

2 DECADES OF THAI POLITICS

Violent demonstrations, multiple coups and a cryptic election eve message from the king. Thailand's unpredictable political history has few rivals. Here is a brief look at two turbulent decades in Thai politics.

'LOST DECADE'

2001: Policeman-turned-billionaire telecoms magnate Thaksin Shinawatra wins at the polls promising social welfare schemes.

2003: A brutal war on drugs kills upwards of 2,500 people. A year later a crackdown in the Muslim-majority Deep South sparks a renewed insurgency.

2005: Thaksin repeats electoral triumph, heading up the first civilian administration to complete a four-year term in a history rattled by army take-overs.

2006: While at the UN in New York, Thaksin is toppled in bloodless coup. A period of protests and violent clashes ensues and historians dub the prolonged instability the "Lost Decade".

YELLOW AND RED

2008: Thaksin is convicted in absentia on corruption charges he says are politically motivated and flees into self-exile. Anti-Thaksin protesters known as "Yellow Shirts" storm Bangkok's airports, shutting them down for over a week to protest a Thaksin ally as premier — who is soon removed. Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva becomes prime minister after a parliamentary vote.

2009: Pro-Thaksin "Red Shirts" storm a regional summit hosted by Thailand demanding elections and forcing participants to flee by helicopter and boat.

2010: More than 90 people are killed as the army — led by current junta leader Prayut Chan-O-cha — opens fire on Red Shirts protesting in downtown Bangkok.

2011: Fresh elections in 2011 see Thaksin's younger sister Yingluck emerge as Thailand's first female prime minister.

2014: Anti-Yingluck demonstrators hold months-long protests that turn violent. A snap 2014 election is annulled and military seizes power.

JUNTA DELAYS, HOLDS VOTE

2016: Junta leader Prayut oversees a crackdown on dissent and wins a referendum to change the constitution.

2017: Yingluck flees the country to avoid negligence charges and joins brother in self-exile.

2018: Junta announces elections for next year after repeated delays.

SOURCE: AFP



Tibetan community in France takes part in a march in Paris yesterday to protest against the visit of Chinese President to France. Xi's official visit to Paris on Monday will mark 55 years since Charles de Gaulle established diplomatic relations with Beijing.

PHOTO: AFP

Trump 'did not conspire with Russia'

US attorney general says quoting Mueller report

AGENCIES

Special Counsel Robert Mueller's report on Moscow's meddling in the 2016 election found no evidence of conspiracy by President Donald Trump's campaign to collude with Russia, the US Justice Department said yesterday.

Mueller declined to rule on whether evidence showed Trump obstructed justice, according to a summary submitted to Congress by Attorney General Bill Barr.

"While this report does not conclude that the president committed crime, it also does not exonerate him," Barr cited Mueller's report as saying.

It was not immediately known what Mueller's report says about another strand of inquiry: whether Trump committed obstruction of justice to hinder the Russia investigation by acts such as firing FBI Director James Comey in 2017.

There might be no more criminal charges against Trump associates on the issue of whether the Trump campaign conspired with Russia to help the real estate magnate beat Democrat Hillary Clinton in the 2016 White House race. US intelligence agencies concluded shortly before Trump took office in January 2017 that Moscow meddled in the election.

Barr, the top US law enforcement official, spent nine hours on Saturday studying the report. He had said he hoped to hand over a summary of its "principal conclusions" by the end of the weekend.

Mueller brought charges against 34 people and three companies during his investigation, with prison sentences for some of Trump's former aides such as campaign chairman Paul Manafort and longtime personal lawyer Michael Cohen.

Brexit mayday?

Report says 11 cabinet ministers want PM May to go as chaos deepens

REUTERS, London

The United Kingdom's exit from the European Union was in disarray yesterday as Prime Minister Theresa May faced a possible plot by ministers to topple her and parliament prepared to grab control of Brexit from the government.

At one of the most important junctures for the country since World War Two, British politics was at fever pitch and, nearly three years since the 2016 referendum, it was still unclear how, when or if Brexit will ever take place.

With May humiliated and weakened, ministers insisted she and the British government were still in charge of the country, and that the best option was still for parliament to ratify May's twice-defeated Brexit divorce deal.

As hundreds of thousands of people marched across central London on Saturday to demand another Brexit referendum, May was the subject of what The Sunday Times said was a "coup" by senior ministers seeking to oust her.

