



KADUNA (Dispatches) -- Nigeria's Muslim cleric Sheikh Ibrahim al-Zakzaky and his wife are in critical health condition, their lawyer has said after their trial was postponed due to their deteriorating health. According to a report by the London-based Islamic Human Rights Commission, Femi Falana said on Thursday that his clients - jailed Sheikh Zakzaky and his wife Mallimah Zinat - could not appear in the high court in Kaduna, the capital of an eponymous province in northwestern Nigeria, for trial due to their critical health conditions. He added that prison officials also prevented any physician from out of the prison to see his clients, who are desperately in need of medical attention and care. Falana, who is also a human rights activist, also noted that the court finally agreed to order the prison officials to allow the top cleric and his wife, who can barely talk with clutches, see a physician. The lawyer added that his clients' case was also adjourned to February 24 as their extremely poor health condition barred them from being present in the hearing session on Thursday. Zakzaky, who is in his mid-60s, has been in detention since December 2015 after his residence in the city of Zaria was raided by Nigeria's forces, during which he was beaten and lost vision in his left eye. During the brutal arrest, three of his sons were also killed, his wife sustained serious wounds, and more than 300 of his followers were killed.

PARIS (Dispatches) - Demonstrations were held across France on Thursday as citizens continued to protest the government reforms in the pension system. Protest rallies were held in the capital as well as major cities from the east-central region of Burgundy to the southern parts of the country, according to website of CGT, a union at the forefront of the protests. The strike involved the country's major unions, including the UNEF, MNL, UNL, CGT, FO, FSU, and Solidaires, who had called for another inter-professional day of protests. The unions cover various industries, including teachers, maritime workers, lawyers, garbage collectors, and general laborers. This is the ninth nationwide "inter-professional day" - or day of action as it has also been called - which has been well-supported. The pension reform bill is now in the National Assembly where it will be reviewed this week. The members will meet Thursday evening for debate. The government must examine 20,000 amendments presented to the bill, including 19,000 from the FI, France's left-wing populist political party.

NEW DELHI (AFP) -- An Indian man has been charged with raping a five-year-old girl on the premises of the U.S. embassy in India's capital New Delhi, police said Thursday. The 25-year-old was arrested at the high-security compound on Sunday a day after the alleged incident at the living quarters for local housekeeping staff. Police officer Yogesh Kumar told AFP preliminary medical tests confirmed the girl had been raped. The man was charged under child rape laws that carry the death penalty. The sprawling diplomatic compound is one of the most secure in Delhi, with multiple layers of manned and electronic security. India is struggling to combat a growing number of sexual assault cases in the country. Violence against women in the South Asian nation has been under the international spotlight following the brutal gang-rape and murder of a Delhi student on a bus in 2012. Almost 34,000 rapes were reported in 2018, according to official data, with activists claiming the figure is just the tip of the iceberg.

GENEVA (AP) -- The UN weather agency said Friday that an Argentine research base on the northern tip of Antarctica is reporting a temperature that, if confirmed, could be a record high for the icy continent. World Meteorological Organization spokeswoman Clare Nullis, citing figures from Argentina's national weather service, said the Esperanza base recorded 18.3 degrees Celsius (64.9 Fahrenheit) on Thursday - topping the former record of 17.5 degrees tallied in March 2015. The WMO's committee that draws on the agency's weather and climate archives is now expected to verify whether the reading would amount to a new record. "Everything we have seen thus far indicates a likely legitimate record but we will of course begin a formal evaluation of the record once we have full data from SMN and on the meteorological conditions surrounding the event," said WMO's Weather and Climate Extremes rapporteur, Randal Cerveny, referring to the acronym for Argentina's weather service.

