



**KINSHASA (Reuters)** - Suspected Takfiri militants killed at least 62 civilians in a series of attacks this week in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where the army is waging a counter-insurgency campaign against the rebels, the government said on Saturday. The upsurge in violence after a period of relative calm in early January undercuts government claims of security progress against the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a Ugandan Takfiri group active in Beni territory. Rights group CEPADHO said ADF fighters had killed at least 74 civilians, many of them women and children, with knives and guns. It said the attacks spanned about 10 villages over the course of less than 48 hours. The army has repeatedly claimed to have made sweeping progress against the group by killing several top commanders and capturing many of its camps in the dense forests near the Ugandan border. But the ADF, which arrived in Congo from Uganda in the 1990s, has survived frequent onslaughts from Congolese force and UN peacekeepers, and taken revenge on civilian populations.

**MOSCOW (Dispatches)** -- Russia has reportedly spotted over two dozen foreign aircraft as well as eight drones on reconnaissance missions near its border in the past week but Russian warplanes did not try to intercept them, a local daily said, citing Moscow's Defense Ministry. "According to the defense ministry, 25 foreign aircraft and eight unmanned aerial vehicles conducted reconnaissance near Russian borders," local newspaper Krasnaya Zvezda reported. "Foreign aircraft and drones were monitored by Russian radars," added the paper, which is affiliated with the ministry, further quoting the military establishment as saying that "violations of Russian airspace were prevented." The news comes as Russia continues to show off its air force and air defenses in addition to conducting operations in Syria amid tensions with the US and the West. Although planes did not have to be scrambled against the reconnaissance missions, Russia's defense ministry says that "Russian pilots carried out 218 sorties at 68 aerodromes in the past week."

**BEIJING (Reuters)** -- North Korean leader Kim Jong Un sent a letter to Chinese President Xi Jinping offering condolences about the coronavirus outbreak in China, North Korean state news agency KCNA reported on Saturday. Kim "expressed the conviction that the party, government and people of China would surely emerge victorious in the campaign to combat the disease" under Xi's guidance, KCNA said. China is the closest ally that isolated North Korea has. The country has canceled most flights to China, imposed mandatory quarantine on all arrivals from China, and heavily restricted border crossings following the outbreak.

**BEIJING (Dispatches)** -- China has harshly lambasted the United States' decision to raise its warning alert to the highest level for travel to the Asian country due to the coronavirus epidemic, saying that the move is inappropriate and not "in line with the facts." The U.S. State Department on Friday raised the warning alert to the same level as Afghanistan and Iraq despite the World Health Organization (WHO)'s measure not to recommend travel curbs on China. "The United States acted in a diametrically opposite way right after the World Health Organization's declaration to oppose any move to close borders with China or restrict Chinese travelers' access, which is too unkind and has set a very bad example," China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said Saturday. "A friend in need is a friend indeed. Many countries are helping China fight with the contagion through different means. In contrast, the words and deeds of the U.S. are neither in line with the facts nor even appropriate," she added.

**WASHINGTON (Reuters)** -- Two billionaire Democratic presidential hopefuls, Michael Bloomberg and Tom Steyer, collectively spent about \$389 million last year on their campaigns, more than the rest of the remaining Democratic field combined, according to disclosures filed on Friday. Bloomberg launched his campaign in November and spent more than \$188 million in two months, a sum sourced entirely from his personal wealth. Steyer, who was also considered a late addition to the field of candidates when he launched his campaign in July, spent \$201 million in 2019 which largely came from \$202.5 million of his own money he put into his campaign and about \$3 million raised in donations.

**ADDIS ABABA (Reuters)** -- Several thousand protesters took to the streets in Ethiopian cities this week, demanding Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed do more to tackle simmering ethnic violence following the kidnapping of a group of university students. Armed men abducted the students from Dembi Dollo University in the Oromiya region in early December, according to survivors who escaped. The government said earlier this week that the army had rescued 21 of the students, but at least 12 others are still missing. While the kidnapers' identity or motive is not clear, the incident has revived widespread fears about ethnic violence ahead of this year's election and intensified pressure on Nobel Peace Laureate Abiy, who comes from the Oromo ethnic group. Many of the students were Amhara, a group that has clashed with Oromos in the past. In the past six months, clashes on campus have killed 12 students and played a role in the decision of 35,000 to drop out of university, according to the higher education ministry.

## U.S. President Lifts Restrictions on Landmines



Jamila Qassem Mahyoub, a Yemeni woman whose legs were amputated after stepping on a landmine while herding her sheep in 2017, holds a prosthetic leg in a house in Yemen's third city of Ta'izz in March 2019.

WASHINGTON (AFP) - U.S. President Donald Trump's administration has lifted U.S. restrictions on landmines, saying new technology made them safer, outraging campaigners for the abolition of the explosives that maim thousands of civilians each year. In the latest reversal of a policy of his predecessor Barack Obama, Trump gave the green light to a new generation of "non-persistent" landmines that can be switched off or destroyed remotely rather than staying active in the ground forever. "The Department of Defense has determined that restrictions imposed on American forces by the Obama administration's policy could place them at a severe disadvantage during a conflict against our adversaries," a White House statement said. Obama in 2014 banned the use of anti-personnel landmines with the exception, under pressure from military planners, of the Korean peninsula where the explosives dot the last Cold War frontier with North Korea.

The White House said the U.S. military will now be free to deploy landmines around the world "in exceptional circumstances." In rescinding the White House directive, the Trump administration said policy would now be set by the Pentagon, which said it was still prohibiting tradi-

tional landmines that cannot be turned off or destroyed remotely.

The new mines are set to self-destruct within 30 days but can be destroyed in as little as two hours if necessary, Vic Mercado, the Pentagon official in charge of the policy, told reporters.

In his estimation, there is only a six in a million chance that the self-destruction system will fail.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper said that the United States took into account the safety of civilians but considered landmines among the "important tools" for the military.

"At the end of day, we want to make sure that we have all the tools in our toolkit that are legally available and effective to ensure our success and to ensure the protection of our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines," he told reporters.

Handicap International, a French-based aid and pressure group for people disabled by conflict, said it was "revolted" by Trump's decision.

"Trump's announcement on anti-personnel mines is a death sentence for civilians," said Anne Hery, the group's advocacy director. "There are acts of war that are simply outside all rules. Mines belong to that category."

Representative Jim McGovern, a Democrat active on human rights issues, fired off a letter to the Pentagon voicing alarm at the change.

## Pompeo Tries to Pry Belarus Away From Russia



U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei arrive for a joint news conference in Minsk, Belarus, February 1, 2020.

MINSK, Belarus (Dispatches) - U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Saturday that the United States is willing and able to provide Belarus with 100% of its oil and gas, taking a slap at Russia which recently cut off supplies.

Pompeo is the first secretary of state to visit Belarus in 26 years and arrived in Minsk amid new tensions between Minsk and Moscow over energy. In a meeting with President Alexander Lukashenko, Pompeo said he hoped to help provide an opportunity for Belarus to achieve the "sovereignty" and "independence" it seeks.

"The United States wants to help Belarus build its own sovereign country," Pompeo said at a joint news conference with Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei. "Our energy producer stand ready to deliver 100% of the oil you need at competitive prices. We're the biggest energy producer in the world and all you have to do is call us."

Belarus last month began purchasing gas from Norway after Russian supplies were cut off. Last week, Lukashenko accused Russia, the country's main provider of cheap oil and gas, of stopping supplies "to dissolve Belarus."

Pompeo said the U.S. wants to help fill the vacuum and will continue to boost staffing at its embassy in Minsk, which was severely reduced 12 years ago when

the U.S. imposed significant sanctions on the country. The two countries agreed in September to exchange ambassadors for the first time since 2008. Pompeo said a new U.S. ambassador would be named soon.

Belarus had been a candidate to be included in the Trump administration's expanded travel ban that was announced on Friday but avoided it by taking measures to improve security cooperation and potential traveler threat information with the United States.

In addition to trying to boost American influence in Belarus, Pompeo urged economic and political reforms as well as improved human rights conditions - a message similar to those he will be bringing to his next stops in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan later this week. At each stop, Pompeo will warn of attempts by Russia and China to aggressively assert themselves in Europe and Central Asia.

Russia stopped supplying oil to Belarus after Dec. 31. The two nations had failed to renegotiate an agreed oil price for this year during drawn-out negotiations on deepening the integration of their economies.

Moscow argues that Belarus should accept greater economic integration if it wants to continue receiving energy resources at Russia's domestic prices.

# Britain Begins Uncertain Future Outside EU



A farewell message was projected onto the White Cliffs of Dover, on the southern coast of England.

LONDON (AFP) -- Britain began an uncertain future outside the European Union on Saturday after the country greeted the historic end to almost half a century of EU membership with a mixture of joy and sadness.

There were celebrations and tears on Friday as the EU's often reluctant member became the first to leave an organization set up to forge unity among nations after the horrors of World War II.

Little has changed as of Saturday as the UK is now in an 11-month transition period negotiated as part of the divorce.

Britons will be able to work in the EU and trade freely -- and vice versa -- until December 31, although the UK will no longer be represented in the bloc's

institutions.

Thousands of people waving Union Jack flags packed London's Parliament Square and sang the national anthem to mark that reality as Brexit became law at 11 pm (2300 GMT) -- midnight in Brussels.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson -- a figurehead in the seismic 2016 referendum vote to leave -- held a private party in his Downing Street office with a clock projected on the walls outside counting down the minutes to departure.

In an address to the nation, he hailed a "new era of friendly cooperation" acknowledging there could be "bumps in the road ahead" but predicting the country could make it a "stunning success".

"The most important thing to say

tonight is that this is not an end but a beginning," he said.

At a "Big Brexit Bash" in the market town of Morley, northern England, Raymond Stott said he was "glad it's all over" after years of political gridlock and acrimony.

"We will look after ourselves. We don't need Europe," said the 66-year-old.

However, Brexit has exposed deep divisions in British society and many fear the consequences of ending 47 years of ties with their nearest neighbors.

Some pro-Europeans, including many of the 3.6 million EU citizens who have made their lives in Britain, marked the occasion with candlelit gatherings.

There was a somber atmosphere among passengers on one of the last ferries to leave the European mainland pre-Brexit and make the 42-kilometre (26-mile) journey across the English Channel.

"It's very depressing what's happening today," said Alessio Bortone, an Italian who has lived in Britain for 10 years.

Brexit has provoked soul-searching in the EU about its future after losing a country of 66 million people with global diplomatic clout and the financial centre of the City of London.

French President Emmanuel Macron described it as a "historic warning sign" that should force the EU and its remaining nations of more than 440 million people to stop and reflect.

## Trump Restricts Immigrants From Six More Countries



Passengers at Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport in Abuja, Nigeria.

WASHINGTON (AP) - The Trump administration announced that it was restricting immigrants from six additional countries that officials said failed to meet minimum security standards, as part of an election-year push to further clamp down immigration.

Officials said immigrants from Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Eritrea, Nigeria, Sudan and Tanzania will face new restrictions in obtaining certain visas to come to the United States. But it is not a total travel ban, unlike President Donald Trump's earlier effort that generated outrage around the world for targeting Muslims.

The announcement came as Trump tries to promote his crack-

ing a signature issue that motivated supporters in 2016 and hoping it has the same effect this November. The administration recently announced birth tourism restrictions, is touting the sharp decline in crossings at the U.S.-Mexico border and citing progress on building the border wall.

Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Eritrea and Nigeria would have all immigrant visas suspended; those are applicants seeking to live in the U.S. permanently. They include visas for people sponsored by family members or employers as well as the diversity visa program that made up to 55,000 visas available in the most recent lottery. In December, for example, 40,666 immigrant visas were granted world-

Sudan and Tanzania will have diversity visas suspended. The State Department uses a computer drawing to select people from around the world for up to 55,000 diversity visas. Nigeria is already excluded from the lottery along with other countries that had more than 50,000 natives immigrate to the U.S. in the previous five years.

The new restrictions were swiftly met with criticism from immigrant advocates who slammed them as a new Muslim ban.

Sudan and Kyrgyzstan are majority-Muslim countries. Nigeria, the seventh-most populous nation in the world with more than 200 million people, is about evenly split between Christians and Muslims but has the world's fifth-largest population of Muslims, according to the Pew Research Center.

Omar Jadwat, director of the American Civil Liberties Union Immigrants' Rights Project, said the previous visa restrictions should not be expanded.

"President Trump is doubling down on his signature anti-Muslim policy -- and using the ban as a way to put even more of his prejudices into practice by excluding more communities of color," he said. "Families, universities, and businesses in the United States are paying an ever-higher price for President Trump's ignorance and racism."

## Fires Burn Out of Control Near Australian Capital

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) - Wildfires burned out of control near Australia's national capital, Canberra, and across surrounding New South Wales state on Saturday, with endangered residents warned to prepare to evacuate.

The capital region declared a state of emergency on Friday because of a fire that by Saturday covered 35,800 hectares (88,500 acres) of forest and farmland south of Canberra, Australian Capital Territory Emergency Services Agency Commissioner Georgeina Whelan said.

Spot fires were sparked by winds up to 10 kilometers (6 miles) from the fire front, and some of those fires will eventually merge with the main fire, she said.

The fires threaten Canberra's southern suburbs and the nearby village of Tharwa, which has been cut off by road closures since Saturday morning.

"The fire may pose a threat to lives directly in its path,"

Whelan told reporters in Canberra. "Driving is extremely dangerous and potentially deadly."

The fire was downgraded from emergency level late Saturday to the second level on a three-tier scale of danger due to a fall in temperatures and winds. But several fires continued to burn at emergency levels in southeast New South Wales.

New South Wales Rural Fire Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said sheds and stables had been destroyed but no homes had been reported lost to wildfires on Saturday.

The continuing danger of embers is the first in the Australian Capital Territory since 2003, when wildfires killed four people and destroyed almost 500 homes in a single day.

Fires across southern Australia have claimed at least 33 lives since September, destroyed more than 3,000 homes and razed more than 10.6 million hectares (26.2 million acres).