

US completes pullback from northeast Syria

Reuters, Washington

The United States has completed its military pullback in northeastern Syria, settling into a more stable posture of about 600 troops in the rest of the country after repositioning and reducing forces, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said.

Esper's remarks in an interview with Reuters could signal the end of a period of turbulence and uncertainty surrounding the US military presence in Syria after President Donald Trump's initial withdrawal order in October.

Since then, troop levels in Syria have fallen about 40 percent from around 1,000.

Esper stressed he retained the ability to move in and out smaller numbers of forces as needed into Syria. But he suggested the number of troops will fluctuate around the 600-level for the foreseeable future.

"It will be relatively static around that number. But if we see things happen ... I can dial up a



little bit," Esper said late on Wednesday during a flight back from the Nato summit on the outskirts of London.

Esper also didn't rule out being able to reduce US troop levels in Syria further if European allies contributed to the Syria mission.

The US military says it is focused on preventing a resurgence of Islamic State in Syria. Trump, in London, said he wanted remaining U.S. forces to ensure Syria's oil reserves don't fall back into the militant group's hands.

"We kept the oil. And the oil is what fueled ISIS," Trump said, using an acronym for Islamic State.

Beijing brushes off Nato fears of China 'challenges'

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday denied posing a threat to other countries, insisting it is a "peaceful power" after Nato members signed a statement acknowledging the "challenges" posed by Beijing for the first time.

Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Tuesday that the alliance had to jointly tackle China's growing military capabilities, which include missiles that could reach Europe and the United States.

The alliance said in a declaration Wednesday it recognised that "China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges" after a summit in London of leaders from Nato's 29 member states.

Foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying yesterday said that "the growth of China's power is the growth of peaceful power" and that "there is not necessarily a connection between the threat and the size of a country".

Speaking at a regular press conference, she said "the largest threat facing the world today is unilateralism and bullying actions," making a thinly veiled reference to the US.

"Even American allies have been harmed," she added.

The two-day summit in London was overshadowed by bad blood with Donald Trump branding Canada's prime minister "two-faced" after a group of allied leaders were caught on video at a Buckingham Palace reception mocking the US president's rambling press appearances.

Nato's summit declaration also stressed the need for "secure and resilient" communications, particularly 5G infrastructure.

This points to growing anxiety in Nato and the West at large about the role of Chinese companies, particularly Huawei, in building the networks needed for the next generation of mobile communications.

Global warming causing birds to shrink

Independent.co.uk

Birds are getting smaller, according to an analysis of migratory birds that died after colliding into buildings in Chicago and were collected as specimens for the Field Museum of Natural History.

David Willard, a Field Museum ornithologist, has measured the Windy City's dead birds since 1978. Data from his calipers and scales reveal decades-long trends in bird bodies: Their legs, on average, are growing shorter. They have lost weight. Their wings are getting slightly longer.

These changes are present in nearly all of the species he measured, according to a study of 70,716 bird specimens from almost 40 years published in the journal *Ecology Letters*.

Morphing birds, Willard and his colleagues say, reflect a changing climate.

"Warming temperatures seem to be

having a pretty consistent and almost universal effect on a large number of different species, regardless of other aspects of their biology," said study author Benjamin Winger, who studies the evolution and ecology of birds at the University of Michigan.

From 1978 to 2016, birds on average lost 2.6 per cent of their mass and their legs shortened by 2.4 per cent. Their wings, meanwhile, lengthened by 1.3 per cent.

"The changes that are being documented are not something you could see with your eye," Willard said. But that they appear in such a large sample, and one involving diverse bird species, indicates the trends are real and widespread, he said.

Winger said it was unclear whether small reductions harm the birds. "We don't really know what the biological significance is, of this difference," he said.

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People take part in a demonstration to protest against the pension overhauls, in Paris, yesterday, as part of a national general strike.

