

An affront to close allies

US partners hit out at US trade tariffs

AFP, Berlin

Key US trading partners yesterday condemned President Donald Trump's decision to slap punitive tariffs on foreign steel and aluminium as "protectionism" and an affront to allies, as fears grew of a global trade war.

Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, Europe's biggest economy and Nato ally, urged dialogue and warned that "no one can win in such a race to the bottom".

Berlin backs the European Union in "seeking dialogue with the United States, but also with countries that could be affected, like China," she said.

Earlier, German Economy Minister Brigitte Zypries said: "This protectionism is an affront to close partners like the European Union and Germany and limits free trade."

The EU has threatened retaliatory tariffs on items from steel to peanut butter, bourbon and denim -- most of which are produced in states that Trump needs to win to be re-elected.

Close US ally Japan warned the tariffs of 25 percent on imported steel and 10 percent on aluminium "could have a grave impact on the economic relationship" between the world's top and third-largest economies.

The world's second-biggest economy, China, derided the tariffs as "a serious attack on normal international trade order".

In a sharp reversal from decades of a US-led drive towards more open trade, Trump declared on Thursday that America had been "ravaged by aggressive foreign trade practices".

"It's really an assault on our country," he blasted, announcing the tariffs on the metals used in everything from cars to construction, roads to railways.

Trump said the tariffs -- which will come into effect after 15 days -- will not initially apply to Canada and Mexico, and that close partners on security and trade could negotiate exemptions.

Canada was the largest US source of steel last year, followed by Brazil, South Korea,

Russia, Mexico, Japan and Germany. The US neighbour to the north was also by far the largest supplier of alumina and aluminium, followed by China, Russia and the United Arab Emirates.

Last week Trump stunned the world -- and his own aides -- with an off-the-cuff announcement of his plan, even before White House lawyers judged the legality of the tariffs.

While the full economic impact remains unknown, the political fallout was swift with the top Republican in Congress Paul Ryan publicly denouncing Trump's move, and with top economic advisor Gary Cohn resigning in protest.

Meanwhile, eleven nations signed a slimmed-down version of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement Thursday, after US withdrew from the deal.

The TPP, which would have represented 40 percent of the global economy and nearly one-quarter of its trade, was left for dead after Trump pulled out to pursue his "America First" agenda.

But the revamped deal, now known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), is still a significant achievement and a victory for openness, its supporters said at the signing ceremony in Santiago, Chile.

The pact includes Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam, representing together 13.5 percent of the global economy.

Without US, 11 Asia-Pacific states sign trade deal



A Tibetan exile activist is detained by Indian police during a protest to commemorate the anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule, outside the Chinese embassy in New Delhi, yesterday. Inset, Another activist holds a placard after being detained.

PHOTO: AFP



BJP-led NDA muzzling voices of opposition: Sonia Gandhi

Says Congress needs new way to connect with grassroots

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's top opposition leader and former Congress party president Sonia Gandhi yesterday attacked the BJP-led NDA government accusing it of muzzling the voices of the opposition.

"Our freedom is under assault. Today we are embracing a regressive vision," Sonia said while delivering her keynote address at the India Today Conclave 2018 in Mumbai.

She alleged "fear and intimidation are order of the day, alternative voices are being silenced, religious tensions are being fuelled, vigilante armies are being let loose with state patronage, society is being polarised with a view to winning election."

Sonia said India is in the midst of "great upheaval" and claimed that the Modi government is using its brute majority in parliament to stifle the voice of the opposition.

"If we are not allowed to speak in parliament, why not shut down parliament so we can all go home. Unlike Vajpayee, this BJP

govt doesn't respect parliament procedures," she charged.

She said she was confident about Congress or Congress-led coalition's return to power in the 2019 national elections.

Sonia spoke on a wide range of topics, including her children Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Vadra Gandhi, her own shortcomings and the role of democracy in India, the

first time she has opened up since relinquishing the party president post in December last year.

Sonia acknowledged that Congress also needs to develop a new style of connecting with people at the organisational level.

Speaking about her own role in leadership after Congress came to power in 2004, she said that she knew Manmohan Singh would be better a prime minister than her and that she was aware of her limitations.

Answering a question on the political role of her daughter Priyanka, Sonia said "Priyanka is pre-occupied with her children at the moment. It is up to her and one never knows the future."



Indian SC permits passive euthanasia

Allows 'living wills' for terminally ill

AFP, New Delhi

India's top court yesterday ruled that terminally ill patients have the right to refuse care, approving the use of "living wills" to set out how they want to be treated.

The Supreme Court's order -- hailed as "historic" by petitioners -- means medical treatment can be withdrawn to hasten a person's death, a practice known as passive euthanasia.

The ruling means the family of someone in a permanent vegetative state and unable to communicate could withdraw life support in accordance with the patient's wishes.

The justices gave the green light to living wills, legal documents that allow adults to express their preference on how they want to be treated if they become terminally ill or slip into an incurable coma.

It enshrines the right to refuse care, although under strictly controlled conditions.

The Press Trust of India news agency said that in each living will, a court-appointed medical panel will review the instructions before they can be carried out.

With the latest decision, India joins a growing list of countries including Britain, France, Germany and Spain that recognise living wills.

Indian law does not permit active euthanasia or assisted suicide, in which patients are helped by doctors to end their lives.

Duterte needs 'psychiatric evaluation'

AFP, Geneva

The UN human rights chief yesterday said that Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who has launched profanity-laced diatribes against United Nations rapporteurs, needs "psychiatric evaluation".

Listing some of Manila's actions against UN envoys, including reportedly filing terrorism charges against one, rights chief Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said "it makes one believe that the president of the Philippines needs to submit himself to some sort of psychiatric evaluation."

Zeid and other UN rights officials have focused significant attention on Duterte's controversial drug war, which killed more than 8,000.

The UN special rapporteur on extra-judicial killings,



Agnes Callamard, has become a particular Duterte target over her criticism of his campaign to stamp out illegal drugs.

In an exchange with Manila's envoys in the UN Human Rights Council on Thursday, Zeid referred to November media reports from the Philippines that quoted Duterte threatening to slap Callamard, while using profanity.

Zeid also referred to a pending case against the UN's special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous people, Victoria Tauli Carpuz.

According to Zeid, the Philippine justice ministry charged Carpuz in a regional court last month with terrorism.



Israeli border guards take aim as a Palestinian protester waves the national flag during clashes following a demonstration in the West Bank city of Ramallah, yesterday. A Palestinian man was killed in the clashes, the Palestinian health ministry said.

PHOTO: AFP

Civilians suffering worse than ever in Syria war: UN

AFP, Beirut

The living conditions of civilians inside Syria are worse than ever, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said yesterday, with the conflict set to enter its eighth year.

"The conditions faced by civilians inside Syria are worse than ever, with 69 percent languishing in extreme poverty," Grandi said during a visit to Lebanon.

Meanwhile, An aid convoy managed to deliver food to hunger-stricken Eastern Ghouta yesterday despite renewed bombardment by Syrian regime forces who have seized more than half of the besieged rebel enclave.

Nearly 950 civilians have been killed since Russia-backed government forces launched a blistering assault on the last opposition bastion near Damascus on February 18.

The war in Syria started in March 2011 when protests against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad sparked a brutal crackdown that led to one of the deadliest conflicts of our time.

Aid reaches Ghouta as more strikes hit rebel enclave

"This seven-year war has left a colossal human tragedy in its wake. For the sake of the living, it is high time to end this devastating conflict," Grandi was quoted as saying in a statement.

March 15 is widely accepted as the conflict's anniversary date.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group, more than 340,000 people have been killed since then in a conflict the UN says caused the worst displacement since World War II.

The collapse of the "caliphate" proclaimed by the Islamic State jihadist group over swathes of Syria has not

brought the conflict to an end and Grandi said civilians were suffering more than ever.

"The share of families spending more than half of their annual income on food has risen to 90 percent, while food prices are on average eight times higher than pre-crisis levels," he said.

The regime, with decisive military backing from Russia, is steadily reconquering areas it lost in the earlier stages of the conflict.

Anti-Rohingya monk walks free from jail

AFP, Yangon

An ultra-nationalist Myanmar monk was defiant upon his release from prison yesterday after serving time for an anti-Rohingya protest in 2016, a rare punishment handed to one of the country's hardline Buddhist clergymen.

Parmaukha, who served a three-month jail term for inciting unrest, has helped peddle a fiery brand of Buddhist nationalism and Islamophobia in Myanmar, a country accused of waging an ethnic cleansing campaign against Rohingya Muslims.

The monk was arrested in November over a rally he held outside the US Embassy in Yangon in April 2016 to protest against America's use of the word "Rohingya".

The jail time appears to have done little to dampen the resolve of the abbot, who declared himself unrepentant upon his release.

"There is no Rohingya ethnic group among the 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar," he told reporters after returning to his Yangon monastery on Friday.

The influential monk was released from Yangon's Insein prison at dawn to the cheers of several dozen supporters who scattered petals in front of him as he left the jail.

Anti-Muslim hate speech aimed the Rohingya has been brewing in Myanmar for several years, often spilling over into bouts of bloodshed.

Iranian woman who removed headscarf jailed for two years

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

An Iranian woman who publicly removed her veil in protest against the country's mandatory hijab law has been sentenced to two years in prison, prosecutors have said.

The woman, who has not been identified, reportedly took off her headscarf in Tehran's Enghelab Street to "encourage corruption through the removal of the hijab in public".

Tehran's prosecutor Abbas Jafari-Dolatabadi, who announced the sentence, said she intended to appeal against the verdict, according to Mizan Online newsagency.

The woman was jailed on Wednesday for three months without parole and Mr Jafari-Dolatabadi said she was in need of medical treatment.

But he criticised the suspension of the majority of her sentence and argued that she should serve the full term of her penalty.

A number of women in Iran have been

pictured in protesting the obligatory Islamic headscarf by publicly taking off their hijabs and waving them on sticks in recent months.

Videos and photos shared widely on Facebook and Twitter have showed the women purportedly following the lead of a woman who was arrested for a similar demonstration in January.



The 31-year-old protester, known as the "Girl of Enghelab Street", later identified as Vida Movahed, took off her headscarf on a street in the capital Tehran. She was detained for several weeks before being released from custody.

Women in Iran have been forced to cover their hair since the 1979 revolution, although they are usually sentenced to far shorter terms of two months or less, and fined \$25.

More than 30 Iranian women have been arrested since the end of December for publicly removing their veils in defiance of the law.

Sri Lanka monks denounce riots

AFP, Colombo

Hundreds of Buddhist monks and activists staged a demonstration in the Sri Lankan capital yesterday to condemn anti-Muslim riots that have killed three people and forced the government to declare a nationwide state of emergency.

The National Bhikku Front said they organised the silent protest against what they called "communal clashes destroying national unity". Moderate Buddhist leaders have also denounced the riots concentrated in the central city of Kandy.

Several Sri Lankan users also posted photos on Twitter of Buddhist monks visiting mosques during Friday prayers to express solidarity.

Sinhalese and Muslim civil society groups had staged a joint protest in Colombo Thursday calling for tough action against the perpetrators of the riots.

Violence erupted on Monday after a Sinhalese man died of injuries suffered during an attack last week by four Muslim men. Tensions escalated when the body of a Muslim man was found in a burnt out building in the Kandy district on Tuesday.

Sinhalese gangs set fire to mosques and Muslim-owned businesses, homes and vehicles in Kandy and elsewhere.

Police said the main instigator of the riots was arrested on Thursday along with 145 others. He was identified as Amith Weerasinghe, a Sinhalese known for anti-Muslim activism and extremist social media posts.

US offers \$5mn reward for Pak Taliban leader

AFP, Washington

The US State Department placed a \$5 million reward for help locating the leader of the Pakistani Taliban on Thursday, linked to bloody attacks in Pakistan and the 2010 attempted Times Square car bombing in New York. Alongside Maulana Fazlullah, it also offered \$3 million each for two other Islamic militants associated with the TTP: Abdul Wali, leader of Jamaat ul-Ahrar, and Mangal Bagh, the leader of Lashkar-e-Islam.

Gulen ties: 243 more face arrest in Turkey

REUTERS, Istanbul

Turkish prosecutors issued arrest warrants for 243 people, including 92 teachers, in operations targeting suspected followers of the Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen the government blames for a failed 2016 coup. More than 50,000 people have been jailed and over 150,000 sacked or suspended from the military, schools and the public institutions in a crackdown following the coup attempt.

Child rapists to get death in Rajasthan

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's Rajasthan state yesterday cleared a law paving way death penalty to those convicted of raping girls below 12 years of age. Rajasthan became the second Indian state after Madhya Pradesh to have capital punishment for rapists.

Court clears way for Hafiz Saeed's party

PTI, Islamabad

A Pakistan court has ordered the election commission to allow the registration of Mumbai terror attack mastermind Hafiz Saeed's Milli Muslim League as a political party. The order came days after a Pakistani court extended a stay against the "possible arrest" of the JuD chief till April 4.