

NEWSIN  
brief

Esper visits Iraq  
amid troops row

AFP, Baghdad

Pentagon chief Mark Esper arrived in Baghdad for talks on Wednesday as Washington pulled out its remaining troops from northern Syria through Iraq. Esper was due to meet his Iraqi counterpart Najah al-Shammari to address concerns among some in the government that the troops might stay in Iraq. The United States currently has 5,200 troops in Iraq, part of a US-led international coalition against IS.

Widodo taps archrival  
for defense minister

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia's new cabinet were introduced at an informal presentation on the palace steps yesterday, with President Joko Widodo tapping his election arch-rival -- a former general with a chequered rights record -- as defence minister. Widodo, popularly known as Jokowi, beat Prabowo Subianto in April elections to secure another term as president of the world's third-biggest democracy.

Kais Saied sworn in  
as Tunisia president

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia's new President Kais Saied took the oath of office yesterday after his surprise election victory over champions of the political establishment. Saied, a conservative academic with no previous political experience who won the overwhelming support of younger voters in an October 13 runoff, was sworn in before members of the constituent assembly and other top state bodies. The poll followed the death in July of Beji Caid Essebsi, Tunisia's first president freely elected by universal suffrage.



Demonstrators seek shelter behind a makeshift barrier during clashes with riot police on the fifth straight day of street violence which erupted over a now suspended hike in metro ticket prices, in Santiago, Chile, on Tuesday. Chile braced for more protests and a general strike by state workers yesterday, despite President Sebastian Pinera's pleas for forgiveness and announcement of ambitious reforms to quell unrest that has rocked the country and led to at least 15 deaths.

PHOTO:  
AFP

TRUMP IMPEACHMENT PROBE

Testimony adds fuel to fire

Top US Diplomat in Ukraine says Trump used aid to demand probe on Bidens; W House denounces 'smear campaign'

AFP, Washington

The top US diplomat in Ukraine poured fuel on Donald Trump's impeachment probe Tuesday with a detailed account of how the president pushed Kiev to discredit one of his main political rivals, withholding US military aid to exert pressure.

Democrats said the congressional testimony by Bill Taylor was a stunning confirmation of their allegations that Trump abused his office by seeking foreign help to hurt Democratic candidate Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election.

"It's all there. What's there left for me to say when you have such a clear and detailed statement?" said House Democrat Tom Malinowski, a former diplomat.

The White House rejected what it called a "coordinated smear campaign from far-left lawmakers and radical unelected bureaucrats."



Bill Taylor

In a 15-page opening statement quickly leaked to US media, Taylor recounted in deep detail how Ukraine's new president, Volodymyr Zelensky, came under sustained pressure after taking office.

Taylor said he was told Trump wanted Zelensky "to state publicly" that he would investigate Biden and his son Hunter for what he said was corruption in the ex-Soviet republic.

He said that the US ambassador to the European Union, Gordon Sondland, told him that "everything" was

dependent on such an announcement, including security assistance.

Another carrot being dangled, Taylor said, was a proposed summit between Zelensky and Trump.

A new CNN/SSRS poll on Tuesday showed support for Trump's removal from office is now 50 percent to 43 against. However, 87 percent of Democrats are pro-impeachment, compared to just six percent of Republicans.

Trump admits to asking Ukraine's government to probe what he says is corruption related to Biden. However, he denies Democrats' allegation that he tried to strong-arm the Ukrainians by linking the delivery of US military aid to his request for an investigation.

Taylor is a military veteran and career diplomat who served as US ambassador to Ukraine from 2006 to 2009, and is now charge d'affaires following the ouster of ambassador Marie Yovanovitch this year.

US voices Kashmir concern as lawmakers raise tone on India

AFP, Washington

The United States on Tuesday renewed calls on India to ease its clampdown in Kashmir as several lawmakers voiced anger at actions by a country that usually enjoys robust US support.

Senior US officials also criticized Pakistan's record during a congressional hearing on human rights in South Asia, but nearly all lawmakers focused questions on India, which rescinded Kashmir's decades-old autonomous status in August.

Alice Wells, the assistant secretary of state for South Asia, said the US "remains concerned" about the impact of India's actions in the Kashmir Valley.

