

Afghan Taliban cancel peace talks with US

REUTERS, Peshawar

The Afghan Taliban said on Tuesday they had called off peace talks with US officials in Qatar this week due to an "agenda disagreement", especially over the involvement of Afghan officials as well as a possible ceasefire and prisoner exchange. Two days of peace talks had been set to start yesterday, but the militant group had refused to allow "puppet" Afghan officials to join.

India hikes ad rates for print media by 25pc

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

With parliamentary elections three months away, the Indian government has announced a 25 percent hike with immediate effect in advertisement rates for the print media over and above the existing rate structure for advertisement in print media. The hiked rate will be valid for a period of three years, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry said on Tuesday night.

Pakistan bans 'bed scenes' from TV

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani television channels may no longer show "intimate moments between couples" or "bed scenes", the conservative country's media regulator has announced, complaining of too much feminist content and warning that such "bold themes" offend viewers. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) issued the warning on Tuesday.

BITS OF HISTORY (JANUARY 09)

1953: A South Korean passenger ferry sank off Pusan with the loss of 349 lives.

1991: Black pupils admitted to white schools in South Africa.

1996: Chechen rebels seized 2,000 hostages in a southern Russian town and threatened to kill them if their demands were not met.

2007: Apple's Steve Jobs introduces original iPhone.

Americans facing 'crisis of the soul'

Trump escalates migrant wall standoff with Congress, stops short of declaring emergency

CNN ONLINE

President Donald Trump made a televised appeal to Americans on Tuesday for his long-promised border wall, offering familiar warnings but scant detail on how he will negotiate an end to a partial government shutdown that will cost some federal workers their paychecks this week.

In an address to the nation meant to convince Americans of a swelling border crisis that was at times belied by facts, the President gave little indication he is nearing a compromise that might reopen the federal government.

In their response minutes after Trump concluded on Tuesday, the top Democrats in Congress demonstrated an equally entrenched stance.

With neither side appearing to budge after a high-stakes battle of messaging, the situation appeared unchanged as some federal workers prepare for their first missed paycheck and many agencies remain dark.

As expected, the President used the first Oval Office address of his presidency to warn of "a growing humanitarian and security crisis at our southern border."

But he did not declare the situation a "national emergency," stopping short of a move he's openly weighed in the past days that could secure funding but would likely face a legal challenge.

The immigration matter, Trump intoned, is "a crisis of the heart, and a crisis of the soul."

Altogether, the President used the word "crisis" six times

"How much more American blood must be shed before Congress does its job?"



in his remarks, seeking to imbue a deadlocked debate over funding with a new sense of urgency.

Speaking from behind the Resolute Desk, Trump said the US could no longer accommodate immigrants who enter the country illegally and implored those who support him to contact their elected representatives.

"How much American blood must we shed before Congress does its job?" he asked. "This is a choice between right and wrong, justice and injustice. This is about whether we fulfill our sacred duty to the American citizens we serve."

He castigated politicians who have deemed his proposed wall "immoral," painting them as hypocrites.

"The only thing that is immoral is the politicians to do nothing and to continue to allow more innocent people to be so horribly victimized," he said.

After weeks of a partial government shutdown, Trump and his negotiators have made little headway in convincing Democrats a barrier is needed before agencies can reopen and federal workers can begin receiving paychecks again.

The administration has steadfastly refused to take steps that would restore funding to some agencies, believing the shutdown is its best leverage to secure the wall funds. Fearing he could lose a messaging battle as more Americans feel the pain of a shuttered government, Trump escalated his warnings that the country is unsafe without the border wall he promised as a candidate.



Hazmat and fire crews are seen outside the Indian and French Consulates on St Kilda Road in Melbourne, Australia, yesterday. Inset, a fire fighter is seen carrying hazardous material bags into the South Korean consulate in Melbourne. Police are investigating suspicious packages sent to a wide range of embassies and consulates, which officials said included the US and British missions in Melbourne, but there were no reports of harm to staff.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Fresh setback for May

British MPs force plan B if PM's plan fails

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday suffered an early defeat to her Brexit plans, when lawmakers demanded the government come up with a plan B within days if she loses a vote on her deal to leave the European Union.

With less than three months before Britain is due to leave the EU, parliament kicked off a five-day battle over May's Brexit plan with a show of force - undermining her preferred timetable if lawmakers vote down her deal on Tuesday.

May has refused to retreat from her unpopular deal, which envisages close trading ties with the EU after leaving in March, pressing ahead with the vote that she looks set to lose after failing to win over her nominal Northern Irish allies.

Losing the vote would deepen the uncertainty over the future of Brexit, Britain's biggest shift in foreign and trade policy for more than 40 years, and opens the way for several different outcomes, ranging from a disorderly exit to another referendum.

Lawmakers voted 308-297 in favour of demanding the government come up with

an alternative plan within three working days after Tuesday's vote, rather than a planned 21-day limit, a largely symbolic vote aimed at putting pressure on the government.

May's spokesman said the government's advice was that parliament could not change its so-called business motion which set out the procedure for the Brexit vote, but played down the impact of the vote for its overall plans.

