

Russia Warns of 'Uncontrolled Escalation' in Korean Crisis



U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson attends a United Nations Security Council meeting on North Korea's nuclear program at UN headquarters in New York, December 15, 2017.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- Russian deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov Saturday warned of a risk of escalation after Washington toughened its stance on North Korea nuclear talks and U.S. President Donald Trump accused Moscow of failing to help.

"It's sad that this powerful element of demands for further pressure on Pyongyang has once again appeared in the American position," Ryabkov told RIA Novosti news agency.

"It's high time to stop this race

of threats, pressure, blackmail and presentation of preconditions and shift to a real search for a political solution," Ryabkov said.

He said that both Pyongyang and Washington are now putting forward preconditions for talks and there is a "risk of uncontrolled escalation".

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on Friday at the United Nations Security Council backed away from an earlier offer of unconditional talks to end the standoff with Pyongyang, apparently

under White House pressure.

Trump on Friday complained that "Russia is not helping" to pressure North Korea to halt its nuclear weapons program.

Ryabkov said that "after the UN Security Council session and speeches by senior representatives of Western countries, we got the impression that the logic of pressure is the dominant one in their approach".

He warned that the current situation is "extremely dangerous".

"We wouldn't like to end up in a situation where despite all the efforts by Russia and North Korea and by our two countries jointly, yet another spiral of confrontation begins."

Moscow had close ties with its far eastern neighbor during the Soviet era when the countries shared Communist ideology and they still have relatively warm relations.

Both Pyongyang's chief ally China and Russia argue that sanctions alone will not compel North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un to change course and want to step up diplomatic efforts to achieve a solution.

Ryabkov called for "openness and dialogue from both Pyongyang and Washington, mutual restraint and an aim to work out a starting point for a diplomatic step forward".

'Pharaonic' Macron Celebrates Birthday With Pomp



French President Emmanuel Macron is driven up the Champs Elysees in a tactical vehicle on the day of his inauguration on May 17, 2017.

PARIS (Dispatches) -- French President Emmanuel Macron celebrated his birthday Saturday at the iconic chateau of King Francois I, a choice that could feed into perceptions of a "president of the rich".

Macron, who turns 40 on Thursday, is spending the weekend with his wife Brigitte and extended family at the chateau of Chambord in France's Loire Valley, the French daily La Nouvelle Republique reported.

With its fairy tale facade, elaborately turreted roofline and vast grounds, Chambord is probably the valley's best-known Renaissance chateau, located about 200 kilometers southwest of Paris.

Macron and his family will stay at one of the cottages on the vast estate, French media said, with a birthday gala held Saturday evening in one of the castle's 440 rooms.

The estate has several 4-star guest houses which can be rented for 1,000 euros (\$950-\$1,200) per weekend.

The Elysee Palace said Macron and his wife were using private funds to pay for their stay.

Commissioned nearly 500 years ago by King Francois I (1494-1547), the immense chateau remains the largest of the Loire grand estates, boasting 365 chimneys and a 5,500-hectare (21-square mile) estate.

It also boasts the largest enclosed forest park in Europe, a long-time favorite for presidential hunts.

The chateau, which attracts some two million visitors each year, has been listed as a regional UNESCO World

Heritage cultural site. Macron, a media darling during

his campaign, has seen his image as a monarchical or even "pharaonic" leader climb from the night of his election, which featured a theatrical production at the foot of the Louvre pyramid in Paris.

Several newspapers have also expressed unease over the growing concentration of power in the presidency, and critics have said his use of executive orders to ram through landmark reform in September did not help matters.

In July, the cover of the left-wing Liberation newspaper mockingly depicted him as Jupiter, the Roman god of gods, and accused him of failing to share power -- an accusation echoed by Le Monde daily.

Jupiter is now regularly used by Macron's critics who accuse his centrist government of favoring the rich.

South Africa Kicks Off Fight to Replace Zuma



Delegates chant slogans as they arrive for the 54th National Conference of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) at the Nasrec Expo Centre in Johannesburg, South Africa December 16, 2017.

JOHANNESBURG (AP) -- The fight to replace South Africa's scandal-prone President Jacob Zuma was set to begin Saturday as thousands of delegates of the ruling African National Congress gathered to elect a new leader.

The reputation of Nelson Mandela's liberation movement has been battered during the tenure of Zuma, whose second term as party president is up. The new ANC leader is likely to become South Africa's next president in 2019 elections.

The two clear front-runners are

Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, former chair of the African Union Commission and Zuma's ex-wife.

Voters are frustrated with the ANC as Zuma's administration has been mired in scandal and corruption allegations. Africa's oldest liberation movement, which celebrated its 105th anniversary this year, led the fight against the system of white minority rule known as apartheid and has governed South Africa since the first democratic elections in 1994.

Observers say the party needs to

Austrian Far-Right Parties Form Government



Heinz-Christian Strache, left, chairman of the right-wing FPÖ at a press conference with leader of ÖVP Sebastian Kurz after forming a new coalition government in Vienna, Dec. 15, 2017.

VIENNA (AFP) -- The heads of Austria's conservative and far-right parties briefed the president on their new coalition deal on Saturday, following elections that saw the Alpine country swing to the right.

Sebastian Kurz's People's Party (ÖVP) and the Freedom Party (FPÖ) struck the agreement late Friday, setting Kurz up to become chancellor and also the world's youngest leader at 31.

The parties were due later Saturday to rubber-stamp the accord before a joint press conference by Kurz and FPÖ chief Heinz-Christian Strache to outline their program.

The ÖVP came first in the October 15 vote with 31.5% after Kurz, nicknamed "wunderwuzzi" ("whizz-kid"), rebranded the staid party as his own personal "movement", promising to get tough on immigration and lower taxes.

The anti-immigration FPÖ came third with 26% of the vote, double the stunning 13% notched by Alternative for Germany (AfD) in elections the month before.

Kurz and Strache stoked concerns about immigration following a record influx in 2015 and fatigue with the ÖVP's previous "grand coalition" with the Social Democrats (SPÖ).

This was mirrored elsewhere, with Geert Wilders' Freedom Party now the second-largest in the Netherlands, France's National Front in a runoff for the presidency in May and AfD entering the Bundestag and re-drawing Germany's political map.

"Our aims are quite clear. We want to ease the tax burden for people, we want to strengthen our economy, which will

bolster our social system," Kurz said late Friday.

"And first and foremost we want to increase security in our country, including by combating illegal immigration," Kurz told reporters in a joint news conference with Strache.

Strache, 48, is set to be deputy chancellor and press reports suggest that his party has also secured the interior and defense ministries.

A seasoned diplomat, Karin Kneissl, close to the FPÖ but not a member, will be foreign minister, media reports say.

EU Warns UK: Brexit Talks to Get Tougher

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) -- EU leaders have warned Theresa May that the second phase of Brexit talks will be harder and "more challenging" than the first, as the spotlight turns to the difficulties Britain's negotiators will face in the coming months.

The EU27's new red lines, released at the end of the Prime Minister's most successful Brussels summit since taking office, show that the EU will make a series of demands already on their way to enraging hardline Brexiters in May's Cabinet and party.

The new European Council guidelines to their negotiators show there will be no full trade talks between the two sides until next March, and that UK will be made to implement all new EU rules created by the EU27 during the transition period, without any say in drawing them up.

EU negotiators are also preparing to demand that Britain follow EU customs rules while in its two-year transition period, a move that would bar the UK from inking the third-party trade deals beloved of Cabinet ministers like Liam Fox.

The demands have already angered Tory Eurosceptic hardliners, who see negotiating trade deals around the world and freedom from Brussels regulations as key red lines in their vision for a post-EU Britain.

"The second phase will be more demanding, more challenging than the first phase," European Council President Donald Tusk told reporters in Brussels at a press conference following EU leaders' meeting.

German chancellor Angela Merkel echoed his comments. Speaking at a separate joint press conference with French President Emmanuel Macron at the summit, she warned that the UK needed to present more detail before talks could begin in earnest.

"The most difficult phase is ahead of us. Britain has to tell us what they want," she said.

Ireland's PM Leo Varadkar said talks had reached a "staging point" but that all issues were far from resolved.

"We're only at the end of phase one," he said, adding: "We're going to have to stay very vigilant. There certainly isn't any room for complacency."



