

End of Gulf dispute seems within reach

Says Saudi Arabia after Kushner's MidEast tour

REUTERS, Dubai/Rome

Saudi Arabia's foreign minister said on Friday a resolution to a bitter dispute with Qatar seemed "within reach" after Kuwait announced progress towards ending a row that Washington says hampers a united Gulf front against Iran.

The United States and Kuwait have worked to end the dispute, during which Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt have imposed a diplomatic, trade and travel embargo on Qatar since mid-2017.

US President Donald Trump's senior adviser Jared Kushner had held talks in Doha on Wednesday following a visit to Saudi Arabia.

"We have made significant progress in the last few days thanks to the continuing efforts of Kuwait but also thanks to strong support from President Trump," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud told a Rome conference via videolink.

"We hope this progress can lead to a final agreement which looks within reach and I can say I am somewhat optimistic that we are close to finalising an agreement between all the nations in the dispute."

A source in Washington familiar with the discussions said a tentative deal had been reached by the parties and that it

could be signed in a few weeks.

"They're working towards taking what's an agreement in principle and getting it actually signed," the source told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah on Friday welcomed the developments, state-run news agency KUNA said.

It quoted him as saying "this agreement has shown that all concerned parties are keen on retaining the pan-Gulf and the pan-Arab solidarity, unity, and stability."

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, speaking remotely at a Bahrain summit on Friday, said the United States was

"very hopeful" that the dispute would be resolved.

All countries involved are US allies. Qatar hosts the region's largest US military base, Bahrain is home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE host US troops.

Washington has been pushing for reopening Gulf airspace for Qatari aircraft as a first step, diplomats and sources have said.

The boycotting nations accuse Doha of supporting terrorism. Qatar denies the charges and says the embargo aims to undermine its sovereignty.



A Covid-19 patient arrives outside Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York City, US, on Friday. For the second day in a row, the United States on Friday notched a record number of coronavirus cases in 24 hours, reaching 225,201 new infections. In that same period, the country recorded 2,506 Covid-related deaths.

PHOTO: REUTERS

POST-ELECTION CHAOS IN US

Trump suffers more legal defeats

His campaign files election lawsuit in Georgia as Biden readies for inauguration

AGENCIES

Donald Trump's campaign said it filed a lawsuit in Georgia state court on Friday seeking to invalidate the presidential election results there, the latest in a series of legal challenges aimed at reversing his loss that have so far gone nowhere.

The Trump campaign said in a statement its new lawsuit would include sworn statements from Georgia residents alleging fraud.

Georgia's Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a Republican, like Trump, and other state officials have said repeatedly they have found no evidence of widespread fraud in the Nov 3 election won by Democrat Joe Biden.

Trump's team and various individuals backing him have suffered a string of legal defeats around the country, including in cases filed in Nevada and Wisconsin that sought court orders to reverse those states' election results.

President-elect Biden won the election with 306 Electoral College votes - against the 270 required - to Trump's 232.

A district judge in Nevada on Friday dismissed



a case brought by would-be Republican presidential electors and said they must pay defendants' legal costs after failing "to meet their burden to provide credible and relevant evidence to substantiate" any of the lawsuit's claims.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court in a 4-3 decision declined to act on a case that sought to have the court nullify the presidential election in the state and pave the way for the state legislature to choose Wisconsin's 10 presidential electors.

"Such a move would appear to be unprecedented in American history," Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Brian Hagedorn wrote in his concurring opinion of four justices issued on

Friday.

Trump's campaign has spent nearly \$9 million on its unsuccessful bid to overturn the results of the election, including nearly \$2.3 million to lawyers and consultants.

The campaign and the Republican National Committee have raised at least \$207.5 million since Election Day, much of it from solicitations asking for donations to an "Official Election Defense Fund".

The fine print made clear most of the money would go to other priorities through Trump's new political action committee, which could fuel his future political endeavors.

Meanwhile, US President-elect Joe Biden said Friday that he expects his January inauguration to be a scaled-down event with an emphasis on safety because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"We're going to follow the science and the recommendations of the experts on keeping people safe," Biden told reporters.

The 78-year-old Biden is to be sworn in as the 46th president of the United States on January 20, 2021.

