

Spain Moves to Dismiss Catalonia's Leaders



Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy presides a crisis cabinet meeting at the Moncloa Palace in Madrid on October 21, 2017.

MADRID (AFP) -- Spain said Saturday that it will move to dismiss Catalonia's separatist government and call fresh elections in the region in a bid to stop its leaders from declaring independence.

Speaking after an emergency cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy said his government had no choice after the administration of Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont acted in a way

that was "unilateral, contrary to the law and seeking confrontation" in holding a banned independence referendum in the northeastern region.

Taking Spain into uncharted legal waters by using Article 155 of the constitution, which allows Madrid to wrest back control of rebellious regions, Rajoy said he was asking the Senate to give him permission to dissolve the Catalan parliament and "call elections within a

maximum of six months."

He is also requesting that all of Puigdemont's government be stripped of their functions, which "in principle will be carried out by (national) ministers for the duration of this exceptional situation."

The national Senate will now have to agree to these unprecedented steps -- a process that will take about a week.

Rajoy's conservative Popular Party holds a majority in the Senate. As the measures enjoy the support of other major parties, they are highly likely to pass.

Catalonia sparked Spain's worst political crisis in decades with the chaotic referendum on October 1, which Puigdemont said resulted in a 90% vote in favor of breaking away from Spain.

But turnout was given as 43% as many anti-independence Catalans stayed away from the vote, which had been ruled illegal by the Constitutional Court, while others were hindered from voting by a police crackdown.

Trump to Release Secret Files on John F. Kennedy

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- U.S. President Donald Trump said on Saturday that, subject to receipt of further information, he planned to allow the opening of long-secret files on the November 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy that are scheduled for release next week.

Politico magazine earlier quoted Trump administration and other U.S. government officials as saying the president would almost certainly block the release of information from some of the thousands of classified files, which the U.S. National Archives is due to make public by an Oct. 26 deadline.

"Subject to the receipt of further information, I will be allowing, as President, the long blocked and classified JFK FILES to be opened," Trump said in a tweet.

The Nov. 22 1963 assassination cut short "Camelot," as the 1,000 days of the Kennedy presidency became known. Kennedy was 46 when he died and remains one of the most admired U.S. presidents.

Thousands of books, articles, TV shows, movies and documentaries have been produced about the assassination and surveys have shown that a majority of Americans still distrust official evidence that points to Lee Harvey Oswald as the sole killer.

Despite serious questions about the official inquest, and theories purporting that organized crime, Cuba or a cabal of U.S. security agents was involved, conspiracy theorists have yet to produce conclusive proof that Oswald acted in consort with anyone.

Over the years, the National Archives

has released most documents related to the case, but a final batch remains and only Trump has the authority to decide whether some should continue to be withheld or released in redacted form.

The Washington Post and other media have quoted officials as saying that government agencies have lobbied Trump to withhold some of the documents, arguing that some of the more recent files could expose relatively recent intelligence and law enforcement operations.

Saturday's Washington Post said Kennedy assassination experts do not think the last batch of papers contains any major bombshells, but may shed light on the activities of Oswald while he was traveling in Mexico City in late September 1963, and courting Cuban and Soviet spies.

Most Britons Think Brexit Going Badly



British PM Theresa May has admitted that Brexit negotiations have hit difficulty.

LONDON (Dispatches) -- The British public have delivered a damning verdict on the government's Brexit strategy after a new poll revealed a huge majority think negotiations with Brussels are going badly.

The exclusive BMG Research survey carried out before and during the European Council summit at which the prime minister won a small concession from EU leaders, shows more than three-quarters of people still think her

strategy is failing.

Almost half also think that the no-deal scenario threatened by ministers would be "bad" for Britain, and reject outright the hard Brexit plan to abandon talks at Christmas if the EU does not allow progress, according to the poll.

Still a majority want the government to continue negotiating, despite many still feeling the UK will come off worse than the EU in any eventual deal.

The polling undertaken between October 17 and 20 came after a tough European Council meeting at which Theresa May herself admitted talks had hit "difficulty", as she beseeched European leaders to give her a deal she could sell to the British public.

At the same time May is under increasing pressure in London to give no new concessions to the EU and walk away from negotiations if Brussels does not agree to start discussing a future trade deal by the next summit in December.

While EU leaders confirmed they would begin internal discussions in preparation for trade talks -- something expected for more than a week -- they made clear May must still give a stronger commitment to pay a bigger divorce bill.

May has said she does not want the negotiations to collapse, but has consistently threatened to walk away from talks if she does not get what she wants, coining the phrase in her Lancaster House speech "no deal is better than a bad deal."

The survey suggests almost half of people, some 46%, believe a deal is either "fairly" or "very" unlikely, with 37% believing the opposite and 17% saying they "don't know".

U.S. Flexes Muscles in Korean Peninsula After Drill



The aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan is escorted by South Korean military ships in Busan port, South Korea, after completing a joint drill with the South Korean military, Oct. 21, 2017.

BUSAN, South Korea (Dispatches) -- U.S. naval commanders on Saturday reiterated what they called Washington's "ironclad" commitment to South Korea as an American nuclear-powered aircraft carrier visited a South Korean port following a joint naval drill.

Rear Adm. Brad Cooper, commander of Naval Forces Korea, said aboard the USS Ronald Reagan that the drills enhanced the allies' ability to coordinate operations.

The five-day drills that ended Friday involved fighter jets, helicopters and 40 naval ships and submarines from the two countries training for what they called potential North Korean aggression.

In an apparent show of force against North Korea, the United States also sent several of its advanced warplanes, including four F-22 and F-35 fighter jets and two B-1B long-range bombers, for an air show and exhibition in Seoul that began on Tuesday.

The drills came ahead of President Donald Trump's first official visit to Asia next month

that's likely to be overshadowed by tensions with North Korea.

The allies regularly conduct joint military exercises that Pyongyang condemns as invasion rehearsals. North Korea's official Rodong Sinmun newspaper said Saturday that the latest naval drills have driven the situation of the Korean Peninsula to a "touch-and-go situation" and accused the allies of "getting frantic with the move to start a nuclear war."

The United States has been sending its strategic assets to the region more frequently for patrols or drills.

In recent months, North Korea has responded to the bellicose American moves by testing developmental intercontinental ballistic missiles that could potentially reach the U.S. mainland and conducting its most powerful nuclear test to date. It also flew two powerful new mid-range missiles over Japan between threats to fire the same weapons toward Guam, a U.S. Pacific territory and military hub.

Texas Links Hurricane Relief to Support for Israel



Aerial footage shows damage to Salt Grass Landing Apartments in Rockport, Texas, after Hurricane Harvey.

TEXAS (Dispatches) -- To receive Hurricane Harvey relief grants, residents and businesses from a small Texas city must pledge to not boycott the occupying regime of Israel, according to the city of Dickinson's application.

The application, found on Dickinson's website, includes a clause stating that any individual or business asking for financial assistance "does not boycott Israel" and "will not boycott Israel" if approved.

Dickinson Mayor Julie Masters, whose house was flooded by Harvey, told Middle East Eye that the clause was added because of a state law that forbids contractors to boycott the Zionist regime.

The law is known as the Anti-Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions law (Anti-BDS). Passed and signed into law in May, it was touted by Texas Governor Greg Abbott.

"As Israel's number one trading partner in the United States, Texas is proud to reaffirm its support for the people of Israel and we will continue to build on our historic partnership. Anti-Israel policies are anti-Texas policies, and we will not tolerate such actions against an important ally," he said.

Masters said Dickinson's attorney and the city are discussing the possibility of removing the clause. The town does not have a strong financial connection to the occupying regime of Israel, nor does it have many Zionist immigrants.

Houston-based civil rights attorney Randall

Kallinen told Middle East Eye that the clause is a violation of freedom of speech.

"It would violate the first amendment to the Constitution to require someone to abstain from a boycott of a country, because boycotts are treated the same as speech by the law," Kallinen said.

"The Supreme Court of the United States has already decided that boycotts are a form of free speech. You cannot premise disaster relief acceptance upon agreeing to not boycott someone," he said.

He also added that "there is no indication" the anti-BDS law applies to individuals.

Rights groups, including the ACLU, agree that the clause violates free speech.

"The First Amendment protects Americans' right to boycott, and the government cannot condition hurricane relief or any other public benefit on a commitment to refrain from protected political expression," ACLU of Texas Legal Director Andre Segura said in a news release.

Hurricane Harvey wrecked the Texas Gulf shore when it landed south of Houston, then moved slowly up the coast, dumping historic amounts of rainfall and flooding thousands of homes and businesses. Two university professors estimated that the total damage in the areas affected may reach almost \$200 billion.

According to police reports, 10,000 residents from Dickinson reported damages to more than 7,000 homes and 88 businesses.



TENBY, Wales (Reuters) -- Storm Brian battered towns in Ireland and along the western coast of England and Wales on Saturday, with gusts and high seas causing heavy damage to buildings.

Less than a week after Tropical Storm Ophelia killed three people, Ireland's weather office issued a warning that winds were likely to average 55 to 65 km per hour in western regions, with gusts topping 100 kph. In Tenby, a picturesque seaside town in Wales, waves tore through a wall of the harbor master's offices, leaving debris strewn across the promenade. Britain's Met Office also warned of strong winds, although not quite as intense as those blowing through Ireland. "These (winds) are expected to coincide with high tides, leading to locally dangerous conditions in coastal parts," said Met Office chief forecast Dan Suri. The Environment Agency warned flooding was possible in coastal areas. On Monday, Ophelia left more than 300,000 homes and businesses in Ireland without electricity, described by the country's power regulator as an unprecedented situation.

PRAGUE (AP) -- Czech citizens are voting for a second day in a parliamentary election that could install another euroskeptic government in Central Europe.

Two days of balloting that started Friday are being held to fill 200 seats in the Czech Republic's lower house of Parliament. Voting wraps up on Saturday afternoon and results are expected late in the day. The centrist ANO (YES) movement led by populist billionaire Andrej Babis was the front-runner heading into the election. Polls show he is likely to become the next prime minister despite allegations of fraud linked to EU subsidies. Babis has been critical of the European Union; he opposes the EU's quota system on redistributing refugees and setting a date for adopting the euro. Eight parties and groupings are in line to win seats.

NIAMEY (Dispatches) -- Twelve paramilitary police were killed Saturday in a fresh attack in Niger's restive southwest bordering Mali, the interior minister said.

"There was a new attack. Twelve gendarmes were killed. We have launched search operations," Mohamed Bazoum told AFP. It comes after an ambush at the beginning of October killed four U.S. and four Niger soldiers along the border, which has been regularly targeted by militant groups. The latest dawn raid happened in the town of Ayorou in the Tillaberi region, 200 kilometers (124 miles) northwest of the capital Niamey. A security source said the attackers arrived in five vehicles and fled when police reinforcements arrived. Villagers saw them leave carrying bodies.

SEOUL (AFP) -- Hundreds of demonstrators on Saturday called for the immediate release of South Korea's ousted president Park Geun-Hye whose corruption trial has been put on hold following mass resignations by her lawyers.

Park's trial was put on hold Thursday after her lawyers resigned in protest over what they called biased proceedings following a court decision to extend her detention warrant for another six months. Park condemned the trial as "political revenge" in her first public statement since she was arrested, while her lawyers protested over the extension of the warrant, saying that the principle of the presumption of innocence was "collapsing". A crowd of some 1,000 pro-Park protesters marched through Seoul for more than an hour, chanting slogans and waving South Korean and U.S. flags. "Release President Park Geun-Hye immediately," they chanted. The sprawling scandal involving the 65-year-old former leader and her powerful secret confidante, Choi Soon-Sil, unleashed massive nationwide protests last year, culminating in her impeachment in March.

KUALA LUMPUR (AFP) -- Two workers were found dead and 12 others were missing Saturday after a landslide at a construction site on the popular Malaysian tourist island of Penang, officials said.

Rescuers rushed to the Tanjung Bungah area on the north of Penang after the accident was reported just before 9:00 am (0100 GMT), the fire and rescue department said. Pictures showed large piles of earth had slipped off a hillside onto the site, where houses were being built. Two bodies were pulled from the mud and twelve others were still missing, said Anuar Omar, a local police official. He said the victims were believed to be migrant workers. Many foreigners work in low-paying, physically-demanding industries such as construction in Malaysia.

VALLETTA (AP) -- Malta's government is offering a \$1.18 million reward and full protection for anyone with information on who killed an investigative reporter with a car bomb. The government statement Saturday called the Oct. 16 car bomb slaying of Daphne Caruana Galizia, whose reporting on corruption targeted the prime minister and other top figures on the southern Mediterranean island, a "case of extraordinary importance." It said it is offering the "unprecedented" reward to whoever comes forward with information leading to the identification of those responsible for the bombing, which stunned the tiny EU island nation.