

News in Brief

MADRID (AP) — Twenty-two Cabinet ministers took their oaths Monday to join Spain's new coalition government, a first in a country dominated until recently by two main parties taking turns in power. King Felipe VI presided over the short ceremony, which marked the inauguration of an administration led by Socialist leader and Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, that ranges from the political center to the far left. Five ministers come from the anti-austerity United We Can Party. The leader of that party, Pablo Iglesias, is one of four deputy prime ministers in the new, enlarged Cabinet. Sánchez has set as goals of the new administration achieving social reforms, sound economic growth and "dialogue" with separatists in northeastern Catalonia. One by one, the 22 ministers all promised to follow the Spanish Constitution and to be loyal to the monarch.

MELBOURNE (AFP) -- Exhausted firefighters said they had finally brought Australia's largest "megablaze" under control Monday, as wet weather promised to deliver much-needed respite for countryside ravaged by bushfires. New South Wales firefighters said they finally had the upper hand in the fight against the vast Gospers Mountain fire on Sydney's northwestern outskirts, which has been burning for almost three months. Visiting the area on Monday, New South Wales Rural Fire Service commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said there was a "small area of burning still to complete" but the "containment prognosis looks promising". The fire seared an area of national park three times the size of Greater London and lit several connected blazes totalling over 800,000 hectares. As residents and authorities continued to come to grips with the sheer scale of the devastation, the Bureau of Meteorology forecast some fireground areas could get up to 50 millimeters (two inches) of rain in the next week, a relief after a prolonged drought.

NIAMEY (Reuters) -- Nigerian President Mahamadou Issoufou has replaced the head of the army after two of the country's deadliest attacks in living memory killed at least 160 soldiers and prompted a rethink in the battle against Takfiri groups, the government said. Ahmed Mohamed led the army for over two years, a period marked by a steep rise in attacks by militants linked to Daesh and Al-Qaeda that culminated in a daytime raid on a remote army base on Thursday that killed at least 89 soldiers. That attack came less than a month after another on an outpost that killed 71 soldiers and raised questions about Niger's ability to contain the spread of Takfiri groups across its western border from Mali and Burkina Faso. Major General Salifou Modi was appointed Mohamed's successor on Monday, the government announced after a cabinet meeting. Niger said it would launch a new military offensive against militants, but past campaigns have failed to curb violence despite the presence of French and American troops.

LONDON (Reuters) -- WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is not getting the time he needs with his legal team to discuss his fight against extradition to the United States, causing delays to the case, his lawyer told a British court on Monday. After skipping bail in Britain, Assange spent seven years holed up in Ecuador's embassy in London before he was dragged out by police in April last year. The United States wants him extradited to face 18 charges including conspiring to hack government computers and violating an espionage law. He could spend decades in prison if convicted. The 48-year-old Australian appeared for Monday's hearing at Westminster Magistrates Court wearing glasses and a dark blazer over a light top. He spoke only to confirm his name and date of birth to the judge and saluted his supporters in the public gallery at the beginning and end of the hearing. Assange's lawyer Gareth Peirce said difficulty in getting time with Assange had delayed the case, telling the court: "This slippage in the timetable is extremely worrying." Assange is being held in a British jail pending the U.S. extradition case, having served a sentence for skipping bail. He fled to Ecuador's embassy in 2012 to avoid being sent to Sweden to face sex crimes accusations that were dropped last year. He says the U.S. charges against him are a political attempt to silence journalists and publishers, and that the Swedish allegations were part of a plot to catch him.

BERLIN (AFP) -- Two World War II-era bombs were made safe in the western German city of Dortmund after around 14,000 people were evacuated, the city said Sunday. Officials there warning on Saturday that unexploded bombs buried by Allied forces during the war might be drenched in four sites in a heavily populated part of the city centre. Workers had detected anomalies during construction work that they announced on the city's official Twitter. Two unexploded bombs weighing 250 kilograms (550 pounds) each, one British and the other American, were found and made safe. Searches for another two suspected bombs turned up nothing. The precautions included the evacuation of two hospitals and the interruption of rail traffic. The discovery of World War II bombs is not uncommon in Germany. Last September a 250-kilo bomb was made safe in Hanover, with 15,000 people evacuated.

Philippine Capital Shut Down as Volcano Rumbles



Police officers guard a road nearby the erupting Taal Volcano in Talisay, Batangas, Philippines, January 13, 2020.

MANILA (Reuters) -- Schools and businesses shut across the Philippine capital on Monday as a volcano belched clouds of ash across the city and seismologists warned an eruption could happen at any time, potentially triggering a tsunami.

Thousands of people were forced to evacuate their homes around Taal, one of the world's smallest active volcanoes, which spewed ash for a second day from its crater in the middle of a lake about 70 km (45 miles) south of central Manila.

"The speed of escalation of Taal's volcanic activity caught us by surprise," Maria Antonia Bomas, chief science research specialist at the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology, told reporters.

