

US SHUTDOWN ROW

No cave in on wall demands: Trump

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump had a message Tuesday for Democrats hoping he'll relent in the political arm wrestling that has seen funds blocked to parts of the government for a record 32 days: "No Cave!"

Trump's defiant tweet again blamed congressional Democrats for the chaos, insisting he will not lift his shutdown on federal government funding unless they approve his \$5.7 billion plan for more walls along the US-Mexican border.

"Without a Wall our Country can never have Border or National Security. With a powerful Wall or Steel Barrier, Crime Rates (and Drugs) will go substantially down all over the U.S.," Trump tweeted.

"The Dems know this but want to play political games."

Trump triggered a partial government shutdown on December 22 -- refusing to sign off on funding everything from FBI salaries to the National Park Service -- as a way of pressuring the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives to back the wall project.

But with Democrats refusing to give in and Trump sticking to his hardball tactics.

The Senate is set to vote on two bills this week that would in theory break the deadlock, even if both have little chance of passing.

The first is on Trump's compromise offer made Saturday, when he told Democrats he would extend temporary protection to about a million immigrants currently risking deportation if he gets his wall funding.

Pelosi sent out a rejection before Trump had even officially laid out his proposal. The president also caught backlash from the right wing of his own party, which accused

him of wanting to give amnesty to large numbers of people living in the country illegally.

Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell announced that a vote on Trump's plan would take place this week, saying the chance to end the shutdown is "staring us in the face."

However, the bill looks doomed, with the senior Democrat in the Senate, Chuck Schumer, describing the Trump offer as "going nowhere fast."

The Senate was also expected to reject a second, Democrat-backed bill to restart funding for the government. Even if it did get through Congress, "the president won't sign it," a senior Senate Republican aide said.

Both votes are expected today.

Meanwhile, dozens of federal employees have been lining up in Brooklyn for basics. Customs, tax and emergency management officials are all among the crowd, having gone unemployed since December 22.

Others deemed "essential" like transportation workers or prison guards are forced to continue working without pay, taking advantage of their lunch breaks to stock up.

Volunteers are manning distribution tables in the lobby of the New York borough's Barclays Center, which usually hosts concerts or sporting events rather than charity drives.

Those in need first register and then fill plastic bags with canned goods, potatoes, chicken, grapes and basic toiletries.

Senate plans votes on bills to reopen govt

US federal workers turn to food banks



Israeli forces detain a protestor during a demonstration by Palestinian, Israeli and foreign protesters against the newly-opened Route 4370 in the occupied West Bank yesterday. Inset, a protestor scuffles with an Israeli border guard during the demonstration. The highway into Jerusalem divides Israeli and Palestinian drivers into separate lanes with a wall, leading Palestinians to label it an "apartheid road". PHOTO: AFP

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM SUMMIT

Pompeo hails wave of 'disruption' in politics

Renews Trump's calls to protect sovereignty

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Tuesday praised a wave of "disruption" in world politics, citing Donald Trump and Brexit but also pointing to elections in France and Malaysia.

Addressing the world's business elite in the Swiss ski resort of Davos, Pompeo renewed Trump's criticism of international institutions and the US president's calls for "strong borders" to protect national sovereignty.

"New winds are blowing across the world," Pompeo told the World Economic Forum, speaking by video after the his trip was scuttled by the ongoing US government shutdown.

"I'd argue that this disruption is a positive development," he said.

Pompeo said that in recent years, "voters have tuned out politicians and political alliances that they thought were not representing their interests."

He cited Trump's 2016 election and Britain's referendum four months to leave the European Union -- both of which stunned elites -- as well as more recent election triumphs by Italy's anti-establishment Five Star Movement and Brazil's far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, who addressed Davos earlier on Tuesday.

More surprisingly, Pompeo pointed to the 2017 election in France of President Emmanuel Macron -- a political centrist who broke out of the party system but who recently has been beleaguered by protests from the Yellow Vest movement which says he is out of touch with ordinary people's economic anxieties.

Pompeo also listed as an example of the world's new directions last year's electoral comeback of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad after corruption allegations against his predecessor.



EU will never accept May's 'plan-B': Barnier

UK PM says delaying Brexit won't solve issue

AGENCIES

The EU's chief Brexit negotiator has ruled out ever accepting Theresa May's Brexit 'plan-B', in a major blow to the prime minister's bid to get MPs to back her deal.

Michel Barnier said repeated requests for a time-limit on the controversial backstop had already been discussed and rejected twice by EU leaders.

In a joint interview to continental newspapers Barnier said "we cannot tie the backstop to a time limit" as suggested by the prime minister.

He said the withdrawal agreement on the table was "the only possible option" for Britain and also ruled out the possibility of a so-called "managed no-deal" as advocated by some Tory Brexiters, reported The Independent Online.

"In the case of no-deal action will of course be taken to ensure that planes can land but ... the 'no-deal' cannot be a sum of mini-deals and be a situation of 'business as usual'," he told Le Monde, Rzeczpospolita and Luxemburger Wort.

"Even an agreement for an ordered Brexit will cause disruptions and have serious consequences. The 'no-deal' even more so."

Barnier also said: "The question of limiting the backstop in time has already been discussed twice by the European leaders, in November and in December 2018.

"This backstop is the only one possible because an assurance is no longer operational if it is for a limited time. Imagine if it were to be limited in time and the problem arose after expiry: it is useless!"

Meanwhile, May yesterday said attempts by some lawmakers to use parliamentary procedure to delay Brexit did not address the underlying decision about how Britain should leave the European Union.

BREXIT IMPASSE



ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN MYANMAR

UN envoy unable to visit conflict areas

STAR REPORT

Myanmar did not allow the UN special envoy for Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener, to visit conflict areas in northern Rakhine State on Tuesday, citing safety concerns, reported Myanmar Times yesterday.

U Mya Than, deputy speaker of the Rakhine parliament, said she was not allowed to visit Maungdaw township and refugee camps in Buthidaung township because of government fears for her safety.

Than, who met with the UN envoy, said Burgener asked the parliament to urge the state government to allow her to visit the refugee camps.

"She told me that she wanted to go to the camps and give aid to the refugees but the government would not allow it. I explained to her about the security risk of going to these areas," he told Myanmar Times.

He added that the special envoy focused the discussion on the clashes between the Tatmadaw (military) and Arakan Army (AA) and the refugees, but did not bring up the repatriation of over 700,000 refugees from northern Rakhine who are living in Bangladesh.

"She urged parliament to push the government to try to stop the fighting as soon as possible and to allow UN organisations to visit the camps," U Mya Than said.

Sri Lanka opposition leader slams PM over new charter

Says govt lacks political moral to introduce it

PTI, Colombo

Sri Lanka's opposition leader Mahinda Rajapaksa yesterday slammed the efforts being made to formulate a new Constitution, saying Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's government does not have political moral to introduce it and should therefore hold fresh polls.

Rajapaksa was speaking in parliament on the report of the experts panel presented in the Constitutional assembly by Wickremesinghe two weeks ago.

Sri Lanka's former strongman, who attempted to overthrow Wickremesinghe with the help of President Maithripala Sirisena last year, criticised the prime minister's statements that the country will remain indivisible and united even after the new Constitution is enacted.

Rajapaksa said the new Constitution would weaken the parliament and "immeasurably strengthen provincial legislatures".

Since the presentation of the report, Rajapaksa has been alleging that the government is drafting a new Constitution to appease the main Tamil political party - Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and that the new Constitution would harm the Sinhala majority community.

Rajapaksa said that the limitations imposed on the legislative power of Parliament is "the turning point at which the unitary state becomes a federal state". He is also critical of the devolved police powers for provinces as advocated in the report.

He told Parliament that Wickremesinghe's government lacked political moral to introduce a new Constitution and therefore they should hold a fresh parliamentary poll.

It appears that the current constitutional process had run into the same historical problems which stopped efforts by various government to address the Tamil demand for political recognition.



HUAWEI CFO EXTRADITION BID

China accuses US of bullying behaviour

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday accused the United States of "bullying behaviour" after US authorities confirmed plans to seek the extradition of a top Chinese telecom executive detained in Canada.

The United States faces a January 30 deadline to file an extradition request for Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou, whose arrest last month sparked diplomatic tensions.

"We will continue to pursue the extradition of defendant Ms Meng Wanzhou, and will meet all deadlines set by the US/Canada Extradition Treaty," said US Justice Department spokesman Marc Raimondi on Tuesday.

Meng, the daughter of Huawei's founder, was arrested at Vancouver airport on December 1 at the request of the United States, which says she violated American sanctions on Iran.

She has since been freed on Can\$10 million (US\$7.5 million) bail and is awaiting a hearing on her extradition.

According to the agreement between the two countries, the United States has 60 days after an arrest made at its request in Canada to formalise an extradition request.

China, which has defended both Huawei and Meng since the CFO's arrest, criticised the US extradition request as without "legitimate reason" and "not in conformity with international law".

No citizenship to immigrants unless states on board

Says India's home ministry

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

In the midst of growing protests in north eastern states against the Citizenship Amendment Bill for non-Muslims from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, Indian Home Ministry has sought to assuage concerns saying citizenship would not be granted to any foreigner without the consent of concerned governments in states where the immigrants want to settle.

Home Ministry spokesman Ashok Prasad told reporters here on Tuesday that every application for Indian citizenship will be inquired into by the Deputy Commissioner or District Magistrate concerned who will carry out due diligence and submit it to the state government concerned.

The state government also has to conduct an inquiry through its agencies. Only then, an individual will be granted Indian nationality, he said, making it clear that "without the state government's recommendations, no one will be given Indian citizenship."

Prasad said the Bill does not confer automatic citizenship to anyone nor will anyone become Indian citizen overnight. "The mistaken perception about the Bill in the north east is creating insecurity in the region," he added.

He said the state government will have to verify the applicants' claim of having come from the three countries concerned and that they have suffered religious persecution there.

The Citizenship Amendment Bill 2019, passed by the Lok Sabha on January 8 and pending in the Rajya Sabha, is facing stiff resistance from a majority of the non-Bangla speaking people of north eastern states and civil society organizations. There are opposed to Indian citizenship to "persecuted" Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists and Christians from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

France tops social spending: OECD

AFP, Paris

France's social spending is the highest in the developed world relative to the size of its economy, an OECD study found yesterday, as the government weighs how to respond to "yellow vest" protests.

Expenditure on healthcare, pensions and other social services stood at 32 percent of GDP last year, said the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, a Paris-based inter-governmental research institution.

Outlays have risen sharply since 1990, when they represented just under 25 percent of GDP, and are nearly triple the level of roughly 12 percent of GDP in 1960.

That trend is broadly in line with other developed countries, reflecting the development of more comprehensive welfare states and higher pension spending as more people live longer.

But France's outlays are well above the current average of 20.5 percent of GDP for the 36 OECD member countries, with pensions making up a large chunk of the cash benefits paid out every month.

In neighbouring Germany social spending is just 25 percent of GDP, while in the US it makes up just 19 percent.

And when taking all public spending into account, such as police and defence, France leads Europe with government outlays the equivalent of 56.5 percent of GDP in 2017, according to the most recent data available.



Flood-affected residents transport a motorcycle using a makeshift bamboo raft in Makassar, Indonesia yesterday. At least eight people have been killed and thousands forced to evacuate their homes after heavy rain triggered devastating flash floods and landslides.

NEWSIN brief

Thailand to hold polls on March 24

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand will hold a general election on March 24, authorities said yesterday, the first national poll since a 2014 coup knocked out the civilian government of Yingluck Shinawatra. The military has since rewritten the constitution and muzzled all dissent in a bid to scratch the Shinawatra clan from the Thai political scene.

US teens held for anti-Muslim bomb plot

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A group of former Boy Scouts stockpiled firearms and explosive devices as they plotted to bomb a rural Muslim community in upstate New York, police said on Tuesday. At the time the four were arrested they had access to 23 rifles and shotguns, as well as three home-made bombs.

Four dead ahead of anti-Maduro rally

AFP, Caracas

At least four people have died following overnight clashes ahead of yesterday's rival protests in Venezuela by supporters and opponents of President Nicolas Maduro, police and a non-governmental organization said. A 16-year-old was among the dead, having suffered firearm injury during a demonstration in Caracas.

BITS OF HISTORY (JANUARY 23)

1997: Madeleine Albright becomes first female US Secretary of State.

2006: Evo Morales becomes first Indigenous president of Bolivia.

2008: Thousands of Palestinians poured into Egypt from the Gaza Strip through a border wall blown up by militants and stocked up on food and fuel in short supply due to an Israeli blockade.