



FLOODS HIT US MIDWEST EMERGENCY DECLARED IN MISSOURI

Missouri Governor Mike Parson declared a state of emergency Thursday following flooding that left several people stranded and continues to cause damage and strain levees in several Midwest states. Parson's action will allow state agencies to work directly with local officials responding to flooding. The flooding has claimed three lives, damaged thousands of homes and busted about 20 levees in Nebraska, Iowa and Missouri.

TOP OF THE WORLD



BRAZIL Ex-president Temer arrested

Sao Paulo: Brazil's former President Michel Temer was arrested on Thursday in "Operation Radioactivity," a probe of alleged graft in the construction of a nuclear power plant, threatening to delay debate over the government's ambitious fiscal reforms. Temer was president from 2016 to 2018, taking office after the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, who he served under as vice president for six years. His lawyer confirmed he was arrested in Sao Paulo, and his legal team has lodged an appeal for Temer to be freed. Prosecutors alleged that Temer was the leader of a "criminal organisation" that took in \$472 million in bribes or pending future kick-backs as part of numerous schemes.

Deal or no deal: EU gives Britain 'last chance' for orderly Brexit

Bloc give UK Parliament until April 12 to come up with new plan or choose to exit without a deal

ALASTAIR MACDONALD & THOMAS ESCRITT BRUSSELS, MARCH 22

EU LEADERS on Friday said Britain had a final chance to leave the bloc in an orderly fashion, having given the UK Parliament an April 12 deadline to offer a new plan or choose to quit the bloc without a treaty.

Arriving for a second day of a summit dominated by talks over Britain's departure, Belgium's Prime Minister said he hoped for a rational decision by British MPs to back the withdrawal treaty that May concluded with Brussels.

Preparations for a no-deal, in which Britain would face sudden trade barriers and restrictions on business, were still underway, however, Charles Michel said.

"This is perhaps the last chance for Britain to say what it wants for the future," Michel



(From left) Finnish Prime Minister Juha Sipila, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė and French President Emmanuel Macron at an EU summit in Brussels on Friday. AP

said. "More than ever, this is in the hands of the British parliament," he said, adding that the 27 EU leaders were not blind to the risks of a no-deal.

Seven hours of summit brainstorming on Thursday kept

a host of options open for leaders, who say they regret Britain's decision to leave but are eager to move on from what they increasingly see as a distraction.

A first-ever leaders' dinner debate over the EU's China policy

at the summit was delayed until Friday, for example.

May, who addressed leaders on Thursday but missed out on the dinner because the 27 were forced to focus on Brexit rather than China, was kept in the loop by summit chair Donald Tusk, the European Council president, who shuttled back and forth.

Tusk explained the leaders' thinking to May and secured her nod for the plans, officials said. May originally wanted to be able to delay Britain's departure until June 30 to tie up legislative loose ends.

But now, a May 22 departure date will apply if Parliament rallies behind the British Prime Minister next week. If it does not, Britain will have until April 12 to offer a new plan or decide to leave the EU without a treaty.

That date corresponds to the six weeks' legal notice required for the EU election — which the bloc

would insist Britain hold on May 23 if it remains a member. If it does not hold the election, leaders said, the very last date Britain must leave would be June 30, before the new EU Parliament convenes.

"We wanted to support May and we showed that," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said. A senior EU official said the key achievement was to shift the focus of responsibility to London from Brussels.

French President Emmanuel Macron argued at the summit that if the leaders left their decision until late next week, they would be seen as either pushing Britain out on Friday or blinking at their own deadline. Instead, they have pushed the trigger back to Britain, which will be confronted with making a choice by April 12 on whether to hold an EU election as part of a long-term rethink, or prepare to quit by May 22, or in June, without a deal. REUTERS

Trump accepts Israeli sovereignty over Golan Heights, draws widespread criticism

AGENCIES

WASHINGTON, BEIRUT, MARCH 22

IN A policy shift, US President Donald Trump has said the United States should acknowledge Israeli sovereignty over the hotly-contested Golan Heights.

The Syrian government vowed to recover the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights as its allies and enemies alike condemned Trump on Friday for his decision.

"After 52 years it is time for the United States to fully recognise Israel's Sovereignty over the Golan Heights," Trump said in a tweet.

Trump called the Golan — an area seized from Syria and annexed in a move never recognised by the international community — "of critical strategic and security importance to the State of Israel and Regional Stability!"

Trump's abrupt announcement was immediately cheered by Netanyahu, who visits Washington next week.

Trump's statement marked a dramatic shift in US policy over the status of a disputed area that Israel captured from Syria in the 1967 Middle East conflict and annexed in 1981.

