

Russia sends troops,
cargo to Venezuela

AFP, Caracas

Two Russian military planes delivered troops and equipment to Venezuela over the weekend, Russian state news agency Sputnik reported yesterday. It gave no other details but quoted an unnamed official from the Russian embassy in Caracas saying "there is nothing mysterious" about the flights. Reports said around 100 troops and 35 tonnes of unspecified equipment were offloaded from the planes.

China chemical plant
blast toll hits 78

AFP, Beijing

The death toll from a chemical plant explosion in China rose to 78 yesterday, with more than 500 still receiving medical treatment four days after one of the country's worst industrial accidents. Thursday's explosion in Yancheng city, eastern Jiangsu province razed an industrial park and blew out the windows of surrounding homes.

US military to use
Oman ports

AFP, Muscat

Oman on Sunday said it had signed an agreement with the United States that would allow American ships and warplanes to take advantage of ports and airports. Duqm port is located in southern Oman on the Arabian Sea and around 500 kilometres (310 miles) from the Strait of Hormuz.

At least 18 dead as
floods sweep Iran

AFP, Tehran

The death toll of floods that have swept across most Iranian provinces has risen to 18 with more than 70 injured, the country's emergency services said yesterday. Iran has been facing unprecedented floods in 25 of its 31 provinces, the country's Crisis Management Organisation said.

'An illegal takedown that failed'

Says US president on Russia probe after Robert Mueller finds no collusion;
Democrats on back foot, demand release of full report, documents

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump has declared himself completely exonerated after his campaign was cleared of colluding with Russia in the 2016 election, in a major boost for his re-election hopes.

The long-awaited final report of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's probe into Moscow's election meddling concluded that no member or associate of the campaign conspired or coordinated with Russia in its plot to boost Trump in the vote more than two years ago.

While the Mueller report did not exonerate the president of obstruction of justice, Attorney General Bill Barr's letter to Congress summarizing the still-secret document cleared a dark cloud that had hung over the Trump's legitimacy since he took office in January 2017.

"There was no collusion with Russia. There was no obstruction. It was a complete and total exoneration," Trump said Sunday of Mueller's conclusions.

"It's a shame that the country had to go through this," he added. "This was an illegal takedown that failed."

Deputy press secretary Hogan Gidley said Trump was "in a really good mood" and



"very happy with how it all turned out."

Following the release of the report, the Kremlin again said that Moscow did not interfere in the 2016 presidential vote that brought Trump to office -- a denial at odds with the conclusion of the US intelligence community.

Summarizing Mueller's findings, Barr said no Trump campaign official was involved in Russian conspiracies in 2016 to hack Democratic computers and flood social media with disinformation to harm Trump's Democratic election rival Hillary Clinton.

He also said there were no new surprises coming from the Mueller team, which is disbanding -- no further indictments being referred, and no sealed indictments out-

standing.

On the other hand, according to Barr's letter, Mueller clearly had some evidence to support an obstruction case, but was uncertain whether it was enough to support criminal charges.

Democrats in Congress are now certain to demand Mueller's underlying evidence and push to investigate further.

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Barr's summary of the Mueller findings "raises as many questions as it answers."

Democrats in Congress are already conducting some 17 investigations of the administration, spreading their net far more broadly than Mueller's relatively narrow mandate.

KEY FINDINGS

RUSSIA COLLUSION: Mueller found that there was conclusive evidence that Russia did interfere in the election, both through a coordinated campaign of disinformation and by hacking emails from Hillary Clinton's election team. But quoting directly from Mueller's report, Barr said that the special counsel's investigation "did not establish that members of the Trump campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities."

OBSTRUCTION OF JUSTICE: Many observers had predicted the biggest danger to Trump came from a possible accusation of obstruction of justice, particularly over his decision to sack the FBI director James Comey, who headed the investigation before Mueller. But Barr said that the evidence outlined in Mueller's report "is not sufficient to establish that the President committed an obstruction-of-justice offence." "The Special Counsel states that 'while this report does not conclude that the president committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him,'" he added.

NO MORE INDICTMENTS: Trump's former national security advisor Mike Flynn, his former personal lawyer Michael Cohen and his campaign chairman Paul Manafort are among the 34 individuals already indicted by Mueller but they will be the last, according to Barr. "The report does not recommend any further indictments nor did the special counsel obtain any sealed indictments that have yet to be made public," Barr said in his letter to the heads of the Senate and House judiciary committees.

SOURCE: AFP



N Korea returns to inter-Korean liaison office

AFP, Seoul

North Korea has returned its staff to an inter-Korean liaison office, Seoul said yesterday, just days after unilaterally withdrawing from the joint facility.

The office in the Northern city of Kaesong was opened in September as the two Koreas knitted closer ties, but the North pulled its staff out last week amid a deadlock in talks between Washington and Pyongyang.

The unification ministry said some of the North Korean staff were back at work yesterday saying they had come to cover their "shift as usual".

"Thus, the South and the North held consultations at the liaison office this morning and will continue to operate the office as usual," the ministry said in a statement.

It said the North did not offer details on why they had returned or pulled out in the first place.

Experts had suggested that the withdrawal was Pyongyang's attempt of pressuring Seoul to exert more influence on the US in the current diplomacy.

Their return follows US President Donald Trump's abrupt tweet at the weekend saying he had "ordered" the withdrawal of additional sanctions -- without identifying the measures -- against Pyongyang by the US Treasury.

The liaison office opened three months after Kim signed a vague pledge at his first summit with Trump in Singapore to work towards "denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula", and shortly before Moon went to Pyongyang for his third summit with Kim last year.

When it opened, Seoul's unification ministry said the office would become a "round-the-clock consultation and communication channel" for advancing inter-Korean relations, improving ties between the US and the North, and easing military tensions.



Demonstrators take part in a protest against growing Islamophobia, white supremacy, and anti-immigrant bigotry following the attacks at Christchurch New Zealand on Sunday at the Time Square in New York City. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern yesterday ordered an independent judicial inquiry into whether police and intelligence services could have prevented the Christchurch mosque attacks on March 15 that killed 50 people.

PHOTO: AFP

US AIR STRIKE IN AFGHANISTAN

10 kids among 13 killed: UN

REUTERS, Kabul

Ten children, part of the same extended family, were killed by a US air strike in Afghanistan, along with three adult civilians, the United Nations said yesterday.

The air strike early on Saturday was part of a battle between the Taliban and combined Afghan and US forces that lasted about 30 hours in Kunduz, a northern province where the Taliban insurgency is strong.

The children and their family had been displaced by fighting elsewhere in the country, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said, releasing its preliminary findings about the incident. UNAMA said in a statement that it is verifying that all 13 civilian casualties occurred around the time of the air strike.

Three other civilians were wounded. The incident happened in the Telawka neighbourhood near Kunduz city.

A record number of Afghan civilians were killed last year as aerial attacks and suicide bombings increased, the United Nations said in a February report. Child casualties from air strikes have increased every year since 2014.

Fighting has accelerated during a period of recurring talks between US and Taliban officials aimed at ending Afghanistan's 17-year war.

'Time's up, Theresa'?

UK PM admits still not enough support for her Brexit deal amid ouster plot

REUTERS, London

Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday battled to keep control of Britain's exit from the European Union as some in her party called on her to quit and parliament plotted to wrest Brexit away from the government.

At one of the most important junctures for the country in at least a generation, British politics was at fever pitch and, nearly three years since the 2016 EU membership referendum, it was still unclear how, when or if Brexit will take place.

The PM yesterday admitted that there was not yet enough support for her to put her Brexit deal to a vote in parliament for a third time, but she would continue with talks with lawmakers to try to get their backing.

May said that parliament would debate secondary legislation tomorrow to formally change the date of Brexit in British law.

The leader of Britain's opposition Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, yesterday said that May's approach to Brexit had become "a national embarrassment" that risked Britain leaving the European Union without an agreement.

With May humiliated and weakened, minis-



ters lined up to insist she was still in charge and to deny any part in, or knowledge of, a reported plot to demand she name a date to leave office at a cabinet meeting yesterday.