"We have detected magma. It's still deep, it hasn't reached the surface. We still can expect a hazardous eruption any time."

Authorities warned that an eruption could send a tsunami surging across the lake.

More than 24,000 people have been evacuated from the volcanic island and the area immediately around it - normally a popular tourist spot.

To the southwest of the volcano, the towns of Agoncillo and Lemery were coated by a thick layer of ash, making roads impassable.

Agoncillo's mayor, Daniel Reyes, told DZMM radio some homes and part of a building had collapsed under the weight of the fallen ash.

In nearby Talisay Batangas, Vice Governor

Mark Leviste said rain had turned ash to mud and trucks were needed to evacuate more people from remote communities.

"There is no power. Even water was cut, so we are in need of potable water," he said. "We are in need of face masks."

In Manila, masks sold out quickly after residents were advised to wear them if they had to go out. Some wore handkerchiefs across their faces as they breathed air tainted by the smell of sulfur.

Streets that would normally be snarled with some of the world's worst traffic were largely empty in the city of 13 million people.

Schools and government offices were closed on official orders. The stock exchange suspended trading and many private businesses shut for the day too.

Classes in some cities in the capital will remain suspended on Tuesday, officials said.

Flight operations at Manila's international airport partially resumed, authorities said, after more than 500 flights were delayed or canceled on Sunday.

One of the most active volcanoes in the Philippines, Taal has erupted more than 30 times in the past five centuries, most recently in 1977. An eruption in 1911 killed 1,500 people and one in 1754 lasted for a few months.

The island has been showing signs of restiveness since early last year.

The Philippines lies on the "Ring of Fire," a belt of volcanoes circling the Pacific Ocean that is also prone to earthquakes.

Libyan Warring Sides in Moscow to Ink Ceasefire Deal



Military strongman Khalifa Haftar (R) and head of UN-recognized Government of National Accord Fayeze al-Sarraj were to meet in Moscow Jan. 13, 2020 for ceasefire talks.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- The heads of Libya's warring sides were to meet in Moscow on Monday to sign a ceasefire deal ending nine months of heavy fighting.

The two sides were expected to sign an agreement on the terms of a ceasefire that took effect over the weekend, raising hopes of an end to the fighting that has wracked the oil-rich North African country since a 2011 NATO-backed uprising killed longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

The UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, headed by Fayeze al-Sarraj, has been under attack since last April from forces loyal to strongman Khalifa Haftar, who is based in the east of the country.

Haftar and Sarraj were to meet in Moscow for talks along with "representatives of other Libyan sides", the Russian foreign ministry said, with Turkey and Russia's foreign and defense ministers acting as mediators.

Russian news agencies reported representatives of the two sides had arrived for talks, but it was unclear if Haftar and Sarraj would meet face-to-face.

The ceasefire initiative was launched by President Vladimir Putin and Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who jointly called for a truce in Istanbul last week.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel vis-

ited Putin on Saturday and he supported her drive to hold a peace conference sponsored by the United Nations. Berlin said Monday the summit was planned for later this month.

French President Emmanuel Macron on Monday called for a "credible, lasting and verifiable" truce while Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte was due in Turkey to discuss the situation with Erdogan.

Foreign powers are keen to secure influence in Libya -- home to Africa's largest proven crude reserves.

The GNA has signed agreements with Ankara assigning Turkey rights over a vast area of the eastern Mediterranean, in a deal denounced by France, Greece, Egypt and Cyprus.

Sarraj on Monday called on Libyans to "turn the page on the past, reject discord and to close ranks to move towards stability and peace".

His comments came after a ceasefire began at midnight on Sunday (22:00 GMT on Saturday) in line with Putin and Erdogan's joint call.

Since the start of the offensive against Tripoli, more than 280 civilians and about 2,000 fighters have been killed and 146,000 Libyans displaced, according to the United Nations.

Turkey and Russia's diplomatic offensive came despite the countries being seen as supporting opposing sides.

False Nuclear Alarm Sparks Terror in Canada



The Pickering Nuclear Generating Station, in Pickering, Ontario is seen in this file photo.

TORONTO (AP) — People throughout the Canadian province of Ontario awoke Sunday to a cellphone alert warning them of an "incident" at a nuclear plant just east of Toronto — only to later be told the message was a mistake.

The message, which was transmitted throughout the nation's most populous province, was accompanied by a shrill emergency broadcast noise. It said an unspecified event had occurred at the Pickering Nuclear Generating Station. There was no abnormal release of radioactivity, it added, and people did not need to take protective action.

More than an hour later, utility of-

ficials sent another message saying the alert "was sent in error" and that there was "no danger to the public or environment."

"No further action is required," said the message, which was also sent to television screens.

The alert went out during a routine training exercise being conducted by the Provincial Emergency Operations Centre, Ontario Solicitor General Sylvia Jones said in a statement that apologized for the mistake.

She said the government had started a full investigation and would "take the appropriate steps to ensure this doesn't happen again."

Jim Vlahos, a 44-year-old Toronto

man, awoke to the alert and quickly made a hotel reservation more than 60 miles away in Niagara Falls. He said he figured he would go as far west as possible and then cross the border.

"Having watched 'Chernobyl' didn't help," he said, referring to the HBO show about the 1986 nuclear disaster in the Soviet Union. "The lack of communication following the alert didn't help either," he said.

Many people slept through the first alert and saw it was a false alarm by the time they woke up.

Jonathan Davies, also 44, was taken aback when he spotted the alert while driving. But he waited until after he picked up his Tim Hortons coffee to check the news.

Scott Pelton, a 48-year-old Toronto resident, wondered if was a cyber attack. "Could be sign of a hack or could just be an innocent mistake? But is a mistake like that possible?" Pelton said.

Pickering Mayor Dave Ryan said he was "very troubled" by the message. He said on Twitter that he spoke to provincial officials and demanded an investigation.

Toronto Mayor John Tory joined him, tweeting that there were "far too many unanswered questions" about the warning that was sent across the province of 14 million people.

House Speaker Pelosi:

GOP to Pay for Denying Witnesses in Trump Probe



Pat A. Cipollone, center, the White House counsel, will be a constant during the impeachment trial. The Pickering Nuclear Generating Station, in Pickering, Ontario is seen in this file photo.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said House Democrats would determine on Tuesday when to send formal impeachment charges against President Donald Trump to the Senate and warned that Republicans will pay a political price for denying a trial with witnesses.

Pelosi, speaking on Sunday on ABC's "This Week" program, said her caucus at a regular meeting on Tuesday morning would vote on the timing of sending articles of impeachment to the Senate and naming trial managers in the House.

"I have always said I would send them over. So there shouldn't be any mystery to that," Pelosi said.

Pelosi has delayed delivery of the charges for weeks to compel

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to agree to include new witness testimony and evidence about Trump's pressure on Ukraine to probe former Vice President Joe Biden, a leading Democrat running for the nomination to face Trump in the November election.

Her gambit appeared to fail as McConnell slammed the door on that idea last week, saying he had enough Republican votes to start the trial without a commitment to hear from additional witnesses, including former Trump national security adviser John Bolton.

Bolton has said he would be willing to testify if subpoenaed by the Senate.

Pelosi insisted her delay helped make American voters aware of the need for a "fair trial" with witness

testimony and evidence. If McConnell continues to block such proceedings, Republicans would pay a political price.

"I think that he will be accountable to the American people for that," Pelosi said.

The Senate, where Trump's Republican party holds a majority, is widely expected to acquit Trump of the charges, as no Republicans have voiced support for ousting him, a step that would require a two-thirds majority.

Nonetheless, Democrats want a longer trial that turns up more information about Trump's efforts to pressure Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to open a Biden probe, including a July 25 phone call between the leaders. As the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign heats up, they believe this will turn some voters against Trump.

The Democratic-controlled House, in a party-line vote, impeached Trump on Dec. 18 on charges of abusing power and obstructing Congress. Trump says he did nothing wrong and has dismissed his impeachment as a partisan bid to undo his 2016 election win.

Trump sent several tweets on Sunday criticizing Pelosi and the Democratic-led impeachment effort.

"This phony Impeachment Hoax should not even be allowed to proceed. Did NOTHING wrong. Just a partisan vote. Zero Republicans. Never happened before!" Trump said on Twitter.

Senior Diplomat Wang Yi:

Taiwan Election Not to Change 'One China' Policy

BEIJING (Reuters/AFP) -- Senior Chinese diplomat Wang Yi said Monday that the One China principle will not be changed by the Taiwan election result and will not be shaken by the wrong words and actions of Western politicians.

The Taiwanese re-elected President Tsai Ing-wen, who says Taiwan is an independent country, by a landslide on Saturday. China claims Taiwan as its rightful territory under the One China principle.

China meanwhile defended barring the head of Human Rights Watch from entering Hong Kong, saying non-governmental organizations were responsible for political unrest in the city and should "pay the proper price".

Kenneth Roth was supposed to give a press conference in Hong Kong this week to unveil the New York-based rights group's latest global survey, which accuses China of prosecuting "an intensive attack" on international human rights agencies.

The long-time executive director said Sunday that he was

turned back by authorities at the city's airport.

China last month announced sanctions on American NGOs, including HRW, in retaliation for the passage of a US bill backing Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement.

"Allowing or not allowing someone's entry is China's sovereign right," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said at a regular press briefing.

"Plenty of facts and evidence show that the relevant NGO has through various means supported anti-China radicals, encouraged them to engage in extremist, violent and criminal activity, and incited Hong Kong independence separatist activities," Geng said.

"They bear major responsibility for the current chaos in Hong Kong. These organizations should be punished, and should pay the proper price."

Hong Kong has been battered by nearly seven months of occasionally violent protests, its biggest political crisis in decades.