

BREAK-IN AT MADRID EMBASSY

North Korea calls Feb raid a terror attack

Says it's watching rumours the FBI, small fry of anti-DPRK body played vital role

North Korea yesterday described the February raid on its embassy in Madrid by a dissident group as a "grave terrorist attack" and urged an investigation into the perpetrators.

A group of armed men burst into Pyongyang's Spanish embassy last month and roughed up employees before fleeing with documents and computers.

The incident came just days before a high-stakes nuclear summit in Hanoi between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump that ultimately failed to reach an accord.

In its first official comment on the raid, North Korea suggested the possible involvement of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and called on Spanish authorities to bring the "terrorists and their wire-pullers to justice".

"A grave terrorist attack occurred on February 22, where an armed group assaulted the DPRK Embassy in Spain," a spokesman for the foreign ministry said in a statement carried by the official KCNA news agency, using the acronym for the North's official name.

Pyongyang urges probe into the perpetrators

The incident came days before second Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi



Thai anti-junta protesters shout slogans during a demonstration in Bangkok yesterday, disputing results of the country's first general election since a 2014 coup. A military-backed party and its main rival led by a self-exiled billionaire have both claimed the right to lead the government as inconsistent tallies released by the Election Commission have raised suspicion among voters. Full results will be ratified by May 9. PHOTO: AFP

TALIBAN ATTACK

Afghan VP escapes death

Taliban fighters on Saturday attacked a convoy carrying Afghanistan's vice president Abdul Rashid Dostum, in an assault that left the former warlord unscathed but killed one of his bodyguards, an official told AFP.

Enayatullah Babur, Dostum's former chief of staff, said the hour-long attack also left several others in the convoy wounded.

The attack occurred in the northern province of Balkh, where Dostum had held a rally earlier in the day.

On Twitter, a Taliban spokesman said the insurgent group had carried out the attack and claimed four of Dostum's bodyguards had been killed.

Dostum, a powerful ethnic Uzbek leader, is notorious in Afghanistan for extreme barbarities and for repeatedly switching loyalties over 40 years of conflict.



US migrant crisis deepens

Trump cuts aid to three central American countries, accuses them of having 'set up' migrant caravans

REUTERS, Washington

The US government cut aid to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras on Saturday after President Donald Trump blasted the Central American countries for sending migrants to the United States and threatened to shutter the US-Mexico border.

A surge of asylum seekers from the three countries has sought to enter the United States across the southern border in recent days. On Friday, Trump accused the nations of having "set up" migrant caravans and sent them north.

Trump said there was a "very good likelihood" he would close the border this week if Mexico did not stop immigrants from reaching the United States. Frequent crossers of the border, including workers and students, worried about the disruption to their lives the president's threatened shutdown could cause.

At a rally on the border in El Paso, Texas, Democratic presidential hopeful Beto O'Rourke denounced Trump's immigration policies as the politics of "fear and division."

A State Department spokesman said in a statement it was carrying out Trump's directive by ending aid programs to the three Central American nations, known as the Northern Triangle.

The department said it would "engage Congress in the process," an apparent acknowledgement that it will need lawmakers' approval to end funding that a Congressional aide estimated would total about \$700 million.

New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, called Trump's order a "reckless announcement" and urged Democrats and Republicans alike to reject it.

Trump told reporters at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida on Friday that the United States was paying the three countries "tremendous amounts of money," but received nothing in return.

The government of El Salvador has said it has tried to stem the flow of migrants.

The Honduran Foreign Ministry on Saturday called the US policies "contradictory" but stressed that its relationship with the United States was "solid, close and positive."

Trump threatens to shut Mexico border amid migration surge

Honduras calls the US policies 'contradictory' to the aid cut move



POLICING INTERNET CONTENT

Facebook boss urges active govt role

AFP, Washington

Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg called Saturday for governments to play a "more active role" in regulating the internet, urging more countries to adopt versions of sweeping European rules aimed at safeguarding user privacy.

Facebook and other internet giants have long resisted government intervention, but the leading social network has reversed course amid growing calls for regulation, in an apparent bid to help steer the debate.

"I believe we need a more active role for governments and regulators," Zuckerberg wrote in an op-ed published in The Washington Post.

"By updating the rules for the internet, we can preserve what's best about it -- the freedom for people to express themselves and for entrepreneurs to build new things -- while also protecting society from broader harms," he said.

Zuckerberg argues that new regulations are needed in four areas: harmful content, protection of elections, privacy and data portability.

Facebook has drawn fire over all four, from hate speech on the platform and the recent live streaming of attacks on mosques in New Zealand, to its use in foreign efforts to meddle in elections and concerns over its collection of personal user data.

NEWS IN brief

Global landmarks go dark for Earth Hour

AFP, New York

The UN headquarters in New York, the pyramids of Egypt and Rio's Christ the Redeemer statue were among top world monuments plunged into darkness for an hour Saturday to put the spotlight on climate change.

Organised by WWF, the 13th edition of Earth Hour saw millions of people across 180 countries turning off their lights at 8:30 pm to highlight energy use and the need for conservation.

Slovakia elects first female president

AFP, Bratislava

The election of Zuzana Caputova as Slovakia's first female president was greeted yesterday as a vote for change, with the anti-graft activist expected to provide a check on a government tarnished after last year's murder of a journalist. The 45-year-old environmental lawyer's clear victory Saturday over the ruling party's candidate was a blow to the populist-left Smer-SD.