GABORONE (AFP) -- Botswana will hold its first major auction for trophy elephant hunting quotas since controversially scrapping a hunting ban last year, a wildlife official said. President Mokgweetsi Masisi's government in May revoked a moratorium, just a year after he succeeded Ian Khama, an avid environmentalist, who introduced a blanket ban in 2014 to reverse a decline in the population of wild animals. Masisi defended off criticism of his government's decision, saying the move would not threaten the elephant population. The government will issue seven hunting "packages" of 10 elephants each, confined to "controlled hunting areas", a wildlife spokeswoman Alice Mmolawa told AFP on Thursday. idlers must deposit a refundable of 200,000 pula (\$18,300) to participate. The lifting of the hunting ban was praised by local communities but derided by conservationists and ignited tension between the Khama and Masisi.

Russia Blasts U.S. 'Provocations' Against Venezuela



Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and Russian President Vladimir Putin confer at the Kremlin in Moscow in September.

CARACAS (Dispatches) -- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Thursday denounced U.S. foreign policy in Venezuela, criticizing U.S. "provocations" and attempts to create what he called a pretext for military intervention.

Russia and the United States have repeatedly clashed over Venezuela, where Russian oil companies and military advisers are playing a key role in support of the government of President Nicolas Maduro.

The United States and several of its allies recognize opposition leader Juan Guaido, who has been trying to oust Maduro, as Venezuela's rightful president. Washington has imposed sanctions in a bid to dislodge Maduro.

Lavrov condemned attempts to remove Maduro as not "useful," and said during a visit to Mexico that Washington's threats against Venezuela were counterproductive.

Lavrov said the United States was "threatening that all options are on the table" and was involved in "provocations" in Venezuela.

"No one can solve the problems of Venezuelans for them, but others may very well try to prevent them from negotiating. We see such attempts aimed at setting a pretext for a military intervention," Lavrov said, according to Russian state news agency TASS.

"Russia and Mexico agree that this will be categorically unacceptable," Lavrov

added, according to TASS.

Lavrov met with Mexican counterpart Marcelo Ebrard on Thursday and afterwards said U.S. foreign policy was stuck in the past, accusing Washington of bullying tactics.

"The United States thinks that everything is allowed and in the meantime they threaten the interlocutors, including punishments and sanctions," Lavrov said at a news conference in Mexico City, according to a live translation of his comments into Spanish.

Mexican and Russian positions on Venezuela have moved closed under Mexico's leftist President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

The United States on Thursday warned Venezuela of consequences if opposition Guaido is not allowed to return safely from a visit to Washington.

"We hope that the regime makes the calculation, particularly after this trip, that the support for Guaido is strong and that the counter-reaction to any move against him would make it a mistake for the regime," said Elliott Abrams, the U.S. pointman on Venezuela.

Asked to spell out what the United States would do, Abrams said only: "We are prepared."

Guaido, seen as a puppet by the Venezuelan government, paid a surprise visit as a guest Tuesday at President Donald Trump's State of the Union address to Congress.

Trump Cheers 'Acquittal' With Profane Language



President Donald Trump addresses the U.S. from the East Room of the White House, thanks supporters and blasts what he calls dirty cops, leakers and liars.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Exulting in his impeachment acquittal, a defiant President Donald Trump took a scorched-earth victory lap Thursday, unleashing his fury against those who tried to remove him from office and pointing ahead to his reelection campaign.

Triumphantly waving newspaper front pages that declared him "ACQUITTED," Trump denounced the impeachment proceedings as a "disgrace" and portrayed himself as a victim of political foes he labeled "scum," "sleaze bags" and "crooked" people. Hours earlier, he unleashed broadsides that stunned the crowd at an annual bipartisan prayer breakfast.

"It was evil, it was corrupt, it was dirty cops," Trump declared in a packed White House East Room, where he was surrounded by several hundred of his most loyal supporters. "This should never ever happen to another president, ever."

He conceded nothing in regard to charges that he improperly withheld a White House meeting and U.S. military aid in an effort to pressure Ukraine to investigate Democratic rival Joe Biden and other political matters.

"We went through hell, unfairly," he insisted. "Did nothing wrong."

His comments were a clear sign that, post-impeachment, Trump is emboldened like never before as he barrels ahead in his reelection fight with a united Republican Party behind him. And his remarks stood

in stark contrast to the apology offered by President Bill Clinton when he faced the American people in the aftermath of his own impeachment acquittal in 1999.

The only contrition Trump offered was to his own family, apologizing "for having them go through a phony, rotten deal."

Trump had plenty else to say, however. Venting for more than an hour, he ticked off names of the "vicious and mean" people he felt had wronged him: House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff and former FBI Director James Comey. And he reveled in the verdict handed down by the GOP-controlled Senate Wednesday, saluting one-by-one in Oscar acceptance speech-fashion the "warrior" GOP lawmakers who had backed him both in the Capitol and on television.

"Now we have that gorgeous word. I never thought it would sound so good," Trump said. "It's called 'total acquittal.'"

Trump's remarks, delivered with the aid of scribbled notes but no teleprompter, served as a dramatic contrast to his State of the Union address earlier this week. Standing before Congress Tuesday night, Trump bowed closely to his script and offered an optimistic message to the country with no mention of impeachment.

This time, his remarks were rambling and replete with profane language, comedic interludes and plenty of tangents and asides.

Xi Raps U.S. for Not Responding 'Reasonably' to Epidemic



U.S. President Donald Trump meets with China's President Xi Jinping at the start of their bilateral meeting at the G20 leaders summit in Osaka, Japan, June 29, 2019.

BEIJING (Dispatches) -- Chinese President Xi Jinping has urged U.S. President Donald Trump to respond "reasonably" to the coronavirus outbreak, saying Beijing is doing all it can to contain the epidemic.

In a phone conversation with his U.S. counterpart on Friday, Xi said China was "fully confident and capable of defeating the epidemic."

He said "the long-term trend of China's economic development for the better will not change" under the brunt of the epidemic, Chinese national broadcaster CCTV reported.

Xi called the fight to contain the new coronavirus a "people's war", saying China has implemented "nationwide mobili-

zation, comprehensive deployment and rapid response" along with "the strictest prevention and control measures" against the virus.

Xi's comments came after China accused the United States of spreading fear over the epidemic by pulling Americans out of the Asian country and enforcing travel restrictions instead of providing aid to Beijing in curbing the killer infection.

The U.S. was the first country that began pulling its nationals from China, issued a travel warning against going to the Asian country, and from Sunday barred entry to foreigners who had recently been there.

Many international officials, however, have hailed the Asian giant's efforts to contain the epidemic.

Argentine Health Minister Gines Gonzalez Garcia said on Thursday China's response to the epidemic was prompt and the prevention and control measures were appropriate.

"I think China is taking correct prevention and control measures. We thank the Chinese government for its actions. We oppose all kinds of discrimination, and we fully support China," said Garcia.

Sazaly Abu Bakar, a senior professor at the Tropical Infectious Diseases Research and Education Center at University of Malaya, also spoke highly of China's efforts in timely reporting and sharing the information about the virus.

Bakar who is also the director of the WHO Collaborating Center for Arbovirus Reference and Research showed his support for the Chinese government's decisive measures to deal with the epidemic.

On Monday, Iran's Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif praised China for taking "successful" measures to contain the outbreak and denounced U.S. attempts to exploit the health crisis.

Zarif told his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi that Iran was willing to work together with China to combat the epidemic caused by the coronavirus.

"China is obviously more responsible and successful than the United States in preventing and controlling (the) H1N1 flu in 2009," he said.

Wang, for his part, thanked Tehran for supporting Beijing in fighting the epidemic, hailing Zarif as the first foreign minister publicly backing China.

Indian Minister: Muslims Should Be Fed With 'Bullets'



Chief Minister of India's Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath (L) gestures during BJP rally ahead of general elections in Ahmedabad, India, on March 26, 2019.

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) -- An Indian provincial chief minister affiliated with the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been provoking anti-Muslim sentiments in his state.

Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath, who is known for promoting hate and violence against Indian Muslims, recently told orange-clad Hindutva supporters that the Muslims protesting a new citizenship law in the country were "terrorists" who should be fed with "bullets not biryani."

He also described the thousands of women who have been rallying for weeks in the Delhi's suburb of Shaheen Bagh in protest against the citizenship law as "terrorists."

The controversial Citizenship

Amendment Act (CAA), supported by Modi's right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was passed in December last year, triggering waves of massive protests. Some 30 people have so far lost their lives during rallies.

The controversial law allows granting citizenship to millions of migrants — with the exception of Muslims — who legally or illegally came into India from Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Afghanistan before December 2014.

"The protests happening at various places in Delhi are not because of the Citizenship Amendment Act," Adityanath said. "They are happening because these people want to prevent India from becoming a global power."

In the weeks leading up to the Delhi State elections, BJP candidates have been out in force in their most brazenly anti-Muslim campaign ever. They are desperately trying to defeat the ruling anti-corruption Aam Aadmi Party, which has secured 67 out of 70 parliament seats since the last elections five years ago.

The BJP has governed India on the national level since 2015, but it has suffered losses in Delhi State.

India has extended the detention of four political leaders in Kashmir who had been held by authorities since August to quell dissent after the central government stripped the region of its autonomy, two senior officials said on Friday.

The latest detention order was issued under the draconian Public Safety Act, which allows detention without charges for up to two years, the officials in Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu & Kashmir state, told Reuters.

The four included two former chief ministers of India's only Muslim majority state, Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti, and two regional party leaders, Ali Mohammad Sagar and Sartaj Madni, the officials said.

They were originally held under a law that allowed a maximum of six months, and their detention was about to expire.

Rights group Amnesty International has described the PSA as a "lawless law".

Macron: We 'Cannot Remain Spectators' in Nuke Race

PARIS (Dispatches) -- French President Emmanuel Macron called Friday for European nations to play a more direct role in halting a new nuclear arms race, saying they "cannot remain spectators" against a threat to the continent's collective security.

"In the absence of a legal framework, they could rapidly face a new race for conventional weapons, even nuclear weapons, on their own soil," Macron told military officers in a speech laying out France's post-Brexit nuclear strategy.

France is now the nuclear-armed power in the European Union at a time when long-standing accords on limiting the growth of nuclear arsenals appear increasingly at risk.

The U.S. has abandoned the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty and Washington is threatening to quit the New START arms reduction treaty when it expires next year.

Macron said there is a strong need for Europe to ensure it does not find itself in the middle of a Cold War-style standoff "which could jeopardize the peace obtained after so many tragedies on our continent."

He warned of "the possibility of a pure and unrestrained military and nuclear competition, the likes of which we haven't seen since the end of the 1960s."

France has already reduced the number of its warheads to under 300, Macron said, giving it "the legitimacy to demand concrete moves from

other nuclear powers toward global disarmament that is gradual, credible and can be verified."

But he stopped short of offering to share France's nuclear capabilities, a pillar of its security strategy since implemented by Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s.

Germany in particular remains strongly opposed to atomic weapons, although a leader in Chancellor Angela Merkel's party, Johann Wadepuhl, said this week that Paris should consider putting its arsenal under the auspices of the EU or NATO.

Macron invited European partners to engage in a "strategic dialogue" on the role of France's nuclear capacity as the country embarks on a costly modernization of its arsenal.

Macron also warned of the need for "a greater capacity for autonomous action by Europeans," who must step up their military spending. "Why are they not ready to make defense a budget priority and make the necessary sacrifices, even as the risks are growing?" Macron asked.

France has broken with some EU nations by recently reaching out to restore dialogue with President Vladimir Putin, who controls the world's largest nuclear arsenal.

"There can be no defense and security project for European citizens without a political vision that seeks to progressively restore trust with Russia," Macron said.