

Three MPs Abandon PM May Over ‘Dismal Failure’



British Conservative Party MPs Heidi Allen, Anna Soubry and Sarah Wollaston attend a news conference in London, Britain February 20, 2019.

LONDON (AFP) - Three MPs quit the governing Conservative Party over Brexit on Wednesday, joining a mounting rebellion in parliament this week against the two major parties that is shaking the system in British politics.

Anna Soubry, Heidi Allen and Sarah Wollaston said they planned to sit in parliament alongside eight former Labor MPs who, also citing their opposition to Brexit, have resigned from the main opposition party since Monday to form the new Independent Group.

The trio of Conservatives, who support Britain remaining in the European Union, said in a joint resignation letter to Prime Minister Theresa May that Brexit had

“re-defined” their party and was “undoing all the efforts to modernize it”.

“The final straw for us has been this government’s disastrous handling of Brexit,” they added, in stinging criticism of May’s leadership, noting they could “no longer act as bystanders” to her EU exit strategy.

“Following the EU referendum of 2016, no genuine effort was made to build a cross-party, let alone a national consensus to deliver Brexit.”

The resignations posed a fresh and embarrassing headache for the prime minister as she prepared to travel to Brussels later Wednesday for crucial talks with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker.

It also reinforced the view that

Britain was plunging further into political turmoil as its MPs struggle to agree a divorce deal just five weeks before it is due to leave the bloc on March 29.

The political impasse risks the country crashing out without an agreement, with the rising uncertainty blamed for a string of car-makers and other businesses recently announcing job cuts and reduced investment in Britain.

May said she was “saddened” by the resignations and thanked the MPs for their “dedicated service to our party over many years”.

She noted Britain’s membership of the EU has been “a source of disagreement both in our party and our country for a long time” but the MPs’ move would not stop her delivering on the referendum result.

“Under my leadership, the Conservative Party will always offer the decent, moderate and patriotic politics that the people of this country deserve,” she added.

The shake-up of seats mean May’s centre-right Conservatives alone are now six votes short of a majority in parliament’s lower House of Commons.

In their resignation statement, the three former Conservative MPs, who have voted against multiple elements of the government’s Brexit legislation, blamed their decision on May’s “dismal failure” to stand up to the “hard line” European Research Group (ERG) of Brexiteers in her own party.

President Duterte Vows Harsher Anti-Drug War



President Rodrigo Duterte speaks at Davao International airport in Davao City in southern Philippines, September 8, 2018.

MANILA (Reuters) - Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte warned on Wednesday that his signature anti-narcotics campaign will be even harsher in the future, signaling no let-up in a bloody crackdown that has alarmed the international

community.

Duterte won the presidency by a wide margin in 2016 on promises of eradicating drugs and crime, and recent opinion polls indicate broad support for him and for the crackdown, despite widespread allegations of police cover-ups and

summary killings resulting from weak intelligence.

Duterte said the drugs problem was a national security issue.

“I will not allow my country to end up a failed state because of drugs,” he said in a speech.

He did not elaborate on how he would intensify a campaign that had already seen more than 5,000 people killed by police since he took office.

Human rights groups say many of those deaths were executions of people suspected of selling or using drugs, which police deny, insisting the killings were in self-defense.

Critics, including the Catholic Church, say the campaign has overwhelmingly targeted the urban poor and left drug kingpins largely untouched.

Asked by reporters later if the crackdown would be bloodier, Duterte said: “I think so.”

A poll last week showed that about two thirds of Filipinos believed there were fewer drug users in their community now than last year. Most respondents said it was vital for police to arrest suspects alive and believed police agreed.

UN Reports Mass Rape, Killings in South Sudan

GENEVA (Reuters) - UN investigators have identified perpetrators of pervasive rape and killings and torture in secret safe houses in South Sudan, and believe oil revenues have driven much of the violence in its civil war, a report said on Wednesday.

The UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan recommended further investigation of evidence that proceeds from South Sudan’s oil-based economy had been channeled to government forces and militias linked to reported war crimes.

The Commission said the army, national security, military intelligence, rebel forces and affiliated armed groups had committed serious human rights breaches, and it had drawn up a confidential list of suspects including army and opposition commanders, two state governors and a county commissioner.

Its 212-page report detailed people

being held for years and tortured in secret, vermin-ridden detention centers, children being run down by tanks, rape of girls as young as seven, and babies being drowned, starved or smashed against trees.

In some stricken areas, 65 percent of females and 36 percent of males may have been sexually abused, according to the report.

Although South Sudan’s main warring parties signed a peace deal in September, widespread violence, especially rape, has continued.

A member of the three-person commission, Andrew Clapham, said it was outraged by reports of further fighting between government forces and the rebel National Salvation Front, which was not part of the peace agreement, in the Yei River area.

“There are thousands of civilians who have been forcibly displaced following a scorched-earth policy in which the parties to the conflict are attacking the villages, torching the

homes, killing civilians and raping women and girls,” Clapham said.

More than 5,000 refugees had reached neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo and up to 20,000 people were expected to be displaced by the latest fighting, he said.

The report cited a close connection between oil and the conflict. A law ensuring that South Sudan’s oil-producing regions and communities received two and three percent of its oil revenue respectively had triggered a redrawing of provincial boundaries and ethnic conflict.

The Human Rights Council should get to the bottom of the sums involved and where the money was going, he told reporters, noting that health and education spending was “minuscule”.

South Sudan is one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises. This year the United Nations needs \$1.5 billion for live-saving aid for its population and \$2.7 billion for its refugees.

Pakistan Tensions Mar Saudi Prince’s Visit to India



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, right, gives a bear hug to Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman as President Ram Nath Kovind watches during the Saudi leader's ceremonial reception at Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi on Feb. 20, 2019.

NEW DELHI (AFP) - Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman arrived in New Delhi on Tuesday, with his business mission under threat of being overshadowed by soaring tensions between India and Pakistan.

The crown prince, who wants to persuade the world’s fastest growing major economy to consume more Saudi oil, was greeted at the airport by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who gave his traditional bear hug for honored guests.

The prince arrived from a two-day stay in Pakistan as it clashed with its giant neighbor over responsibility for a suicide attack in Kashmir last Thursday that left at least 40 members of Indian security forces dead.

The attack was claimed by Pakistan-based group Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and has sparked calls in India for a firm response.

The latest showdown between the nuclear-armed neighbors, which is causing mounting international concern, was expected to figure prominently in Prince Mohamed’s talks with Modi on Wednesday.

Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan offered Tuesday to investigate the attack if India provided proof of its involvement -- but said his country would retaliate if attacked.

India rebuffed Khan’s comments and called in turn for “credible and visible action” to rein in militants.

Washington threw its weight behind India Tuesday, pressing Pakistan to punish those behind the Kashmir attack.

Before the attack, the agenda for the crown prince’s visit had been dominated by oil and other key investment decisions.

Saudi Arabia currently supplies about 20 percent of India’s crude oil and wants to definitively push aside arch-rival Iran as a source.

Iran at one stage last year overtook Saudi Arabia among India’s suppliers but U.S. sanctions since have severely hit the Islamic Republic’s oil business.

Kabir Taneja, associate fellow with Observer Research Foundation, a New Delhi-based think tank, said India would aim to use these closer economic ties to push for Saudi Arabia’s “unconditional support” regarding Pakistan.

The crown prince is on a three-country Asian tour as the kingdom seeks to recover its reputation after last year’s murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Prince Mohammed was to leave India late Wednesday and is expected to spend two days in China.

Analysts have said the tour is part of a pivot to rising Asia as a growing oil market and a retort to the West where the crown prince has faced harsh criticism over the Khashoggi affair.

North Korea Shuffles Nuclear Team Ahead of U.S. Talks



Kim Hyok Chol (R), North Korea’s interlocutor leading negotiations with the United States, is pictured upon arrival at Beijing’s international airport on his way to the Vietnamese capital Hanoi, in Beijing, China in this photo taken by Kyodo February 19, 2019.

SEOUL (Reuters) - Veteran North Korean diplomats are being sidelined from nuclear talks ahead of a second summit with the United States as recent defections and allegations of spying undermine the trust of leader Kim Jong Un, South Korean officials and experts say.

Kim has purged and replaced many top diplomats and officials who served his father and grandfather with new, younger advisors as he gears up to meet U.S. President Donald Trump in Vietnam next week.

Among the most significant changes, Kim has appointed little-known Kim Hyok Chol to spearhead working-level talks with U.S. nuclear envoy Stephen Biegun.

A former ambassador to Spain who was expelled in 2017 after North Korean nuclear and missile tests, Kim Hyok Chol has been working at the State Affairs Commission, a top governing body chaired by the young leader, a South Korean official said.

He replaced Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui, who led negotiations in the run up to the first Trump-Kim summit in Singapore in June.

“It’s a big boys’ game and many diplomats are being neglected, as they face fierce inter-agency rivalry and questions about their ideological faithfulness given their experience in richer, capitalist nations,” the South Korean official said, asking to remain anonymous due

to the sensitivity of the issue.

“Kim Hyok Chol is a career diplomat too, but he apparently has passed a loyalty test to become the point man in the negotiations.”

The promotion of Kim Hyok Chol, believed to be in his late 40s, was partly influenced by the 2016 defection of Thae Yong Ho, a former deputy ambassador to Britain, and the recent disappearance of Jo Song Gil, a senior diplomat in Italy, the official said.

Adding to Kim Jong Un’s mistrust in veteran diplomats, Han Song Ryol, who was vice foreign minister in charge of U.S. relations until early last year, has been purged on charges of spying for the United States, two sources with knowledge of the situation told Reuters.

Han was one of the best known and highly respected North Korean diplomats in the United States, having for years manned the so-called “New York channel,” a key diplomatic conduit between Pyongyang and Washington, before returning home in 2013.

But Han has been out of the public eye for the past year, with state media last mentioning him in February 2018.

South Korea’s Unification Ministry removed his name in its annual ‘Who’s Who’ in North Korea directory, released last month.

A diplomatic source in Seoul told Reuters, citing North Korean officials, Han was purged last year after being accused of spying for the United States and pocketing funds.



GENEVA (Reuters) - At least 600 French “yellow vest” protesters gathered in Geneva outside United Nations European headquarters Wednesday to denounce alleged French police brutality against the movement. The UN Human Rights Council opens its main four-week annual session in the Swiss city on Monday. The protests started in November over fuel taxes and the high cost of living and morphed into a more general revolt against President Emmanuel Macron and a government they see as out of touch. Nicolas Mollier, an organizer, said the protesters hoped to bring their case to the attention of a U.N. official. “France must be held accountable,” he told Reuters Television. “Today, there are victims who have lost an eye, victims who have had their hands blown away or their feet.” “Yellow vest” actions have at times been marred by violence, and according to a survey published last week by pollster Elabe, 56 percent of French people want the weekly protests to end.

ROME (Reuters) - Pope Francis said on Wednesday that people who spent their lives denouncing the Catholic Church were friends of the devil, as survivors of sexual abuse by clergymen accused him of snubbing an invitation to meet them. Speaking on the eve of a conference he has convened to guide senior bishops on how to tackle widespread abuse that has decimated the Church’s credibility, Francis said its mistakes should be corrected. But those accusers who did nothing but criticize the Church were “friends, cousins and relatives of the devil,” he told worshippers at the Vatican. Gathered outside the Vatican, a group of abuse survivors said they were disappointed that the pontiff had declined their invitation to meet them. “We believed that this morning’s meeting would be with the Pope, with a cross-section of survivors from around the world,” one, Englishman Peter Saunders, told Reuters TV. “It would seem that the Pope, once again, is giving the two fingers to survivors and to child protection everywhere,” he said, using an English expression for a crude gesture.

BEIJING (Reuters) - The United States should respect China’s right to develop and become prosperous, the Chinese government’s top diplomat told a visiting U.S. delegation, reiterating that the country’s doors to the outside world would open wider. The world’s two largest economies began their latest round of trade talks this week to resolve a bitter dispute in which each has levied tariffs on imports from the other. The United States has accused China of unfair trade practices, including forced technology transfers, charges it has denied. Respect and cooperation are the correct choice for both countries, something the international community hopes to see, State Councillor Wang Yi told the delegation of U.S. business leaders and former officials in Beijing on Tuesday. “Just like the United States, China also has the right to development, and the Chinese people also have the right to have a good life,” the foreign ministry paraphrased Wang as saying, in a statement issued on Wednesday. “The U.S. side should recognize that China’s development is in the world’s interest, as well as the United States’. Only by seeing China’s development as an opportunity for the United States can this help resolve certain problems, including trade and economic ones,” Wang said.

LONDON (AFP) - A British teenager who joined the Daesh group in Syria in 2015 said Wednesday she was shocked by a government decision to revoke her citizenship. Shamima Begum, who now wants to return home after giving birth in a refugee camp in Syria last weekend, said the order was “unjust”. “I am a bit shocked,” she told ITV News after learning of the move which was announced in a letter Tuesday from Britain’s interior ministry to her mother in London. “It’s a bit upsetting and frustrating. I feel like it’s a bit unjust on me and my son.” Begum’s fate has stirred controversy since she and two friends fled her east London home to join the terror network four years ago when she was aged just 15. The case highlights a dilemma facing many European countries, divided over whether to allow Takfiris and Daesh sympathizers home to face prosecution or barring them over security concerns as the so-called “caliphate” crumbles.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - A winter storm swept across much of the U.S. Midwest and East Coast on Wednesday, hampering air travel and prompting officials to close federal offices in Washington and several large public school systems. The National Weather Service warned the storm could make travel very difficult, with snow, sleet and freezing rain potentially causing downed branches and power outages. The storm reached from northern Minnesota down through Missouri and east into the Mid-Atlantic region and could bring as much as 6 inches (15 cm) of snow along with sleet and freezing rain, the National Weather Service said in an advisory. The storm forced the closing of federal agencies in Washington as well as schools in Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington. Hundreds of flights were delayed or canceled in and out of major airports in Washington, Philadelphia and Chicago, according to Flightaware.com. Airports told passengers on social media to check their airlines for delays and cancellations.