

# Merkel Clinches Deal After Months of Deadlock



Acting German Chancellor Angela Merkel, leader of the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU) Horst Seehofer and Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Martin Schulz arrive for a press conference after exploratory talks about forming a new coalition government at the SPD headquarters in Berlin, January 12, 2018.

BERLIN (Dispatches) -- Angela Merkel hailed a "new dawn for Europe" as she unveiled a coalition deal between her conservative bloc and the Social Democrats that should put Germany back at the forefront of efforts to reform the EU.

Speaking after marathon talks with SPD leader Martin Schulz, the chancellor said she was now confident that Germany would find "common solutions with France" on taking Europe forward.

Germany's allies have been on tenterhooks ever since last September's inconclusive Bundestag election plunged Europe's largest economy into uncertainty and raised questions about the future of Merkel, one of the continent's most experienced and respected political leaders.

The paralysis has undermined the chancellor's authority both at home and abroad, held up critical business in Europe and weakened Germany's international reputation. It has also

thwarted French president Emmanuel Macron's hopes of a speedy German response to the ambitious proposals he unveiled last September for reforming the EU.

But on Friday Schulz, a former president of the European Parliament who has called for the creation of a United States of Europe by 2025, said: "We are determined to deploy Germany's full economic and political power to turn Europe once again into the great project that this community of nations is."

The coalition, however, is by no means a done deal. Resistance to an alliance with the conservatives runs strong in the SPD's rank and file, who will get to vote on any final coalition agreement. Formal negotiations on a grand coalition can only start once an SPD party conference in Bonn on January 21 has given the green light.

Skepticism remains strong among Social Democrats, who feel the party lost its identity in the previous grand coalition between 2013 and 2017. The SPD scored some significant successes, such as the introduction of a minimum wage, but many party members felt that Ms Merkel got all the credit for them.

In the aftermath of the election, the SPD had firmly ruled out reviving its alliance with Merkel, but was forced to reconsider after her attempts to form an unprecedented three-way coalition with the liberal Free Democrats and environmental Greens collapsed in November.

# Ecuador Grants Citizenship to Julian Assange



WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is seen on the balcony of the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, May 19, 2017.

QUITO (Dispatches) -- Ecuador said Thursday it had granted citizenship to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in an attempt to provide him with diplomatic immunity and usher him out of its London embassy without the threat of arrest by Britain.

Foreign Minister Maria Fernanda Espinosa said the 46-year-old Australian, who has been holed up at the embassy for five years to avoid arrest, became an Ecuadorian citizen on Dec 12.

She told a press conference in Quito that

Ecuador had asked London to recognize Assange as a diplomat -- which would give him safe passage out of the embassy without fear of arrest -- but Britain had refused.

"The Ecuadoran government is empowered to grant nationality to the protected person and thus facilitate ... his inclusion in the host state," Espinosa told reporters.

She said the request to Britain to accept diplomatic status for Assange was made on Dec 20, and denied a day later.

The foreign minister said Quito would not press the issue because of the "good relations we have with the United Kingdom".

The British foreign ministry said in a statement that Ecuador had "recently requested diplomatic status for Mr Assange here in the UK. The UK did not grant that request, nor are we in talks with Ecuador on this matter."

"Ecuador knows that the way to resolve this issue is for Julian Assange to leave the embassy to face justice," the British government added.

Ecuador's attempt to obtain diplomatic status for Assange comes as part of the country's broader efforts to resolve the case of their long-term lodger, who moved into the embassy in 2012 to avoid arrest over a Swedish probe into rape allegations.

Sweden dropped their investigation over the 2010 allegations last year, but British police have said they are still seeking to arrest him for failing to surrender to a court after violating bail terms.

Assange has refused to step outside the embassy and claimed he fears being extradited to the United States over WikiLeaks' publication of secret U.S. military documents and diplomatic cables in 2010.

Espinosa told the press conference that Quito would continue "to explore other ways of solving" Assange's situation.

# Hundreds Arrested as Protests Rage in Tunisia

TUNIS (Reuters) -- Tunisian authorities arrested another 150 people including local opposition leaders over unrest against price and tax rises that prompted troop deployments to restive towns, and activists called for renewed rallies at the weekend.

Protests, some violent, flared across Tunisia on Monday, when one protester was killed, before ebbing on Thursday. Protesters have burned dozens of state buildings, prompting the government to send the army into several cities and towns.

Activists and opposition politicians appealed for fresh demonstrations in the capital, Tunis, on Friday and on Sunday, the seventh anniversary of the toppling of authoritarian president Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali.

On Thursday, unrest was limited to

sporadic clashes in the northern city of Siliana, in Sidi Bouzid in central Tunisia and Douz in the south of the North African country.

Three local leaders of the Popular Front, the main opposition bloc, were detained in Gafsa for allegedly setting fire to a government building, a judicial source said.

The Popular Front said its leaders had been targeted in a political campaign that was "reproducing the methods of the oppressive Ben Ali regime". Party members had also been arrested in Mahdia and Karbariya, it said.

The protests draw on anger over price and tax increases included in this year's budget that took effect on Jan. 1.

The government has blamed the opposition and "troublemakers"

for stoking unrest, a charge the opposition has denied. The government has vowed not to back down on the austerity measures, taken to satisfy foreign lenders.

Prices have increased for fuel and some consumer goods, while taxes on cars, phone calls, the internet, hotel accommodation and other items have also gone up.

Tunisia appears to have little scope to back away austerity. The International Monetary Funds says Tunisia is committed to "decisive action" to reform its economy before the IMF reviews the payment of its next loan tranche.

Last year, the Washington-based IMF agreed a four-year loan program worth about \$2.8 billion with Tunisia, but tied to economic reforms.

# Trump Cancels UK Visit Amid Protest Fears



U.S. President Donald Trump and British Prime Minister Theresa May are pictured in Brussels ahead of a NATO summit meeting in May 2017.

LONDON (Dispatches) -- U.S. President Donald Trump has cancelled a visit to Britain next month to open the new American embassy in London, amid fears of mass protests.

Trump claimed on Twitter that the reason for calling off the trip was his displeasure at Barack Obama having sold the current embassy for "peanuts" and built a replacement for \$1 billion. "Bad deal," he wrote.

But the embassy's plan to move from Mayfair to Nine Elms in London was first reported in October 2008, when George W. Bush was still president.

The London mayor, Sadiq Khan, said Trump had "got the message" that many Londoners staunchly opposed his policies and actions.

"It appears that President Trump got the message from the many Londoners who love and admire America and Americans but find his policies and actions the polar opposite of our city's values of inclusion, diversity and tolerance," Khan said on Friday.

"His visit next month would without doubt have been met by mass peaceful protests. This just reinforces what a mistake it was for Theresa May to rush and extend an invitation of a state visit in

the first place."

The prime minister invited Trump for a state visit when she became the first world leader to visit the president in the White House a year ago. Activists immediately pledged to stage protests and MPs have said they would not give the president the opportunity to address parliament.

Instead of a state visit, it had been expected that Trump would make a brief, less formal "working visit" in February to cut the ribbon on the embassy in southwest London, and hold meetings with May. Officials had also been examining plans for Trump to meet the Queen without the pomp of a full-blown state banquet.

Government sources suggested Washington had signaled that the secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, would instead open the embassy.

Trump confirmed on Twitter late on Thursday night that the trip was off. "Reason I canceled my trip to London is that I am not a big fan of the Obama Administration having sold perhaps the best located and finest embassy in London for 'peanuts,' only to build a new one in an off location for 1.2 billion dollars," he wrote just before midnight local time. "Bad deal. Wanted me to cut ribbon-NO!"

# Anti-Austerity Protests Cripple Greek Capital



Protestors shout slogans as they march behind a banner during a rally against property foreclosure auctions outside the courthouse in Thessaloniki on January 10, 2018.

ATHENS (Reuters) -- Thousands of Greek protesters marched in central Athens Friday against new reforms, including restrictions on the right to strike, that parliament is set to approve next week in return for bailout funds.

In the first major industrial upheaval of 2018, the shutdown of the Athens metro, used by some 938,000 commuters daily, caused traffic gridlock in the city of 3.8 million people.

Ships were unable to sail as workers went on strike and state-run hospitals had to rely on reserve staff as doctors walked off the job. More work stoppages were expected Monday.

The bill pending parliament approval Monday would restructure family benefits, introduce a new process for foreclosures on overdue loans, and make it harder to call a strike.

"Hands off strikes!" protesters with Communist-affiliated group PAME chanted during a march of about 20,000 people, as lawmakers debated in parliament. Others held banners reading "Uprising!" and "No to modern slavery!"

There were some clashes outside parliament when some protesters attempted to approach the building. They were pushed back by police who sprayed teargas, but the altercation was brief.

The draft law has outraged many Greeks, who have seen living conditions and incomes plummet since the country first sought international aid to stave off bankruptcy in 2010, and required another two bailouts thereafter.

It is a bitter pill for ruling Syriza, the dominant party in the government elected in 2015, which has its roots in left-wing labor activism.

"This essentially abolishes the right to strike ... such things only happened during the junta," retired ship officer George Papatyropoulos said, referring to the military dictatorship that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974.

"This government is a leftist in name only, but in deeds it's a junta."

At present, unions can call strikes with the support of one-third of their members. The new law would raise that to just over 50%, which creditors hope would limit the frequency of strikes and improve productivity that lags about 20% behind the European Union average.