The newspaper cited 11 unidentified senior ministers and said they had agreed that the prime minister should stand down, warning that she has become a toxic and erratic figure whose judgment has "gone haywire".

When asked by Sky about reports in The Sunday Times and other newspa-



pers of a plot and whether she had run out of road, finance minister Philip Hammond said: "No. I don't think that is the case at all."

"Changing prime minister wouldn't help us," Hammond said. "To be talking about changing the players on the board, frankly, is self-indulgent at this time."

Brexit had been due to happen on March 29 before May secured a delay in talks with the EU on Thursday.

Now a May 22 departure date will apply if parliament rallies behind the British prime minister and she is able to pass her deal. If she fails to do so, Britain will have until April 12 to offer a new plan or decide to leave the EU without a treaty.

Some lawmakers have asked May to name her departure date as the price for supporting her deal, though it was unclear when a third vote might take place.

If May's deal is dead, then parliament will try to find a different option. That opens an array of options including a much softer divorce than May had intended, a referendum, a revocation of the Article 50 divorce papers or even an election.

The Sunday Times reported that May's de-facto deputy, David Lidington, was one contender to be interim prime minister but others are pushing for Environment Secretary Michael Gove or Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt.

MOSQUE MASSACRE

NZ to hold nat'l remembrance service for victims next Friday

AFP, Christchurch

New Zealand will hold a national remembrance service for victims of the Christchurch massacre on March 29, the government announced yesterday, as the country grieves over a tragedy that shocked the world.

The service will take place in Christchurch at 10:00am local time, two weeks after an Australian white supremacist gunned down 50 Muslims and wounded dozens of others during Friday prayers at two mosques in the city on March 15.

Brenton Tarrant, a 28-year-old motivated by the white extremist belief that Muslims were "invading" Western countries, was arrested within minutes of the massacre and has been charged with murder.

The slaughter, which he cold-bloodedly live-streamed, has rocked the normally laid-back country of 4.5 million.

The service will be held at Hagley Park in

Christchurch, located across the street from the Al Noor Mosque where the killing spree began.

Most victims were gunned down at Al Noor before Tarrant killed seven more at the smaller Linwood Mosque several kilometres (miles) away.

New Zealand came to a standstill on Friday to mark one week since the bloodshed, with the Muslim call to prayer broadcast across the country from a ceremony at Hagley Park followed by two minutes of silence. Friday's ceremonies saw poignant scenes across the country with non-believers embracing Muslims, Maoris performing the traditional haka war dance, and non-Muslim New Zealand women donning makeshift Islamic headscarves in solidarity.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern on Thursday moved swiftly to ban the military-style rifles used in the assault, with immediate effect.



Trump to recognise Golan as its territory today: Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

US President Donald Trump will sign an order recognising Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights when he meets Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Washington today, Israel's foreign minister said.

"President Trump will sign tomorrow in the presence of PM Netanyahu an order recognising Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights," Foreign Minister Israel Katz wrote on Twitter on Sunday.

Again breaking with long-standing international consensus, Trump said on Thursday that the United States should acknowledge Israeli sovereignty over the strategic plateau it seized from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War.

He however left unanswered if or when he would follow through with an order to do so.

Netanyahu has long pushed for such recognition, and many analysts saw Trump's statement, which came in a tweet, as a campaign gift ahead of Israel's April 9 polls.

The prime minister is locked in tough election campaign with a centrist political

alliance headed by former military chief Benny Gantz and ex-finance minister Yair Lapid.

Syria and other states in the region condemned Trump's pledge, saying it violates international law. France said the same.

Israel annexed the Golan in 1981 in a move never recognised by the international community.



