

NATO SUMMIT IN BRUSSELS

Trump, Merkel in new war of words

AFP, Brussels

US President Donald Trump traded barbs with German Chancellor Angela Merkel at a tense Nato summit yesterday after he accused Berlin of being "captive" to Russia and demanded it immediately step up defence spending.

The two-day meet in Brussels is shaping up as the alliance's most difficult in years, with Europe and the US engaged in a bitter trade spat and Trump demanding that Nato allies "reimburse" Washington for the cost of defending the continent.

Merkel shot back that Germany had the right to make its own policy choices, setting up an explosive one-on-one meeting with Trump later in the afternoon.

European alliance members were braced for criticism from Trump on defence spending, but his blistering attack on Germany at a break-fast meeting with Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg took the summit by surprise.

"Germany is a captive of Russia because it is getting so much of its energy from Russia," Trump said, taking particular aim at the proposed Nord Stream II gas pipeline, which he has previously criticised.

"Everybody's talking about it all over the world, they're saying we're paying you billions of dollars to protect you but you're paying billions of dollars to Russia."

Merkel, who grew up in Soviet-dominated East Germany, ramped up the febrile atmosphere of the summit with a sharp reply on arriving at Nato HQ.



"I myself have also experienced a part of Germany being controlled by the Soviet Union," she said.

"I am very glad that we are united today in freedom as the Federal Republic of Germany and that we can therefore also make our own independent policies and make our own independent decisions."

Trump has long complained that European Nato members do not pay enough for their own defence, accusing them of freeloading on America and singling out Germany for particular criticism.

Nato allies agreed at a summit in Wales in 2014 to move towards spending two percent of GDP on defence by 2024. But Germany, Europe's biggest economy, spends just 1.24 percent, compared with 3.5 percent for the US.

"These countries have to step it up -- not over a 10 year period, they have to step it up immediately," Trump said.

"We're protecting Germany, France and everybody... this has been going on for decades," Trump said. "We're not going to put up with it, we can't put up with it and it's inappropriate."

Meanwhile, Nato yesterday invited Macedonia to start talks to join the alliance after Skopje reached a deal with Greece in a long-running row over the country's name.

Trump lashes Germany for being 'captive' to Russia

Germany was free of Russian control since the fall of the Berlin Wall: Merkel

Nato invites Macedonia to start membership talks



This handout video grab taken from footage released by the Thai government public relations department (PRD) and Government spokesman bureau yesterday shows members of the "Wild Boars" football team being treated at a hospital in Chiang Rai. Inset, Thai students smile as they hold pictures of 12 boys and their football coach in front of the hospital.

PHOTO: AFP

A drama fit for Hollywood

Thai boys were passed 'sleeping' through cave

REUTERS, Los Angeles

The nail-biting rescue of a Thai boys soccer team and their coach from a flooded cave complex transfixed news viewers around the world, and the story could be headed for a retelling by Hollywood.

Divers freed the last four of 12 boys and the adult coach on Tuesday, a successful end to a mission that gripped the world for more than two weeks.

The saga is reminiscent of the 2010 rescue of 33 Chilean miners who were trapped for 69 days, a tale that was turned into the 2015 movie "The 33" starring Antonio Banderas.

Like the Chilean rescue, the Thai drama showcases real-life courage in the face of harrowing circumstances, said Mike Medavoy, the Oscar-nominated producer of "The 33."

It is likely the saga will be turned into a film or series of TV episodes at some point, he said.

"It's about the triumphs of individuals and groups of human beings over tragedy," Medavoy said. "It's a terrific story."

Producers with US-based Pure Flix, a studio that specializes in Christian and family movies, already are on the ground interviewing rescue workers for a potential film.

Pure Flix co-founder Michael Scott lives in Thailand part of the year and said he became captivated by the story while watching the news at his home in Bangkok. His wife grew up with the former Thai navy SEAL who died during the mission, he added.

Scott said he believes the international cooperation at the scene will help stoke interest in a movie about the effort.

"It's Thai, Westerners, Europeans, Aussies - people from all over the world who helped bring these kids to safety," he said.

AFP, Chiang Rai

The boys rescued from a Thai cave were passed "sleeping" on stretchers through the treacherous pathways, a former Thai Navy SEAL who was the last diver to leave the Tham Luang complex told AFP yesterday.

The details of the complex operation are among the first to emerge from a rescue effort to save 12 boys and their football coach that has been shrouded in secrecy since it began on Sunday and ended successfully three days later.

"Some of them were asleep, some of them were wiggling their fingers... (as if) groggy, but they were breathing," Commander Chaiyananta Peeranarong said, adding that doctors stationed along the dark corridors of the Tham Luang cave were constantly checking their condition and pulse.

