

Assange begins UK fight against US extradition

AFP, London

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange yesterday told a court he would oppose extradition to the United States as the legal process began in London, a day after he was jailed for breaching his bail conditions in a former case.

He appeared via video link at Westminster Magistrates Court, where a lawyer for the US authorities briefly set out his alleged involvement in the release of classified documents.

"I do not wish to surrender myself for extradition for doing journalism that has won many awards and protected many people," Assange told the judge, who set the next hearing for May 30.

The Australian was jailed on Wednesday for 50 weeks for breaking his bail conditions in 2012, when he fled to Ecuador's London embassy to avoid extradition to Sweden.

He was accused of sexual assault and rape but strongly denied the claims, saying they were linked to



the whistleblowing work of WikiLeaks.

Assange feared they were a pretext to get him in custody and eventually transfer him to the United States to face prosecution.

He was dragged out of the embassy and arrested on April 11 after Quito gave him up. The Swedish claims had been dropped, but he was later that day convicted of skipping bail.

The 47-year-old was subsequently confronted with a warrant for extradition to the United States. The US indictment charges him with "conspiracy" for working with former US Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning to crack a password stored on Department of Defence computers in March 2010.



Indian school children hold placards at a tribute to Indian commandos organized at their school in Siliguri yesterday, a day after a deadly attack by Maoist rebels in Maharashtra state. A bomb attack by suspected Maoist rebels killed 15 Indian elite commandos and their driver on May 1, police said, in the latest incident of election-time violence in a decades-long insurgency.

PHOTO: AFP

South Sudan rivals meet to save deal

AFP, Addis Ababa

South Sudan's rival parties began two days of talks in Addis Ababa yesterday in a bid to salvage a peace deal, with just days left before a unity government is meant to be formed.

President Salva Kiir, rebel leader Riek Machar and a handful of other groups inked the peace deal in September 2018, the latest in a string of efforts to end a devastating conflict now in its sixth year.

But the parties have failed to resolve several crunch issues before a power-sharing government is to be installed on May 12.

Representatives of the parties gathered in Addis for a meeting called by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional bloc for East Africa, holding prayers before going into a closed session.

Government has insisted the meeting focus on how to push forward with the formation of the unity government.

Machar's camp, though, wants a six-month delay to resolve security and other issues that, it says, prevent him from making his return.

Machar is living in exile in Khartoum, having been hounded out of Juba in a hail of gunfire in 2016 when a prior deal collapsed. He is supposed to return as first vice president under the new deal.

Battles between members of Machar's Nuer community and Kiir's Dinka people were characterised by brutal violence on both sides, rape and UN warnings about "ethnic cleansing". The fighting has killed around 380,000 people and forced more than four million South Sudanese -- almost a third of the population -- to flee their homes.

DENIAL TO PROVIDE MUELLER'S FULL REPORT

Barr defies US Congress

Top Democrat threatens to hold US attorney general in contempt

REUTERS, Washington

A senior US congressional Democrat yesterday threatened to hold Attorney General William Barr in contempt of Congress for ignoring a subpoena to provide Special Counsel Robert Mueller's full report on the Russia inquiry, and accused President Donald Trump's administration of a growing attack on democracy.

Barr canceled his scheduled appearance on Thursday before the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee after clashing with Democratic Chairman Jerrold Nadler over the hearing's format. Barr testified on Wednesday to the Republican-led Senate Judiciary Committee, stoutly defending the Republican president in the wake of the release of Mueller's report on Russian interference in the 2016 election.

"We will have no choice but to move quickly to hold the attorney general in contempt if he stalls or fails to negotiate in good faith,"

Nadler said at the outset of a brief committee session held in place of Barr's testimony.

Nadler painted the confrontation with Barr in stark terms.

"Ladies and gentleman, the challenge we face is that the president of the United States wants desperately to



him together today we risk forever losing the power to stand up to any president in the future. The very system of government of the United States - the system of limited power, the system of not having a president as a dictator - is very much at stake," Nadler said.