She told told a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee that the United States was also concerned about the detention of residents including mainstream political leaders and about impediments to both local and foreign media coverage.

Representative Ilhan Omar charged that

Kashmir is part of a pattern against Islam by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party.

She pointed to reports of detention camps being built in the northeastern state of Assam, which borders Muslim-majority Bangladesh. Nearly two million people failed to prove their Indian citizenship

in a controversial registration drive, with Modi's government vowing that "illegal" immigrants cannot stay.

"This is how the Rohingya genocide started," Omar said, referring to the bloody campaign by Myanmar against the mostly Muslim people.

Wells said US shared concerns but noted that the Assam citizenship registration was ordered by a court and that an appeals process was in place.

Representative Brad Sherman, who heads the House subcommittee on Asia, shot back: "A human rights abuse doesn't cease to be a human rights abuse just because it's being done pursuant to the law or court rulings of the country committing the abuse."



BREXIT CHAOS

WHAT'S NEXT?

Britain's three-year Brexit saga took another dramatic twist on Tuesday, with the outcome still tortuously tough to predict. In a landmark vote, MPs finally backed an EU divorce deal -- only then to reject Prime Minister Boris Johnson's rushed timetable to turn it into law ahead of the country's scheduled October 31 departure date. The decision makes that deadline almost impossible to meet, but it does not kill the deal -- the first that has got a majority in parliament. Here are the possible scenarios ahead:

**TECHNICAL EXTENSION?:** Legislation passed last month stated that unless MPs backed a divorce deal by October 19, Johnson must write to EU leaders asking for Brexit to be postponed for three months to January 31, 2020. The prime minister reluctantly sent the letter late on Saturday, and EU leaders are still considering their response. European Council President Donald Tusk said that he was now recommending they accept the request. Although Johnson insisted Britain should still leave on October 31, he may have little choice but to accept a short "technical" delay to allow for a new parliamentary timetable to pass the legislation in the coming weeks.



**LONGER DELAY:** Despite Johnson being adamant he will not delay Brexit for months, the EU may also offer Britain the option of a longer extension -- which opposition MPs argue the premier would be compelled by law to accept. European leaders could claim a longer delay is necessary to give the country enough time to resolve the issue. Legislation of this type would normally take months and must be approved again by the House of Commons as well as by the upper House of Lords. There is a real risk MPs could try to hijack its passage and attach various amendments, for example to make approval subject to negotiating a future customs union with the bloc or even to hold a new referendum. A longer delay could also allow for a general election.

**ANOTHER ELECTION?:** Johnson warned MPs ahead of the votes on Tuesday that he would pull his Brexit deal legislation and try to hold a general election if they rejected his timetable -- although he did not repeat the threat afterwards. Riding high in the polls, he has already unsuccessfully tried twice to get an early election to win back a majority in parliament, and seemed buoyed by having secured MPs' initial approval for his new Brexit deal. But he needs the support of the main opposition Labour Party for an election to be called and it has so far resisted. Labour says it would back an election when the threat of a "no deal" Brexit is off the table.

**A SECOND REFERENDUM?:** Labour says any deal should be subject to a new referendum, and has promised to call one if it takes office. Some MPs may try to force the issue during the passage of the Brexit deal legislation, although it is far from clear that they have the numbers to succeed.

SOURCE: AFP

US 'betrayed' Syrian Kurds

Says Moscow; Trump hails deal struck between Russia and Turkey

AFP, Moscow

The Kremlin yesterday accused Washington of betraying the Kurds by withdrawing its forces from northern Syria and leaving allies alone in the face of a Turkish offensive.

To international surprise, US President Donald Trump announced in early October that American forces would withdraw from Syria, paving the way for Turkey to push into the border area against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia it considers "terrorists".

"The US were the closest allies for the Kurds for several years. In the end the US abandoned the Kurds, effectively betraying them," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Russian news agencies.

"They prefer to leave the Kurds at the

Russian forces head for Syrian-Turkish border in blow to Kurds

Erdogan vows 'necessary steps' if US, Russian promises not kept



border and practically force them to fight the Turks," he said.

Meanwhile, Russian forces in Syria yesterday headed for the border with Turkey to ensure Kurdish fighters pull back after a deal between Moscow and Ankara wrested control of the Kurds' entire heartland.