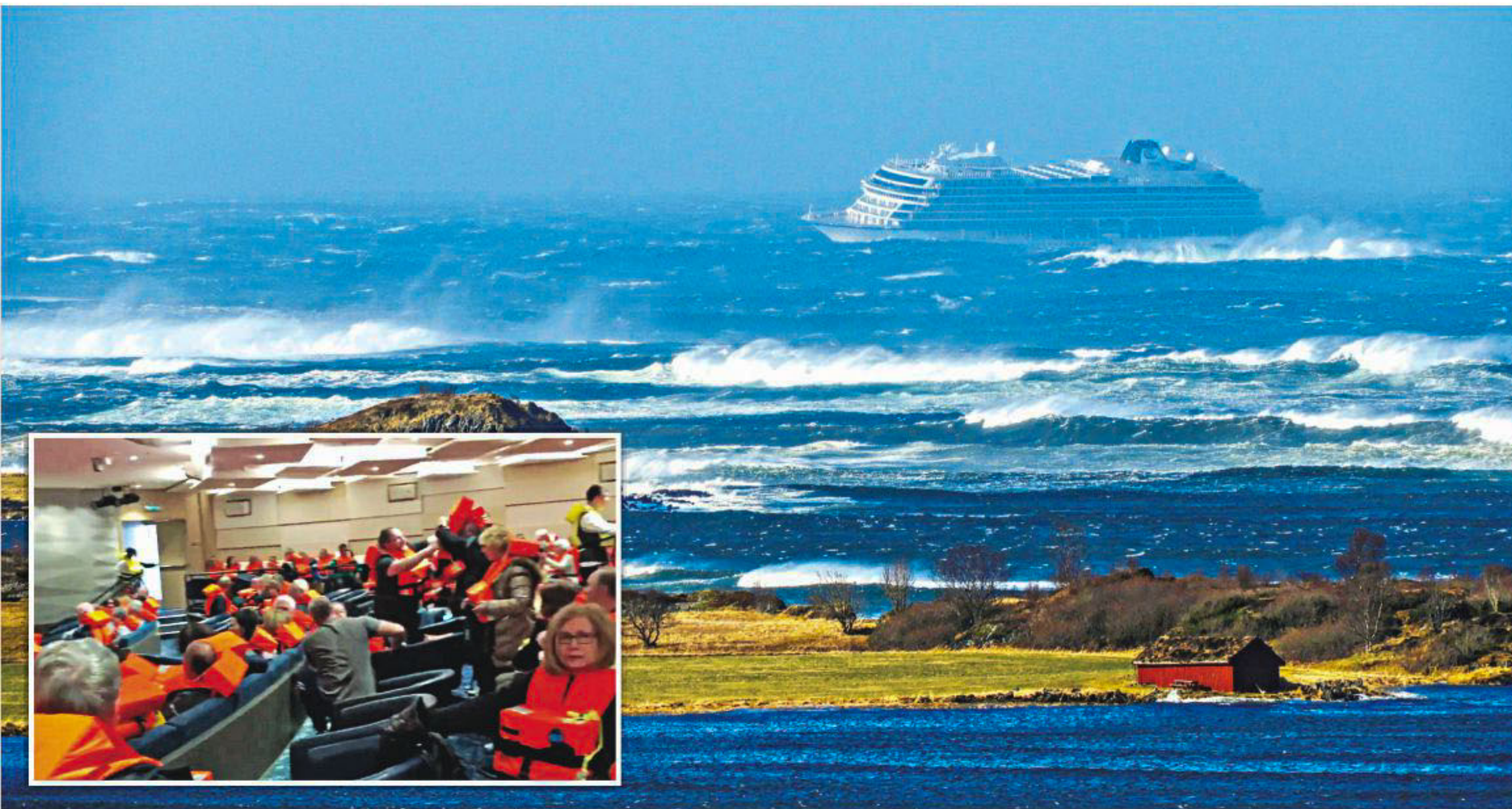
The decision is the latest major move in favour of Israel by Trump, who in 2017 recognised the disputed city of Jerusalem as the country's capital.

Moscow warned the policy U-turn could spark new conflicts.

Any such move would break with UN Security

Council resolutions and with more than half a century of US foreign policy, which treated the Golan as occupied territory whose future would be negotiated in talks with Syria on a comprehensive peace.

The Syrian foreign ministry sent a letter to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, urging him to reiterate the UN's rejection of Israeli claims over the Golan, SANA said.



