

Esper in surprise
Saudi Arabia visit

AFP, Riyadh

US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper arrived Monday in Saudi Arabia, state television said. On October 11, the Pentagon said it was deploying new US troops to Saudi Arabia after Riyadh asked for reinforcements following a mid-September drone and missile attack on Saudi oil plants, which Washington blames on Iran.

55 elephants die
in Zimbabwe

AFP, Harare

At least 55 elephants have died in a month in Zimbabwe due to a lack of food and water, its wildlife agency said Monday, as the country faces one of the worst droughts in its history. Africa's elephant numbers have dropped from around 415,000 to 111,000 over the past decade, mainly due to poaching for ivory, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature. But Zimbabwe is struggling with overpopulation. There are more than 50,000 elephants in the park which can accommodate 15,000.

N Ireland liberalises
restrictive laws

AFP, Belfast

Same-sex marriage and abortion laws in Northern Ireland were liberalised on Monday in a landmark shift for the province aimed at bringing it into line with mainland Britain. The relaxation of the UK-ruled territory's restrictive laws on the issues occurred at midnight (2300 GMT), after a deadline elapsed for local lawmakers to stop the changes imposed by MPs in Westminster in July. Abortion and same-sex marriage are legal in England, Wales and Scotland.



Liberal Leader and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau appears on stage with his wife Sophie Grégoire Trudeau to deliver his victory speech at his election night headquarters on Monday in Montreal, Canada. Inset, Liberal party supporters react to the polls results.

PHOTO: AFP

End of Syria 'truce' looms

Erdogan threatens to restart offensive against Kurdish forces, holds talks with Putin; Assad vows support for Kurds

AFP, sochi

Russian President Vladimir Putin held talks with Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday as the Turkish leader threatened to restart Ankara's military offensive against Kurdish forces in Syria.

The two leaders met in southern Russia with just hours to go before a deadline for the withdrawal of Kurdish fighters from parts of Syria under a US-brokered deal.

Putin -- who has emerged as the key powerbroker in Syria -- said he hoped to find a way to deal with the "very severe" situation in the country's north.

Sitting down with Erdogan in Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi, Putin said he believed that good ties between the two countries "will let us find an answer to even the most difficult questions".

Russia and Turkey have emerged as the main foreign players in Syria's conflict, with Moscow's position strengthened after US President Donald Trump announced this month he would be withdrawing American forces from the north of the country.

The announcement cleared the way for Turkey to launch a cross-border offensive on October 9 against the Kurdish YPG militia, viewed by Ankara as "terrorists" linked to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The assault sparked Western outrage and accusations of betrayal from the Kurds, whose frontline fighters were crucial in the fight against the Islamic State group in Syria.

Speaking to reporters at Ankara airport on his way to Sochi, Erdogan said he and Putin would discuss "steps to end (Kurdish fighters') presence in regime-held areas" of Syria.

Turkey says that deadline was set to expire at 1900 GMT yesterday and Erdogan warned Ankara would not hesitate to resume its military assault.

Meanwhile, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad yesterday said the regime would support Kurdish fighters in the northeast of the war-torn country against Turkish soldiers and their Syrian proxies.

"We are prepared to support any group carrying out popular resistance against the Turkish aggression," he said in a video shared by the presidency.



FRESH SIGNS OF RUSSIA MEDDLING

Facebook steps up security

AFP, San Francisco

Facebook said Monday it was tightening its security for the 2020 US elections, amid signs of fresh activity from Russia attacking Democratic presidential candidates, including Joe Biden.

The leading social network said it was taking down more accounts for "inauthentic" activity and stepping up scrutiny of "state controlled" media seeking to manipulate American voters.

As Facebook unveiled its latest steps, an analysis of activity on the social platform released by the analytics firm Graphika showed accounts originating from Russia taking aim at US political candidates and issues.

"Multiple accounts praised (Democratic hopeful) Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump," the Graphika report said.

"Accounts from both sides of the political spectrum attacked Joe Biden; some also attacked Kamala Harris and Elizabeth Warren. Almost half the accounts claimed to be based in 'swing states,' especially Florida."