US President Donald Trump called the agreement a "big success".

The deal -- hailed as "historic" by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan -- quashes the Kurdish minority's dreams of a semi-autonomous region and makes way for the absorption of their de facto army into the regime's military.

Erdogan vowed that Turkey would take "the necessary steps" if promises to push Kurdish fighters away from the border were not kept.

WOMEN'S QUALITY OF LIFE

Norway at top, Yemen at bottom of rankings

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, New York

Norway and Switzerland are the best countries to be a woman and Yemen and Afghanistan the worst, said research on Tuesday which found the state of women's rights is not "all doom and gloom" around the world.

While life for women has improved in some 60 countries, it has deteriorated in Yemen and other war-torn nations, research organizations Georgetown University's Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo concluded.

The researchers looked at 167 countries since 2017 when the first Women, Peace and Security Index was compiled, weighing variables such as access to bank accounts, jobs and security.

Rounding out the top of the list were Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Austria, United Kingdom, Luxembourg, Sweden and Netherlands tied for ninth place, followed by Canada.

At the bottom were Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, South Sudan, Iraq, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Mali and Libya.

Sri Lanka parliament blames president

AFP, Colombo

A Sri Lankan parliamentary report yesterday accused President Maithripala Sirisena of "actively undermining" national security and of failing to prevent the Easter Sunday bombings earlier this year that killed 269 people.

A cross-party committee which probed alleged intelligence lapses related to the suicide bombings said Sirisena had not given proper guidance or support to the country's security establishment and police.

It also found fault with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and deputy defence minister Ruwan Wijewardene, who it said had "failed in their duties".

Some 269 people were killed on April 21 in a series of suicide attacks on hotels and churches blamed on a local jihadi group.

"The PSC observes that the president failed on numerous occasions to give leadership and also actively undermined government (security and intelligence) systems," the 1,649-page report said.

The parliamentary select committee has no powers to indict, but its findings can form the basis of criminal prosecutions or civil action against those identified as being responsible for serious lapses.

The inquiry said Sirisena -- who is also the minister of defence -- had excluded the police chief from crucial national security council meetings.

The report added that the country's spy agency -- the State Intelligence Service (SIS) which falls directly under Sirisena's remit -- had received advance information on the attacks, but failed to act on it.

EASTER ATTACK LAPSES



Big firm products top worst plastic litter list: report

Tens of thousands of pieces of plastic littering the planet come from just a handful of multinational corporations, an environmental pressure group said yesterday. Coca-Cola, Nestle and PepsiCo were named by Break Free from Plastics, a global coalition of individuals and environmental organisations, who warned the companies largely avoid cleanup responsibility. The coalition's volunteers collected nearly half a million pieces of plastic waste during a coordinated "World Clean Up Day" in 51 countries a month ago, of which 43 percent were marked with a clear consumer brand. For the second year in a row, Coca-Cola came out on top. Others in the top ten polluters include Mondelez International, Unilever, Mars, P&G, Colgate-Palmolive, Philip Morris, and Perfetti Van Mille, the report added.

Beijing to host 'intra-Afghan' conference: Taliban

China has invited a Taliban delegation to attend an "intra-Afghan" conference in Beijing, a militant spokesman said yesterday, after a prospective deal between the United States and the insurgents collapsed last month. Suhail Shaheen, a Taliban political spokesman, said on Twitter that Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the group's co-founder, had met with Chinese diplomats in Doha, where the militants have a political office. "Both sides discussed the upcoming intra-Afghan conference in Beijing and issues related to the solution of Afghan problem," Shaheen wrote. He later told AFP the conference would take place October 29-30. Talks between the US and the Taliban fell apart last month.

11m North Koreans undernourished: UN

Food insecurity in North Korea is at "an alarming level," with nearly half the population of 11 million people undernourished, the United Nations independent investigator on human rights in the country said on Tuesday. Tomas Ojea Quintana told the UN General Assembly's human rights committee that 140,000 children are estimated to be suffering from "undernutrition," including 30,000 who "face an increased risk of death." More broadly, Quintana said he had seen no improvement in North Korea's human rights situation during his three years as special rapporteur.

SOURCE: AFP