



SEOUL (Dispatches) -- A Russian delegation has arrived in North Korea, state media said Wednesday, hours after Secretary of State Rex Tillerson indicated the United States is open to talks with Kim Jong Un's government without preconditions. Victor Kalganov, vice-director of Russia's National Defense Command Center, was pictured at Pyongyang's airport alongside three other officials from the country's defense ministry in an image released by the state-run KCNA news agency. Russian state news agency Interfax gave no details of Wednesday's North Korea visit, but reported that Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov had welcomed Tillerson's comments.

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (Reuters) -- Democrat Doug Jones won a bitter fight for a U.S. Senate seat in deeply conservative Alabama on Tuesday, dealing a political blow to President Donald Trump in a race marked by sexual misconduct accusations against Republican candidate Roy Moore. The stunning upset makes Jones the first Democrat elected to the U.S. Senate from Alabama in a quarter-century and will trim the Republicans' already narrow Senate majority to 51-49, opening the door for Democrats to possibly retake the chamber in next year's congressional elections. The ugly campaign drew national attention and split the Republican Party following accusations by several women that Moore sexually assaulted or pursued them when they were teens and he was in his 30s. Trump endorsed Moore even as other party leaders in Washington walked away from him, but Jones, 63, a former federal prosecutor, portrayed the campaign as a referendum on decency and promised the state's voters he would not embarrass them in Washington.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Two FBI officials who would later be assigned to the special counsel's investigation into Donald Trump's presidential campaign described him with insults like "idiot" and "loathsome human" in a series of text messages last year, according to copies of the messages. One of the officials said in an election night text that the prospect of a Trump victory was "terrifying." Peter Strzok, a veteran FBI counterintelligence agent, was removed over the summer from special counsel Robert Mueller's team following the discovery of text messages exchanged with Lisa Page, an FBI lawyer who was also detailed this year to the group of agents and prosecutors investigating potential coordination between Russia and Trump's Republican campaign.

COPENHAGEN (Dispatches) -- The Danish Immigration Authority has added Saudi preacher Abdullah bin Radi Almoaede al-Shammari to a 'blacklist' of 10 foreign clerics barred from entering the country amid allegations that these individuals promote hate speech. The country's Minister for Immigration Inger Stojberg welcomed the announcement Tuesday. "Hate preachers have no business being in Denmark. They travel around spreading hateful messages and try to convince others to share their rapturous views," Stojberg said. "That's why I'm glad to see that the Immigration Authority is doing a good job by continually discovering these hate preachers," the minister added. There were six people on the list, including two Saudis, one Syrian, one Canadian, and two Americans, when it was first published in May this year. Several other individuals were added to the list in June and in August.

PARIS (Reuters) -- French President Emmanuel Macron delivered a bleak assessment on the global fight against climate change to dozens of world leaders and company executives, telling them: "We are losing the battle." "We're not moving quickly enough. We all need to act," Macron said, seeking to breathe new life into a collective effort that was weakened this summer when President Donald Trump said he was pulling the United States out of an international accord brokered in the French capital two years ago. Macron, who has worked to establish his role as a global leader since his sweeping election win in May, said modern-day science was revealing with each day the danger that global warming posed to the planet, he said. "We are losing the battle," he said, urging a new phase in the fight against global warming.

VIENNA (AFP) -- The major European gas pipeline hub in Austria that suffered a deadly explosion on Tuesday has resumed pumping gas abroad, its operator said Wednesday. "All transit connections were put into operation again before midnight and are 100-percent operational," Harald Stindl, Gas Connect Austria chief, told Oe1 public radio. The explosion at the Baumgarten site on Tuesday killed one person and left 18 others injured, including one seriously. The cause is currently being investigated. The compressor station in eastern Austria is one of Europe's main entry points for Russian gas and pumps it onwards to other countries including Italy and Germany. It handles around 40 billion cubic meters of gas per year, or six million cubic meters per hour, equating to some 10% of the continent's needs.

Tillerson Offers: Talks With North Korea 'Without Preconditions'



U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson made remarks on the U.S.-Korea relationship during a forum at the Atlantic Council in Washington, December 12, 2017.

WASHINGTON/SEOUL (Dispatches) -- U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson offered to begin direct talks with North Korea without preconditions, backing away from a key U.S. demand that Pyongyang must first accept that giving up its nuclear arsenal would be part of any negotiations. Tillerson's new diplomatic overture comes nearly two weeks after North Korea said it had successfully tested a breakthrough intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that put the entire United States mainland within range of its nuclear weapons. "Let's just meet," Tillerson said in a speech to Washington's Atlantic Council think tank on Tuesday. The White House later issued an ambiguous statement that left unclear whether President Donald Trump - who has said Tillerson was wasting his time pursuing dialogue with North Korea - had given his approval for the speech. "The president's views on North Korea have not changed," the White House said. "North Korea is acting in an unsafe way ... North Korea's actions are not good for anyone and certainly not good

for North Korea." In Beijing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang said China welcomed all efforts to ease tension and promote dialogue to resolve the problem. China hopes the United States and North Korea can meet each other half-way and take meaningful steps on dialogue and contact, he told reporters. Ahead of Tillerson's speech, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un vowed to develop more nuclear weapons while personally decorating scientists and officials who contributed to the development of Pyongyang's most advanced ICBM, state media said on Wednesday. Kim said on Tuesday the scientists and workers would continue manufacturing "more latest weapons and equipment" to "bolster up the nuclear force in quality and quantity", the KCNA news agency said. While reiterating Washington's longstanding position that it cannot tolerate a nuclear-armed North Korea, Tillerson said the United States was "ready to talk any time they're ready to talk", but there would first have to be a "period of quiet" without nuclear and missile tests.

France Expresses Concerns: Russia Seeks UN Green Light to Send Arms to CAR



Central African Republic's President Faustin-Archange Touadera inspects a guard of honor troops upon his arrival at the presidential palace in Abidjan on November 7, 2016.

UNITED NATIONS (Dispatches) -- Russia has asked the UN Security Council for permission to supply light arms and ammunition to the struggling armed forces of the Central African Republic beginning next week. The move has raised concerns from France which has stepped up its military involvement in Africa, recalling its colonial past. According to a Security Council diplomat quoted by AFP, France has questioned Russia's plan. Russia is asking for an exemption to the arms embargo imposed on the Central African Republic in 2013 when the impoverished country descended into violence. CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadera asked Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov for the military assistance during talks at the Black Sea resort of Sochi in October, a diplomat said. Russia is proposing to provide two battalions totaling 1,300 men — who were recently trained by the European Union — with automatic rifles, pistols and ammunition. Council members had until Wednesday at 3:00 pm (2000 GMT) to consider the request. If no objections are raised, Russia will

receive a green light for the shipments that would begin next week, according to the request. A first shipment is planned for Monday, with two others scheduled for February 1 and April 1. Russian defense ministry officials travelled to CAR on November 25 to 27 to review the newly trained forces and discuss the military aid. "Having assessed the situation in CAR, the Russian side agreed with the opinion of this country's leadership on the necessity to increase the overall strength of the armed forces of the Central African Republic," said the request from the Russian mission to the United Nations. Moscow has also agreed to provide training to CAR's forces but that deal has yet to be approved by the council's sanctions committee. The Central African Republic has been struggling to return to stability since the country exploded into bloodshed after the 2013 overthrow of longtime leader Francois Bozize by the Seleka rebel alliance. France intervened militarily to push out the Seleka alliance but the country remains plagued with violence pitting groups competing for control of resources and areas of influence.

To 'Fully Restore U.S. Military Might': Trump Signs Massive Bill on Military Spending



U.S. President Donald Trump takes the cap off a pen to sign an executive order to start the Mexico border wall project at the Department of Homeland Security facility in Washington, DC, on January 25, 2017.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- President Donald Trump Tuesday signed a massive bill on military spending that he said would help America bolster its military might and modernize the services. The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) calls for nearly \$700 billion of military spending for the coming fiscal year, but Congress has yet to fully fund it. "With the signing of this defense bill, we accelerate the process of fully restoring America's military might," Trump said at a White House signing

ceremony, where he was flanked by Pentagon top brass including Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. "This legislation will enhance our readiness ... and modernize our forces, and help provide our service members with the tools that they need to fight and to win." While the NDAA passed Congress with bipartisan support, lawmakers have not agreed on how to fund the mammoth spending package, which amounts to more than that of the world's next seven militaries combined. Trump called on Democrats in Con-

gress to get in line with Republicans and back a "clean funding bill." The tough-talking U.S. president also took aim at Obama-era budget caps known as sequestration, which Republicans in Congress love to hate. "Congress must finish the job by eliminating the defense sequester and passing a clean appropriations bill," Trump said. "I think it's going to happen. We need our military. It's got to be perfect." Trump campaigned on the pledge of increasing military spending and has said America needs more ships, submarines, troops and missiles. He said the NDAA would give troops their biggest pay increase in eight years. In signing the bill, Trump said the United States military "has got to be perfect" but less than three hours later, he pointed out the bill's imperfections in a signing statement. Among them were a variety of provisions lawmakers included to force a more aggressive U.S. policy toward Russia. The bill restricts military cooperation with Russia, prohibits the United States from recognizing Russia's legal right to the disputed Crimea peninsula, and requires the military to "develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to counter threats by the Russian Federation" — including Russia's use of disinformation, social media and support for political parties.

EU Toughens Brexit Position Over UK Comments



European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker, right, holds talks with British Prime Minister Theresa May.

STRASBOURG, France (Dispatches) -- The EU has hardened its position on Brexit trade talks after "unacceptable" comments by a British minister that risk undermining negotiations, the European Parliament's Brexit coordinator Guy Verhofstadt said. Britain's David Davis has caused alarm by saying a deal struck last Friday to agree separation arrangements and open talks on future relations was a "statement of intent" rather than "legally enforceable." Verhofstadt said that following Davis' remarks made Sunday, EU

leaders meeting for a summit this week would now insist on the divorce terms being legally binding. "I have seen a hardening of the position of the council (EU leaders), and there will be a hardening position of the Parliament," which will vote on a Brexit motion Wednesday, Verhofstadt told reporters at the Parliament in Strasbourg, France. "It's clear that the European Council will be more strict now in saying ... we want that these commitments are translated into legal texts before we make progress in the second phase." The European Parliament itself was

now adding two amendments to a resolution it voted on Wednesday, including one that unusually mentions Davis by name and says his comments "risk to undermine the good faith that has been built during the negotiations." Davis Sunday told the BBC that Britain would not honor its 35-39 billion-pound (\$47-52 billion) divorce bill as agreed under last week's deal if it fails to secure a future EU trade agreement when it leaves in March 2019. But the EU has said that while the text of Friday's deal sealed by British Prime Minister Theresa May and European Commission Chief Jean-Claude Juncker is for now a "deal between gentlemen," it will become legally binding as part of Britain's withdrawal agreement. Philippe Lamberts, the Green group's representative in the European Parliament's Brexit steering group, said Britain's attitude now would hurt its bid to reach post-Brexit trade deals with other countries. "How can Britain be taken seriously globally if it behaves like a gangster in its international relationships?" Lamberts said. The EU negotiating guidelines that national leaders are set to adopt in Brussels Friday will say phase two talks can only start once the divorce commitments are "translated faithfully in legal terms," according to a draft seen by AFP.

Philippines Extends Martial Law in Volatile South

MANILA, Philippines (Dispatches) -- The Philippine Congress voted overwhelmingly Wednesday to approve President Rodrigo Duterte's request to extend martial law in the south by a year after the military warned that terrorist threats continue to lurk in the region despite the defeat of a disastrous pro-Daesh group siege. A majority of the Senate and the House of Representatives - with 240 voting to approve and 27 opposing - backed the extension of martial law across the Mindanao region through the end of 2018. The vote followed warnings by Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana and other officials that Daesh-linked militants were trying to recover from their defeat in southern Marawi city and were plotting new attacks. "The rebellion has not stopped, it has just moved to another place," Lorenzana told senators and House members in a special joint session. Several lawmakers from the south backed martial law, saying it would prevent a repeat of the bloody Marawi siege and foster the Islamic city's rebuilding. Five months of intense fighting, including daily airstrikes and artillery bombardment by the military on hundreds of militants, left more than 1,100 combatants and noncombatants dead and displaced about half a million people, turning mosque-studded Marawi's central business and residential districts into a smoldering war zone.

Lorenzana said it would take at least three years to rebuild Marawi, a bastion of Islamic faith in the predominantly Roman Catholic Philippines. Opponents argued that extending martial law in the south is unconstitutional because it's an "extreme measure" that can only be imposed when actual rebellions against the government exist. They expressed fears that such a move can be a prelude for Duterte to declare martial law throughout the Philippines. Sen. Francis Pangilinan, who heads the main opposition Liberal Party, rejected the martial law extension, saying it did not have a clear constitutional basis. He cited the government's declaration that the terrorists have been defeated in Marawi, and said that major rebel attacks have been dealt with by past presidents without resorting to martial law. "We will be in danger of becoming the monsters that we seek to defeat, those who have no regard for law, order or respect for the constitution," Pangilinan said. Opposition Rep. Tom Villarin said the remaining threats posed by militants in the south could be addressed by law enforcers without martial law and added that scheduled local elections in the south could be endangered by Duterte's declaration. Another opposition legislator, Edgar Erice, warned that the Philippines risks being regarded as a "banana republic" if officials flaunt the constitution.