

Anger as US bill promotes Taiwan ties

AFP, Beijing

China lodged an official protest with the United States yesterday, saying it was "strongly dissatisfied" after the US Senate passed a bill promoting relations with self-governing Taiwan.

The US Senate passed the Taiwan Travel Act, intended to encourage visits between the United States and Taiwan "at all levels", by unanimous consent on Wednesday, following its approval in the House of Representatives in January.

The bill adds that it should be US policy for high-level Taiwanese officials to enter the United States, meet with US officials and conduct business in the country.

President Donald Trump's signature is now all that is needed for the bill to become law -- something that is not likely to be an obstacle, given that the bill was passed unanimously.

Washington cut formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 1979, recognising the Communist mainland rulers in Beijing as the sole government of "One China."

Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said that while some of the new bill's provisions are not legally binding, it "seriously violates" the One China principle.

"China is strongly dissatisfied and firmly opposes it," Hua told a regular news briefing, adding that "solemn representations" to the US -- a diplomatic protest.

US, she said, should stop official exchanges with Taiwan and handle Taiwan issues "prudently and properly" to avoid "damaging Sino-US relations".

Under the terms of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, Washington maintains an ambiguous approach to the island, maintaining trade relations and selling Taipei weapons.

Trump sparked protest from China shortly after his election in 2016 by accepting a phone call from Taiwan's leader Tsai Ing-wen, an action seen as breaking the protocol of the One China policy.



Flames erupt in the horizon following a reported rocket attack in the rebel-held enclave of Eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of the Syrian capital Damascus. Inset, Civilians search for survivors amid the rubble of buildings which were destroyed earlier in regime air strikes. Both the pictures were taken on Wednesday.



PHOTO: AFP

May to reveal Brexit plan

Meets EU's Tusk on eve of today's key speech amid tensions

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May hosts EU President Donald Tusk for Brexit talks yesterday, on the eve of her keynote speech on future trade ties and amid a row over Northern Ireland.

Their meeting at Downing Street comes as the European Union prepares its position on negotiations on the future relationship with Britain once it leaves the bloc.

May is due to set out her plans in a long-awaited speech today, but it has been overshadowed by a dispute with Brussels over the status of the Irish border after Brexit.

The EU this week published a draft law codifying the divorce terms struck with Britain in December, which includes plans to avoid any customs checks on the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

May reacted angrily to the proposal that Northern Ireland -- part of Britain -- stay in a customs union with the EU if there is no better solution, warning she would not accept anything that risked the constitutional integrity of

her country.

In a speech in Brussels yesterday morning before travelling to London, Tusk said that if the prime minister did not like the idea, she should come up with an alternative.

"In a few hours I will be asking in London whether the UK government has a better idea," he said, adding that



he was "absolutely sure" EU member states would agree to the draft.

He also criticised Britain's approach to the negotiations on the future relations, saying its self-imposed "red lines" made its hopes of frictionless trade impossible.

All sides have pledged to avoid a hard border including customs checks,

in order to protect the 1998 Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland, which ended three decades of bloody sectarian violence.

The EU's chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier insisted the customs union plan was a "fallback" option in case Britain's two preferred options -- hi-tech frictionless border controls, or a solution linked to a future EU-UK trade deal -- fell through.

Before her talks with Tusk, May chaired an extraordinary meeting of her cabinet to discuss her speech today, amid continuing divisions over how closely Britain should remain aligned to the EU.

She has said Britain will create a new "deep and special partnership" with the EU, but has ruled out staying in its single market or a new customs union, which would require continued free movement of migrants and adherence to EU rules.

However, the opposition Labour party this week called for Britain to agree a new customs union, which it said would protect jobs and resolve the Irish question.

UN hopes to enter East Ghouta in 'next few days'

AFP, Geneva

The United Nations yesterday it hoped aid convoys could head into Syria's besieged rebel-held enclave of Eastern Ghouta within days, after the Damascus government appeared to have finally provided authorisation.