China plant explosion kills seven people

AFP, Beijing

An explosion at a electronics component manufacturer in east China yesterday killed seven and injured five others, local authorities said. The blast happened when a container for storing scrap metal burst into flames outside a factory in an export processing zone in Kunshan, Jiangsu province, the local government said.

UKRAINE PRESIDENTIAL POLLS

Comedian tipped to win first round

REUTERS, Kiev

The top three contenders in Ukraine's presidential elections cast their vote yesterday in a first round which a comedian-who happens to play a fictional president in a popular TV series - is tipped to win.

Political newcomer Volodymyr Zelenskiy, 41, who is appealing to voters fed up with entrenched corruption, has consistently led opinion polls in a three-horse race against incumbent President Petro Poroshenko and former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

At stake is the leadership of a country on the front line of the West's standoff with Russia after the 2014 Maidan street protests ejected Poroshenko's Kremlin-friendly predecessor and Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula.

No candidate is expected to receive more than half the votes, meaning the election would go to a run-off on April 21. Out of a crowded field of 39 candidates, none of the likely winners wants to move Ukraine back into Russia's orbit.

Investors are watching to see if the next president will push reforms required to keep the country in an International Monetary Fund bailout programme that has supported Ukraine through war, sharp recession and a currency plunge.



Indian Muslim brides and grooms hold placards to spread the awareness about maximum voting for India's forthcoming general election, during a mass-wedding at Sarkhej Roza in Ahmedabad yesterday. India is holding a general election to be held over nearly six weeks starting on April 11, when hundreds of millions of voters will cast ballots in the world's biggest democracy. PHOTO: AFP

LOK SABHA POLLS

Rahul Gandhi to contest 2nd seat from Kerala

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's main opposition party Congress yesterday announced its President Rahul Gandhi would contest from a second constituency Wayanad in Kerala apart from his traditional bastion of Amethi in the key battleground state of Uttar Pradesh in the coming parliamentary elections.

Senior Congress leader from Kerala A K Antony said "Rahul ji has given his consent to contest from two seats, very happy to inform you that he will also contest from Wayanad in Kerala."

Rahul is at present a Lok Sabha member from Amethi from where his father Rajiv Gandhi had also contested. This is the first time that Rahul, 48, would be contesting from two parliamentary constituencies.

Rahul's decision to contest

Turks vote in test for Erdogan

Ruling AKP may lose control of Ankara; two party members killed

REUTERS, Ankara

Turks voted yesterday in local elections which President Tayyip Erdogan has described as a matter of survival for Turkey and which were tarnished by violence that left two party members dead in the country's southeast.

Erdogan, who has dominated Turkish politics for more than 16 years thanks in part to strong economic growth, has become the country's most popular, yet also most divisive, leader in modern history.

However, he could be dealt an electoral blow with polls indicating his ruling AK Party (AKP) may lose control of the capital Ankara, and even Istanbul, the country's largest city.

With the economy contracting following a currency crisis last year in which the lira lost more than 30 percent of its value, some voters appeared ready to punish Erdogan, who has ruled with an increasingly uncompromising stance.

"I was actually not going to vote today, but when I saw how much they (AKP) were flailing, I thought this might be time to land them a blow. Everyone is unhappy. Everyone is

struggling," said 47-year-old Hakan after voting in Ankara.

Voting started at 7:00 am in eastern Turkey and an hour later in the rest of the country. Polling stations closed at 4:00 pm in the east and 5:00 pm in the west.

Just over 57 million people are eligible to vote. A clear picture of the winners will probably emerge around midnight.

This week, as authorities again scrambled to shore up the lira, Erdogan cast the country's economic woes as resulting from attacks by the West, saying Turkey would overcome its troubles following yesterday's vote and adding he was "the boss" of the economy.

"The aim behind the increasing attacks towards our country ahead of the elections is to block the road of the big, strong Turkey," Erdogan said at a rally in Istanbul on Saturday.

Yesterday's elections, in which Turks vote for mayors and other local officials across the country, are the first since Erdogan assumed sweeping presidential powers last year and will be a reckoning for his government, which has come under fire for its economic policies and record on human rights.

The election was marred by violence in the southeast and Istanbul.



Arab leaders slam US decision over Golan

REUTERS, Tunis

Arab leaders yesterday papered over long-running regional rivalries to condemn a US move to recognise Israel's sovereignty over the Syrian Golan Heights and said stability in the Middle East hinged on creating a Palestinian state.

Arab leaders, attending a summit in the Tunisian capital, have been grappling with regional splits over Iran's influence in the Middle East, a bitter Gulf Arab dispute, international pressure over the war in Yemen and unrest in Algeria and Sudan.

But they have found a reason to unite against President Donald Trump's decision to sign a proclamation last week recognising the Golan Heights as part of Israel, which annexed the area in 1981 after capturing it from Syria in 1967.

It follows a US move less than four months ago to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital, a decision that also prompted Arab condemnation. Palestinians want East Jerusalem as the capital of a future state in the West Bank and Gaza.

Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz told Arab monarchs, presidents and prime ministers at the start of the summit that his country "absolutely rejects" any measures that affect Syria's sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

His remarks echoed those of senior Arab officials before yesterday's summit of the Arab League, which usually ends with a final declaration agreed by the 22 member states.

Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi said Arab leaders also needed to ensure the international community understood the importance of the Palestinian cause to Arab nations.