Nadler's comments indicated that the Democrats, who control the House, prepared to escalate a showdown with Trump's administration, which has resisted their demands for documents and information on a wide range of topics, from Trump's taxes to his potential financial conflicts of interest.

The Justice Department said on Wednesday it would not comply with a subpoena issued by Nadler's committee seeking an unredacted copy of Mueller's report and evidence gathered in the 22-month investigation. Democrats have said they may issue a subpoena to try to force Barr to testify before their committee.

year that said Russia had carried out cyber attacks with impunity.

Thousands of people recently rallied in Russia against this and other bills that critics say aim to restrict information and communication online.

Separately, Putin in March signed controversial laws that allow courts to fine and briefly jail people for showing disrespect towards authorities, and block media for publishing "fake news".

The laws are part of an ongoing Kremlin clampdown on media and internet freedoms that has seen people jailed for sharing humorous memes.

Last week 10 international rights organisations called on Russia to scrap the internet bill.



Voters oust criminal MP

Voters in eastern England will elect a new member of parliament next month after ejecting the incumbent in the first move of its kind, it was announced yesterday. Fiona Onasanya lost her seat after voters in the city of Peterborough signed a recall petition triggered by her conviction for lying over a speeding offence. The 35-year-old was expelled from the main opposition Labour party after she was jailed for three months in January for perverting the course of justice. Onasanya had claimed someone else was driving her car when it was caught speeding in July last year. She had hoped to continue as an independent MP but 28 percent of eligible voters signed the petition, well over the 10 percent threshold required to oust her.

UK, in a first, declares climate emergency

Britain's opposition Labour Party on Wednesday called for "real action" after parliament became the first in the world to vote to declare a climate emergency. "Thanks to pressure from the Labour Party, the UK just became the first country to declare an environment and #climateemergency," the party said on its Twitter page. The vote was taken following 11 days of protests organised by climate activists Extinction Rebellion that brought several London sites to a standstill. Extinction Rebellion called the vote a "first step in the government telling the truth about the climate and ecological emergency."



Three tonnes of rubbish collected from Everest

A dedicated clean-up team sent to Mount Everest has collected three tonnes of garbage in its first two weeks, officials said Wednesday, in an ambitious plan to clean the world's highest rubbish dump. Decades of commercial mountaineering have left the pristine mountain polluted as an increasing number of big-spending climbers pay little attention to the ugly footprint they leave behind. Fluorescent tents, discarded climbing equipment, empty gas canisters and even human excrement litter the well-trodden route to the summit of the 8,848-metre (29,029-foot) peak. Eight members are now cleaning Camp 2 at 6,400 metres and teams of three will take turns to go up to Camp 4 at 7,950 metres, where they will spend 15 days litter-picking on the snowy slopes.

SOURCE: AFP

Fighting in Syria displaces 140,000

AFP, Beirut

Fighting in northwestern Syria has displaced nearly 140,000 people since February, the UN said on Wednesday, as the regime and its ally Russia have stepped up their bombardment.

"Since February, over 138,500 women, children and men have been displaced from northern Hama and southern Idlib," said David Swanson of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA.

"Between 1 and 28 April, its estimated more than 32,500 individuals have moved to different communities in Aleppo, Idlib and Hama governorates," he told AFP.

Idlib has been protected from a massive regime offensive by a September deal inked by Damascus ally Russia and rebel backer Turkey.

But the region of some three million people has come under increasing bombardment since former the jihadist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group took full control of it in January.

The escalation has killed more than 200 civilians since February, the UN said last week.

A new wave of shelling and airstrikes this week targeted schools and medical centres, according to Swanson.

"The UN is deeply concerned over the recent escalation," he said.

The attacks targeted parts of Hama and southern Idlib, including the village of al-Qasabiyah.