"Time's up, Theresa," Rupert Murdoch's The Sun newspaper said in a front page editorial. It said her one chance of getting her Brexit deal approved by parliament was to name a date for her departure.

Days before the original exit date of March 29, British ministers and lawmakers were still publicly discussing an array of options including leaving with May's deal, with no deal, revoking the Article 50 divorce papers, calling another

referendum or going for a closer relationship with the EU.

May had to delay that departure date due to the political deadlock in London. Now Britain will leave on May 22 if her deal is approved by parliament. If not, Britain will have until April 12 to offer a new plan or decide to leave without a treaty.

The EU ramped up the pressure yesterday, saying it had completed no-deal preparations as this outcome on April 12 was looking "increasingly likely".

Just 24 hours after hundreds of thousands of people marched through London on Saturday to demand another referendum, May called rebel lawmakers to her Chequers residence on Sunday in an attempt to break the deadlock.

Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg and Steve Baker attended along with ministers David Lidington and Michael Gove who had been reportedly lined up as caretaker prime ministers. They were forced on Sunday to deny they wanted May's job.

May told the lawmakers she would quit if they voted for her twice-defeated European Union divorce deal, ITV news said. But there was also concern May could pivot to a no-deal Brexit as the only way to survive in power.

THERESA MAY



Aged 62

BRITISH PRIME MINISTER

- ◆ Since 1997 Conservative member of parliament
- ◆ 2010-16 Home secretary (interior minister)
- ◆ 2016 Opposes UK leaving EU. Becomes prime minister after Brexit vote
- ◆ 2017 Loses majority in snap election. Strikes deal with pro-Brexit DUP
- ◆ March 20, 2019 Forced to ask EU to delay Brexit after UK parliament twice rejects her EU divorce deal
- ◆ March 25-29, 2019 Make-or-break week for Brexit deal and May's future

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An emergency responder inspects a damaged house after it was hit by a rocket in the village of Mishmeret, north of Tel Aviv, yesterday. Story on page 16.

PHOTO: AFP

Syria's Kurds call for int'l court to try IS jihadists

AFP, Ain Issa

Syria's Kurds yesterday called for an international court to be set up in the country to try suspected Islamic State group jihadists following the announced fall of their "caliphate".

IS imposed its brutal interpretation of Islam on millions living in the proto-state that it declared across a large swathe of Syria and neighbouring Iraq in 2014. The extremists stand accused of carrying out numerous crimes including mass executions, kidnappings and rape.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces on Saturday announced the end of the "caliphate" after defeating IS jihadists in the eastern village of Baghouz near the Iraqi border.

INDIAN GENERAL ELECTION 2019

'Final assault on poverty'

Rahul vows basic income for poorest if voted to power

AFP, New Delhi

Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi yesterday vowed a "final assault on poverty" in India if elected prime minister in May, promising a minimum income for tens of millions of the country's poorest.

The Congress Party leader, broadly seen as trailing the incumbent Narendra Modi in the race for top office, described the scheme to pay 50 million Indians a guaranteed basic income of \$1,000 a year as the largest of its kind on Earth.

The sop to voters comes less than three weeks before Indians start casting their ballots in mammoth elections that stretch nearly six weeks until May 19.

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party routed Congress at the last general election in 2014 and his supporters hope the Hindu nationalist leader can deliver another crushing victory.

But Gandhi is trying to close the gap, promising among other things a safety net for Indians living beneath the poverty line in the

world's second-most populous nation.

"People have suffered in the last five years. We will give justice to them," the scion of the Gandhi-Nehru dynasty told reporters in Delhi.

"It is on this day that the Congress Party launched its final assault on poverty. It will be the world's largest minimum income scheme."

Gandhi, whose father, grandmother and great-grandfather were all prime ministers, has attacked Modi's economic record, accusing him of failing to create jobs for the nation's youth or aid desperate farmers.

His proposed cash handouts for the poor are seen as modelled loosely on universal basic income, a concept attracting growing interest around the world.

UBI involves people being given a flat lump sum by the state instead of subsidies and social security payments. It has been tried out in several countries including Finland and Kenya, and has been promised by the ruling party of the small northern Indian state of Sikkim as well as Italy's new populist government.