2021 shaping up to be a humanitarian catastrophe

Warns UN amid raging coronavirus pandemic

REUTERS, New York

Next year is shaping up to be a humanitarian catastrophe, top UN officials told the 193-member UN General Assembly on Friday.

World Food Programme (WFP) chief David Beasley and World Health Organization (WHO) head Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus spoke during a special meeting on Covid-19, which emerged in China late last year and has so far infected 65 million globally.

The pandemic, measures taken by countries to try to stop its spread and the economic impact have fueled a 40% increase in the number of people needing humanitarian help, the United Nations said earlier this week. It has appealed for \$35 billion in aid funding.

"2021 is literally going to be catastrophic based on what we're seeing at this stage of the game," said Beasley, adding that for a dozen countries, famine is "knocking on

the door."

He said 2021 was likely to be "the worst humanitarian crisis year since the beginning of the United Nations" 75 years ago and "we're not going to be able to fund everything ... so we have to prioritize, as I say, the icebergs in front of the Titanic."

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and his top officials have also called for Covid-19 vaccines to be made available to all and for rich countries to help developing countries combat and recover from the pandemic.

Tedros appealed for an immediate injection of \$4.3 billion into a world vaccine-sharing program.

"We simply cannot accept a world in which the poor and marginalized are trampled by the rich and powerful in the stampede for vaccines," Tedros told the General Assembly.

"This is a global crisis and the solutions must be shared equitably as global public goods."



A woman is seen at the Um Rakuba refugee camp in Sudan which houses Ethiopians fleeing the fighting in the Tigray region. Fighting between federal army and forces loyal to the region's former ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), erupted on Nov 4. Thousands of people are believed to have died while more than 46,000 refugees have crossed to neighbouring Sudan. The photo was taken on Thursday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

CORONAVIRUS RELIEF SCHEME

Argentina imposes 'millionaire's tax'

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentina's Senate passed a tax on about 12,000 of the country's richest people on Friday, to pay for coronavirus measures including medical supplies and relief for the poor and small businesses.

In a session streamed live on YouTube, and after a long and polarizing debate, the so-called solidarity contribution was signed into law with 42 votes in favor and 26 against, as the pro-government alliance flexed its majority.

The government of President Alberto Fernandez hopes to raise 300 billion pesos (\$3.75 billion) with the one-off levy, which earlier passed the Chamber of Deputies with 133 for votes to 115 against.

Argentina's 44 million population has been badly hit by the coronavirus, with more than 1.4 million cases and over 39,500 deaths, according to figures from Johns Hopkins University.

The pandemic has exacerbated already high unemployment and poverty rates in a country which has been in recession since 2018.

Under the scheme -- also dubbed the "millionaire's tax" -- people with declared assets greater than 200 million pesos will pay a progressive rate of up to 3.5 percent on wealth in Argentina and up to 5.25 percent on wealth outside the country.

Of the proceeds, 20 percent will go to medical supplies for the pandemic, another 20 percent to small and medium-sized businesses, 15 percent to social developments, 20 percent to student scholarships and 25 percent to natural gas ventures.

On the opposite side, Daniel Pelegrina, president of the powerful Argentine Rural Society (SRA), warned that Heller "wants to present it as a contribution of the richest, but we know what happens with all those unique taxes, they stay forever."

Trump orders troops pullout from Somalia

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump has ordered the removal of most US military and security personnel from Somalia, where they have been conducting operations against the al-Shabaab militant group, the Pentagon said Friday.

After ordering major troop reductions in Iraq and Afghanistan recently, Trump's new move reflects his drive to disengage US forces from what he calls endless wars abroad, making good on a campaign pledge in the final weeks of his presidency.

Trump "has ordered the Department of Defense and the United States Africa Command to reposition the majority of personnel and assets out of Somalia by early 2021," the Pentagon said in a statement.

The US Africa Command has maintained some 700 troops, personnel from other US security operations, and private security contractors in Somalia, both conducting attacks on Al-Shabaab and training Somali forces.

US troops have conducted operations against extremist groups in Somalia since the early 2000s, killing hundreds in mostly conventional aircraft and drone strikes that have caused significant civilian deaths.

