

Trump says he is Israel's best friend

AFP, Hollywood

US President Donald Trump aimed to make inroads Saturday in the politically important Jewish-American vote with a Florida speech where he declared himself the best friend Israel has ever had.

At a conference in Hollywood, Florida, the Republican real estate magnate said Jewish-Americans had been wrong to vote for Democrats under his predecessor Barack Obama. By contrast, Trump said, "the Jewish state has never had a better friend in the White House than your president, Donald J. Trump."

Historically, American-Jews have voted heavily Democratic.

To win Jewish votes, Trump has has upended decades of American policy in the Middle East.

This includes recognizing the disputed city of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and also recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, a territory taken from Syria in 1967.



Protesters attend a Human Rights Day march, organised by the Civil Human Right Front, in Hong Kong, yesterday. Vast crowds of democracy protesters thronged Hong Kong's streets yesterday in a forceful display of support for the movement as it marks six months with organisers warning the city's pro-Beijing leaders they had a "last chance" to end the political crisis.

PHOTO: REUTERS



France firm on pension reform as strikes bite

The French government said it would see through planned pension reforms but said the new system that has sparked nationwide strikes would be introduced gradually and public concerns would be addressed. Transport systems were paralysed for a fourth day yesterday as unions at state railway SNCF and Paris public transport system RATP extended their strike against the changes. Prime Minister Edouard Philippe has said he would present a detailed outline of the pension reform plan on Wednesday. France has one of the most generous pension systems among countries in the OECD grouping of industrialised nations. President Emmanuel Macron was elected in 2017 on a platform to liberalise the economy and reform the pension system.

Israel strikes in Gaza after rocket attack

Israeli aircraft carried out attacks in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip early yesterday, Palestinian security officials said, hours after militants in the enclave launched three rockets at the Jewish state. The strikes targeted two sites belonging to Al-Qassam Brigades, the Hamas military wing, in northern Gaza, with another series of sorties at a Qassam site west of Gaza City, Hamas officials said. There were no immediate reports of injuries. The Israeli army said "fighter jets and attack helicopters struck a number of Hamas terror targets" in Gaza, as well as "a military post belonging to the Hamas naval force in the northern Gaza Strip." All three projectiles fired from Gaza were intercepted by the Iron Dome defence system.

Bushfires: Haze settles over Australian capital



Smoke haze from bushfires raging in Australia spread to the capital yesterday, as firefighters raced to contain more than 140 blazes ahead of a heatwave forecast early this week. Australia is experiencing a horrific start to its fire season, which scientists say began earlier and is more extreme this year due to a prolonged drought and the effects of climate change. Residents of Canberra in the country's southeast woke up to see the capital shrouded in haze yesterday, joining those in Sydney who have endured weeks of toxic air pollution caused by bushfire smoke. Officials said favourable weather conditions had given them a chance to bring several blazes under control before the forecast return of strong winds and high temperatures tomorrow.

SOURCE: AFP



From democracy icon to genocide defender

AFP, Yangon

From democracy champion to defending Myanmar against genocide charges, the shock decision by civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi to face the UN's top court risks further damaging her image overseas and deepening the siege mentality at home.

"We stand with you," proclaim billboards across Myanmar, sporting beaming portraits of the Nobel laureate as she prepares to face the International Court of Justice (ICJ) over the Rohingya crisis.

Suu Kyi's supporters are printing off T-shirts, organising rallies and even signing up to VIP tours to The Hague to offer their backing.

Political parties and even some rebel armed groups have also fallen over themselves to give their support, in a country where the Rohingya garner little sympathy and are widely regarded as illegal immigrants.

Yet overseas, particularly in the West and in Muslim countries, Suu Kyi's reputation lies in tatters with multiple awards and even an honorary citizenship revoked.

Critics say "The Lady", once lauded alongside Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, has become an apologist for a murderous military intent on wiping out the country's Rohingya Muslims.

The spectacle of Suu Kyi standing up in court on behalf of the nation might play well at home but she risks suffering a fatal blow to what remains of her international reputation.

"If she's only going to use the visit to demonstrate defiance and continue to defend the indefensible, then it only widens the impasse," Yangon-based analyst David Mathieson told AFP.

On behalf of 57 Muslim countries, Gambia will call on the ICJ on December 10 to announce interim measures to prevent any further genocide by Myanmar.

The tiny, mainly Muslim West African state alleges Myanmar breached the UN's Genocide Convention with its bloody crackdown against its Rohingya community two years ago.

Some 740,000 Rohingya fled into sprawling camps in Bangladesh, bringing with them accounts of widespread murder, rape and arson -- violence UN investigators branded as genocide.

Myanmar says the operations were justified to flush out Rohingya militants and insists abuse allegations are under investigation by its own committees. Rights groups say those panels have only whitewashed the atrocities.

The UN team also accused Suu Kyi and her government of complicity in the violence -- an astounding fall from grace for the one-time rights icon who endured 15 years of house arrest under the former military junta.

N Korea signals impatience

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea has carried out a "very important" test at its Sohae satellite launch site, state media KCNA reported yesterday, a rocket testing ground that US officials once said Pyongyang had promised to close.

The reported test comes as a year-end deadline North Korea has imposed nears, warning it could take a "new path" amid stalled denuclearisation talks with the United States. The KCNA report called it a "successful test of great significance" on Saturday but did not specify what was tested.

South Korea's defence ministry said South Korea and the United States are cooperating closely in monitoring activities at major North Korean sites including Tongchang-ri, the area where Sohae is located.

Missile experts said it appeared likely the North Koreans had conducted a static test of a rocket engine, rather than a missile launch, which are usually quickly detected by neighbouring South Korea and Japan.