"We are doing everything we can to win the meaningful vote that happens on Tuesday," the spokesman said.

"But it is also the intention, if that were not to take place, that we respond quickly to provide certainty on the way forward following that vote."

Combined with a vote late on Tuesday when the government lost on the finance bill, the defeats underline May's precarious position in parliament and the difficult she will have in winning approval for her Brexit deal.

The opposition Labour Party has said that it will immediately table a vote of no confidence in the government if May loses the vote.

Some US officials 'first-class idiots'

Says Iran's Khamenei

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei yesterday dubbed some US officials "first-class idiots" as he ridiculed them for predicting the collapse of the Islamic Republic.

"Some US officials pretend that they are mad. Of course I don't agree with that, but they are first-class idiots," he said in speech in Tehran, quoted on his official Twitter feed.

Khamenei was having a dig at US officials who had predicted there would be regime change in Iran by the end of 2018.

"A while ago, a US politician had said, among a gathering of terrorists and thugs, that he hopes to celebrate this Christmas in Tehran," Khamenei said, according to his Twitter feed.

"Christmas was a few days ago. This is how US calculations work."

It was not clear to which US official he was referring, but members of President Donald Trump's administration have called for regime change and predicted it would happen soon.

This has included National Security Advisor John Bolton -- a long-time regime change advocate -- who often speaks at gatherings of the exiled People's Mujahedeen of Iran (MEK) opposition group, considered a terrorist cult by Tehran's leaders.

"Before 2019 we here will celebrate in Tehran," Bolton told an MEK meeting in Paris in July 2017.

Iran's economy has faced instability in recent months with the rial fluctuating in value, making it difficult for ordinary people to make ends meet.



PHOTO: AFP

Migrants arrive at the harbour of Malaga yesterday after an inflatable boat carrying 188 migrants was rescued by the Spanish coast guard. Spain has become Europe's main entry point for migrants, overtaking Greece and Italy.

Citizenship bill won't hurt anyone's rights

Indian PM assures northeastern states

NDTV ONLINE

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, addressing a rally in Maharashtra yesterday, reached out to the northeast on the Citizenship Bill, which has caused a rift between the BJP and its allies in the northeastern states. "I want to assure my brother and sisters of Assam and the Northeast, the youth there, that their rights will not be harmed," the prime minister said.

The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill 2016, seeking to provide Indian citizenship to non-Muslims from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, was passed by the Lok Sabha on Tuesday amid protests by opposition parties who termed the proposed law "divisive" and "flawed".

The new bill has become more controversial alongside allegations that the draft National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam, which leaves out lakhs of people,



targets mostly Muslim immigrants. Opponents have alleged that the new bill legitimises non-Muslim immigrants, while Muslims who might have migrated years ago to India will be deported based on the citizen's register.

A day-long shutdown was held against the Bill across the northeast on Tuesday, in which five people were injured. There have been student protests in Assam and the Assam Gana Parishad, an ally of the BJP, has ended its ties with the ruling party.

In Meghalaya, Chief Minister Conrad Sangma also warned that he would meet with his party to decide on whether to continue his alliance with the BJP. "I will call the party leaders from all states and decide on the next step," he said.

Mizoram Chief Minister Zoramthanga, another BJP partner, is also upset. Zoramthanga and his party Mizo National Front (MNF) supported Tuesday's bandh.

MOST POWERFUL PASSPORTS

Japan tops 2019 list

CNN ONLINE

The country with the world's most powerful passport in 2019 is...Japan. Again.

That's the view of the Henley Passport Index, which periodically measures the access each country's travel documents afford.

It's the second time in a row that the Asian nation has come out on top in the index, which is revised quarterly.

Japan retains its top spot as the world's most travel-friendly passport thanks to the document's access to 190 countries.

South Korea edged up the ranking from October's index to join Singapore, offering access to 189 jurisdictions, thanks to a new visa-on-arrival agreement with India.

That the top countries in the list are all Asian -- along with other significant movers from the region -- shows that many Asia nations are "sustaining a high comfort level with mutually beneficial economic migration," Parag Khanna, the founder and managing partner of FutureMap in Singapore, told Henley & Partners.

Elsewhere in the region, China jumped almost 20 places in just two years, from 85th in 2017 to 69th this year.

European countries also performed favourably, with European Union member states (along with Norway and the US) filling in the places behind the top three nations -- although the UK continues to drop down the rankings, along with the US.

The two held joint-first position in 2015, according to a press release from the firm.

"The UNHCR has referred Ms Rahaf Mohammed Al-Qunun to Australia for consideration for refugee resettlement," Australia's Department of Home Affairs confirmed in a statement.

Qunun said she had intended to claim asylum.

But armed with a phone, she barricaded herself into an airside hotel room and fought back -- live-tweeting her fears of deportation in a campaign that swiftly galvanised international support and prompted a sharp U-turn by Thai officials.

Qunun is now in the care of the UN's refugee agency in Bangkok, which is processing her case.

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