"My job was to transfer them along," he said, adding the "boys were wrapped up in stretchers already when they were being transferred".

Thailand's junta chief told reporters on

Tuesday that the group had been given a "minor tranquiliser" to help calm their nerves.

But he denied they were knocked out for the miraculous rescue.

The lack of information about the meticulously planned rescue had baffled observers given that the team were extracted safely.

The members of the "Wild Boars" team, aged 11-16, had no experience in scuba diving, and the death of an ex-Navy SEAL who had helped install oxygen tanks in preparation for the rescue underscored the dangers of the mission.

Thailand said it had called on 13 "world class" divers to help with the unprecedented job, one of whom was Australian Richard "Harry" Harris, a diver and professional anaesthetist.

Rescue chief Narongsak Osottanakorn told reporters yesterday that the entire operation would not have been possible without the unique skills that Harris brought to the mission, though he did not elaborate.



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NEWSIN brief

Sri Lanka to hang drug criminals

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka announced yesterday it would start hanging drug criminals, ending a near-half century moratorium on capital punishment as officials promised to "replicate the success" of the Philippines drug war.

Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte's brutal war on drugs since coming to power in 2016 has left thousands of people dead and prompted allegations of crimes against humanity.

Indian police charge BJP MP with teen rape

AFP, New Delhi

Indian federal investigators yesterday charged a politician from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party with raping a teenager whose plight was ignored by police until she tried to set herself alight. The Central Bureau of Investigation charged Kuldeep Singh Sengar with the 2017 rape of a 16-year-old girl, whose father was later beaten in custody allegedly by Sengar's brother and later died.

Neo-Nazi given life for German race murders

AFP, Munich

The only surviving member of a German neo-Nazi cell behind a shocking series of racist murders was yesterday sentenced to life in prison, capping one of the longest and politically charged trials of the post-war period. Beate Zschaepe, 43, was found guilty of 10 counts of murder for her complicity in the deadly shootings of nine Turkish and Greek-born immigrants and a German policewoman.



Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (R) visits a shelter for people affected by the recent flooding in Mabi, Okayama prefecture yesterday. The toll in record rains that have devastated parts of Japan has risen to 179, a government spokesman said.

PHOTO: AFP

'Clear evidence of need' in N Korea: UN aid chief

AFP, Seoul

The United Nations' humanitarian chief said yesterday he had seen "clear evidence" of need in North Korea -- where one fifth of children are malnourished -- during a rare trip.

Mark Lowcock's visit to the impoverished, isolated country this week is the first such trip by a UN undersecretary for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator since 2011.

"More than half of children in rural areas... have no clean water," he said in a video posted on Twitter. "Something like 20 percent of the children in the country have malnutrition."

One hospital he visited had 140 patients with tuberculosis but had drugs for only 40 of them, Lowcock added, saying: "There's a very clear humanitarian need."

About 10.6 million people among the country's 25 million population need humanitarian assistance, the UN said, also noting "disparities" in access to basic health

services between rural and urban areas.

Mortality rates for under-fives are 20 percent higher in the countryside than in towns, it said, adding a shortage of funding had forced it to stop nutrition support to kindergartens since November 2017.

The UN earlier this year called for \$111 million in aid to help improve nutrition, health and sanitation in the North but the programme remains 90 percent underfunded.

The North has a fragile economy and has long struggled to feed its people, and is under multiple layers of UN Security Council sanctions over a series of nuclear and missile tests staged in violation of UN resolutions.

NGOs have told AFP that the enforcement of sanctions has hampered their operations.

The food situation has improved in recent years, partly due to reforms in agriculture and increasing trade at state-sanctioned private markets, but the nation remains vulnerable to natural disasters while medical services remain poor in many regions.

One fifth of children are malnourished

Mortality rates 20pc higher in countryside than in towns

Syria regime hits IS pocket in southwest

REUTERS, Amman

The Syrian government widened its offensive to recover the southwest yesterday, extending it to an enclave held by Islamic State-affiliated fighters as Russian warplanes targeted the area, a war monitor said.

The bombardment targeted the Yarmouk Basin, which borders the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and Jordan, and which is held by the Islamic State-affiliated Khalid Ibn al-Walid Army.

President Bashar al-Assad is seeking to recover the entire southwestern corner of Syria in an offensive that got underway last month and has so far recovered swathes of territory from rebels fighting under the Free Syrian Army (FSA) banner.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said yesterday's air strikes marked the first Russian strikes on the Yarmouk basin area in the war. It also said FSA rebels were simultaneously battling the IS-affiliated militants.

