

# Opposition ‘Plebiscite’ Seeks to Topple Maduro



Nearly 100 people have died in Western-backed riots in Venezuela since the beginning of April.

CARACAS (Dispatches) – Some Venezuelans went to the polls Sunday in a vote organized by the pro-Western opposition aimed at gauging public support for Maduro’s plan to rewrite the constitution, against a backdrop of worsening political violence.

Authorities are refusing to greenlight a vote presented as an act of civil disobedience and supporters of President Nicolas Maduro have boycotted it.

The “plebiscite” comes two weeks ahead of a Maduro-backed vote to elect a citizens’ body that would revise the constitution. The opposition has told its supporters to stay away.

The opposition’s muscle flexing is stoking fears of more riots and running street battles with police, which have been persistent for the past three and a half months. Nearly 100 people have died in the unrest since the beginning of April.

While Maduro is deeply unpopular among the protesters, he enjoys backing from mostly poor parts of the population and, most importantly, from the military.

Maduro, giving a national radio and TV broadcast, portrayed the vote as merely an “internal consultation by the opposition parties” with no electoral legitimacy.

“I call on all Venezuelans to participate

peacefully in political events tomorrow, with respect for others’ ideas, with no incidents. Peace is what I ask,” he said.

He said the opposition was tied to foreign powers - implied to be the “imperialist” United States - with the aim of toppling his government. The international media, he said, was covering the opposition vote in a way to justify foreign intervention.

Five former Latin American presidents - from Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico and two from Costa Rica - were in Venezuela at the opposition’s invitation to act as observers of the vote, alongside electoral experts from various countries.

Former Mexican leader Vicente Fox said on arriving in Caracas that the vote could be the “beginning of the end” of Maduro’s government.

On Friday, UN Secretary-General Guterres said talks were “urgently” needed between the opposition and government to stem the violence and find a “constitutional path” to peace.

Latin America expert Isaac Bigio said the opposition is calling for a referendum to topple Maduro and if the method does not work, they will push for a military coup.

The referendum is not going to have “any legal binding” but “the opposition will try to use that to little by little undermine this government” and to ask for a military “coup d’état” against President Maduro, he told Press TV on Sunday.

## U.S. House Passes Bill on India Military Ties



U.S. President Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi gesture at the White House on June 26, 2017.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- **The U.S. House of Representatives has passed a \$621.5 billion military expenditure bill that proposes to advance military cooperation with India.**

An India-related amendment was passed by the House as part of the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), beginning on October 1 of this year.

The amendment, sponsored by Indian-American Congressman Ami Bera, requires the Pentagon chief in consultation with the secretary of state, to develop a strategy for advancing military cooperation between the U.S. and India.

“I am grateful this amendment passed and look forward to the Defense Department’s strategy that addresses critical issues like common security challenges, the role of partners and allies, and areas for collaboration in science and technology,” Bera said.

“It is vitally important to develop a strategy that advances defense cooperation between our two nations,” he said.

NDAA needs to be passed by the Senate, which is the upper chamber

of Congress, before it can be sent to the White House for the U.S. President Donald Trump to sign into law.

The 2017 NDAA had designated New Delhi as a major military partner of Washington, which brings India at par with closest U.S. partners in terms of arms trade and technology transfer.

On Friday, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a massive military bill for the year 2018 that far exceeds Trump’s previous budget request.

The bill allows the allocation of a military budget of \$696 billion for the fiscal year 2018, which blows past Trump’s requested \$603 billion budget.

The bill also exceeds a strict military spending cap of \$549bn imposed under the 2011 Budget Control Act by about \$72 billion.

The U.S. already has the highest military spending in the world. The new budget increase serves to further expand the U.S. military as Trump has promised.

Trump has pledged a “massive” increase in the pentagon’s budget spending to implement “the greatest military build-up in American history.”

## New Kidnappings Hit Restive Philippine Island

JOLO, Philippines (Dispatches) -- **Suspected Abu Sayyaf gunmen abducted four workers in a school in a southern Philippine province where President Rodrigo Duterte visited troops waging an offensive against the militants, officials said Sunday.**

About 20 militants barged into a grade school compound in Sulu province’s Patikul town shortly after midnight Saturday and seized six painters and carpenters, one of whom managed to escape and alerted the police. Army troops later rescued another worker.

