



MANILA (Dispatches) -- Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said on Thursday "genocide" was taking place in Myanmar and he was willing to accept Rohingya Muslim refugees fleeing from it, though Europe should help too. The United Nations and several Western countries have said the Myanmar action constitutes ethnic cleansing. Duterte, in a wide-ranging speech to farmers and agriculture officials at the presidential palace, touched on various issues including his recent decision to withdraw from the International Criminal Court over its decision to open a preliminary investigation into his bloody war on drugs. Drawing the ire of officials in Myanmar, Duterte then expressed sympathy for the Rohingya and offered to help. "I really pity the people there," Duterte said. "I'm willing to accept refugees. Rohingyas, yes. I will help but we should split them with Europe." He also mentioned the inability of the international community to resolve problems in Myanmar. "They can't even solve the Rohingya. That's what genocide is, if I may say so," Duterte said.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- Russia's state communications watchdog said on Friday it had filed a lawsuit to limit access to the Telegram messaging app after the company refused to give Russian state security services access to its users' secret messages. Russia's FSB Federal Security Service has said it needs access to some messages for its work, including guarding against terrorist attacks. Telegram has refused to comply with its demands, citing respect for user privacy. Russia's Roskomnadzor communications watchdog said it had filed a lawsuit at a Moscow court on Friday "with a request to restrict access on the territory of Russia to the information resources of... Telegram Messenger Limited Liability Partnership." It said the suit was connected to statements by the FSB that Telegram was not complying with its legal obligations as an "organizer of information distribution." The Russian court decision will be closely watched by investors as Telegram is also undertaking the world's biggest initial coin offering - a private sale of tokens which could be traded as an alternative currency, similar to Bitcoin or Ethereum.

BRUSSELS (AFP) -- As many as 2.7 million people in the European Union may have been affected by the Facebook personal data scandal, the bloc announced on Friday, saying it would demand further answers from the social media giant. "Facebook confirmed to us that the data of overall up to 2.7 million people in the EU may have been improperly shared with Cambridge Analytica," spokesman Christian Wigand told reporters. On Wednesday, Facebook said the personal data of as many as 87 million users around the world was improperly shared with British political consultancy Cambridge Analytica. Facebook's estimate was far higher than news reports suggesting 50 million users may have been affected. In March, U.S. newspapers revealed that Cambridge Analytica harvested the private information to develop techniques to support the election campaign of President Donald Trump's in 2016.

BERLIN (Reuters) -- Catalonia's former leader Carles Puigdemont walked out of a German prison on Friday after a court in the northern state of Schleswig-Holstein agreed to release him on bail, Reuters Television showed. The court on Thursday rejected an extradition request on the charge of rebellion for Puigdemont's role in the campaign for Catalonia's independence, but said extradition to Spain was possible on a lesser charge of misuse of public funds. The former Catalan leader, who wore a dark suit on leaving the prison in the German town of Neumunster, was arrested last month on a Spanish-issued arrest warrant as he entered Germany.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev said on Friday that Moscow's contacts with the United States government would not be brought to an end by new U.S. sanctions. Patrushev told reporters after a meeting of the Security Council that sanctioned individuals and entities would find ways to offset the restrictions. The United States imposed sanctions on Friday against Russian businessmen, companies and government officials, striking at associates of President Vladimir Putin in one of Washington's most aggressive moves to punish Moscow for a range of activities, including alleged meddling in the 2016 U.S. election.

PARIS (AFP) -- Jean-Marie Le Pen, the firebrand co-founder of France's far-right National Front who was eventually kicked out of the party by his daughter, confirmed Thursday he had joined a little-known European extreme right movement. Le Pen said he was now a member of the Alliance for Peace and Freedom (APF), a grouping of European far-right parties, which said the octogenarian had joined on March 22. Le Pen, who was elected to the European Parliament on a National Front ticket in 2004 but now sits as an independent, declined to comment on the move. The APF does not have enough members to constitute a recognized group in the EU's parliament, meaning its members currently sit in a non-attached capacity. Among its member parties are the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) and the DSSS in the Czech Republic. Le Pen, 89, has said he will not stand for re-election in EU parliamentary elections next year.

South Korea Jails Ex-President Park for 24 Years



A supporter of South Korea's former President Park Geun Hye is holding a national flag next to her portrait outside the Seoul Central District Court in Seoul on April 6, 2018.

SEOUL (AFP/REUTERS) -- South Korea's disgraced former president Park Geun Hye was jailed for 24 years on Friday for corruption, closing out a dramatic fall from grace for the country's first woman leader who became a figure of public fury and ridicule.

The sentence followed a trial lasting more than 10 months which ended with Park being found guilty on multiple criminal charges, including bribery and abuse of power.

The court ruled that Park colluded with her long-time confidante, Choi Soon Sil, to receive tens of billions of won from major South Korean conglomerates to help Choi's family and fund non-profit foundations owned by her.

"The amount of bribery the accused received or demanded in collaboration with Choi amounts to more than 23 billion won (\$28.6 million)," Judge Kim Se Yoon said, referring to Choi. "I sentence the accused to 24 years in prison and 18 billion won (\$22.3 million) in fines."

The judge said Park had shown "no sign of repentance" but had instead tried to shift the blame to Choi and her secretaries. "We cannot help but sternly hold her accountable," Kim said.

Park, 66, apologized at her trial for seeking help from Choi, who held no formal position or security clearance, but that was as close as Park came to admitting any guilt.

Up to 1,000 Park supporters gathered

outside the court Friday, holding national flags and signs calling for an end to "political revenge" against her.

She boycotted most of the trial in protest at being held in custody and was not present in court for Friday's judgment which, in a rare move, was broadcast live on television.

She had been expected to learn her fate at the detention centre near Seoul where she has been in custody for almost a year. Park has refused to see any visitors, including her brother and sister, except for her two lawyers.

Kang Chul Koo, one of Park's state-appointed lawyers, said he would discuss with her the possibility of an appeal. "We tried our utmost but regret the result turned out very bad," Kang told reporters at the court. "The truth will be revealed one day."

The daughter of assassinated dictator Park Chung Hee, Park took office in 2013 as a conservative icon who cast herself in the role of daughter of the nation - incorruptible and beholden to none.

Less than four years later, she was impeached, stripped of all her powers and ousted from office on the back of months-long mass protests that brought millions onto the streets of Seoul and other cities.

The trigger was a snowballing graft scandal involving Park and Choi and accusations of graft, influence-peddling and taking bribes from corporate bigwigs in exchange for policy favors.

Malaysia PM, Accused of 'Dirty Tricks', Dissolves Parliament



Malaysians watch televisions on display at a shopping mall store as Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak announces the dissolution of parliament during a live telecast in Kuala Lumpur, on April 6, 2018.

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) -- Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak on Friday announced the dissolution of parliament, with critics accusing his government of playing "dirty tricks."

"I would like to inform the people that I met the king... and sought his permission for the parliament to be dissolved on Saturday, April 7," Najib said.

The move paves the way for general elections in the country.

The prime minister, who is grappling with a massive scandal at a state fund and public anger over rising living costs, will see his five-year term officially end on June 24.

Adding to the controversy are two pieces of legislation that have been rushed through the parliament over the past week. One has revised the electoral map, and the other, the so-called Anti-Fake News 2018 Bill, would allow prison terms of up to six years for spreading lies.

Critics have described the moves as "dirty tricks" and "downright cheating" ahead of the elections.

Referring to the legislation on the electoral map, Shahrul Aman, the chair of an organization to promote reform, said, "It is an attempt to steal the election."

"Najib is using the executive power and legislation to strengthen his hand," said Bridget Welsh, a professor of political science at John Cabot University, according to The Guardian.

Other critics say the laws favor Razak's ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, which has been in power since independence from Britain in 1957.

Among Najib's main critics is former prime minister Mahathir Mohamed. In early 2016, a probe into the high-profile state fund corruption case found that Prime Minister Najib had received nearly \$700 million as a gift from Saudi Arabia's royal family.

Opposition and some ruling party members believed the money was siphoned off from debt-ridden state-owned strategic development company 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) that Najib had launched.

U.S. Cancels Drill in Djibouti After Air Accidents



U.S. Marines fast-rope from a CH-53E Super Stallion during helicopter rope suspension technique training near Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, Feb. 7, 2017.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- The Pentagon has canceled a training exercise in the Djibouti region following two separate aviation mishaps this week, officials said Thursday, as the U.S. military grapples with a spate of flight accidents.

The government of Djibouti ordered the grounding of military flights following the incidents, said Commander Bill Urban, a spokesman for the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet.

As a consequence an amphibious training exercise known as Alligator Dagger was canceled.

"A safety stand-down has been ini-

tiated for all exercise participants," Urban said.

The U.S. military has been rocked by a string of aviation accidents in recent days, including an F-16 crash near Las Vegas on Wednesday that killed the pilot.

On Tuesday, four crew members died when a Marine Corps helicopter crashed while on a routine training mission in Southern California.

And in Djibouti, two incidents on Tuesday triggered the grounding of U.S. military flights.

The first saw an AV-8B Harrier jet crash at Djibouti International Air-

port. The pilot, who ejected, survived the crash.

Then separately, a Marine CH-53 Super Stallion helicopter suffered "structural damage" during a landing at a landing zone at Djibouti's Arta Beach, Urban said. The crew in that case was not injured.