Government helicopters had also dropped barrel bombs on the area - containers filled with explosive material, it said.

Assad has so far recovered swathes of Deraa province in the southwest from FSA rebels, many of whom have been forced into surrender agreements mediated by Russian officers. The United States, which once armed the southern FSA rebels, told them at the start of the attack not to expect its intervention.

'Imagine the joy' Father, 4-yr-old son reunite in US immigration crisis

REUTERS, San Benito

With tears and smiles, Salvadoran asylum seeker Walter Armando Jimenez Melendez reunited with his 4-year-old son Jeremy on Tuesday after six weeks of anguished separation.

"(I went) without knowing where he was - if he was eating, how they were treating him," said Jimenez, 29, as he shared a meal with his child for the first time since May. "Imagine the joy I felt."

The father said that he and his son were overcome with emotion when they set eyes on each other. The boy cried, he said. Asked if he was happy to see his dad, Jeremy shyly smiled and nodded.

Jimenez, who was held in two different facilities in Texas, said he did not learn he would rejoin Jeremy until four hours before and did not believe it until he saw the boy. Jeremy was among 63 children under the age of five whom Judge Dana Sabraw in US

District Court in San Diego ordered the US government to reunite with their parents by Tuesday. They were separated by immigration officials when they crossed into the United States from Mexico.

On Tuesday, Sabraw told government attorneys he would not extend that deadline set two weeks ago for the children under five or for 2,000 other children to be reunited by July 26.

The government had asked Sabraw to extend the deadlines because it needed time to test DNA to confirm family relationships, run background checks, find parents who were released from custody and review parental fitness.

"We've saved kids' lives by keeping them from being with some really evil people some of them," Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar told CNN, adding that 38 children were to be reunited on Tuesday.



India is 'failing' to protect Taj Mahal

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday slammed the federal government and its authorities for their "lethargy" in taking steps to protect the Taj Mahal, the 17th century monument of love threatened by air pollution, dubbing the issue of preserving the historic structure a "hopeless cause".

A bench of Justices M B Lokur and Deepak Gupta said no concrete steps have been taken by the government, despite a parliamentary standing committee report on the Taj's protection.

The apex court also expressed anguish over the Uttar Pradesh state government failure to come out with a vision document to preserve and protect the Taj Mahal. The Taj Mahal is located in Agra is located in Uttar Pradesh ruled by Bharatiya Janata Party.

The court directed the federal government to furnish full details of the steps taken and action required to be taken for protecting the iconic white marble monument.

The government told the apex court bench that the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur was assessing the air pollution level in and around the mausoleum and will give its report in four months.

It said a special committee has also been set up to find the source of pollution in and around the Taj, which will suggest measures to prevent it.

THAI CAVE RESCUE

COACH EKKAPOL THE UNLIKELY STATELESS HERO

Schooled as a monk and now hailed a hero, football coach Ekkapol Chantawong is one of several stateless members of the "Wild Boars", a team whose survival after days trapped in a flooded Thai cave fixed a country that does not recognise them as citizens.

The UN refugee agency says Thailand is home to around 480,000 stateless people. Among the stateless are Ek and three of the boys who were trapped in the cave alongside him -- Dul, Mark and Tee. "To get nationality is the biggest hope for the boys... in the past these boys have problems travelling to play matches outside of Chiang Rai," he added, because of travel restrictions that accompany their lack of status.

TRAUMA FEARS CLOUD UPBEAT PICTURE OF BOYS

The dramatic rescue of a dozen boys from a flooded Thai cave ended a harrowing two-week ordeal that most seem to have weathered with astonishing mental and physical resilience -- at least for the moment.

Despite that trapped in the gloom of a cramped, part-submerged chamber the youngsters' psychological state is "very good", Thongchai Lertwilairatanapong, Inspector General of the Public Health Ministry, told reporters yesterday, adding that they were now "free from stress".

Despite the positive health assessments so far experts said they would all need to be monitored closely for signs of psychological distress that could take months to manifest itself.

SUCCESSFUL CAVE RESCUE A BOOST FOR JUNTA CHIEF

"Hooyah! Hooyah!" Thailand's junta chief, Prayuth Chan-ocha, was greeted with a rousing cheer when he inspected the operation to rescue 12 boys and their soccer coach from a flooded cave this week.

The rescue, which ended on Tuesday with all 13 brought out safely, has been greeted with joy around the world, and at home it has, for now at least, united in a glow of goodwill a country divided by politics for years.

The success of the military-led operation could help Prayuth burnish his image in the approach to a general election that some Thais hope will see the austere military veteran emerge as chief of a new civilian government.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS