



'Divisive' Trump urges unity

Calls for end to 'revenge' politics as he aims second term in 2020

VENEZUELA CRISIS

Military blocks humanitarian aid shipment

AFP, Caracas

Venezuelan military officers blocked a bridge on the border with Colombia ahead of an anticipated humanitarian aid shipment, as opposition leader Juan Guaido stepped up his challenge to President Nicolas Maduro's authority. Earlier Tuesday the opposition-dominated National Assembly had warned the armed forces, which make up much of Maduro's power base, not to cross a "red line" by blocking aid. Guaido, who proclaimed himself acting president on January 23 -- sparking an international crisis -- claims that up to 300,000 people face death if the aid is not delivered. "You know there's a red line, you know well there's a limit, you know that medicines, food and medical supplies are that limit," lawmaker Miguel Pizarro said in a message to the military. Maduro, though, said humanitarian aid would be the forerunner of a US-led invasion, insisting that "no one will enter, not one invading soldier."

Venezuelan military officers used a tanker truck and huge shipping container to block access to the Tienditas bridge, which links Cucuta, Colombia to Urena, Venezuela. The aid delivery was being coordinated by Guaido, who has declared himself interim president of the oil-rich country and now enjoys the backing of some 40 countries as Venezuela's legitimate leader. Maduro, 56, has repeatedly accused the United States of fomenting a coup.

President Donald Trump urged Americans to come together in a State of the Union speech seeking to turn the page on two years of divisive turmoil and transform him into a bipartisan national leader. But opposition Democrats almost instantly rejected the overture, while Trump's steadfast insistence on building US-Mexico border walls promised new political strife in the near future. At times joking, at times impassioned, Trump told Congress and a huge television audience that "we must reject the politics of revenge, resistance, and retribution -- and embrace the boundless potential of cooperation, compromise, and the common good."

On foreign policy, Trump reaffirmed his determination to get US troops out of Afghanistan and Syria as quickly as possible. And he announced he would extend his trailblazing personal diplomacy with North Korea by meeting reclusive leader Kim Jong Un on February 27-28 in Vietnam. Trump vowed that the United States would outspend Russia on missiles without a fresh international accord after he ditched a landmark Cold War treaty. He also told Congress that Washington's aggressive trade negotiations with Beijing would mean an end to China's alleged "theft" of US jobs and wealth. Trump touted what he hopes will remain his strongest card with voters -- "the hottest economy anywhere in the

world." He also called for a bipartisan push to eradicate the AIDS epidemic in the United States in a decade.

But the key aim in the speech, littered with soaring rhetoric and interrupted continuously by applause from the Republicans, was to announce a new, more inclusive presidential tone ahead of Trump's 2020 reelection bid. The problem is that in two years of his administration Trump has driven an already polarised country into bitter, even violent debate over almost every aspect of politics. The divide was stark from the moment Trump entered the House of Representatives chamber, with Republicans scrambling to shake his hands, but most Democrats keeping out

TRUMP'S STATE OF UNION SPEECH

Reasserts his commitment to get troops out of Syria, Afghanistan

Declares second summit with Kim on February 27-28 in Vietnam

Says China 'theft' of US jobs and wealth must end

Vows to build his promised Mexico border wall

Vows to outspend Russia without new missile pact

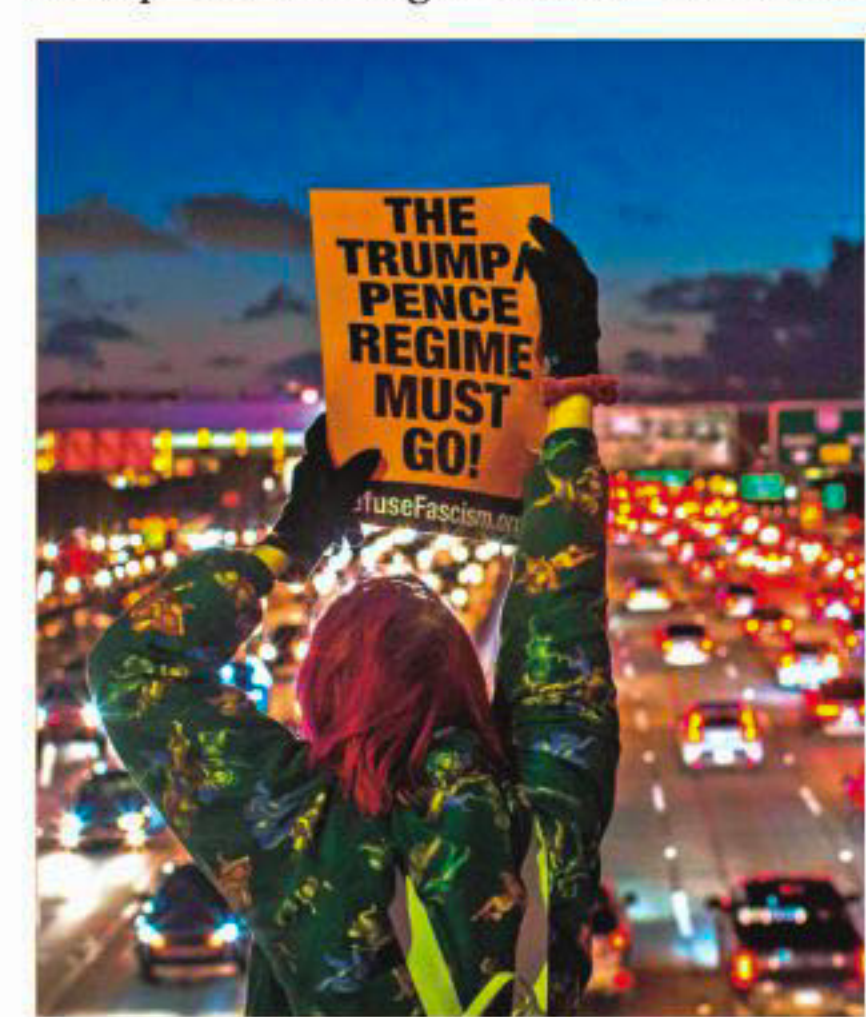
Reaffirms his support to 'freedom-seeking' Venezuela people



of the way. And the moment Trump swung onto his favorite topic of building a wall on the Mexican border to stop an "onslaught" of illegal immigrants, Democrats angrily shook their heads. A decision by Democrat women to wear white, in honor of the early 20th century suffragette movement, was seen as a visual rebuke of Trump. After the speech, Senior House Democrat Steny Hoyer declared that Trump "leaned on falsehoods and fear to obscure the reality of a presidency lacking in leadership and harmful to America's future." The president's single-minded drive -- and failure -- to get congressional funding for that wall is at the heart of the political dysfunction his speech claimed

to be trying to resolve. Democrats say that Trump's warnings about illegal immigrant murderers amount to political fearmongering and they refuse to authorize the money. The resulting standoff has turned what might have been a relatively minor funding debate into an existential test of political strength in the buildup to 2020. In December, Trump took revenge on Congress by triggering a crippling five-week partial shutdown of government. Democratic House speaker Nancy Pelosi, who was seated behind Trump for the State of the Union, exacted her own reprisal by forcing the speech to be delayed by a week. Things could soon escalate, with Trump threatening to renew the shut-

down or declare a national emergency so that he can bypass Congress and give himself power to take military funds for his project. "I will get it built," he said firmly, to cheers from Republicans and silence from Democrats. Trump's claims to foreign policy successes are not necessarily endorsed even in his own party. He repeated in the speech that he wants US troops to pull out from long-running wars, such as Afghanistan and Syria as soon as possible. "Constructive" talks with the Taliban guerrillas have "accelerated," he said in a notably upbeat assessment. There were cheers but the withdrawal promises have been criticized by some in the security services and many Republicans, who fear a loss of American influence on the world stage. Trump likewise gave an update on his plan for a second summit with reclusive North Korea's Kim, whom he is trying to persuade to give up nuclear weapons. Closer to home, he dialed up the pressure on Venezuela's leftist leader Nicolas Maduro, saying "we stand with the Venezuelan people in their noble quest for freedom." But it was clear that political foes in Washington were not persuaded. "It will take more than a speech to paper over President Trump's consistent view that the only obligation he has is to his political base," Democratic Senator Michael Bennet tweeted.



US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Mike Pence clap as US President Donald Trump arrives to deliver the State of the Union address at the US Capitol in Washington, DC, on Tuesday; US congresswomen from both political parties wore white outfits at the behest of the Democratic Women's Working Group to honor the legacy of women's suffrage in the United States.



PHOTO: AFP

'Special place in Hell' for no plan Brexiteers

Tusk's comment sparks uproar ahead of UK PM's EU visit

REUTERS, Brussels

The European Union will make no new offer on Brexit and those who promoted Britain's exit without any understanding of how to deliver it deserve a special place in hell, Council President Donald Tusk said yesterday. The United Kingdom is on course to leave the European Union on March 29 without a deal unless Prime Minister Theresa May can convince the bloc to reopen the divorce deal she agreed in November and then sell it to sceptical British lawmakers. As companies and governments across Europe step up preparations for the turmoil of a no-deal exit, diplomats and officials said the United Kingdom now faces three main options: a no-deal exit, a last-minute deal or a delay to Brexit. Rebuffing May's bid to renegotiate just a day before she is due in Brussels, Tusk said he wished the United Kingdom would reverse Brexit but that the bloc was preparing for a disorderly British exit as it would not gamble on peace in Ireland.