"We may now be able to go to Eastern Ghouta in the next few days," said Jan Egeland, head of the UN's humanitarian taskforce for Syria.

He told reporters in Geneva that he had received word during a taskforce meeting on Thursday "that we may have the first facilitation letter, permit from the government, to go to (the main Eastern Ghouta town of) Douma in a very long time."

But he stressed that the five-hour daily "humanitarian pause" declared by Russia for the enclave was not enough to allow aid deliveries or ensure orderly medical evacuations.

"Five hours is not enough," he insisted, underscoring that deliveries take time and that an estimated 1,000 civilians needed medical evacuation.

More than 40 trucks loaded with aid have been unable to reach the 400,000 people living in the battered enclave.

Egeland's comments came as civilians in Eastern Ghouta continued to shun Russia's offer to quit the area, and as rebels and Moscow blamed each other for the humanitarian deadlock.

A five-hour daily "pause" announced by Moscow on Monday has led to a reduction in the bombardment that killed hundreds in only a few days.

But the humanitarian corridor offered by Russia for civilians to flee has remained ostensibly empty for a third day.



Top Trump aide Hicks to resign

AFP, Washington

Hope Hicks, one of Donald Trump's longest-serving aides and perhaps his most trusted confidante, on Wednesday announced her resignation in the latest of a string of departures from the embattled White House.

The 29-year-old former model and PR operative took her first job in politics as spokesperson for the Republican's victorious campaign, before joining him in the White House where she was named communications director last September.

While she cut a discreet figure in the White House -- refusing all interviews -- the former advisor to Ivanka Trump was known around the West Wing for her close relationship with the president's family and as a keen defender of his image.

She was well known to have the ear of the president, who never publicly voiced even the slightest criticism of her.

"There are no words to adequately express my gratitude to President Trump," the 29-year-old Hicks said in a statement on her departure.

Trump paid tribute to Hicks' "outstanding" contribution over the past three years, calling her "as smart and thoughtful as they come, a truly great person."

White House Chief of Staff John Kelly said Hicks had "served her country with great distinction."

"To say that she will be missed, is an understatement," Kelly said.

Hicks' announcement came a day after she testified before a Congressional intelligence committee about the Russia election meddling investigation.

She reportedly told lawmakers she had told "white lies" for Trump in the course of her duties, but never over the Russia probe.



Blizzards kill 53 in Europe

AFP, Paris

Heavy snowfall and deadly blizzards lashed Europe Thursday, forcing Geneva's busy airport to close, as the region shivered in a deep freeze that has gripped countries from the far north to Mediterranean beaches in the south.

The snowstorms, unusual for much of Europe at this time of year, left roads blocked, thousands of drivers stranded and schools shut, with weather agencies predicting the biting cold would continue in parts of the region at least through Thursday evening.

The death toll continued to mount, as another three people perished in Poland, taking the number of victims there to 21, most of them rough sleepers.

There have also been six deaths in the Czech Republic in recent days, five in Lithuania, four each in France and Slovakia, three in Spain, two each in Italy, Serbia, Romania and Slovenia, and one each in Britain and the Netherlands.

The Siberian cold front -- dubbed the "Beast from the East" in Britain, "Siberian bear" by the Dutch and the "snow cannon" by Swedes -- on Thursday forced Geneva airport to announce it was shut until further notice.

In Britain, Storm Emma, rolling in from the Atlantic, looked poised to meet the Siberian chill, causing further snowfall and bitterly cold temperatures.

A red alert was extended yesterday for southwestern England, southern Wales and Scotland.

Glasgow airport remained shut, as Gatwick in London expected "a large number of cancellations and delays to flights today".



A woman walks through the snow storm in central London, Britain, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Mueller probing Trump's attacks on Jeff Sessions

Says report; Manafort pleads not guilty, faces trial

REUTERS, Washington

The special counsel in the Russia probe is investigating a period of time last summer when President Donald Trump seemed determined to push Attorney General Jeff Sessions to resign, the Washington Post reported on Wednesday.