The government says it needs the reforms to receive tranches of bailout aid. The latest bailout, worth up to 86 billion euros (\$104 billion), expires in August. So far Greece has received 40.2 billion euros, and a new tranche is expected to be worth around 4.5 billion euros.



YANGON (apa) -- The Myanmar military's involvement in the deaths of 10 Rohingya Muslims in northern Rakhine State, admitted by the commander-in-chief, is just a fraction of the abuses for which security forces are culpable, rights groups say. Following the discovery of a mass grave in Inn Dinn village, the military launched an investigation into the incident last month. On Wednesday, it admitted that ethnic Rakhine villagers and security forces killed the 10 Rohingya Muslims in the village on September 2 last year. In separate statements, Fortify Rights, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch all described the admission as the "tip of the iceberg" and urged an international investigation. Matthew Smith, co-founder and chief executive of Fortify Rights, said the group, based in Bangkok, had documented similar atrocities across the northern Rakhine State, where a military crackdown prompted by Rohingya militant attacks has driven more than 650,000 Rohingya to flee the country.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- The Russian Communist Party moved to overhaul its geriatric image Friday, registering a wealthy 57-year-old farm boss to challenge incumbent Vladimir Putin for the presidency in a gamble it hopes will revive its electoral fortunes. Russia's central election commission on Friday said it had registered Pavel Grudinin, who runs a farm business on the edge of Moscow, as the party's candidate for the March 18 election after the communists unexpectedly decided against putting up their veteran 73-year-old leader Gennady Zyuganov. Backed by state TV, the ruling United Russia party, and many voters who live outside big cities, polls show 65-year-old Putin, who has dominated Russian politics for the last 18 years, is on track to comfortably win a fourth presidential term. Putin said Thursday opposition leader Alexei Navalny appeared to be Washington's pick for the Russian presidency, which was why the United States had complained about Navalny not being allowed to run for office. Russia's central election commission last month barred Navalny from taking part in a March presidential election, ruling he was ineligible due to a suspended prison sentence on charges he says were trumped up.

MADRID (Reuters) -- The Spanish government dismissed outright Friday the possibility of former Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont ruling the region from self-imposed exile in Brussels, and said Madrid would contest any attempt to do so in the courts. Catalan separatists agreed Wednesday to try to re-elect Puigdemont as regional leader, raising the scenario of the fugitive former leader governing by video link from Belgium. He faces arrest in Spain for sedition and rebellion. "Parliamentary rules are very clear," Spanish government spokesman Inigo Mendez de Vigo said, at a weekly press conference. "They do not contemplate the possibility of a (parliamentary) presence that is not in person." Puigdemont spearheaded a movement last year for the wealthy northeastern region of Catalonia to split from Spain, culminating in Madrid sacking his administration and imposing direct rule. He moved to Brussels shortly afterwards.

BORNO, Nigeria (Dispatches) -- Boko Haram Takfiri terrorists have killed at least 20 loggers, militia members and residents said on Friday, in the latest attack against civilians in Borno. The attack happened on Monday when gunmen on motorbikes opened fire on a group of loggers collecting firewood at Kaje village, near the Borno state capital, Maiduguri. "They (Boko Haram) killed 20 people in the attack. Fifteen others are missing and presumed kidnapped by the attackers," civilian militia leader Ibrahim Liman told AFP. Details of the attack have been slow to emerge due to limited communications infrastructure after years of fighting in the remote region. Kaje resident Shuaibu Sidi corroborated Liman's account and said his brother was among the dead. The federal government and military maintain that the Takfiri militants, who have pledged allegiance to Daesh, are on the verge of defeat.

VIENNA (AFP) -- Austria's new far-right interior minister sparked an outcry Thursday by saying that his government wants to "concentrate" asylum-seekers, employing a word widely associated with Nazi camps. Herbert Kickl told a news conference he wants "basic services centers, suitable infrastructure that enables us to concentrate people in the asylum process in one place". The comments quickly provoked outrage, with Alexander Pollak, head of migrants charity SOS Mimmensch, calling it a "deliberate provocation" and left-wing essayist Robert Misik saying "a Rubicon has been crossed". The opposition Green Party warned against the "language of National Socialism creeping into our way of thinking and feeling", while the NEOS party said Kickl must apologize for his "deliberate provocation". Kickl, who became interior minister last month when his Freedom Party (FPÖ) formed a coalition with the center-right following elections in October, back-peddled, saying he did not "intend to provoke anyone".

NEW DELHI (Reuters) -- India launched its 100th satellite on Friday as Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeks to project the country as a global low-cost provider of services in space. A total of 31 small satellites were launched into space on Friday. More than half of the micro and nano satellites were for the United States, and the remainder India, Canada, Finland, France, South Korea and the United Kingdom. India's space program has a budget of around \$4 billion and Modi's government hopes the latest launches will improve its prospects of winning a larger share of the more than \$300 billion global space industry.