Trump's declaration is the latest US step to fuel anger in the region, both in states hostile to Israel



DISPUTED TERRITORY LEBANON SYRIA ISRAEL JORDAN Tel Aviv West bank Jerusalem

and others that have relations with it and are allied to the US.

It follows the US recognition in December 2017 of Jerusalem as Israel's capital — a decision that also drew international criticism as the city's disputed status remains at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Russia, an ally of President Bashar al-Assad, said Trump's comments risked destabilising the region, and it voiced hope the statement was just declaratory.

Iran, Assad's main regional ally, condemned the statement as illegal and unacceptable.

Turkey, a US-allied state and an adversary of Damascus, said the statement had brought the Middle East to the edge of a new crisis and the legitimisation of the occupation of the Golan Heights could not be allowed.



NEW ZEALAND MOURNS WITH PRAYERS, SILENCE

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern (left) leaves Friday prayers at Hagley Park in Christchurch. The Muslim call to prayer sounded out over Christchurch and around New Zealand on Friday, as thousands gathered to remember the 50 people killed by a lone gunman at two mosques a week ago. Others said silent prayers at schools, cafes and offices. "New Zealand mourns with you. We are one," Ardern said in a short speech, followed by two minutes of silence at Hagley Park, in front of the Al Noor mosque where most of the victims were killed during Friday prayers last week. AP

94 dead as Iraq ferry sinks on spring holiday trip

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA MOSUL, MARCH 22

ALMOST 100 people, mostly women and children, died as a ferry packed with families celebrating Kurdish New Year sank in a swollen river in the former jihadist stronghold of Mosul, in Iraq's worst accident in years.

There was an outpouring of grief among residents who only this year resumed the annual festivities on the banks of the Tigris after the northern city's recapture from the Islamic State group.

Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi decreed three days of national mourning as he visited the site of the tragedy. He ordered a swift investigation "to determine responsibilities".

The vessel was crammed with men, women and children crossing the Tigris Thursday to go to a popular picnic area to celebrate Nowruz, the Kurdish New Year and a holiday across Iraq marking the start of spring.

The accident, which struck the overloaded vessel turned back, also coincided with Mother's Day in Iraq.

The interior ministry, issuing a fresh toll, said 94 people died and 55 were rescued, after spokesman Saad Maan said at least 19 children were among the dead.

The Premier said 61 women had died in the accident.

While war and jihadist attacks have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives in Iraq in recent years, such accidents are relatively rare.

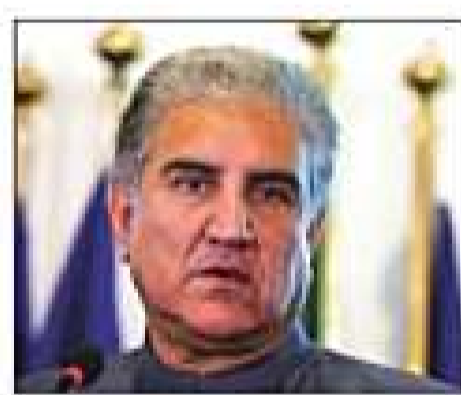
Pak's Qureshi says he discussed Masood Azhar issue with China

SAJJAD HUSSAIN ISLAMABAD, MARCH 22

PAKISTAN FOREIGN Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said he discussed the issue of Masood Azhar with close ally China, which blocked, for the fourth time, a proposal at the UN to designate the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed chief as a global terrorist.

Qureshi, who returned from Beijing Thursday after attending the first strategic bilateral dialogue between the two all-weather allies, heaped praise on China.

"We take each other into confidence on all issues. Sometime they guide us and sometimes they change their policy after listening to us," he said after talks with



Pakistan's Foreign Minister was in Beijing for talks with his Chinese counterpart

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

Qureshi said he discussed the issue of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) chief Azhar with China, which used its right of technical hold to stop a proposal by France, the US and the UK against him at the UN Security Council.

China, a veto-wielding permanent member of the Security Council, for the fourth time blocked a bid in the 1267 Al Qaeda Sanctions Committee of the UN Security Council to designate Azhar as a "global terrorist", saying it wanted "more time to examine" the proposal. The technical hold is valid for up to six months and it can be again extended by up to three months.

The JeM claimed responsibility for the February 14 Pulwama suicide attack that left 40 CRPF personnel dead.

"As you know, China despite a lot of pressure used the right of technical hold in order to collect more information on the issue... We talked what US, China and UK were thinking about it," Qureshi said. PTI

US says Islamic State has lost all territory in Syria

REUTERS PALM SPRINGS, MARCH 22

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump said on Friday that US-backed forces had dislodged the Islamic State militant group from its last holdout in Syria.

"Here's ISIS on Election Day. And here's ISIS right now," Trump said, using the acronym for the group, as he displayed a before-and-after map to reporters, with the "before" portion full of red dots and the after-map empty.

"You guys can have the map. Congratulations," Trump said. "I think it's about time." The President has previously displayed a map illustrating the diminution of Islamic State.

Trump has said Islamic State no longer holds territory sev-

eral times over the past few weeks. But US officials told Reuters that fighting continued late into Thursday between US-backed forces and Islamic State militants in the last remaining territory it holds.

Earlier on Friday, White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders told reporters the Islamic State no longer held any territory in Syria and that US acting Defence Secretary Patrick Shanahan had briefed the president on the milestone as he was traveling to Florida on Air Force One.

The Syrian Democratic Forces battled Islamic State militants holed up in the Baghouz area overnight, supported by US-led coalition airstrikes, the SDF said, seeking to defeat the last pockets of jihadist resistance.

CASE DRAWS REBUKE FROM CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Rejecting asylum bid, UK quotes Bible to say Christianity not peaceful

ANNA SCHAVERIEN NEW YORK, MARCH 22

BRITAIN'S IMMIGRATION department has been condemned for citing violent Bible passages as the basis to reject an asylum claim by an Iranian national who said he had converted to Christianity because it was a "peaceful" religion.

The Home Office — which is responsible for handling immigration, security and law and order — used verses from the books of Leviticus, Exodus and Revelation in an attempt to argue that Christianity was hardly "peaceful". The asylum-seeker's application was denied Tuesday, according to the man's legal representative, who shared details on social media.

The case drew a rebuke from



The UK Home Office made the observation while rejecting the asylum request of an Iranian national who had converted to Christianity. Reuters

the Church of England, and immigration advocates denounced the decision as another example of the Home Office's harsh methods.

The man, who has not been identified and had converted from Islam, filed the claim in 2016, the immigration case-worker and legal representative, Nathan Stevens, wrote on Twitter. It was not clear whether the man had made his conversion a basis for his claim.

But the Home Office used extensive quotes from the Bible, such as "You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall by the sword before you," from Leviticus, as evidence against the asylum-seeker's claim about Christianity.

"These examples are inconsistent with your claim that you converted to Christianity after discovering it is a 'peaceful' religion, as

opposed to Islam which contains violence, rage and revenge," read a rejection letter Stevens shared excerpts of online.

The immigration caseworker said he was stunned by the contents of the letter.

comment Thursday. No further details about the asylum-seeker were available.

As outrage grew on social media, the Home Office distanced itself from the decision, though it confirmed the letter was authentic.

"This letter is not in accordance with our policy approach to claims based on religious persecution, including conversions to a particular faith," a spokesman for the department said in an emailed statement.

Asylum cases based on religious persecution and involving religious conversion require a great deal of expertise to assess, said Colin Yeo, a lawyer specialising in immigration at Garden Court Chambers.

"It is very hard to tell if the person is telling the truth and you need to think about what

the person's motivations are," Yeo, who is also editor of the asylum and immigration information website Free Movement, said in a phone interview.

"But to go as far as to dig out specific verses to try and justify a claim seems extremely bizarre," Yeo added. "I have seen quite a lot of cases where the Home Office does not believe that the person has not converted from Islam to Christianity, but I have never seen anything quite like this one."

The Home Office's approach even prompted the Church of England to issue a response.

"I am extremely concerned that a government department could determine the future of another human being based on such a profound misunderstanding of the texts and practices of faith communities," Bishop Paul Butler of Durham

said in a statement.

"To use extracts from the Book of Revelation to argue that Christianity is a violent religion is like arguing that a government report on the impact of climate change is advocating drought and flooding," he added.

Cynthia Orchard, a legal adviser at the charity Asylum Aid, called the document "an appalling decision letter" but said it was just one of "many other examples of the Home Office making terribly unfair decisions on asylum and other matters".

In 2018, the Home Office found itself under scrutiny after many longtime legal residents of West Indian and Caribbean descent were wrongly declared undocumented immigrants, and some were detained and subjected to threats of deportation. NYT

Priest stabbed during mass at Canada church

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA MONTREAL, MARCH 22

A PRIEST was stabbed during a livestreamed morning mass Friday at Canada's biggest church, Saint Joseph's Oratory in Montreal, police said.

The suspect was arrested at the Roman Catholic basilica shortly after the attack in front of 50 people and a TV audience around 8.40 am, while priest Claude Grou was taken to hospital.

Police said Grou was "slightly wounded in the upper body" when, according to witnesses cited by authorities, "the suspect suddenly ran up to the priest and attacked him with a knife" while he was officiating the mass.

The suspect was taken into custody. He "did not shout, didn't say anything" during the assault, but appeared "very determined," a witness said.