The U.S. base in Djibouti is a key staging area for the U.S. in its anti-jihadist campaigns in Yemen and Somalia.

Pentagon spokesman Marine Lieutenant General Kenneth McKenzie said there was no apparent linkage between any of the accidents.

"We regret each one. We'll look at them carefully. I'm certainly not prepared to say that it's a wave of mishaps or some form of crisis," McKenzie said.

Djibouti, which is home to the only permanent U.S. military base in Africa, hosts about 4,000 U.S. troops. The tiny African nation has become a strategic area for Washington due to its vicinity to Somalia and Yemen, where the Pentagon has been conducting operations. The recent grounding of U.S. flights in Djibouti would affect the U.S. operations in both of those countries.

Citing U.S. officials, CNN wrote that the U.S. military and the State Department were in talks with the government of Djibouti to get approval for flights on a case-by-case basis.

Mexico Hits Out at Trump Over Border Wall Plan



A placard is held with President Donald Trump at a march in Mexico City in 2017 to call for unity and protest Trump's proposed border wall.

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) -- Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto on Thursday sharply rebuked Donald Trump over his plan to send National Guard troops to the border, joining with opponents to tell the US leader not to vent his domestic political "frustration" on Mexico.

Trump has been unable to get the U.S. Congress or Mexico to fully fund his planned border wall, and Trump said Thursday he will probably keep National Guard troops along the Mexican border until it is built.

In an unusually combative address, a stern-looking Pena Nieto urged Trump to stop sowing discord between the two nations and demanded a more respectful tone in bilateral relations.

"If your recent declarations are due to frustration over issues to do with internal policy, your laws, or your Congress, direct yourself to them, not to Mexicans," Pena Nieto said.

For months Mexico has been locked in tortuous negotiations with the United States and Canada to rework the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), but hopes have risen recently that some kind of preliminary deal could be within reach.

"President Trump: if you want to reach agreements with Mexico, we stand ready," Pena Nieto said, before adding: "We will not allow negative rhetoric to define our actions."

Pena Nieto and Trump have had a strained relationship ever since

the New Yorker launched his campaign in 2015 with the claim that some Mexican migrants are criminals and rapists.

The White House says mobilizing the National Guard was part of Trump's strategy to stop illegal immigrants from entering the country, whom he blames for serious crime.

Pena Nieto has faced criticism for failing to take a tough line against Trump in the past. Trump's comments have thrust the countries' relationship into the center of Mexico's presidential campaign, where Pena Nieto's party is trailing.

All the country's presidential candidates on Thursday criticized Trump's plan to militarize the border.

The front-runner in the race, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, said Trump's scheme was political "propaganda" based on misinformation that aimed to stir up "xenophobia" and "racism."

"This great threat on the southern border of the United States that he says is there does not exist," said the leftist Lopez Obrador, who has a double-digit lead in most polls.

Ricardo Anaya, the second-place contender who heads a right-left coalition, echoed a Senate motion on Wednesday calling on the government to end cooperation with the United States on migration and security if Trump did not back down.

"You cannot negotiate or cooperate with threats," he said.

Supporters Rally as Brazil's Ex-President Lula Faces Jail

SAO BERNARDO DO CAMPO, Brazil (Reuters) -- Brazil's former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva on Friday spent his last hours before a 12-year prison sentence surrounded by supporters who vowed to fight for his right to run in a presidential race he is currently leading.

Ordered to turn himself in after he lost an appeal of his bribery conviction, Lula huddled with aides and allies at the headquarters of the steel workers union in metropolitan Sao Paulo where he got his start in Brazilian politics.

"We are gathered here with our supporters in the birthplace of the Workers Party ... so we can combat this injustice," said party leader Gleisi Hoffmann. "Lula is innocent!"

Lula's lawyers filed a last-minute appeal to a court to suspend the prison order, arguing they had not been given time to exhaust procedural appeals. It was not clear if the higher court would intervene before a 5 p.m. (2000 GMT) deadline for the former president to turn himself in.

Hundreds of die-hard supporters in red shirts thronged outside the union offices late into the night on Thursday, cheering spirited defenses of Lula, who sought refuge inside. Many remained camped outside the building early on Friday.

The same union was the launchpad for Lula's political career nearly four decades ago, when he led nationwide strikes that helped to end Brazil's 1964-85 military government.

Lula's everyman style and unvarnished speeches electrified millions long governed by the elite and eventually won him two terms as president, from 2003 to 2011, when he oversaw robust economic growth and falling inequality amid a commodities boom.

He left office with sky-high approval of 83% and was called "the most popular politician on Earth" by former U.S. President Barack Obama.

Lula's downfall has been as stunning as the unprecedented corruption probes that have convulsed Brazil for the last four years, jailing dozens of politicians and business leaders long considered above the law.