



BRUSSELS (Reuters) -- China dismissed U.S. security warnings against its telecoms equipment maker Huawei as groundless and "abnormal" on Monday, as the Chinese government's top diplomat went to Brussels to cool growing European frustration over trade. In a veiled reference to Huawei Technologies Co., which the United States says could spy on the West, Chinese State Councilor Wang Yi told Washington to stop its attempts to "bring down" the company. "What we oppose are groundless accusations for political purposes and attempts to bring down a foreign company," Wang told a news conference, although he did not name Huawei, which is seeking to sell the next generation of mobile technology in Europe, its top market outside China. "We think such practices are abnormal, immoral and have no support," he said after a meeting with EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and hours before a lunch with EU foreign ministers in Brussels.

SEOUL (Reuters) -- It is premature to say whether recent activity at some of North Korea's rocket facilities involved preparation for a missile launch, South Korea's defense minister told a parliamentary hearing on Monday. Early in March, several American think-tanks and South Korean officials reported that satellite imagery showed possible preparations for a launch from the Sohae rocket launch site at Tongchang-ri, North Korea, which has been used in the past to launch satellites but not intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of delivering a nuclear warhead. "It's hasty to call it missile-related activity," Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo told a parliamentary defense committee. "Tongchang-ri is a launch site but we don't see any activity being carried out for a missile launch."

CARACAS (Reuters) -- Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro is planning a "deep restructuring" of his government, Vice President Delcy Rodriguez said, as the country recovers from a prolonged blackout amid a power struggle with the opposition. "President @NicolasMaduro has asked the entire executive Cabinet to put their roles up for review in a deep restructuring of the methods and functions of the Bolivarian government, to protect the fatherland of Bolivar and Chavez from any threat," Rodriguez wrote on Twitter, referring to independence leader Simon Bolivar and former President Hugo Chavez. The possible reshuffling comes on the heels of a nearly weeklong blackout that paralyzed the OPEC nation, which had already been experiencing a hyperinflationary economic collapse, shortages of food and medicine and the emigration of millions of citizens. Maduro has blamed the blackout on a cyber attack perpetrated by the United States and sabotage by the domestic opposition.

BEIJING (AP) -- China has arrested nearly 13,000 people it describes as terrorists and has broken up hundreds of "terrorist gangs" in Xinjiang since 2014, the government said in a report Monday issued to counter criticism of internment camps and other oppressive security in the traditionally Islamic region. China describes the camps as vocational training centers and says participation is voluntary. Former detainees say they were held in abusive conditions, forced to renounce Islam and swear allegiance to China's ruling Communist Party. The new report said "law-based de-radicalization" in Xinjiang has curbed the rise and spread of religious extremism. It said 1,588 terrorist gangs have been crushed and 12,995 terrorists seized since 2014. Over that time, 2,052 explosive devices were seized and more than 30,000 people were punished for taking part in almost 5,000 "illegal religious activities," the report said. It said 345,229 copies of "illegal religious publicity materials" were also seized.

OTTAWA (Reuters) -- Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Monday changed his cabinet for the third time in three months in response to a crisis caused by the resignation of a minister who later alleged inappropriate conduct by officials. In a surprise move, Trudeau named backbench Liberal legislator Joyce Murray to the post of Treasury Board President, where she will be in overall charge of government spending. It is the first federal cabinet post for Murray, 64, who had previously been a provincial government minister in British Columbia. Murray replaces Jane Philpott, who quit on March 4 in protest over how the government was handling a corruption case involving SNC-Lavalin Group Inc., a major construction company.

JAKARTA (Reuters) -- Authorities in Indonesia raised the death toll from floods and landslides in the easternmost province of Papua to nearly 80 on Monday as President Joko Widodo called for the urgent evacuation of victims from devastated communities. The deadly floods and landslide struck at the weekend after torrential rain fell across the Cyclops mountain range, much of which has been stripped of tree cover by villagers chopping fire wood and farmers cultivating plantations. The death toll shot up to nearly 80 from 58 on Sunday as rescuers found more victims as they struggled to clear mud, rocks and shattered trees from the area near the provincial capital of Jayapura, including a 70 km stretch of road. With 43 people missing, Widodo urged rescuers to step up their efforts.

Macron Summons Security Officials After Revolt



A protester stands in front of burning barricade during a demonstration by the yellow vests movement in Paris on March 16, 2019.

PARIS (AP) - French President Emmanuel Macron summoned top security officials Monday after police failed to contain resurgent rioting during yellow vest protests that transformed a luxurious Paris avenue into a battle scene.

The prime minister promised to announce new measures later Monday to avoid a repeat of Saturday's violence, in which rioters set life-threatening fires, ransacked luxury stores and attacked police around the Champs-Elysees.

The new surge in violence came as the 4-month-old yellow vest movement demanding economic justice has been dwindling. Images of the destruction — including from a bank fire that engulfed a residential building and threatened the lives of a mother and child — could further erode public support.

But the renewed attention energized some protesters, who took to social networks to call for new protests this Saturday to occupy the avenue to demand lower taxes and more support for workers from big business.

The Finance Ministry held a meeting Monday with groups representing small businesses, restaurants, hotels, insurance companies and banks to estimate the economic impact of the protests.

The Paris region's Chamber of Commerce said 91 businesses suffered consequences from Saturday's riot at the Champs-Elysees, 80 percent of which were severely damaged.

It called for an "emergency plan" to support the those shopkeepers and employees.

One of the security officials meeting Monday with Macron, junior Interior Minister Laurent Nunez, acknowledged that the French police response to Saturday's rioting was "a failure."

Nunez said Monday on RTL radio that police had prepared for an upsurge in violence but the protesters were exceptionally radicalized. He said police were "less reactive" Saturday than in previous demonstrations, and notably more cautious about using rubber ball launchers because of numerous injuries they've caused at previous protests.

Last month the French Parliament passed a bill backed by Macron's government to further prevent violence during protests and to help authorities maintain order. The "anti-troublemakers" law has not yet taken effect since the Constitutional Council must assess it first.

It would authorize regional prefects to prevent people seen as a serious threat to public order from protesting, and would force protesters involved in violence to pay for damage. It would also make it a crime for protesters to conceal their faces, punishable by up to one year in prison and a 15,000-euro (\$17,000) fine.

The bill has been criticized by rights groups, opposition members and even members of Macron's centrist party as going too far in restricting freedoms.

New Zealand to Announce New Gun Laws Within Days



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern meets representatives of the Muslim community at Canterbury refugee centre in Christchurch, New Zealand March 16, 2019.

CHRISTCHURCH (Reuters) - New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said on Monday she would announce new gun laws within days, after a lone gunman killed 50 people in mass shootings at two mosques in the city of Christchurch.

Australian Brenton Tarrant, 28, a suspected white supremacist, was charged with murder on Saturday. Tarrant was remanded without a plea and is due back in court on April 5 where police said he was likely to face more charges.

"Within 10 days of this horrific act of terrorism we will have announced reforms which will, I believe, make our community safer," Ardern told a news conference after her cabinet reached in principle decisions on gun reform laws in the wake of New Zealand's worst ever mass shooting.

In addition to the 50 killed, dozens were wounded at two mosques in the South Island city during Friday prayers.

Ardern did not give details on new laws, but has said she supports a ban on semi-automatic weapons following the Christchurch shootings.

Australia introduced some of the world's toughest gun laws after its worst mass killing, the 1996 Port Arthur massacre in which a lone gunman killed 35 people using a semi-automatic AR-15 - the same weapon used in the Christchurch massacre.

New Zealand, a country of only 5 million people, has an estimated 1.5 million firearms.

Ardern said an inquiry will be held into what authorities knew or should have known about Tarrant and the events leading up to the massacre, to see whether the attack could have been prevented.

There were 250 detectives and specialists across the country working on the investigation, said police.

Tarrant had declined to be represented by a lawyer but the court appointed duty lawyer Richard Peters to handle the case.

Peters told media Tarrant was lucid and understood the situation facing him.

"He was lucid," Peters told Australian TV network Channel Nine. He seemed to appreciate what he was facing and why he was there."

The majority of victims were migrants or refugees from countries such as Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, Somalia, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. The youngest was a boy of three, born in New Zealand to Somali refugee parents.

Six Pakistanis, five Indians and five Bangladeshis were killed, officials said.

Frustration was building among the families of victims as under Islam it is custom to conduct burials within 24 hours, but bodies will not be released until post mortems are carried out.

Cyclone Kills About 160 in Zimbabwe, Mozambique



Floodwaters had already inundated Mozambique's Zambezia province earlier this week, prior to Cyclone Idai making landfall Thursday evening.

HARARE/MAPUTO (Reuters) - Cyclone Idai killed at least 157 people in Zimbabwe and Mozambique as it tore across Southern Africa, officials and state media said on Monday, and vast areas of land have been flooded, roads destroyed and communications disrupted.

The Mozambican port city of Beira has suffered massive damage, the Red Cross said. The storm has also pounded Malawi.

"The scale of devastation (in Beira) is enormous. It seems that 90 percent of the area is completely destroyed," said Jamie LeSueur, leader of the

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) team there.

In Zimbabwe, the Chimanimani district has been cut off from the rest of the country by torrential rains and winds of up to 170 km per hour that swept away roads, homes and bridges and knocked out power and communication lines.

Zimbabwean information ministry official Nick Mangwana told Reuters the number of confirmed deaths throughout the country was now 89. The body count is expected to rise.

The Mozambican state news agency put the death toll in Beira at 68,

although television channel TVM reported that about 84 people had died across Mozambique.

Zimbabwean rescuers were struggling to reach people in Chimanimani, many of whom have been sleeping in the mountains since Friday, after their homes were flattened by rock falls and mudslides or washed away by torrential rains. Many families cannot bury the dead due to the floods.

The Harare government has declared a state of disaster in areas affected by the storm, the worst to hit the country since Cyclone Eline devastated eastern and southern Zimbabwe in 2000.

The country of 15 million people is already suffering a severe drought that has wilted crops. A United Nations humanitarian agency says 5.3 million people will require food aid.

In Beira, home to Mozambique's second largest port which serves as gateway for imports to landlocked countries in southeast Africa, billboards were blown down and electricity and telephone poles knocked down.

Large swathes of land city's outskirts were submerged, and many houses were destroyed. In some streets, people waded through knee-high water, avoiding piles of mangled metal, detached tin roofs and other debris.

Beira has a population of 500,000 and sits at the mouth of the Pungwe River.

Putin Visits Crimea to Mark Reintegration Anniversary



President Vladimir Putin greets workers at a new power station inaugurated in Crimea on March 18, 2019.

MOSCOW (AP) - Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday marked the fifth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine by visiting the Black Sea peninsula.

Putin began his trip by attending the launch of new power plants in Crimea, part of Moscow's efforts to upgrade the region's infrastructure. Ukraine has cut off energy supplies to the peninsula and blocked shipments of Crimea-bound cargo via its territory after Moscow annexed the region in 2014.

"The situation has changed radically," Putin said, adding that the

new power facilities will fully cover Crimea's needs.

Russia's modernization effort has included the construction of a 19-kilometer (11.8-mile) bridge which opened last year across the Kerch Strait that links the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. The \$3.6-billion project gave Crimea a land link to Russia. Previously, ties between the two depended on a ferry crossing that was often interrupted by gales.

Russia's annexation of Crimea drew U.S. and EU sanctions against Russia. On Monday, NATO allies said in a statement that "we strongly condemn this act, which we do not and will not

recognize." Putin claims that Russia "re-integrated" Crimea after the ouster of Ukraine's former pro-Russian president in 2014 to protect ethnic Russians who made up the majority of Crimea's population from Ukrainian nationalists. The Kremlin was also worried that a new Ukrainian government could annul Russia's lease on its key Black Sea navy base in Crimea and welcome NATO there instead.

Crimea was first seized by Russian forces in the 18th century under Catherine the Great.

The 27,000-square kilometer (10,425-square mile) territory, roughly the size of Massachusetts, became part of Ukraine in 1954 when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred jurisdiction from Russia, a move that was a mere formality until the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union meant that Crimea landed in an independent Ukraine.

The Kremlin has argued that Khrushchev's move violated then-Soviet law, making the transfer illegitimate.

Russian troops swept Crimea just days after the February 2014 ouster of Ukraine's Russia-friendly president, catching the West by surprise. The Russian forces blocked Ukrainian soldiers at their garrisons, setting the stage for a referendum in Crimea that the West denounced as illegitimate.

May in Last-Ditch Push to Save EU Divorce Deal

LONDON (AP) - British Prime Minister Theresa May was making a last-minute push Monday to win support for her European Union divorce deal, warning opponents that failure to approve it would mean a long — and possibly indefinite — delay to Brexit.

Parliament has rejected the agreement twice, but May aims to try a third time this week if she can persuade enough lawmakers to change their minds. Her aim is to have the deal agreed before EU leaders meet Thursday for a summit in Brussels.

But there was no sign of a breakthrough, and the government faces a deadline of the end of Tuesday to decide whether they have enough votes to pass the deal, so that a vote can be held on Wednesday. May's spokesman, James Slack,

said Monday that the government would only hold a vote if there is "a realistic prospect of success."

May is likely to ask for a delay to Brexit at the Brussels summit. If a deal is approved, she says she will ask the EU to extend the deadline until June 30 so that Parliament has time to approve the necessary legislation. If it isn't, she will have to seek a longer extension that would mean Britain participating in May 23-26 elections for the European Parliament — something the government is keen to avoid.

May's goal is to win over Northern Ireland's small, power-brokering Democratic Unionist Party. The DUP's 10 lawmakers prop up May's Conservative government, and their support could influence pro-Brexit Conservatives to drop their opposition to the deal.

Still, May faces a struggle to reverse the huge margins of defeat for the agreement in Parliament. It was rejected by 230 votes in January and by 149 votes last week.

After months of political deadlock, British lawmakers voted last week to seek to postpone Brexit. That will likely avert a chaotic British withdrawal on the scheduled exit date of March 29 — although the power to approve or reject a Brexit extension lies with the EU, whose leaders are fed up with British prevarication.

EU leaders say they will only grant it if Britain has a solid plan for what to do with the extra time.

Opposition to May's deal centers on a measure designed to ensure there is no hard border between the UK's Northern Ireland and EU member Ireland after Brexit.