The report said these accounts reused messages from the Internet Research Agency which targeted US audiences in the 2016 presidential election and that "Facebook's own analysis ... showed some links to the IRA."

One of the new steps announced by Facebook calls for labeling of messages coming from state-controlled media outlets, starting next month.



Lebanese protesters scuffle with soldiers as they try to block a main road on the eastern outskirts of the capital Beirut yesterday. Protesters gathered for a sixth consecutive day yesterday, keeping the country on lockdown to demand new leaders despite the government's adoption of an emergency economic rescue plan.

PHOTO: AFP

Violence in HK 'unacceptable'

Says China FM Wang Yi

AFP, PARIS

China's foreign minister has denounced months of pro-democracy unrest in Hong Kong as "violence pure and simple", accusing foreign forces and the international media of fuelling the political crisis.

The comments, in an exclusive interview with AFP, were the most direct condemnation from a top Chinese official of the protests that erupted five months ago and have seen millions of people take to the streets calling for greater democracy.

"What is happening in Hong Kong today are in no way peaceful protests," Wang Yi said during the interview with AFP during a trip to Paris on Monday.

"It's violence pure and simple. These are unacceptable acts in any country," he added.

Hong Kong has been riven by seething protests for the past 20 weeks, with violence spiralling on both sides of the ideological divide.

While huge crowds have regularly marched peacefully, clashes have repeatedly broken out between smaller groups of hardcore protesters and riot police.

China has run Hong Kong under a special "one country, two systems" model, which allows the city liberties not seen on the mainland, since the financial hub's handover from the British in 1997. But public anger has been building for years over fears that Beijing has begun eroding those freedoms, especially since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012.

This summer's protests were initially sparked by opposition to a now-scrapped proposal to allow extraditions of criminal suspects to mainland China. They quickly snowballed into a wider anti-government movement after Beijing and local leaders in Hong Kong took a hard line.

Netanyahu suffers defeat in failing to form Israeli govt

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has suffered a bitter defeat in his bid to hang on as premier by failing to form a new government, but his opponent faced similar difficulties yesterday.

Ex-military chief Benny Gantz is now expected to be given the chance to try to negotiate a coalition by President Reuven Rivlin, but a deadlock following September 17 polls remains and yet another election cannot be ruled out.

It would be the third election within a year after Netanyahu also failed to form a coalition after April polls.

Netanyahu's decision to inform Rivlin on Monday night that he has been unable to form a government by no means signalled the end of his tenure as Israel's longest-serving prime minister.

He remains premier as long as no new government is formed, and a number of scenarios exist that could see him retain his post even as he faces the possibility of



corruption charges in the weeks ahead.

One of the few things clear in Israel's post-electoral morass was that Netanyahu, who celebrated his 70th birthday on Monday, was not giving up.

But his announcement was a landmark moment in Israeli politics since Netanyahu has been given the president's mandate to form a government after every election since 2009.

When announcing his decision with a social media video, Netanyahu sought to blame Gantz since the ex-military chief has refused to negotiate on the premier's preferred terms.

Rivlin said Monday night he intends to ask Gantz to try to form a government, but he can take up to three days to hear out the parties elected to parliament before officially tasking him with doing so.

The deadlock following September 17 polls will likely require major concessions or a decision by members of Netanyahu's right-wing Likud to abandon him -- and both of those options appear a long way off for now.

Chile orders new curfew as violent protests rage

Chile was under curfew for the third night in a row Monday as violent protests and looting that left 12 people dead raged on into the working week. Protests originally against a hike in metro fares have turned into anger at the military and President Sebastian Pinera, who on Monday night proposed a "social agreement" to meet the demands of demonstrators. Army general Javier Iturriaga, charged with security in the capital, said the 8:00 pm to 6:00 am curfew was "necessary" as Santiago and several other cities were once again gripped by violence.

Taliban attack kills 15 cops in Afghanistan

The Taliban stormed a checkpoint in northern Afghanistan killing at least 15 policemen in the latest attack by the armed group, an official said yesterday. The multi-pronged attack on the checkpoint in the Ali Abad district of northern Kunduz province began late on Monday and set off an hours-long shootout, according to Ghulam Rabani Rabani, a provincial council member. The attack came as Afghan troops have been battling the Taliban for the past few weeks in Kunduz's Dashti Archi and Imam Sahib districts, Rabani added. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for the checkpoint attack.

Everest garbage given a new lease of life in Nepal



In homes across the Nepali capital upcycled items, from pots to lamps, crafted from Everest waste products are slowly making their way as authorities and businesses look for fresh ways to tackle the damage caused by decades of commercial mountaineering. Tonnes of trash litter the mountain, which has been dubbed the "highest dumpster in the world". After heavy criticism, Nepal's government and mountaineering groups this year organised a six-week clean-up. Scaling almost 8,000 metres from base camp to the closest camp to the summit, a 14-strong team retrieved more than 10 tonnes of trash that was flown or driven to recycling centres in Kathmandu. Workers there manually sorted the materials -- each type following a different path to rebirth: Iron was sent to rod manufacturing firms, shredded aluminium cans to utensil makers, and discarded bottles re-fashioned into household items.

SOURCE: AFP

'We speak our minds'

Malaysia PM Mahathir stands by Kashmir comments despite India palm oil boycott

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad yesterday said he would not retract his criticism of New Delhi's actions in the disputed region of Kashmir even though Indian traders have urged a boycott of Malaysian palm oil.

The impasse could exacerbate what Mahathir described as a trade war between the world's second biggest producer and exporter of the commodity and its biggest buyer so far this year.

India's top vegetable oil trade body on Monday asked its members to stop buying Malaysian palm oil after Mahathir said at the UN General Assembly last month that India had "invaded and occupied" Kashmir, a disputed Muslim-majority region also claimed by Pakistan.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government removed the long-standing autonomy of India's portion of the Kashmir valley on Aug. 5, calling it an internal matter and criticising countries that have spoken out against the move.



"We speak our minds, and we don't retract or change," Mahathir told reporters outside parliament. "What we are saying is we should all abide by resolutions of the (United Nations). Otherwise, what is the use of the UN?"

The UN Security Council adopted several resolutions in 1948 and in the 1950s on the dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, including one which says a plebiscite should be held to determine the future of the region.

Mahathir said Malaysia would study the impact of the boycott called by the Mumbai-based Solvent Extractors' Association of India and look at ways to address the issue.

New Delhi has so far refused to comment on the trade spat.

Malaysia's exports to India were worth \$10.8 billion in the fiscal year through March 31, while imports totalled \$6.4 billion, according to Indian government data.

India was Malaysia's third-largest export destination in 2018 for palm oil and palm-based products worth 6.84 billion ringgit (\$1.63 billion).

Impeachment is 'lynching'

Claims Trump, says he is too famous to 'need promotion'

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump yesterday likened the impeachment investigation against him to a "lynching," a racially charged word from the darkest days of America's slavery legacy.

There was an immediate backlash to Trump's tweet in which he claimed that impeachment was unfair and stripping him of his legal rights.

"All Republicans must remember what they are witnessing here -- a lynching. But we will WIN!," Trump tweeted.

Kristen Clarke, president of the National Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, said she was "sickened to see Trump's gross misappropriation of this term today."

Clarke said that 4,743 people were lynched in the United States between 1882 and 1968, of which 3,446 were African Americans.

Trump is being investigated for possible impeachment in the Democratic-led House of Representatives over his alleged abuse of office. He is counting on the Republican-

dominated Senate to acquit him if the House does vote to impeach.

Trump on Monday said his much-criticized attempt to stage the G7 at one of his golf courses was not intended to promote his business brand, arguing he's too famous to "need promotion."

"They say, 'Oh, you get promotion.' You don't think I get enough promotion? I get more promotion than any human being that's ever lived," Trump said at a meeting of his cabinet in the White House. "I don't need promotion."

His critics accuse him of corruption over his proposal to arrange the summit at his resort. But Trump lashed out at accusations of corruption.

He noted that he gives away his presidential salary of about \$450,000 and insisted that being president has personally cost him between \$2-\$5 billion in lost business revenues -- a calculation that has not been independently tested.

"I don't care. If you're rich, it doesn't matter," Trump said. "I'm doing this for the country."