14,000 MORE US TROOPS TO MIDEAST Pentagon denies W Post report

Agencies

The Pentagon has denied a report that the United States was weighing sending up to 14,000 more troops to the Middle East in the face of a perceived threat from Iran.

The Wall Street Journal reported that the possible deployment would include "dozens" more ships and double the number of troops added to the US force in the region since the beginning of this year, citing unnamed US officials.

The paper said President Donald Trump could make a decision on the troop boost as early as this month.

But the Pentagon disputed the accuracy of the report.

"To be clear, the reporting is wrong. The US is not considering sending 14,000 additional troops to the Middle East," spokeswoman Alyssa Farah tweeted.

The region has seen a series of attacks on shipping vessels and a drone and missile attack on Saudi oil installations in September blamed on Iran.

Meanwhile, a senior Pentagon official said on Wednesday there were indications that Iran could potentially carry out aggressive actions in the future, amid simmering tensions between Tehran and Washington.

"We also continue to see indications, and for obvious reasons I won't go into the details, that potential

US official sees threat of Iranian 'aggression' in the region

Netanyahu presses Pompeo for more pressure on 'trotter' Iran

Iranian aggression could occur," John Rood, the Pentagon's No. 3 official, told reporters.

Two US officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said there was intelligence over the past month indicating that Iran was moving forces and weapons in the region.

Rood's statement came after a

US Navy warship seized advanced missile parts believed to be linked to Iran from a boat it had stopped in the Arabian Sea, US officials said on Wednesday.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Portugal on Wednesday and called for increased pressure on the "trotter" Iranian government.

It also follows a call by Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to pile up more pressure on Iran.

Washington has already ratcheted up its military presence in the Gulf. In mid-November the US aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln sailed through the Strait of Hormuz in a show of force aimed at reassuring allies worried about the Iran threat.

In October Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced that two fighter squadrons and additional missile defense batteries were being sent to Saudi Arabia, for a total of about 3,000 new troops.

58 migrants dead after boat sinks off Mauritania

AFP, Nouakchott

At least 58 migrants trying to reach Europe from West Africa died as their makeshift boat capsized off the coast of Mauritania, but dozens of survivors managed to swim to shore.

Wednesday's sinking was the largest known loss of life along the West Africa smuggling route this year, and the sixth deadliest migrant drowning globally, according to the UN's International Organization for Migration.

The migrants "were mostly clandestine immigrants trying to reach Spain, coming from Banjul in Gambia," Mauritania's interior ministry said in a statement released Wednesday night.

"At least 58 people are confirmed dead after a vessel carrying migrants sank as it approached the coast of Mauritania," the IOM said in a statement.

"Eighty-three others swam to shore and are receiving assistance."

"The craft hit a rock in the middle of the sea, it started taking on water and the

CONTROVERSIAL PENSION OVERHAUL

Strike, protests paralyse France

AFP, Paris

A nationwide strike brought much of France to a halt yesterday as unions kicked off a massive protest against a pension overhaul by President Emmanuel Macron, which they say will force millions of people to work longer or face cutbacks.

Most schools were closed or only assuring daycare services, forcing many parents to find alternatives or stay home from work as trains, metros and buses were cancelled.

