about that."

US, N Korea clash again

REUTERS, Geneva

North Korea is only months away from obtaining the capability to hit US territory with a nuclear weapon and must be disarmed, a US envoy said yesterday, dismissing Pyongyang's diplomatic thaw with South Korea as a "charm offensive" that fooled no one.

In a diplomatic showdown at a UN-sponsored Conference on Disarmament, North Korea responded by blaming Washington for escalating confrontation, saying it was deploying nuclear assets including aircraft carriers near the divided peninsula and was considering a pre-emptive strike against Pyongyang.

"North Korea has accelerated its provocative pursuit of nuclear weapons and missile capabilities, and expressed explicit threats to use nuclear weapons against the United States and its allies in the region," US disarmament ambassador Robert Wood told the Geneva forum.

"North Korean officials insist that

they will not give up nuclear weapons, and North Korea may now be only months away from the capability to strike the United States with nuclear-armed ballistic missiles," he said.

A new US nuclear policy review outlined last week "reaffirms that

US says Pyongyang may be 'months away' from missile able to reach US

Pyongyang says Washington considering pre-emptive strike

North Korea's illicit nuclear program must be completely, verifiably, and irreversibly eliminated, resulting in a Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons," he said.

In November North Korea tested the Hwasong-15 ballistic missile, believed to be capable of reaching the continen-

tal United States. It is not yet believed to have the capability to mount a nuclear warhead on a ballistic missile.

North Korea accused the United States of seeking to aggravate the situation on the divided peninsula by "deploying large nuclear assets" nearby, laying the ground for a possible pre-emptive strike against it.

"US officials including the defense secretary and the CIA director repeatedly talked about DPRK nuclear and missile threat to justify their argument for a military option and a new concept of a so-called 'bloody nose', a limited pre-emptive strike on the DPRK is under consideration within the US administration," North Korean diplomat Ju Yong Chol told the talks.

He said President Donald Trump's 'America First' doctrine and US nuclear superiority would endanger global peace and security and "trigger off a new nuclear arms race and could bring the whole world close to a horrible catastrophe".

KASHMIR HOSPITAL RAID

Top militant freed, police official killed

AFP, Srinagar

Two gunmen yesterday opened fire in a hospital in Indian Kashmir where a Pakistani militant was brought for treatment, an official said, escaping with the high-profile prisoner and killing a police officer in the daring assault.

A manhunt is underway after the assailants stormed the Shri Maharaja Hari Singh Hospital in Srinagar and opened fire on police guarding Naved Jutt, a Pakistani rebel imprisoned in the restive province since 2014.

"The militants attacked the policemen inside the hospital, killed one accompanying the Pakistani prisoner, and fled on a motorcycle," deputy inspector general of police Ghulam Hassan Bhat told AFP.

He said another officer was critically wounded in the audacious daytime attack. Patients and hospital staff panicked but none were injured.

Bhat said a manhunt was underway to capture Jutt, an influential rebel who ranked second in command of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) militant group at the time of his arrest.

LeT has been blamed for a string of deadly attacks inside India, most notably the Mumbai carnage in November 2008 that left more than 160 people dead.

SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW

China activity has eroded trust: Asean

Rohingya issue discussed

AFP, Singapore

China's continued reclamation in the South China Sea has eroded trust among claimants and could raise regional tensions, Southeast Asian foreign ministers said yesterday.

The ministers from the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) did not mention China by name in their statement after a one-day meeting in Singapore, current chair of the grouping.

Beijing claims nearly all of the waterway and has been turning reefs and islets into islands and installing military facilities and equipment on them. Asean members Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and Vietnam as well as Taiwan also have partial claims in the waterway.

Ministers "took note of the concerns expressed by some ministers on the land reclamations and activities in the area, which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions and may undermine peace, security and stability in the region," said Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan in the statement.

China had in December defended its construction on disputed islands as "normal" after a US think tank released new satellite images showing the deployment of radar and other equipment.

He added that ministers were briefed on the humanitarian situation in Myanmar's Rakhine state but kept silent over accusations of ethnic cleansing by the army, instead pledging to support Yangon's humanitarian relief efforts.

Asean defence ministers also held a meeting in the city-state yesterday, including a special session with Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan.

How one group changed history

AFP, London

British women won the right to vote 100 years ago after an intense struggle marked by a violent fringe campaign that shocked the country but helped to change the world.

On February 6, 1918, the Representation of the People Bill became law and added to the voting roll around eight million women who were aged over 30 and met other conditions.

It was not until 1928 that British women gained the same voting rights as men, but the 1918 act was a major step towards it.

Among those involved in the decades-long British campaign, the Suffragettes stand out for militant actions that were unprecedented at the time.

Suffragettes chained themselves to railings, broke shop windows and blew up post boxes

as part of their fight. They cut electricity lines, disrupted meetings and even bombed the house of a government minister.

known as the Suffragettes.

In the most shocking act, Suffragette Emily Davison became a martyr to the cause when she was

by refusing to eat. Many were force fed. Pankhurst was jailed and released 11 times.

Some historians credit the role of women in World War I as more important in securing voting rights than militant activism.

But in 1999 Time magazine named Pankhurst as one of the 100 most important people of the 20th century noting "the militant campaign was absolutely essential to moving the vote forward".

When World War I broke out in 1914, Pankhurst called a halt to the militant campaign in support of the government's war effort.

Women stepped into crucial jobs vacated by men sent to fight. In a revolution of their role in society, they worked in fields, factories and beyond.

As the war wound down, the first steps towards equal right votes were allowed.

killed throwing herself under the king's horse at the 1913 Derby.

Hundreds of Suffragettes were jailed for their actions but they continued their protest in prison

100 YEARS OF WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE



It was a deliberate move into militancy preached by Emmeline Pankhurst, founder of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) which became