TACLOBAN, Philippines (AFP) -- At least three people were killed and tens of thousands were driven from their homes by floods as Tropical Storm Kai-Tak pounded the eastern Philippines Saturday, cutting off power and triggering landslides, officials said.

Kai-Tak, packing gusts of up to 110 kilometers an hour, hit the country's third-largest island Samar in the afternoon and tore through a region devastated by Super Typhoon Haiyan four years ago, the state weather service said. Local officials reported three deaths on neighboring Leyte island -- a two-year-old boy who drowned in the town of Mahaplag, a woman buried by a landslide and another person who fell into a flooded manhole in Ormoc city. Samar and Leyte, with a combined population of about 4.5 million, had borne the brunt of Haiyan in 2013, which left more than 7,350 people dead or missing. Strong winds toppled trees and power pylons, knocking out power throughout the region while floods, small landslides and rock falls blocked roads and buried some homes, local officials and witnesses said.

SYDNEY (Dispatches) -- Australia's ruling coalition won a strong victory at a crucial special election on Saturday that was heralded as a "renaissance" for the embattled Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Following a vicious campaign, Liberal MP John Alexander won a by-election in Sydney to ensure that the Liberal-National Coalition held onto its one-seat majority in Parliament. The victory will help bolster the leadership of Turnbull, who has come under heavy pressure due to the coalition's poor standing in the national opinion polls. The by-election, in the seat of Bennelong, was held after Alexander was forced to resign because he realized that he was a dual citizen via his British father. Australia has experienced an ongoing crisis in recent months which has forced nine MPs out of parliament after it forced them were in breach of a ban on political candidates holding a foreign citizenship.

LONDON (Dispatches) -- UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson has warned that missiles being developed by North Korea could hit Britain within six months.

Johnson made the comments at a private meeting with Conservative members of parliament. Britain's top diplomat also said the United States could pull all of their military forces out of South Korea in a bid to convince China to topple North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un. Johnson's warning echoes those of Richard Barrons, the UK's former commander of Joint Forces Command, who said in November that North Korea would be able to strike Britain with nuclear missiles within 12 to 18 months. Barrons underscored the growing range of perceived threats to Britain, including from North Korea and Russia, which he said UK forces had no defense against.

LIMA (AFP) -- Peru's Congress voted overwhelmingly to consider impeaching President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski next week over allegations he received bribes from Brazilian contractor Odebrecht.

Ninety-three of the 118 legislators present supported the proposal to debate impeachment on December 21. Dismissal of Kuczynski would require support from 87 of the chamber's 130 members. The rightwing Popular Force party, which controls the legislature, had already warned it would begin impeachment proceedings if the president did not resign by next Thursday. But Kuczynski has brushed off the ultimatum.

TOKYO (Reuters) -- Japan's government plans an initial budget of a record 97.7 trillion yen (\$872 billion) for the 2018/19 fiscal year, while keeping new debt issuance below this year's level thanks to hefty tax revenue as the economy picks up, government sources told Reuters.

The planned budget spending for the year beginning April 1 marks an increase from this year's 97.5 trillion yen, the sources said on condition of anonymity as the plan has not yet been finalized. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's cabinet is expected to approve the budget draft on Dec. 22, along with an extra budget for the current year. The budget underscores the difficulty Japan has in curbing spending -- despite the heaviest debt burden in the industrial world -- as an ageing population pushes up welfare costs, and regional tensions related to North Korea mean rising military spending. It all means a test of Abe's will to restore fiscal health and revive the world's third-largest economy at the same time, while he is seen favoring growth over austerity.

MAIDUGURI, Nigeria (AP) -- Military authorities say Nigerian soldiers have arrested more than 400 people associated with the Boko Haram extremist group hiding on the islands of Lake Chad, including fighters, wives and children.

Col. Onyema Nwachukwu says the two-week operation netted the largest number of arrests of Boko Haram fighters in recent months in northeast Nigeria. It included air and ground offensives targeting insurgents' locations. Nwachukwu says the military arrested 167 Boko Haram fighters, 67 women and 173 children who were family members of the insurgents. The women and children will be handed over to authorities of displacement camps after investigations.