Theresa May Donald Tusk

"After Brexit we will be free of unelected, arrogant bullies like you - sounds like heaven to me." Varadkar said the Brexit deal, which was rejected by the UK parliament, was "the best possible". He said Britain's political instability was another proof of why the backstop was needed. At meetings in Belfast, May tried to tackle the biggest obstacle to getting a deal ratified by the British parliament - an insurance policy covering the possible future arrangements for the border between EU-member Ireland and the British province of Northern Ireland. May said she would seek an alternative arrangement which avoids the need for a hard border or legally binding changes to the border backstop to introduce a time limit or create an exit mechanism. British ministers, The Sun newspaper said, have been examining a plan drawn up by Japan's Fujitsu to track trade across the border, while the Telegraph said ministers had discussed delaying Brexit by eight weeks.

He said he no longer believed there was a way to stop Britain leaving due to the "pro-Brexit stance" of both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition. "I've been wondering what that special place in hell looks like, for those who promoted Brexit, without even a sketch of a plan how to carry it out safely," Tusk said at a joint news conference with Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar. The remark, which angered Brexit supporters in Britain, was tweeted from his account as he spoke the words, indicating it was not an off-the-cuff remark. Brexiteer Nigel Farage responded:

Senate passes key ME bill

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

The US Senate has passed legislation defining United States security policy in the Middle East, introducing a measure that would allow state and local governments to sanction those who support boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel. Tuesday's Senate vote, which was 77-23, sends the legislation to the House of Representatives where it will likely face renewed debate, politicians said.

The legislation authorises \$3.3b a year for 10 years in US military aid to Israel, reauthorises the US-Jordan Defense Cooperation Act and imposes financial sanctions on the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad or companies and banks that do business with Damascus. "Israel is without a doubt one of the best friends in the world," Senator Jim Risch, an Idaho Republican and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said in remarks to the Senate. "Certainly, in that neighbourhood they live in, which is a dangerous neighbourhood, they need our help. We worked with them very closely in many, many respects." The legislation, which consolidated four bills that did not make it to Congress last year, drew controversy in the Senate and opposition from a number of senators because of added language authorising state and local governments to terminate con-

tracts with US citizens who support the pro-Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Critics decried the measure as contrary to the free speech rights of Americans under the First Amendment of the Constitution, which in US jurisprudence has provided protection for people participating in boycotts as a form of political protest. Twenty-six US states have adopted anti-BDS measures, which is backed by the influential American Israel Public Affairs Committee advocacy group. However, US

Bill aims to shield Israel from boycotts, sanctions
Text approves slowdown of troop withdrawal from Syria

judges in Kansas and Arizona struck down such laws in 2018. In addition to supporting Israel, the legislation signals strong sentiment among politicians for continuing the limited US military engagement in Syria. Senior Republican leaders and a number of key Democrats said they want a delay and reevaluation of Trump's order to withdraw US special forces from Syria. On December 19, Trump announced he was pulling 2,000 US forces out of Syria, claiming the IS group had been "defeated".



Priests, bishops sexually abused nuns: Pope

AFP, Aboard Papal Plane

Pope Francis admitted Tuesday that Catholic priests and bishops had sexually abused nuns, the latest scandal to rock the church. "There are some priests and also bishops who have done it," the pontiff said in response to a journalist's question on the abuse of nuns, speaking on the return flight from his trip to the United Arab Emirates. The papal admission followed a rare outcry last week from the Vatican's women's magazine over the sexual abuse of nuns, leaving them feeling forced to have abortions or raise children not recognised by their priest fathers. The issue hit the headlines last year after a nun accused an Indian bishop of repeatedly raping her in a case that triggered rare dissent within the country's Catholic Church. Francis said the problem could be found "anywhere" but was prevalent in "some new congregations and in some regions". He said the Church has "suspended several clerics" and the Vatican has been "working (on the issue) for a long time". He said it was a cultural problem, the roots of which lie in "seeing women as second class". In the Indian case, Bishop Franco Mulakkal was arrested on September 21 in the southern state of Kerala on suspicion of raping the nun in question 13 times between 2014 and 2016. Pope Francis suspended him the day before his arrest, appointing another bishop in his place.

WAR CRIMES INVESTIGATIONS

Nepal extends deadline again

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal yesterday approved a third extension for commissions tasked with probing crimes committed during its decade-long civil war, promising changes to make the hamstrung bodies effective. The commissions had initially been given two years in 2015 to probe abuses by government forces and Maoist rebels during the conflict that left 17,000 dead and others missing without a trace. But even after four years and two extensions, their mandates were to expire on Saturday without resolving a single case. A parliament meeting passed an amendment to the Transitional Justice Act that allowed a year's extension. Law minister Bhanu Bhakta Dhakal said that the terms of the commissions had to be extended to avoid a legal vacuum. Critics say the truth and reconciliation process has been poorly designed from the outset and stymied by a lack of funding and political will. The government has not granted the commissioners the legal powers necessary to prosecute war crimes, while a provision granting amnesty to perpetrators is still on the books.



Members of the King's Troop Royal Horse Artillery stage a 41 gun salute to mark the 67th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II's ascension to the Throne in Green Park Central London, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP