

ICC to probe 'war crimes' in Palestinian territories

AFP, The Hague

The International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor said Friday she wanted to open a full investigation into alleged war crimes in the Palestinian territories, sparking a furious reaction from Israel and condemnation from the United States.

The Palestinians welcomed the move by the ICC as a "long overdue step" following a nearly five-year preliminary probe by the prosecutor into the situation since the 2014 war in Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the decision made the Hague-based court, which Israel has refused to sign up to since its creation in 2002, a "political tool" against the Jewish state.

"I am satisfied that there is a reasonable basis to proceed with an investigation into the situation in Palestine," ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said in a statement.

"In brief, I am satisfied that war crimes have been or are being committed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip," she added, without specifying the perpetrators of the alleged crimes.

She said that before opening a full probe, she would ask the ICC to rule on the territory over which it has jurisdiction because of the "unique and highly contested legal and factual issues attaching to this situation."

The prosecutor added however that she

did not require any authorisation from judges to open a probe as there had been a referral from the Palestinians, who joined the court in 2015.

"We firmly oppose this and any other action that seeks to target Israel unfairly," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said of Washington's top ally in the region.

"We do not believe the Palestinians qualify as a sovereign state, and they therefore are not qualified to obtain full membership, or participate as a state in international organizations, entities, or conferences, including the ICC."

Both Israel and US have refused to sign up to the court, which was set up in 2002 to be the only global tribunal trying the world's worst crimes, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Bensouda launched a preliminary probe in January 2015 into allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Israel and the Palestinian territories, in the wake of the 2014 Gaza war.

A full ICC investigation could possibly lead to charges against individuals. States cannot be charged by the ICC.

The ICC's preliminary investigation has looked at the 2014 war which left 2,251 dead on the Palestinian side, the majority civilians, and 74 on the Israeli side, most of them soldiers.

It has also looked at violence near the Israel-Gaza border in 2018.



(From left, clockwise) Demonstrators carry posters during a protest against a new citizenship law, outside the Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi, yesterday; demonstrators shout slogans during a protest in Guwahati, Assam; and a woman holds a sign during a protest against the law in Chennai. Thousands of people joined fresh rallies against a contentious citizenship law in India yesterday, with 21 killed so far in the unrest.

PHOTO: AFP



Impeached Trump has one of best weeks

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump kicked off Christmas vacation on Friday after a series of legislative victories gave him one of his best weeks in office -- apart from becoming only the third US president ever impeached.

Surprisingly, for a capital paralyzed by Democratic-Republican gridlock and a presidency mired in scandal, a whole string of breakthroughs came through at once.

While Democrats and Republicans tussle over how his Senate impeachment trial will unfold, possibly in January, Trump is fighting to refocus voters' minds on the brighter side of his presidency ahead of the 2020 election.

And as he packed his bags for a golf holiday through the New Year at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, Congress handed him ammunition.

Trump signed a giant \$1.4 trillion spending deal that the Senate passed on Thursday, ahead of a deadline to avoid leaving the federal government with empty coffers.

Also Thursday, the House of Representatives, where the Democratic majority had voted for impeachment a day earlier, finally approved a new US-Mexico-Canada free trade deal, known as USMCA.

That will go to the Republican-controlled Senate and on to Trump.

To top it all off, just before departing for Florida Trump signed a \$738 billion defense spending bill that includes funding for the creation of one of his pet projects -- a new branch of the military called Space Force.

One more slice of seasonal cheer was delivered Friday with the White House accepting a formal invitation from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, one of Trump's leading Democratic foes, to deliver his annual State of the Union speech to Congress on February 4.



Impeachment and the still-to-come trial were not even mentioned.

Not bad for a president who some 48 hours ago was being pilloried by Democrats in the House for betraying his oath of office and impeached on two counts.

Republicans exasperated by Trump's erratic foreign policy, bombastic style and habit of

insulting people in public have long wished he would stick to touting the country's roaring economy.

Unemployment is rock bottom, the stock market is hitting record highs and, usually, an incumbent president with a good economy gets a straightforward path to re-election.

The fact that despite these advantages Trump's approval rating is stuck in the low 40 percent range and almost half the country backs impeachment shows his inherent weaknesses.

But Trump appears to be making more effort to stay on message since his impeachment.

At a rally on Wednesday in the swing state of Michigan -- held as the House was voting his impeachment -- Trump said the economy would be his shield against any assault from the eventual Democratic challenger in 2020.

"When I'm on the debate stage with one of these characters and they try and say negative stuff, I'll just say, 'Well, here's the story: In the history of our country, this group is doing the best, and that group is doing the best, and the women are doing the best,'" he told the crowd.

"The whole country is doing the best."

Democrats, who are yet to pick a candidate from the big field of hopefuls, say Trump's economic boom and the rosy macro-economic statistics ignore reality for swaths of the country.

'People are dying'

AFP, Malaysia

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has criticised India's new citizenship law, which is seen as discriminatory against Muslims and has sparked deadly protests across the South Asian country.

Speaking on the sidelines of the Kuala Lumpur Summit 2019 on Friday, Mahathir questioned the "necessity" of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), when Indians have "lived together for 70 years".

"People are dying because of this law. Why is there a necessity to do this when all the while, for 70 years, they have lived together as citizens without any problem?" he asked.

The CAA makes it easier for "persecuted" minorities from three neighbouring countries to get citizenship but not if they are Muslims.

The law has stoked fears that Prime Minister Narendra Modi wants to remould India as a Hindu nation and marginalise its 200 million Muslims, who form nearly 14

percent of India's 1.3 billion population.

"I am sorry to see that India, which claims to be a secular state now is taking action to deprive some Muslims of their citizenship," said the 94-year-old leader.

"If we do that here, I do not know what will happen. There will be chaos and instability, and everybody will suffer."

Mahathir's comments came amid deadly protests in India over the CAA, in which at least 20 people have been killed so far.

The death toll jumped after demonstrations turned violent on Friday in the most populous state Uttar Pradesh, leaving at least 11 dead including an eight-year-old boy, who was trampled.

Protests continue to be organised in various Indian cities as authorities impose a ban on public gatherings and arrest hundreds of people.

The United Nations has called the CAA "fundamentally discriminatory" while the United States's State Department has urged India to "protect the rights of its religious minorities".



N Korea warns US could 'pay dearly' for rights criticism

North Korea yesterday warned Washington would only aggravate tensions and "pay dearly" for criticising Pyongyang over human rights, with nuclear negotiations between the two deadlocked.

Criticising Pyongyang's human rights record would only aggravate the "already tense situation" on the Korean peninsula, "like pouring oil over burning fire", a North Korean foreign ministry spokesperson said, according to the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

The statement was in response to concern expressed by a US state department official over North Korea's human rights situation, KCNA said.

Gang fight in Honduran prison kills 18 inmates

At least 18 inmates were killed and 16 wounded during a fight between rival gangs in a Honduran penitentiary on Friday, authorities said, in one of the worst recent outbreaks of prison violence in the country.

Two days earlier, the government declared a state of emergency in the prison system, transferring control to security forces in a bid to clamp down on a recent wave of violence.

Fights in Honduras' overcrowded prisons are frequent as street gangs vie for control inside the institutions.

WikiLeaks' Assange testifies in embassy spying case



WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange on Friday testified in his legal case against a Spanish private security firm that he claims spied on him while he was holed up in the Ecuadoran embassy in London.

Assange, who is currently serving time at a high-security prison in Britain, answered questions from a judge at Spain's National Court in Madrid, testifying by videoconference from Westminster Magistrates Court in London, his legal team said.

Spain's top criminal court is investigating whether Undercover Global Ltd, which was responsible for security at the embassy, spied on 48-year-old Australian and passed on information to US.

The case is key to Assange's efforts to fight an extradition request by the US Justice Department which is pushing to have him put on trial for leaking hundreds of thousands of secret US military and diplomatic documents in 2010.

SOURCE: AFP



A helicopter prepares to drop water on a large bushfire in Bargo, southwest of Sydney, yesterday.

Pak professor sentenced to death for blasphemy

AFP, Lahore

A Pakistani court yesterday sentenced a university professor to death for blasphemy under a law that critics say is often used to target minorities and liberal activists.