People stop and stand in silence on a street in central Jerusalem yesterday as sirens wailed across Israel for two minutes marking the annual day of remembrance for the six million Jewish victims of the Nazi genocide.

PHOTO: AFP

SACKING OF DEFENCE MINISTER OVER HUAWEI LEAK

UK PM May under fire

REUTERS, London

Theresa May hoped firing her defence secretary over a leak would put her latest government scandal to rest. But it seems only to have unleashed yet another political storm for the British prime minister, with members of her own party questioning her judgment and opponents demanding the police be called in.

May, who is clinging to her job despite failing to persuade parliament to accept her plans for Britain's exit from the EU, fired Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson on Wednesday.

She blamed him for a leak about Chinese telecoms firm Huawei from a meeting of the cabinet's National Security Council (NSC) which discusses intelligence and defence strategy.

Williamson has continued to deny responsibility, saying he had been judged by a "kangaroo court". May has said she considers the matter closed. Others have refused to let it rest.

"In what world is it acceptable that

the prime minister should be the arbiter of whether a politician she believes guilty of criminal conduct in office should face a criminal investigation?" said Tom Watson, Deputy Leader of the opposition Labour Party.

The leak, first reported in the Telegraph newspaper, said Britain

would allow Huawei a role in building parts of its 5G network, setting London at odds with Washington, which wants allies to ban the Chinese firm from the next generation of communications technology.

Williamson, previously in charge of party discipline, was an important

political ally for May as she struggled to steer Britain through Brexit, its biggest upheaval in decades, without a majority in parliament and no clear consensus about the best way to leave the EU.

The Huawei leak has crystallised doubts about May's ability to keep her ministers in check and govern effectively. Meetings of the NSC are attended by senior cabinet ministers, several of whom are top candidates to replace May. It was widely assumed that the leak was intended to give rivals a chance to portray themselves as stronger than May on security.

In firing Williamson on Wednesday, May said an investigation had left no other credible explanation for the leak except that Williamson was responsible.

Lawmakers, including Conservatives, called for all the evidence against Williamson to be made public.

Sky News reported that Williamson also wanted a criminal probe to clear his name.

"Congress should investigate the lobbying roles of Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Raytheon who took the lion's share of these contracts," Fihn said in a statement.

Missile contracts surge as US exits arms treaty

AFP, Geneva

Washington has signed more than \$1 billion in new missile contracts in the three months since it announced plans to withdraw from a key Cold War-era arms treaty, campaigners said yesterday.

"The withdrawal from the INF Treaty has fired the starting pistol on a new Cold War," warned Beatrice Fihn, who heads the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN).

US President Donald Trump announced last October that his country would leave the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement concluded between the US and the former Soviet Union in 1987.

Washington, which accused Russia of violating the treaty through a new missile system, began the official process of withdrawing from the pact in February.

Russian President Vladimir Putin responded by saying Moscow would also leave the INF treaty, which is considered the cornerstone of global arms control.

The report detailed over \$1.1 billion in new contracts with six mainly US companies.

"Congress should investigate the lobbying roles of Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Raytheon who took the lion's share of these contracts," Fihn said in a statement.

At a global level, the report found that governments are currently contracting at least \$116 billion (102 billion euros) to private companies in France, India, Italy, the Netherlands, Britain and the US for the production, development and stockpiling of nuclear weapons.

Putin signs controversial internet law

AFP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday signed into law a "sovereign internet" bill which will allow Russian authorities to isolate the country's internet, a move decried by rights groups.

Russian lawmakers insist the new law is necessary to ensure the security of Russia's online networks but critics say the vaguely worded bill gives new censorship powers to government monitors.

The text of the law was published Wednesday but it will not come into effect until November.

The measures include creating technology to monitor internet routing and to steer Russian internet traffic away from foreign servers, ostensibly to prevent a foreign country from shutting it down.

The authors of the initiative say Russia must ensure the security of its networks after US President Donald Trump unveiled a new American cybersecurity strategy last