Special Counsel Robert Mueller is looking into whether Trump's apparent effort to drive Sessions from his job was part of a pattern of attempted obstruction of justice, the Post said, citing people familiar with the matter.

Mueller's team, which is investigating alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 US presidential election, has questioned witnesses about Trump's private comments in late July and early August, around the time he issued a series of tweets belittling Sessions, according to the Post.

Trump's goal was to oust Sessions in order to pick a replacement who would exercise control over the investigation into possible coordination between Russia and the Trump campaign during the 2016 election, the Post said.

Meanwhile, Trump's former campaign manager Paul Manafort pleaded not guilty on Wednesday to a new indictment brought against him in the investigation into alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 election and will face trial in September.

Manafort's former business partner Rick Gates, another Trump ex-campaign official, decided last week to cooperate with the investigation.

Manafort is facing two separate indictments on an array of charges, including conspiracy to launder money, filing false tax returns, bank fraud, and failing to register as a foreign agent despite lobbying in the United States for the pro-Kremlin Ukrainian government.

YEMEN WAR

Senators to force vote on US role

AFP, Washington

US lawmakers on Wednesday launched a bipartisan effort to end American involvement in Saudi Arabia's conflict with Yemen, an extraordinary attempt to force a vote on whether to over-rule presidential military authorization.

The United Nations has described Yemen, the poorest country in the Middle East, as the world's largest humanitarian disaster.

More than 9,200 people have been killed and tens of thousands wounded in Yemen's three-year-old war, which is seen as both a civil conflict and a proxy war between regional titans Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Since 2015 Washington has provided weapons, intelligence and aerial refueling for a Saudi-led coalition which has conducted air strikes against Huthi rebels.

Senators Bernie Sanders, Mike Lee and Chris Murphy said in a joint statement that their resolution would force the first-ever vote in the Senate "to withdraw US armed forces from an unauthorized war."

President Donald Trump's top military and diplomatic advisors said last October that the administration was not seeking new authority for conducting military operations in the world's hotspots.

Congress first passed an authorization to use military force, or AUMF, on September 14, 2001 -- three days after the devastating attacks on New York and Washington by Al-Qaeda hijackers.

Since then, presidents George W Bush, Barack Obama and now Trump have relied on the order's authority, along with a subsequent AUMF in 2002 as they launched operations against armed Islamist groups in far-flung battle zones around the world.

Several Democrats, and some Republicans, have warned that the 15-year-old authorities are licenses for endless US military engagement.

Prince William to visit Palestinian Territories, Israel

AFP, London

Prince William will be the first senior British royal to make an official visit to the Palestinian Territories and Israel, it was announced yesterday, as part of a tour which will also take him to Jordan.

The visit this summer by the second in line to the throne "is at the request of Her Majesty's government and has been welcomed by the Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian authorities", the palace said in a statement.

There have been no previous official visits by members of the British royal family to the Palestinian Territories.

William will be the first close relation of the Queen to make an official visit to Israel, following official trips made previously by the monarch's cousins the Duke of Kent and

FORCED REMOVAL OF HIJAB

NY to pay \$60,000 to each women

AFP, New York

The city of New York has agreed to pay \$180,000 to three Muslim women forced by police to remove their headscarves to have mug shots taken, officials said Wednesday.

Each of the women is to receive \$60,000 after the settlements were finalized in a Brooklyn federal court earlier this week, their lawyer Tahanie Aboushi said.

Two of the them were arrested in 2015 and one in 2012. All three incidents took place in Brooklyn, New York's most populous borough, she added.

The women claimed their religious rights had been violated, suing the city and the New York Police Department, the largest city police force in the United States, which was represented by the city's law department.

New York police have since changed their guidelines to give detainees wearing a religious head covering the option of having their photograph taken in private by a police officer of the same gender.

"It's a step in the right direction and it was a collaborative effort to address a gap in the patrol guide," Aboushi told AFP.

"The resolution of these matters were in the best interest of all parties involved," said Kimberly Joyce, a spokeswoman for the city of New York's law department.