The move came as Trump has sought to wind down US military engagements abroad to honor a pledge he made in the 2016 election.

'We are not Hungary or Turkey'

Macron denies France is eroding freedoms after Erdogan's diatribe

AFP, Paris

President Emmanuel Macron has denied claims that freedoms are being eroded in France under his rule as a "big lie", with controversy intensifying over a new security law.

Striking criticism of Macron appeared in international media after he announced a crackdown on radical Islam and his government tried to push through a security bill that would restrict the publication of images of police.

"I cannot let it be said that we are reducing freedoms in France," Macron told the online news portal Brut in a televised interview, complaining that France had been "caricatured" in the debate over the security legislation.

"It's a big lie. We are not Hungary or Turkey," he added, hours after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had called Macron "trouble" and urged the French to "get rid" of him as soon as possible.

Some commentaries in English-language media have accused Macron of targeting all



Muslims following a spate of attacks in the last weeks blamed on radical Islamists.

But Macron insisted he was not singling out Muslims, rather simply defending the country's secular system.

"France has no problem with Islam... we are a country that has always had a dialogue." But he emphasised: "We founded our Republic on the separation of politics and religion."

Refusing to be drawn into Erdogan's latest personal attack on him, Macron said: "I believe in respect... I think invective between political leaders is not a good method."

"Macron is trouble for France. With

Macron, France is passing through a very, very dangerous period. I hope that France will get rid of Macron trouble as soon as possible," Erdogan told reporters after Friday prayers in Istanbul.

He said the French should dump their leader "otherwise they will not be able to get rid of yellow vests", referring to the protest movement that erupted in France in 2018.

"Yellow vests could later turn into red vests," Erdogan said, without elaborating. The Turkish leader has repeatedly suggested that Macron get "mental checks" and urged the Turkish people to boycott French-labelled products.

Erdogan's diatribe came as the European Union weighs imposing sanctions against Turkey at a December 10 summit, largely over its standoff with EU member Greece in the eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey and France are also at odds over Nagorno-Karabakh, a region of Azerbaijan populated by ethnic Armenians that broke away from Baku's control in a 1990s post-Soviet war.

NEWS IN BRIEF

US ends exchange programs with China

The US State Department on Friday said it has ended five cultural exchange programs with China, calling them "soft power propaganda tools." The Department said on its website it had "terminated" the Policymakers Educational China Trip Program, the US-China Friendship Program, the US-China Leadership Exchange Program, the US-China Trans-Pacific Exchange Program and the Hong Kong Educational and Cultural Program. The programs had been set up under the auspices of the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act - a 1961 law signed by President John F. Kennedy and aimed at boosting academic and cultural exchanges with foreign countries.

Czech boy survives fall from 19th floor

A 15-year-old Czech boy on Friday survived a fall from the 19th floor of a block of flats in Prague, police, rescuers and media said. Czech media said the boy was lucky his fall was broken by the roof over the building's entrance. Prague's emergency service said the boy had been put in an artificial coma. "The 15-year-old youngster was... taken to hospital with serious head and pelvis injuries," it tweeted. Kropacova said the police were looking into the cause of the accident which occurred in a sprawling housing estate on Prague's southern outskirts.

18 Chinese miners killed in underground gas leak

Eighteen miners were confirmed dead yesterday after a coal monoxide leak at Diaoshuidong carbon mine in the city of Chongqing in southwestern China, state media reported, with rescue efforts under way to reach five others still trapped underground. CCTV reported one survivor. The accident occurred while workers were dismantling underground mining equipment.

US govt ordered to reinstate protections for 'Dreamers'

In a rebuke to President Donald Trump's administration, a judge on Friday ordered the US government to reopen to first-time applicants a program that protects from deportation and grants work permits to hundreds of thousands of immigrants who live in the United States unlawfully after arriving as children. The action by US District Judge Nicholas Garaufis in Brooklyn centered on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program created by Trump's Democratic predecessor Barack Obama in 2012. The Supreme Court in June blocked Trump's 2017 bid to end DACA. His administration, however, continued its policy of not accepting new applications for the program. Democratic President-elect Joe Biden, who takes office on Jan. 20, has said he plans to revitalize DACA.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS