

## WORLD PRESS FREEDOM INDEX

## Hatred towards journos growing

RSF says authoritarian, populist leaders to blame

Af, Paris

Hatred of journalists whipped up by populist and authoritarian leaders is degenerating into violence across the world, media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) warned yesterday.

Political leaders' hostility towards the media "has incited increasingly frequent acts of violence that have fuelled an unprecedented level of fear and danger for journalists," its annual World Press Freedom Index revealed.

"If the political debate slides towards a civil war-style atmosphere, where journalists are treated as scapegoats, then democracy is in great danger," RSF chief Christophe Deloire said.

Press freedom was in good health in less than quarter of the 180 countries covered by the index, with the United States sliding to 48th place.

The period since President Donald Trump's election in 2016 has been one of the "American journalism community's darkest moments", the report added.

India, the world's biggest democracy, slid two notches further into the red zone at 140th place.

Turkey, the world's biggest jailer of journalists, was among the worst countries. Russia continued to slide down the table to 149th place. There is little to cheer about in China too, which remains rooted to the bottom of the list with the fourth worst record.

The best performing countries continue to be in Scandinavia with Norway, Finland and Sweden taking the top three places.



CATHEDRAL INFERNO

## Donations row shatters French unity

Af, Paris

France's culture minister yesterday pleaded for an end to the controversy over the 850 million euros (950 million dollars) pledged to rebuild the landmark after it was gutted by fire on Monday evening.

The vast sums have drawn fire in a country where wealth inequality and the plight of the low-income households have been highlighted during five months of demonstrations by "yellow vest" protesters.

"This pointless debate consists of saying 'it's too much money for Notre-Dame even though there are needs elsewhere' -- of course there's a need for money for the social system, for health, the fight against climate change," Culture Minister Franck Riester told RMC radio. "But let's leave this extraordinary show of generosity to run its course," he pleaded.

He said Notre-Dame was "not only old stones. It's a part of our identity, it's our nation, European culture."

## Drop Pompeo from nuke talks

Demands North Korea; tests tactical weapon; Kim to meet Putin in Russia this month

## Agencies

North Korea yesterday said it no longer wanted to deal with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and said he should be replaced in talks by someone more mature, hours after it announced its first weapons test since nuclear talks broke down.

As the nuclear talks stalls, Moscow yesterday said North Korean leader Kim Jong Un will visit Russia in late April for his first meeting with President Vladimir Putin.

"Following an invitation from Vladimir Putin... Kim Jong Un will visit Russia in the second half of April," the Kremlin said in a statement on its website.

The North's official KCNA news agency quoted senior foreign ministry official Kwon Jong Gun as warning that no one could predict the situation on the Korean peninsula if the United States did not abandon the "root cause" that compelled North Korea to develop nuclear weapons.

The statement came shortly after North Korea announced that Kim Jong Un had overseen the testing of a new tactical guided weapon, which KCNA said has a "peculiar mode of guiding flight" and "a



powerful warhead."

It was the North's first weapon test since talks in Vietnam between Kim and US President Donald Trump in late February broke down over conflicting demands by North Korea for sanctions relief and by the United States for North Korea to abandon its nuclear program.

KCNA gave no details on the weapon that was tested on Wednesday but "tactical" implied a short-range weapon rather than the long-range ballistic missiles that have been seen as a threat to the United States.

KCNA quoted Kwon, who is in charge of US affairs, as saying the Vietnam summit, the second between the two leaders, showed that talks could go wrong "whenever Pompeo pokes his nose in."

"I am afraid that, if Pompeo engages in the talks again, the table will be lousy once again and the talks will become entangled," Kwon said.

"Therefore, even in the case of possible resumption of the dialogue with the United States, I wish our dialogue counterpart would be not Pompeo but other person who is more careful and mature in communicating with us."

A spokeswoman for the State Department said it was aware of the report about Pompeo and added: "The United States remains ready to engage North Korea in a constructive negotiation."

