



Zarif hosts Oman Minister amid Gulf tensions

TEHRAN Iran's top diplomat Mohammad Javad Zarif hosted his Omani counterpart Yusuf bin Alawi in Tehran on Saturday, his office said, amid mounting tensions in the region between Tehran and Washington.

France to proceed with tax on U.S. tech firms

PARIS Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said on Saturday that France would proceed with taxing revenues of big technology firms and urged the U.S. not to bring trade tariffs into the debate on how to fairly raise levies on digital services.

Bahrain executes 2 Shia citizens on terror charges

DUBAI Bahrain executed two Shia citizens by firing squad on Saturday on terror charges, officials said, despite appeals for clemency from international human rights groups.

3 police officials killed in Taliban attack

GHAZNI At least three police officers were killed and a dozen more wounded on Saturday when a Taliban suicide bomber drove a U.S.-made armoured vehicle into a compound in eastern Afghanistan, officials said.

Ditch backstop or face no-deal exit, Johnson tells EU

British PM urges Europe to renegotiate the withdrawal agreement

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson cautioned the EU on Saturday that the "anti-democratic" Irish backstop must be ditched if they were to strike a Brexit divorce deal.

Mr. Johnson, since taking office on Wednesday, has repeatedly said that if the EU continues to refuse to renegotiate the Withdrawal Agreement agreed by his predecessor Theresa May, then he will take Britain out on October 31 without a deal.

Biggest demand

His biggest demand is that the most hotly-contested element of the Brexit divorce agreement, the Irish border backstop, be struck out of the Withdrawal Agreement, a demand that has angered Ireland and perturbed other EU capitals.

"If we get rid of the backstop, whole and entire, then we are making a lot of progress," Mr. Johnson said, when asked if it was only the Irish border backstop that he wanted changed.

Speaking before a Stephenson's Rocket, a 19th century steam locomotive, in the northern England city of Manchester, Mr. Johnson dedicated most of his speech to improving public services, transport and the Internet and driving up economic growth.

"Our post-industrial towns have a proud, great heritage but an even greater future. Their best years lie ahead of them," he said, announcing new long-term rail links and promising immediate improvements to bus services.

Boris' Brexit bets

These are the possible Brexit scenarios for the U.K. under its new Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson as the country races to meet an October 31 deadline

1 Brexit with a deal Johnson has vowed to renegotiate the deal that predecessor Theresa May struck with the EU. He says he will withhold Britain's divorce payments as a bargaining chip to try to get rid of the agreement's so-called 'backstop' clause.

2 No-deal Brexit Johnson has promised that he will take the country out of the EU, with or without a deal, on October 31. However, most MPs, including from his own party, are opposed to such an arrangement.

3 Snap election A snap poll could be called by Parliament but the minimum duration between a successful vote of no-confidence and an election is 51 days.

4 Proroguing Parliament Johnson has not ruled out the controversial option of 'proroguing' Parliament to pre-empt a no-confidence vote by MPs who may want to avert a no-deal Brexit



What happens when Parliament is prorogued?

All legislative activity stops and no debates or votes are held in the House

Can a Prime Minister prorogue the House?

The power is with the Queen, who acts on the advice of the Prime Minister. So, Johnson can ask the Queen to temporarily shut Parliament

Second referendum

Johnson could also call another referendum to establish a mandate for leaving without a deal, but he has said he is opposed to such a vote

What is the Irish backstop?

The plan aims to ensure that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.



Prime Minister Boris Johnson

that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The backstop, opposed by hard-Brexiters, will keep the U.K. territory of Northern Ireland in the EU customs union and much of the single market

How Parliament voted

The Withdrawal Agreement has been voted down thrice in Parliament so far. However, a majority of British MPs have also voted twice against leaving the EU without a deal

1 First parliamentary vote: January 15

For the deal: 202/635 Against the deal: 432/635 Abstention: 1

Margin of defeat: 230 votes

2 Second parliamentary vote: March 12

For the deal: 242/634 Against the deal: 391/634 Abstention: 1

Margin of defeat: 149 votes

3 Third parliamentary vote: March 29

For the deal: 286/634 Against the deal: 344/634 Abstentions: 4

a) Votes on no-deal Brexit

Most MPs are opposed to a no-deal Brexit scenario as two parliamentary votes indicate

March 13: For a no-deal Brexit: 308 Against a no-deal Brexit: 312

Margin: 4 votes

b) Indicative vote

March 27: A no-deal scenario was again rejected by Parliament in one of the eight indicative votes that took place

For a no-deal Brexit: 160 Against a no-deal Brexit: 400 Abstentions: 74

Margin: 240 votes

For the deal: 286/634 Against the deal: 344/634 Abstentions: 4

Margin of defeat: 58 votes

Trump hits out at black lawmaker from Baltimore

Cummings had criticised border officials

WASHINGTON President Donald Trump hit out at a prominent African-American critic on Saturday, calling him a "brutal bully" who should concentrate on cleaning up his "distasteful, rat and rodent-infested" Baltimore district rather than criticising the work of immigration officers on the Mexican border.



Elijah Cummings. AFP

Mr. Trump's target in a series of early morning tweets was Representative Elijah Cummings, the Democratic Chairman of the House of Representatives Oversight Committee, who has called Mr. Trump a racist and sharply criticised his immigration policies.

Mr. Cummings responded to Trump on Twitter. "Mr. President, I go home to my district daily. Each morning, I wake up, and I go and fight for my neighbors. It is my constitutional duty to conduct oversight of the Executive Branch. But, it is my moral duty to fight for my constituents," he said.

Baltimore Mayor Bernard Young called Mr. Trump's rhetoric "hurtful and dangerous."

SUDOKU

Sudoku grid with numbers 1-9 in various positions.

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

Solved Sudoku grid.

Hong Kong activists clash with police

Rocks, bottles thrown as the Chinese territory sees protests against gang attack

HONG KONG Police fired volleys of tear gas and protesters hurled bricks during clashes in a rural Hong Kong town on Saturday as several thousand activists gathered to protest an attack by suspected triad gang members at a train station last weekend.



Rallying against police: A demonstration in the district of Yuen Long in Hong Kong on Saturday.

Activists pushed ahead with the march in Yuen Long, scene of the attack by club-wielding men, in spite of a refusal by police to allow the protest on safety grounds.

Rocks and bottles were thrown by protesters, who built barricades out of street furniture and umbrellas, creating multiple stand-offs.

Police, widely criticised for failing to better protect the public from last week's attack, responded with tear gas as they pushed activists into retreat as it grew dark.

"Many people want to go but some will stay. There is still a lot of anger. I'm not sure which way it will go.

Nam Pin Wai (village) could be a target," said Kenneth, 27, retreating from one of the front lines.

Amid the retreat, which saw several hundred protesters leave the area, Reuters witnesses saw a hardcore group of activists with small metal bats, metal and wooden poles and slingshots moving against the tide.

Last Sunday, about 100 white-shirted men stormed the Yuen Long mass-transit station, hours after protesters marched through central Hong Kong and defaced China's Liaison Office - the main symbol of Beijing's authority over the former British colony.

The men attacked black-clad protesters returning from Hong Kong island, passers-by, journalists and lawmakers with pipes and clubs, leaving 45 people injured. Some of the men later fled to Nam Pin Wai, a traditional walled village.

On Sunday, a car was dented and its windows smashed near the village.

Govt. can use Pentagon funds to build wall: Court

Ruling gives President's plan a boost

WASHINGTON The U.S. Supreme Court on Friday ruled in favour of President Donald Trump, allowing him to proceed with plans to divert billions of dollars in Pentagon funds towards construction of his border wall with Mexico.

"Wow! Big VICTORY on the Wall," Mr. Trump tweeted in reaction to the ruling. "Big WIN for Border Security and the Rule of Law!" Mr. Trump declared a national emergency earlier this year in a bid to bypass Congress and obtain funding for his signature project, after the stand-off led to the longest government shutdown in U.S. history. But about 20 U.S. States along with rights and environmental groups and border communities are backing lawsuits that claim the emergency declaration violates the Constitution.

A federal judge on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals had issued a temporary injunction against using Defense Department funds for wall construction.

On Friday, the Supreme Court overturned the lower court decision with a 5-4 ruling, writing that the government had "made a sufficient showing at this stage" that the groups did not have the standing to challenge the allocation of funds, freeing up the money for the President's use while litigation proceeds.

Afghan govt. to hold talks with Taliban in August

Oslo likely to be the venue, say officials

KABUL Direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban could begin in Norway within the next two weeks, officials and sources said on Saturday, marking a potentially crucial step in efforts to end the war.

The Taliban has so far refused to speak to the government of President Ashraf Ghani, which it sees as illegitimate, except for at a recent summit where Ghani officials attended in a "personal capacity".

"We are preparing for direct talks," said Abdul Salam Rahimi, the State Minister for Peace Affairs, noting that the government would be represented by a 15-member delegation. "We are working with all sides and hope that in the next two weeks the first meeting will take place in a European country."

He did not specify where the summit might take place, but diplomatic sources said the talks were scheduled to begin in Oslo on August 7. The sources said the international community and the Afghan government were still awaiting word from the Taliban.

The apparent development comes after Taliban negotiators sat with Afghan representatives at a so-called intra-Afghan dialogue brokered by Germany in Doha this month.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said any new talks would only begin after a deal has been forged with the U.S., and he reiterated the insurgents' long-held position that they would "not talk to the Kabul administration as a government".

Mr. Rahimi said the next delegation would include some of those who went to Doha, as well as religious scholars, women and other members of civil society.

U.S., Guatemala sign asylum deal

Central American migrants could be sent back to Guatemala

WASHINGTON President Donald Trump announced on Friday that a "landmark" asylum agreement has been reached with Guatemala, as the United States ratchets up pressure on its southern neighbours to stem the flow of migrants towards its border.

The White House said Guatemala would now be considered a "safe third country," meaning that U.S.-bound migrants who enter Guatemala would be required to seek asylum there instead. Mr. Trump said the deal will "provide safety to legitimate asylum seekers and stop asylum fraud" in the region.

The asylum agreement with Guatemala comes days after Mr. Trump threatened tough retaliation against the small Central American country if it did not sign on to an asylum deal. Friday's agreement, signed in the Oval Office by Guatemala's Interior Minister Enrique Degenhart in Washington on Friday.



President Donald Trump, acting Homeland Security Secretary Kevin McAleenan, seated right, and Guatemalan Interior Minister Enrique Degenhart in Washington on Friday.

ter, Enrique Degenhart, and U.S. Acting Homeland Security Secretary Kevin McAleenan, would apply to Salvadoran or Honduran migrants passing through Guatemala towards the United States.

Their asylum claims should now be filed in Guatemala, Mr. McAleenan said. If Central American migrants instead "make a journey all the way to the U.S. border, they would be re-

movable back to Guatemala if they want to seek asylum," he noted. The deal is expected to be up and running in August, Mr. McAleenan said. It was not immediately clear how the agreement signed on Friday would jibe with a provision of Guatemala's Constitutional Court, which recently blocked the idea of a deal making Guatemala a "safe third country" for asylum requests.

Russia: 800 detained over poll protest

MOSCOW Russian police arrested more than 800 people in Moscow on Saturday in one of the biggest crackdowns of recent times against an increasingly defiant Opposition decrying President Vladimir Putin's tight grip on power.

The detentions came before and after a protest to demand that Opposition members be allowed to run in a local election. Authorities had declared it illegal and sought to block participation, but several thousand people turned up.

Chants of "Russia without Putin" and "Putin resign" echoed through central Moscow as guardsmen beat back protesters with batons and detained people. Jailed Opposition leader Alexei Navalny had called for Saturday's protest to persuade officials to allow candidates to run in a September 8 vote.