Duterte pinned medals on wounded

troops during brief visit Saturday to Sulu, a predominantly Muslim province about 950 kilometers south of Manila.

The tough-talking president has ordered government forces to destroy the ransom-seeking militants who still hold several foreign and Filipino hostages in Sulu’s jungles.

Fourteen inmates, including suspected Abu Sayyaf fighters and drug dealers, meanwhile escaped early Sunday from a jail in a new building that also houses the police headquarters in a government compound in Sulu’s main town of Jolo, officials said.

Three of those who escaped were gunned down by police and another was shot and captured. Army troops were helping police track down the rest with the use of military drones and sniffer dogs, a police statement said.

The new kidnappings and jailbreak reflect the diverse security challenges confronting Duterte’s administration in the south, where thousands of troops have been separately battling militants aligned with Daesh who laid siege to Marawi city on May 23.

After 55 days of fighting, more than 530 people, including 399 militants and 93 soldiers and police, have died in the violence in the lakeside city.

Troops, backed by airstrikes, are fighting less than 100 remaining militants, who are holding an unspecified number of civilian hostages in four Marawi neighborhoods in an offensive that Duterte said last week was winding down and may end in about 10 to 15 days. He said that the offensive won’t stop until the last militant is killed.



SYDNEY, Australia (Reuters) -- The perpetrators who brought down Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 in July 2014, killing all 298 aboard, may be tried in absentia, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said Sunday.

Most of those on board the Boeing 777 were Dutch, but others came from 17 countries, including 38 Australians. It was shot down by a Russian-made Buk missile over eastern Ukrainian territory held by pro-Russia separatists, the Dutch Safety Board concluded in 2015. Bishop said “every legal avenue” was being pursued, and urged Russia to comply with UN Security Council resolution 2166, authored by Australia.

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LONDON (AP) -- British police have charged a teenager with a spate of London acid attacks, as authorities consider whether tougher sentences would curb a spike in assaults with corrosive liquids.

The Metropolitan Police force says a 16-year-old boy faces 15 charges, including grievous bodily harm. The boy, who can’t be named because of his age, was arrested after five moped riders were attacked during a 90-minute period last week. Police say the number of reported attacks with corrosive liquids in London rose from 261 in 2015 to 454 in 2016. The government says it is considering increasing sentences for acid attacks to a maximum of life.

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PARIS (AP) -- French President Emmanuel Macron says his glamorous Paris charm offensive on Donald Trump was carefully calculated - and may have changed the U.S. president’s mind about climate change.

Macron defended his outreach to Trump, whose “America first” policies have elicited worry and disdain in Europe. “Our countries are friends, so we should be too,” Macron said in an interview Sunday in the Journal du dimanche newspaper. After a tense, white-knuckle handshake at their first meeting in May, Macron said they gained “better, intimate knowledge of each other” during Trump’s visit to Paris last week.

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BRUSSELS (Reuters) -- EU officials hope the British government shows more urgency about a Brexit deal when its negotiators come to Brussels on Monday for a first full round of talks aimed at smoothing Britain’s departure.

“The hard work starts now,” European Union chief negotiator Michel Barnier said on Wednesday, again sounding a note of alarm that London has yet to provide detailed proposals on a range of key issues, with barely a year left for bargaining. Prime Minister Theresa May’s top team of ministers are increasingly convinced of the need for a transition period as Britain leaves the European Union, finance minister Philip Hammond said Sunday.

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BRUSSELS (Dispatches) -- NATO’s Secretary General spoke to the Turkish and German foreign ministers last week to urge them to resolve their differences over visits to Turkish air bases, part of a wider row between the two allies.

German soldiers contribute to a NATO air surveillance mission at Konya, 250 km (155 miles) south of the Turkish capital Ankara, and its troops stationed at another air base, in Incirlik, have already been moved to Jordan. NATO said Jens Stoltenberg had called Sigmar Gabriel and Mevlut Cavusoglu on Friday to ask them to settle the disputes. “We hope that Germany and Turkey are able to find a mutually acceptable date for a visit,” a NATO spokesman said.

## Libya on Brink of Proxy War for Control of Tripoli

TRIPOLI (Dispatches) -- **As chaos reigns in Libya, with competing authorities continuing to vie for power, the battle for Tripoli appears to have begun anew.**

Clashes broke out earlier this week, in the east of the capital city, between forces loyal to the Government of National Accord (GNA) and those loyal to the National Guard of the Salvation Government (SG).

The capital is an important target for warring sides in the region, offering control over strategic assets such as the Libyan Central Bank, the air and sea ports in the city, as well as all other institutions.

The Garabulli region, where the clashes took place, is considered a strategic gateway into the city, and fighting there may have been intended to be the start of a wider battle.

The clashes left at least four dead and over 20 injured, according to the UN-backed government’s health ministry, with the SG forces being pushed further from the city.

Each of the parties is being steered by external governments. They are each backed by different countries, and the war they are fighting is not just a war between Libyans

The PC, based in the country’s western capital city Tripoli, was welcomed by much of the population with great optimism. However, over the year and four months in which it has been somewhat in power, public opinion of al-Sarraj and his government has plummeted.

Next is the Government of National Salvation, which presides over the General



Smoke rises in the center of the Libyan capital of Tripoli after the clashes on May 26, 2017.

National Congress elected in 2012, and which is also in Tripoli.

Finally, there is the third grouping in the east of the country, comprising various authorities, including military forces loyal to renegade general Khalifa Haftar and the House of Representatives.

The three power houses in the country have all had their sights set on the capital, with each enjoying backing from external powers.

The GNA has the support of the United States, but Tripoli has been rife with clashes and instability ever since the GNA came into

the city last year.

The government in the east has the support of the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, with the UAE breaking an arms embargo by supplying Haftar’s forces with military supplies, according to the UN.

All of these parties want to control the capital, observers say, and all of the assets within it and surrounding it, including oil ports; claiming Tripoli would be the first step to controlling the rest of the country.

Accusations have also been made, by the UAE and others, against the SG that they are supported by Qatar and Turkey.

## Australia-U.S. Refugee Settlement Plan in Limbo



In this Sept. 21, 2001, file photo, men shave, brush their teeth and prepare for the day at a refugee camp on the Island of Nauru.

SYDNEY, Australia (AFP) -- **The abrupt departure of American officials from an Australian Pacific island refugee camp has fanned fears among asylum-seekers that plans to resettle them in the U.S. may not go**

ahead, an activist group said Sunday.

Canberra sends asylum-seekers who try to enter Australia by boat to camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island, but the conditions there have been criticized by refugee advocates and

medical professionals.

The Australian government struck a deal with Washington under former president Barack Obama to resettle some of those refugees in the U.S.

But doubts over the arrangement have persisted after President Donald Trump this year reportedly lambasted his Australian counterpart Malcolm Turnbull during a phone call and attacked it as a “dumb deal,” before agreeing to go ahead with the proposal.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security officials had been assessing the asylum-seekers at Nauru as part of the arrangement when they abruptly left the island on Friday and Saturday, Refugee Action Coalition spokesman Ian Rintoul said, days after the U.S. passed its annual 50,000-refugee intake cap.

“They’ve (the DHS officials) given the people on Nauru no indication that they are coming back,” Rintoul told AFP.

About 200 refugees on Nauru have undergone interviews and medical check-ups, while on Manus, some 70

had been through a similar process, Rintoul said.

“People are becoming increasingly doubtful that there is any deal,” he added.

The situation is particularly acute on Manus, with the camp set to close by October after a PNG Supreme Court ruling declared that holding people there was unconstitutional.

Australian Immigration Minister Peter Dutton has said those on Manus would not be moved to Australia and instead relocated to third countries such as the U.S. and Cambodia or resettled in PNG.

“News like this makes us feel dead. It defuses the spark of hope that we try to hold on to,” Manus refugee detainee Imran Mohammad, from Myanmar, said in a statement Sunday via Australia’s Human Rights Law Centre.

More than 800 men are being held on Manus, and 370 men, women and children are detained on Nauru, according to Australian immigration data ending May 31.