Kwon did not elaborate on why North Korea felt compelled to develop nuclear weapons, but North Korea has long spoken of the need to defend itself from what it sees as US aggression.

Kim said last week said the breakdown in talks risked reviving tensions and he gave a year-end deadline for the United States to change its attitude.



Police carry away a climate change activist of The Extinction Rebellion group protesting at Oxford Circus in London on Wednesday. London commuters faced further disruption yesterday as climate change protests continued to bring parts of the British capital to a standstill, leading to over 300 arrests. The Extinction Rebellion group was established last year in Britain by academics and has become one of the world's fastest-growing environmental movements.

## Death toll tops 200 in battle for Tripoli

Af, Tripoli

At least 205 people have been killed and more than 900 wounded in the battle for control of the Libyan capital Tripoli, the World Health Organization said yesterday.

Fighting broke out on April 4 when military strongman Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive to take Tripoli, seat of the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA).

Reporting at least 205 people dead and 913 wounded, WHO said it was keeping medical and surgical teams deployed at field hospitals near the front lines.

More than 25,000 people have been displaced by the clashes between GNA forces and Haftar's fighters south of Tripoli, including 4,500 over the previous 24 hours, the IOM said Wednesday.



## 29 German tourists die in Portugal bus crash

The Portuguese island of Madeira began three days of mourning yesterday after 29 German tourists died when their bus spun off the road and tumbled down a slope before crashing into a house. Local authorities said most of the dead were in their 40s and 50s. There were 11 men and 18 women among the victims and all of them were German. They were among the more than one million tourists who visit the Atlantic islands off the coast of Morocco each year. There were 50-odd tourists on the bus when the accident happened on Wednesday.

## Netanyahu formally named next Israeli PM



Israeli President Reuven Rivlin on Wednesday formally handed Benjamin Netanyahu his letter of appointment to start building a coalition government following last week's general election. In a televised ceremony, Rivlin told Netanyahu that in consultations with all parties elected to the incoming 120-seat parliament, "65 MPs recommended you." Rivlin had sounded out delegations from political parties on Monday and Tuesday. The results from the April 9 election put Netanyahu on course to become Israel's longest-serving prime minister later this year, surpassing the state's founding father David Ben-Gurion.



## Drive back Zionism: Iran President Rouhani

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani yesterday called on Middle East states to "drive back Zionism" in an Army Day tirade against the Islamic republic's arch-rival Israel. Speaking flanked by top generals before troops began their annual march-past, Rouhani also sought to reassure the region that the weaponry on display was for defensive purposes and not a threat. Rouhani called on Muslim nations to band together and "restore the historical right of the nation of Palestine."

PHOTO: AFP

## US ramps up pressure on Cuba over Venezuela

Russia to help Caracas, Havana to weather sanctions

Reute RS, Miami/Washington

The Trump administration on Wednesday imposed new sanctions and other punitive measures on Cuba and Venezuela, seeking to ratchet up US pressure on Havana to end its support for Venezuela's socialist president, Nicolas Maduro.

Speaking to a Cuban exile group in Miami, US national security adviser John Bolton said the United States was targeting Cuba's military and intelligence services, including a military-owned airline, for additional sanctions and was tightening travel and trade restrictions against the island.

Bolton's speech followed the State Department's announcement on Wednesday that it was lifting a long-standing ban against US citizens filing lawsuits against foreign companies that use properties seized by Cuba's Communist government since Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution.

President Donald Trump's decision, which the State Department said could

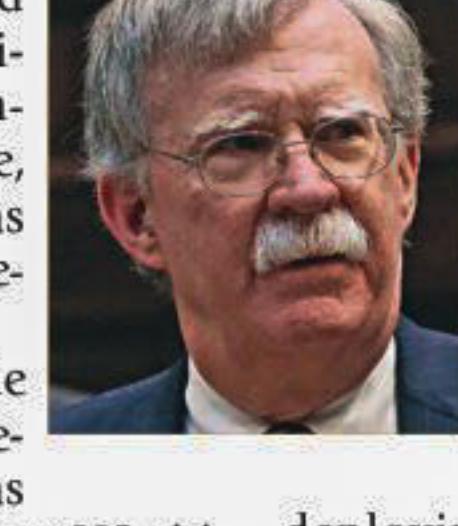
unleash hundreds of thousands of legal claims worth tens of billions of dollars, drew swift criticism from European and Canadian allies, whose companies have significant interests in Cuba.

Taking aim at Venezuela, Bolton said the United States was also imposing sanctions on the country's central bank to prohibit access to dollars by an institution he described as crucial to keeping Maduro in power. Bolton also announced new sanctions on Nicaragua.

While accusing Cuba of propping up Maduro with thousands of security force members in the country, Bolton also warned "all external actors, including Russia," against deploying military assets to support the Venezuelan leader.

Russia termed the sanctions illegal and said it plans to do everything to support its allies in Caracas and Havana, RIA news agency cited Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov as saying.

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## COMPILY IN NAZI KILLINGS

## Former SS guard, 92, charged

Af, Hamburg

German prosecutors yesterday charged a 92-year-old man with aiding and abetting the murder of 5,230 people as a guard at a Nazi concentration camp during World War II.

The allegations against the accused, identified by daily newspaper Die Welt as Bruno Dey from Hamburg, concern atrocities committed at the Stutthof concentration camp, near what was then Danzig, now Gdansk in Poland.

He worked between August 1944 and April 1945 at the camp, which ended up holding 110,000 prisoners, 65,000 of whom perished.

Despite his senior age, the accused will be tried by a juvenile court in Hamburg, because he was 17 when he first worked at Stutthof.

Prosecutors accuse him of having contributed to the implementation of the Nazis' order to kill as a "cog of the murder machinery".

According to Die Welt, Dey was questioned by Hamburg prosecutors last year and he does not deny his presence in the camp, which was part of the Nazis' vast network of concentration camps.

The trained baker reportedly insisted he was never a guard at the camp and only ended up in the SS-Totenkopfverbände (Death's Head Battalion), which ran the camp, because of a heart disease.

According to the report, Dey confirmed he had guard duties at the watchtowers and knew of the camp's gas chambers, where he saw SS prisoners being pushed inside.

The president became angry and lambasted the attorney general for his decision to recuse from the investigation, stating "How could you let this happen, Jeff?" the report said.

## 'End of my presidency'

Report reveals Trump's reaction to Mueller's appointment

Af, Washington

US President Donald Trump reacted with dismay when told a special counsel had been appointed to look into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, according to the Mueller report published Thursday.

Trump was informed on May 17, 2017 of the appointment of former FBI director Robert Mueller as special counsel by then-attorney general Jeff Sessions, the report said.

"When Sessions told the president that a special counsel had been appointed, the President slumped back in his chair and said, 'Oh my God. This is terrible. This is the end of my presidency. I'm f\*\*\*ed,'" the report said, citing notes from the meeting.

Trump then became angry at Sessions for recusing himself from the Russia investigation because of his prior contacts with Russian officials, it said.

"The president became angry and lambasted the attorney general for his decision to recuse from the investigation, stating 'How could you let this happen, Jeff?'" the report said.

In addition to Trump's reaction to Mueller's appointment, the report also provided details of the president's efforts on several occasions to have the special counsel removed.

But the mood was quite different yesterday after the Mueller report was released.

Trump, backed by his attorney general, declared himself fully vindicated in the investigation into Russian election meddling and

alleged collusion with his campaign -- even before the American people and lawmakers see the full probe report.

"Game Over," Trump tweeted, using a "Game of Thrones" style montage that pictured him standing in dramatic fog.

"NO COLLUSION. NO OBSTRUCTION. FOR THE HATERS AND THE RADICAL LEFT DEMOCRATS."

GAME OVER