A cruise ship drifts towards land after an engine failure, Hustadvika, Norway. Inset, This image grab from a video made shows passengers gathering in a room with life jackets. Rescue services had airlifted 479 people to safety from a luxury cruise liner with engine trouble off the coast of Norway by yesterday morning and began towing the vessel to a nearby port. The Viking Sky, with 1,373 passengers and crew on board, sent out a mayday signal on Saturday. Some 20 injured passengers had been taken to hospital, Viking Cruises said, while others had only minor injuries. The ship has been able to restart three of its four engines yesterday morning but still needed assistance.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

Mamata makes false promises

Says Rahul in West Bengal; TMC removes Congress' name from its logo

AGENCIES

Six weeks ago, Congress president Rahul Gandhi and Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee were at the same press meet outside Sharad Pawar's house in New Delhi when she called for a pre-poll alliance. On January 19, the Congress sent two leaders to the Mahagathbandhan rally that Mamata hosted in Kolkata.

But on Saturday, in his first campaign rally in West Bengal, Rahul attacked Mamata in the same breath as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, accusing her of doing nothing for the people and her party of targeting Congress workers.

The Congress president did not once take her name, but he did mention Mamata and PM Modi in the same breath. "Did your youth get employment and did your farmers receive any help? While Narendra Modiji lies on the one hand, your Chief Minister keeps making promises on the other. But eventually, nothing happens," Rahul

said at Chanchole.

Speaking at the rally, he accused the Mamata Banerjee government of being "no better" than the previous Left Front one. "Bengal is being run by just one person. She neither talks to anyone nor takes anybody's suggestion. She does whatever



she feels like," he said. "Does Bengal not have any voice? Should one person be allowed to run an entire state?"

Trinamool Congress rebuffed his comments.

"Rahul is wasting his time here. He should go to other states and fight against the BJP," said Firhad Hakim, minister in

the Mamata Banerjee government.

Meanwhile, twenty-one years after officially separating from the Congress, TMC has removed the grand old party's name from its logo.

The new logo has Trinamool written in green with twin flowers and blue background. It has been in use for a week now, party sources said. The Congress name has been dropped from party banners, posters and all communication material.

However, it will remain registered with the Election Commission as Trinamool Congress, party sources said. The unusual exchange comes at a time when Congress party is struggling to forge an opposition alliance to fight a looming election, improving Modi's chances of a second term.

Voting begins on April 11 and will be spread over several phases until May 19 to cover the country involving more than 900 million voters, and the count will be made on May 23.

Detained jihadists are ticking bomb

Warns Syrian Kurds, urge world to take back foreign militants

AFP, Omar Oil Field

Syria's Kurds yesterday warned that despite the demise of the Islamic State's "caliphate", the thousands of foreign jihadists they hold are a time-bomb the world urgently needs to defuse.

World leaders were quick to hail Saturday's announcement by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces that the last shred of land controlled by IS had been conquered.

But as the SDF swept the devastated riverside village of Baghouz where jihadists made their dramatic last stand, the top Syrian Kurdish foreign affairs official warned that IS members captured during the assault still posed a threat.

"There are thousands of fighters, children and women and from 54 countries, not including Iraqis and Syrians, who are a serious burden and danger for us and for the international community," Abdel Karim Omar told AFP.

As the SDF's months-long, US-backed assault against the last IS strongholds in the Euphrates Valley closed in, jihadists and their families gradually gathered in the final refuge of Baghouz.

While some managed to escape, many foreigners stayed behind, either surrendering or fighting to the death.

According to the SDF, 66,000 people left the last IS pocket since January, including 5,000 jihadists and 24,000 of their relatives.

"There has to be coordination between us and the international community to address this danger," Abdel Karim Omar said.

"There are thousands of children who have been raised according to IS ideology," he added.

"If these children are not re-educated and re-integrated in their societies of origin, they are potential future terrorists."

The SDF's main support has been the international military coalition

launched by the United States in mid-2014 to counter the expansion of IS.

The coalition has provided weapons and carried out 34,000 air strikes in support of local forces in Iraq and Syria, most of the recent ones to back ground advances by the SDF Kurdish-Arab alliance.

The aerial campaigns against IS hubs across a "caliphate" which once spanned territory the size of the United Kingdom have levelled major cities and contributed to the biggest wave of displacement since World War II.

US President Donald Trump has vowed to drastically scale down US military presence in Syria once IS is defeated, leaving the Kurds exposed to threats by Damascus and Turkey.

Ankara sees the SDF as a terrorist organisation and Abdel Karim Omar warned that any cross-border offensive risked leading to mass breakouts from the jails where jihadists are currently held.

"Any new threat or new war would give an opportunity to these criminal