"If it is indeed a static engine test for a new solid or liquid fuel missile, it is yet another loud signal that the door for

diplomacy is quickly slamming, if it isn't already," said Vipin Narang, a nuclear affairs expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States.

"This could be a very credible signal of what might await the world after the New Year."

Tensions have risen ahead of a year-end deadline set by North Korea, which

FALTERING DENUCLEARIZATION TALKS

Pyongyang carries out 'very important' test at once-dismantled launch site

North Korea's UN envoy says denuclearization off negotiating table with US

has called on the United States to change its policy of insisting on Pyongyang's unilateral denuclearisation and demanded relief from punishing sanctions.

On Saturday North Korea's ambassador to the United Nations said denuclearisation was now off the negotiating table with the United States and lengthy talks with Washington are not needed.



Police disperse women during a protest in solidarity with rape victims and to oppose violence against women in Istanbul, Turkey, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

China, Myanmar seek to boost ties

ANN, Nanyitau

Myanmar President U Win Myint yesterday met with visiting Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi with both sides pledging to strengthen high-level exchanges to push bilateral ties to a new high.

The Myanmar president expressed gratitude to China for its long-term support for Myanmar's sovereignty, dignity and socio-economic development.

The president also hoped that China would continue to support Myanmar in pressing forward the ongoing national reconciliation and peace process.

For his part, the Chinese state councilor said China and Myanmar are neighbors linked by rivers and mountains enjoying a "baobo" (brothers and relatives) friendship. Both countries advocate and practice the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, setting an example of equality and mutually beneficial cooperation between countries.

He pledged that China will continue to firmly support Myanmar's efforts in pursuing a development path suited to its own national conditions, protecting its legitimate rights and national integrity in the international arena and maintaining its overall development and stability.

China also appreciates Myanmar's firm support for China on issues bearing on its core interests and major concerns, he said.

CITIZENSHIP AMENDMENT BILL AND NRC

'Second freedom struggle'

Mamata ups ante as contentious bill hits Lok Sabha today

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

With the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) all set to be tabled in the Lok Sabha today to benefit non-Muslims from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee hardened her posturing on the issue by equating the opposition to the proposed law with a "second freedom struggle" and invoking Bengali sub-nationalism.

Dubbing the Bill and NRC as "unconstitutional and discriminatory," Mamata told a party meeting in Dum Dum in Kolkata on Friday that the Constitution made it clear that "there would not be any discrimination on the basis of religion. Citizenship is a constitutional right. If one snatches citizenship, there will be another independence struggle."

Asking the workers of her Trinamool Congress (TMC) party to mobilize public opinion against the CAB and the NRC, she invoked Rabindranath Tagore's song against the partition of Bengal in 1905 to serve as inspiration.

"Let us pledge today that we will not allow NRC and CAB to happen and we will not allow



anyone to leave West Bengal," said Mamata.

The two main components of the Trinamool Congress chief's resistance to the CAB is that it opens religious fault-lines and that it also creates a discrimination between the tribal areas of north eastern states, which have been kept out of the ambit of the Bill and the tribal areas

community, she also pointed out that "people have stayed in West Bengal, elected governments and ministers. Now the BJP is trying to find infiltrators among them."

"All previous governments in the state and at the Centre become invalid if infiltrators have voted them to office. So, the election of all former Prime Ministers Nehru, Atalji (A B Vajpayee) and Manmohan ji is invalid?" Mamata questioned.

While the BJP wants the Citizenship Amendment Bill and the NRC to be seen as stand-alone moves, Mamata treats, as she said yesterday, the two as "two sides of the same coin."

Her scaling up the tirade on a polarizing issue is clearly keeping in mind the fresh assembly elections in West Bengal which has the largest presence of Muslims (about 30 per cent) among the Indian states who can swing the outcome in at least 90 constituencies in the state.

Mamata has also flagged the NRC issue in a big way in the state by pointing to the exclusion of large number of non-Muslims in the final NRC in Assam. That such a strategy seems to have paid off electorally was evident in the TMC's victory in all the three assembly bye-elections recently.

Without referring to any religious

Trump thanks as Iran frees American in prisoner swap

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump had rare positive words for Iran on Saturday, thanking the US foe for a "very fair" negotiation to successfully pull off a prisoner swap that saw an American released from Iranian detention amid soaring tensions.

The exchange, which took place in neutral Switzerland, involved a Princeton graduate student jailed in Iran for espionage since 2016 and an Iranian national arrested over a year ago in Chicago.

"Thank you to Iran on a very fair negotiation," tweeted Trump, as Xiyue Wang made his way home to his family. The US leader was expected to welcome Wang in person when he arrives in the United States, after a stop in Germany for medical evaluations.

"It was a one-on-one hostage swap," Trump told reporters. "I think it was great to show that we can do something. It might have been a precursor as to what can be done."



The Chinese-born American was in apparent good health and in "very, very good humor," said a senior US administration official.

Tehran had announced the release of its national, Massoud Soleimani, shortly before Trump revealed that Wang was returning home.

Meanwhile, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani yesterday announced what he called a "budget of resistance" to counter crippling US sanctions, weeks after a fuel price hike sparked nationwide protests that turned deadly.

Rouhani said the aim was to reduce "hardships" as the Islamic republic has suffered a sharp economic downturn, with a plummeting currency sending inflation skyrocketing and hiking import prices.

The US sanctions imposed in May last year in a bitter dispute centred on Iran's nuclear programme include an embargo on the crucial oil sector whose sales Washington aims to reduce to zero in a campaign of "maximum pressure".