Junaid Hafeez, 33, was arrested in March 2013 for allegedly posting derogatory remarks against Prophet Mohammed on social media.

Blasphemy is a hugely sensitive issue in conservative Muslim-majority Pakistan, where laws against it carry a potential death sentence. Even unproven allegations have led to mob lynchings and vigilante murders.

Hafeez's sentence was announced in central city of Multan, where he was a university professor at the time of his arrest, and his counsel Asad Jamal slammed the decision as "most unfortunate".

"We will appeal against this verdict," Jamal told AFP.

Government lawyer Azim Chaudhry hailed the decision while fellow lawyer Airaz Ali said it was a "victory of truthfulness and righteousness."

Rights group Amnesty International said the verdict was "a gross miscarriage of justice".

"Junaid Hafeez's death sentence is a gross miscarriage of justice and the verdict... is extremely disappointing and surprising," Amnesty's Rabia Mehmood said.

Hafeez's lawyer was killed in 2014 after receiving death threats during a hearing.

About 40 people convicted of blasphemy are on death row in Pakistan, according to a 2018 estimate by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom.

'Catastrophic' conditions as bushfires rage in Australia

AFP, Bargo

A scorching heatwave intensified bushfires ravaging parts of Australia yesterday, and out-of-control blazes surrounding Sydney worsened under "catastrophic" conditions.

Australia's eastern coast has been hit by a record-breaking heatwave, which has moved in from the west of the country, fanning hundreds of fires in its path.

Sydney was shrouded in toxic smoke as blazes flared to its north, south and west, some just 130 kilometres (80 miles) from Australia's largest city.

"Today has been an awful day," New South Wales state fire commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said yesterday afternoon.

Temperatures were expected to peak at 47 degrees Celsius (116 Fahrenheit) in parts of the state -- the country's most populous -- including in parts of west Sydney.

Australia endures bushfires every year but the early and intense start to this season, along with the record temperatures, has fuelled concerns about global warming.

The fires have torched at least three million hectares (7.4 million acres) of land -- an area equivalent to the size of Belgium -- with at least 10 people killed and more than 800 homes destroyed.

Two massive blazes south of Sydney generated their own thunderstorms, fire authorities said, with a "mega fire" burning to the north also threatening the dangerous phenomena.

In the state of South Australia, which in the past few days has borne the brunt of the heat wave, more than 1,500 firefighters have been battling fires that ripped through more than 40,000 hectares. Two people died in fires there over the past two days, and dozens of firefighters and residents have been treated for injuries and smoke inhalation.

Emergency crews were also on alert in the southern state of Victoria, where fires were burning following days of scorching temperatures.

Leading doctors have warned of a "public health emergency" given the unprecedented toxic smoke choking Sydney, which worsened to a dense haze yesterday evening. Hospitals have been recording sharp increases in emergency room visits for heat exhaustion and respiratory problems.

US interfering in internal affairs, Xi tells Trump

REUTERS, Washington/Beijing

US President Donald Trump spoke on Friday with Chinese President Xi Jinping and claimed progress on issues from trade to North Korea and Hong Kong, but China said Xi accused the United States of interfering in its internal affairs.

The two leaders spoke a week after their envoys sealed a "Phase 1" agreement aimed at ending an 18-month trade war that has rattled markets and raised tensions.

Trump announced the phone call in a tweet. A White House official said they spoke on Friday morning. China Central Television said Xi spoke to Trump at the request of the US president.

"Had a very good talk with President Xi of China concerning our giant Trade Deal. China has already started large scale purchase of agricultural product & more. Formal signing being arranged. Also talked about North Korea, where we are working

with China, & Hong Kong (progress!)" Trump tweeted.

China's Xinhua news agency said Xi told Trump that China is deeply concerned about "the negative words and deeds" of the United States on issues related to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet.

"These actions have interfered in China's internal affairs, harmed China's interests and undermined mutual trust and cooperation between the two sides," Xinhua said.

The United States has called for the closure of mass detention camps in China's western region of Xinjiang and expressed concern about the treatment of demonstrators in Hong Kong.

China was angered when Trump last month signed legislation that authorizes sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials responsible for human rights abuses in Hong Kong, in what was seen as support for pro-democracy activists.

