

Power Grab Puts Bolivia on Brink of Civil War



Demonstrators from El Alto area shout slogans and hold Whipala flags as military troops and police officers patrol during a protest asking the return of former President of Bolivia Evo Morales on Nov. 12, 2019 in La Paz, Bolivia.

SUCRE (Dispatches) -- Bolivia is teetering on the brink of a civil war following violent protests which forced President Evo Morales to step down in order to avoid bloodshed.

A senator proclaimed himself Bolivia's interim president Tuesday in an effort to fill the power vacuum, but Morales condemned the move as a "sneaky coup".

The power grab came just as Morales, who transformed the Andean nation as its first indigenous president, left the country for Mexico with the aim of helping Bolivia recover from weeks of violent protests.

But the events unfolding in the wake of deputy Senate speaker Jeanine Anez proclaiming herself as interim president portended more violence ahead as rival protesters fought on the streets of the capital.

Shortly after Morales left for Mexico where he was granted asylum, he accused opposition leader Carlos Mesa and protest leader Luis Fernando Camacho of staging a coup with the help of police.

His departure came after what is seen by many as a dramatic coup against the one-time llama shepherd from the Bolivian highlands and former coca growers' union leader.

As president, Morales helped lift millions out of poverty, increased social rights and presided over nearly 14 years of stability and high economic growth in South America's poorest country.

Bolivia has been experiencing years of political and economic stability and growth under his rule. The economy has grown by an annual average of about 4.5 percent, well above the regional average, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts it will grow at four percent this year.

The opposition has claimed that a fight for "democracy and peace" led Morales to resign and depart the country.

Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard said on Monday the Bolivian military had broken with the constitution by pressing Morales to stand down.

Uruguay, Cuba and Venezuela have also said Morales was deposed illegally.

Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous leader, was declared president for a fourth term in the election but the opposition rejected the outcome and claimed that there had been fraud in the election process.

That sparked violent street protests, which left three people dead and hundreds more wounded, in what the Morales government already called a coup bid.

Morales also denied any wrongdoing but agreed to call for a new election. He said the country's Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TES) would be overhauled before the poll, with the parliament choosing its members.

The opposition rejected the request, prompting Morales to announce his resignation on Sunday as violent protests pushed the country to the brink.

On Tuesday, thousands of people took to the streets, calling for Morales to return to the country.

Scores of people were wounded in clashes with police. Video footage showed police battling demonstrators in the city of Cochabamba.

Police said large crowds of people were also heading toward the capital from the nearby city of El Alto to join the protests.

Around the capital's central Murillo square and other parts of the city, protesters blocked roads.

The U.S. reacted to the departure as "a positive step to begin calming the situation on the ground in Bolivia," according to a senior administration official.

President Donald Trump also said Washington "applauds ... the Bolivian military for abiding by its oath to protect not just a single person, but Bolivia's constitution."

The statement, posted on the White House website, raised concerns among observers, with one describing it "like a chilling warning of more coups to come."

Trump said the events in Bolivia send "a strong signal to the illegitimate regimes in Venezuela and Nicaragua." Those are the governments that have long been resisting Washington's coup attempts.

U.S. Pushes Provocative Bill Amid Hong Kong Unrest



Protesters stand in front of a burning barricade at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), in Hong Kong on Nov. 13, 2019.

HONG KONG (Dispatches) -- Protesters paralyzed parts of the Asian financial hub for a third day on Wednesday as police warned that the territory is on the "brink of total collapse."

Wearing face masks, about 1,000 protesters hurled bricks and blocked roads in the heart of the city's Central business district at lunchtime, Reuters reported.

Most schools and several universities remained closed for a third day. Scores of riot police tried to disperse the crowds near the stock exchange, wrestling some people to the ground.

On Tuesday, they struck the city's transport network, built barricades on roads, set fires and threw petrol bombs, chairs and other objects at the police which fired tear gas and water cannon in response.

Police spokesman Kong Wing-cheung said on Tuesday afternoon that they had "countless examples of rioters using random and indiscriminate violence against innocent" people.

"Hong Kong's rule of law has been pushed to the brink of total collapse as masked rioters recklessly escalate their violence under the hope that they can get away with it," he said.

There were chaotic scenes through the night at the prestigious Chinese University, with explosions, plumes of smoke,

yelling and sustained firing of tear gas and rubber bullets during which scores were injured.

Police said they helped a group of mainland students flee Chinese University's campus by boat on Wednesday after they expressed concern about their safety.

As violence rose, the chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee said he wanted the Senate to pass legislation to support protesters in Hong Kong.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell accused China of undermining Hong Kong's autonomy and suppressing protests.

The legislation would subject Hong Kong's special U.S. trading status to annual reviews and provide for sanctions against officials deemed responsible for undermining Hong Kong's "fundamental freedoms and autonomy."

The Democratic-controlled House of Representatives unanimously passed the bill in mid-October, drawing a strong reaction from Beijing which said the lawmakers had "sinister intentions."

The Foreign Relations Committee approved a similar measure in September, but it has not been scheduled for a vote by the full Senate, which must pass the bill before it can be sent to President Donald Trump.

Ukrainians Feel Victimized by Tumultuous U.S. Politics



This image taken on September 25, 2019 shows U.S. President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky speaking during a meeting in New York on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- Regardless of how the House of Representatives' impeachment hearings into President Donald Trump end, some Ukrainian-Americans believe their ancestral homeland has already become an unwitting victim of tumultuous U.S. politics.

"I think Ukraine is kind of a victim in this case because I believe they were pushed to do something that is not in the real Ukrainian interest," said Igor Yarmak, 63, a tech professional in New York City who has voted Republican in the past but dislikes Trump.

The inquiry into whether Trump misused U.S. foreign policy to ask Ukraine to target a domestic political opponent enters a critical phase on

Wednesday when Congress holds its first public, televised hearings to question witnesses.

Others among the roughly 1 million people of Ukrainian descent living in the United States also expressed frustration at seeing Ukraine, which largely depends on foreign aid and protection from Russia, dragged into the impeachment fight.

"Once again, Ukraine is in the spotlight for its critical position in eastern Europe and I feel it's being used by political powers for their own gain," said Paul Jablonsky, a small business owner and the president of the Ukrainian American Community Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The inquiry comes three years into

Trump's unconventional presidency and as Democrats and Trump's Republicans are gearing up for a brutal election battle.

Democrats are investigating whether there are grounds to impeach Trump over his July 25 request, in a phone call to Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, that the latter investigate former Vice President Joe Biden, a key political rival to Trump in 2020.

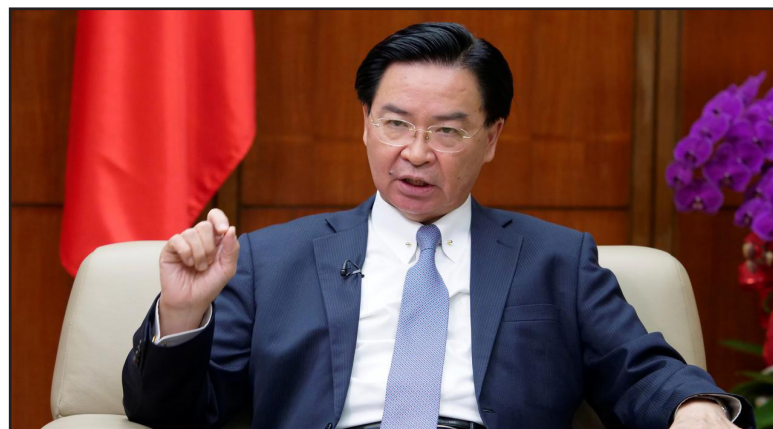
That call prompted a whistleblower complaint that led congressional Democrats to launch the probe into whether Trump abused his power by withholding nearly \$400 million in security assistance to Ukraine to pressure the vulnerable U.S. ally.

"(It is) really disheartening if it does come to pass that President Trump has been using his individual influence as president to further his political ambitions for the next election," said 59-year-old Jablonsky, who considers himself an independent and agrees with Trump politically on issues including trade.

Ukraine's Zelensky, a comedian and, like Trump, a political novice, won a landslide election victory in April promising voters an end to a conflict with Russian-backed forces in the Donbass region that has killed 13,000 people.

He has been walking a diplomatic tightrope to maintain good relations with both US political sides whose bipartisan support Ukraine counts on for aid and diplomatic cover against Russia following Moscow's annexation of the Crimea peninsula in 2014.

China: Attack Claim Aims to Intimate Taiwanese



Taiwan's Foreign Affairs Minister Joseph Wu speaks during an interview in Taipei, Taiwan on November 6, 2019.

TAIPEI (Dispatches) -- China on Wednesday accused Taiwan of scaremongering after the self-ruled island warned of a possible Chinese attack, saying Beijing could resort to military conflict to divert domestic pressure if an economic slowdown bites.

Last week, Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu said China could attack the self-ruled island if any threat to the ruling Communist Party arose from any slowdown in the world's second largest economy amid a trade war with the U.S.

Ma Xiaoguang, spokesperson for the Taiwan Affairs Office of China's State Council, told a regular news conference in Beijing on Wednesday that Wu's comments were "complete nonsense and absolute rubbish."

"Recently, in order to seek benefit for the elections, they have been weaving various lies to intimidate, threaten and mislead the people of Taiwan," he added.

Ma said "compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait must be highly vigilant and not easily misled."

"Under the current complicated economic situation, the mainland's economic development landscape is still good, and this is not something the likes of Joseph Wu can talk down," he said.

Taiwan faces presidential elections in January. China considers the island as a wayward province under the globally-rec-

ognized "One China" policy. The policy refers to the diplomatic acknowledgement that there is only one state called China, despite the existence of two governments; one in China and another on the island of Taiwan.

In January, Chinese President Xi Jinping said in a speech that Beijing reserves the right to use force to bring Taiwan under its control but will strive for peaceful "reunification."

Ties with Beijing have soured since Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen came to power in 2016. Her party refuses to recognize the idea that Taiwan is part of "One China".

China has pursued reunification with Taiwan ever since the island broke away from the mainland during a civil war in 1949. It claims full sovereignty over the island and almost all world countries, including the U.S., recognize that sovereignty.

Under President Donald Trump, the U.S. has however increasingly embraced Taiwan. Since Trump took office in January 2017, Washington has opened a new de facto embassy in Taipei and passed a law to encourage senior U.S. officials to travel to Taiwan to meet their counterparts.

China has warned Washington against meddling in Taiwan, saying it will "resolutely take action" and "fight at all costs" to defend its sovereignty over the self-ruled island as well as South China Sea waters.



WASHINGTON (AFP) -- Donald Trump faces the most perilous challenge of his three-year presidency as public hearings convened as part of the impeachment probe against him open under the glare of television cameras on Wednesday. Democrats who control the House of Representatives plan to prove over several weeks of hearings that the U.S. leader abused his office by seeking Ukraine's help for his 2020 reelection campaign, and sought to extort his Kiev counterpart into finding dirt on Democratic rival Joe Biden. Trump says the inquiry is "corrupt" and "illegal," and maintains he did nothing wrong. In a late-night tweet on the eve of the hearings, he retweeted a lengthy Fox News segment assailing the proceedings as a "phony showtrial" staged by "raging psychotic Democrats." The investigation threatens to make Trump only the third US president to be impeached, after Andrew Johnson in 1868 and Bill Clinton in 1998, although to be removed from office he would need to be convicted by the Republican-led Senate.

SALT, Spain (Reuters) -- Spanish police on Wednesday cleared out scores of protesters supporting Catalan independence who had trapped around 500 vehicles while blocking a major highway for more than 15 hours. Regional and national police said they had dislodged around 200 protesters who had shut traffic on both sides of the AP-7 highway near Girona, a city with a strong Catalan pro-independence movement. Some protesters waved separatist flags while others sported sleeping mats. Protesters burned tires and branches as police approached early on Wednesday. Some threw small objects at police, but most walked away peacefully. A secretive protest group called Democratic Tsunami claimed responsibility for the disruption, while another separatist group known as CDR said it had supported the protest. Both are eager to press the case for secession, days after a national election delivered a deeply fragmented parliament that offers separatist parties a chance to play a role in unblocking the political stalemate in Madrid.

GLASGOW, Scotland (Reuters) -- A Labour government would not grant a referendum on Scottish independence in the first term if it is elected, leader Jeremy Corbyn said on Wednesday. Scottish nationalists led by Nicola Sturgeon have suggested they could support a "progressive alliance" with Labour in the event of a hung parliament at the Dec. 12 election, in return for a second independence vote. "No referendum in the first term of a Labour government because I think we need to concentrate completely on investment across Scotland," Corbyn told reporters. Scottish voters opposed independence in a 2014 plebiscite but then backed remaining in the European Union in 2016, which the Scottish National Party has used to try and boost support for secession.

ROME (Dispatches) -- A new survey reveals that more than half of Italians consider racist acts as "justifiable", a finding that comes following a recent string of racist incidents across the country. Italian polling firm SWG, which questioned a sample of 1,500 people to conduct the survey, found that 45% of respondents said racist acts are acceptable depending on the situation, while a further 10% said that such acts were always justifiable. The remaining 45% said racist acts of any kind were completely unacceptable. "What this means is that there has been a relaxation in attitudes towards racism -- not necessarily that people have become racist, more that they are becoming more accepting of racist acts and do not consider them so scandalous," Enzo Rizzo, scientific director at SWG said on Tuesday. "We can say anything about anyone and are becoming more used to it," said Rizzo. "This is a bad sign from a civic point of view. It's not only in Italy ... what we're seeing in other countries too is a sort of adaptation towards the worst."

ISLAMABAD (Reuters) -- Anti-government protesters in Pakistan blocked a key highway linking the country to Afghanistan on Wednesday, as part of what they called the "second phase" of action aimed at ousting Prime Minister Imran Khan. The protests, led by Fazl-ur-Rehman, head of the conservative Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (F) party, began with the "Azadi" (freedom) March on Oct. 27 from the southern city of Karachi. Tens of thousands of protesters reached the capital Islamabad on Oct. 31, where they have been holding a sit-in in its main highway demanding Khan's resignation and a fresh election, over allegations of electoral fraud and mismanagement of the economy - accusations the government denies. JUI-F workers holding party flags blocked the Quetta-Chaman highway in the west of the country with a sit-in on Wednesday, resulting in a long queue of trucks laden with goods, footage from private news channels showed.

KARACHI (Reuters) -- The crude waxwork figure isn't much to look at, although it does feature the famous moustache. But Pakistan's new museum exhibit on an Indian pilot captured when the two nations came close to war earlier this year is causing ire across the border. Pakistan's Air Force on Wednesday opened a new gallery in its museum on Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, who was shot down in a dog-fight as the two countries clashed over the contested Kashmir region in February. Abhinandan became the face of the crisis after Islamabad released a video of him drinking tea with Pakistani officers while in captivity.

Firefighters Battle 140 Blazes Across East Australia

SYDNEY (AFP) -- Australians on Wednesday began sifting through the ashes of hundreds of bushfires that have ravaged the country, relieved that their worst fears were unrealized -- but wary of a long and brutal summer ahead.

Firefighters were still battling around 140 blazes across the country's eastern seaboard, but a respite from "catastrophic" weather conditions meant the danger from many fires was downgraded.

The northern state of Queensland remained on high alert, with residents on the north shore of popular holiday town Noosa told to "leave immediately" to avoid an "unpredictable" fire burning nearby.

Underscoring the risks to residents and emergency responders, a firefighting helicopter crashed during water-bombing operations in the state.

The pilot survived with "non-life-threatening injuries", a

Queensland Ambulance Service spokesman told AFP.

In the worst-hit areas of New South Wales, cooler southerly winds eased conditions -- a stark contrast with the gale-force gusts and high temperatures that plagued firefighters for much of Tuesday.

In all, 50 homes were damaged or destroyed, and around 20 people were injured, but most populated areas were spared.

Residents of the small towns of Glenreagh and Nana Glen returned to find houses intact, a nearby 150,000-hectare (370,000-acre) inferno having stopped just short of their doors.

But on nearby farmland, unlucky families faced homes destroyed and cars transformed into blackened husks.

Queensland Fire and Emergency Services acting commissioner Michael Wassing said another wind change on Wednesday afternoon could worsen several large fires in difficult-to-access areas of the state.