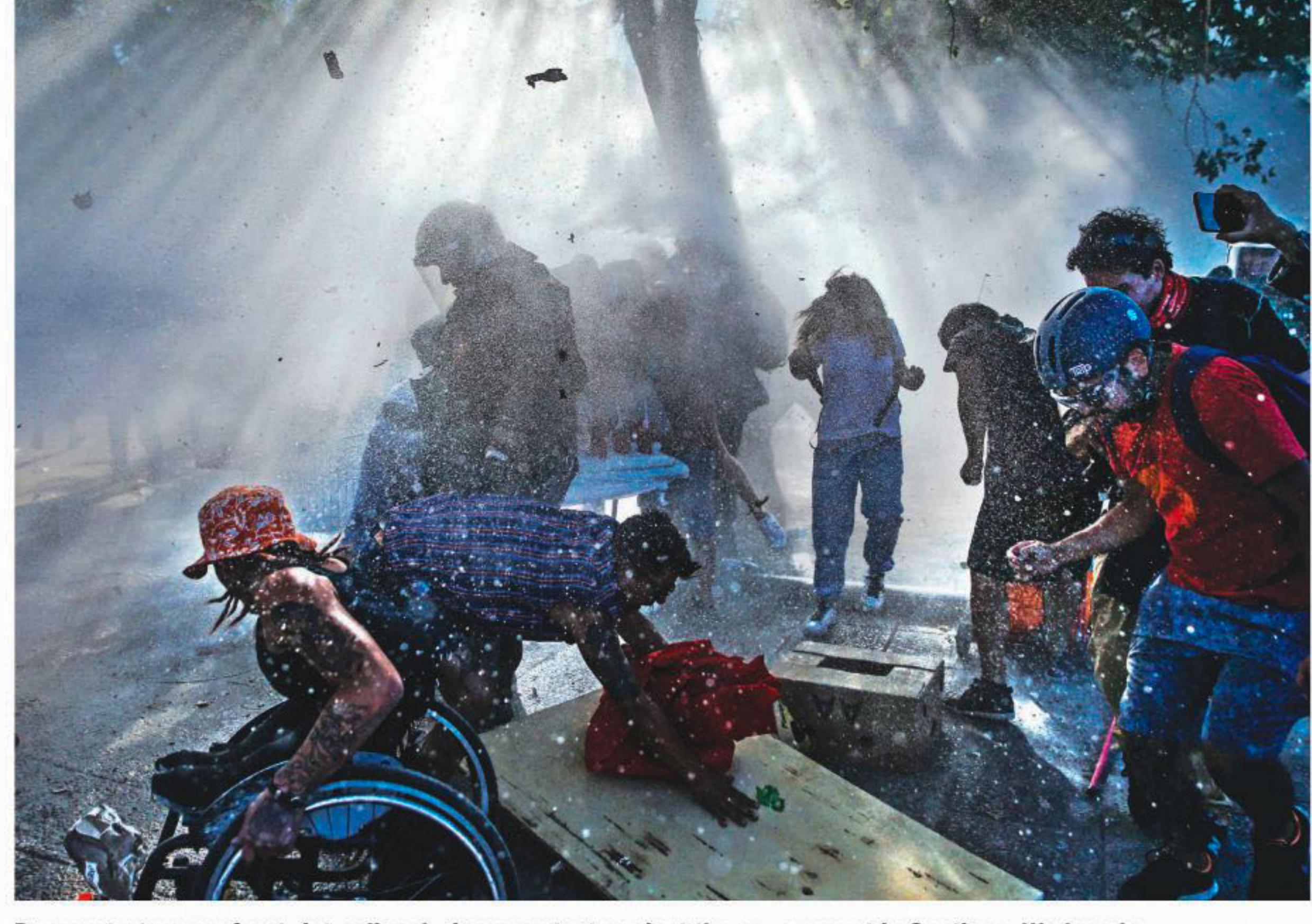
Thousands of people marched in several cities ahead of two major demonstrations planned for Paris, where traffic was lighter than usual as many people simply took the day off to avoid the travel chaos.

Union leaders have vowed to keep up their protest unless Macron drops the pension overhaul, considered a centre piece of the centrist president's push to reform wide swathes of the French economy. Later it was announced that the strike had been extended till Monday.

Officials have admitted that French workers will gradually have to work longer, but so far have given few details of how a "universal" system that does away with dozens of separate schemes will affect their retirement plans. Macron's office said Thursday that Prime Minister Edouard Philippe would lay out the framework for the reform next week, after wrapping up negotiations with unions.

Around 90 percent of high-speed TGV trains as well as regional lines were cancelled, and Air France has axed 30 percent of domestic flights and 15 percent of short-haul international routes.

The CGT union said workers had blocked seven of the country's eight oil refineries, raising the prospect of fuel shortages if the strike continues.



Demonstrators confront riot police during a protest against the government in Santiago, Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

GLOBAL CLIMATE RISK INDEX Heatwaves hitting rich, poor alike

Reuter, Madrid

Worsening heatwaves are taking a heavier toll on rich as well as poor countries, according to an annual ranking that measures the damage done by extreme weather to human life and economies.

The Global Climate Risk Index, published on Wednesday by environmental think-tank Germanwatch, rated Japan as the most weather-affected country in 2018, hit by a triple whammy of extreme summer heat, torrential rainfall and the most powerful typhoon in a quarter-century.

Germany, another industrialised country, was in third position as its hottest-ever April-July period led to the deaths of more than 1,200 people and widespread drought in 2018.

India - in fifth position - suffered one of its longest-ever heatwaves that year, bringing water shortages, crop failures and riots, on top of monsoon floods and two strong cyclones, Germanwatch said in a report.

"Recent science has confirmed the long-established link between climate change and the frequency and severity of extreme heat," it added in a statement.

In 2018, the severe summer heatwave in Japan killed 138 people and caused more than 70,000 people to be hospitalised with heat stroke and

exhaustion, the report said.

Across Europe, scientists calculate extreme heat spells are now up to 100 times more likely than a century ago, it added.

The report noted that the impact of heatwaves on African nations may be under-represented due to a lack of data.

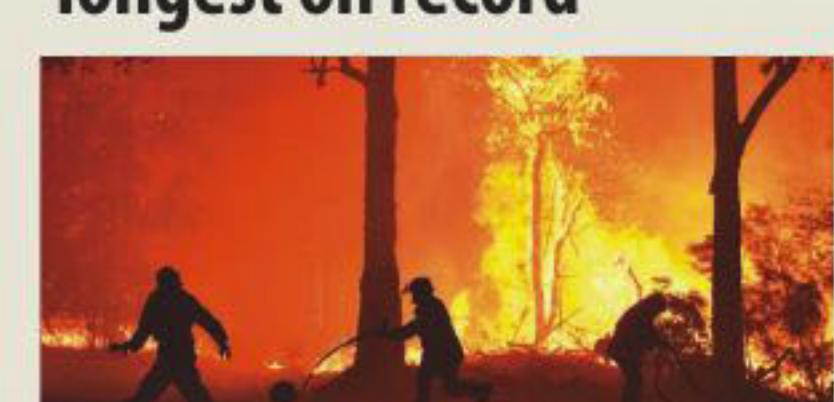
Powerful storms, meanwhile, left a trail of destruction in 2018, with the Philippines second in the climate risk index due to large losses inflicted by top-strength Typhoon Mangkhut. Madagascar was the fourth most weather-hit country as two cyclones killed about 70 people and forced 70,000 to seek refuge.

In Kenya and Rwanda - seventh and eighth in the index - seasonal rains were much heavier than normal, causing floods that destroyed homes and livestock and fuelled diseases.

Laura Schaefer, a policy advisor with Germanwatch, told journalists at the UN climate talks in Madrid that the index results showed that the "signs of climate crisis", on all continents, could no longer be ignored.

In the past 20 years, nearly half a million deaths were directly linked to more than 12,000 extreme weather events worldwide, while economic damages exceeded \$3.5 trillion, the report said.

Sydney smoke crisis 'longest on record'



Australian bushfires have caused unprecedented pollution in Sydney and along the country's east coast, officials said yesterday, with smoke and dust burning residents' eyes and prompting a spike in respiratory complaints. Hundreds of bushfires have burned out of control since September up and down the eastern seaboard, blanketing cities from Sydney to Brisbane in smoke for weeks on end. New South Wales Rural Fire Service said more than a dozen fires were burning near Sydney yesterday, including three that carried an emergency warning. Bushfires are common in Australia, but scientists say this year's season has come earlier and with more intensity due to a prolonged drought fuelled by climate change.

SOURCE: AFP