

UN SECURITY COUNCIL TO VOTE ON ALEPPO OBSERVERS

UNITED NATIONS: The UN Security Council will vote on a French proposal to send observers to the flashpoint Syrian city of Aleppo to monitor evacuations and report on the protection of civilians, diplomats said.

The council will meet at to decide on the draft resolution, despite resistance from Russia, Syria's ally and a veto-wielding Security Council member. France circulated a draft text late Friday stating that the council is "alarmed" by the worsening humanitarian crisis in Aleppo and by the fact that "tens of thousands of besieged Aleppo inhabitants" are in need of aid and evacuation.

Thousands of trapped civilians and the last remaining opposition fighters in Aleppo were waiting for evacuations to resume on Saturday, a day after the operation was suspended by the Syrian government.

Syrian forces this week moved to assert full control over the east of the city, which had been held by opposition fighters since 2012. French Ambassador Francois Delattre said the international presence would prevent Aleppo from turning into another Srebrenica, where thousands of Bosnian men and boys were massacred in 1995 when the town fell to Bosnian Serb forces during the Balkan wars. "Our goal through this resolution is to avoid another Srebrenica in this phase immediately following the military operations," Delattre told AFP.

The draft resolution would request that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon quickly redeploy UN humanitarian staff already in Syria to the city "to carry out adequate, neutral monitoring, direct observation and to report on evacuations from besieged parts of Aleppo and protection of civilians inside Aleppo," according to a copy of the text obtained by AFP.

Ban would also ensure the deployment

of further staff, according to the draft text, which demands that Syria grant access to the observers.

The UN chief would report to the council within five days on whether access has been granted by the Syrian government, which has repeatedly blocked UN access during the nearly six-year war.

Protecting hospitals

Evacuations were expected to resume under a "new deal" that would allow civilians and fighters in other besieged towns to leave, according to rebel officials, according to rebel officials. The Damascus government made no announcements.

The draft resolution would seek to ensure the "voluntary, safe and dignified passage of all civilians" from Aleppo and other areas under UN monitoring and coordination, with priority given to the wounded and most vulnerable.

It demands the protection of all doctors, medical workers, hospitals and ambulances following reports that Syrian forces had bombed all of the medical facilities in Aleppo.

The text specifically mentions the need to protect the border hospitals of Atme, Darkoush, Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salamah, where many of the evacuees would be taken.

The council would also demand that urgent humanitarian aid reach Aleppo, which has been under siege since July. US Ambassador Samantha Power said Friday that the observers on the ground would provide a "presence as protection." But Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin said he found elements of the French proposal "questionable," including whether the observers could be quickly redeployed.

Ban has urged Syrian parties to resume the evacuation operation and allow civilians to leave safely, saying "Aleppo is now a synonym for hell." —AFP



GENEVA: A man wearing a mask of US elected President Donald Trump and a toy gun swims in the lake during the 78th "Coupe de Noel" (Christmas cup) swimming race in the Lake Geneva yesterday. —AFP

US ELECTORAL COLLEGE, ARCHAIC AND UNLOVED, PREPARES TO ANOINT TRUMP

DECISION TO BE ANNOUNCED TODAY

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump's fiercest critics may be dreaming of a last-minute revolt, but the Electoral College, a peculiarly American institution, appears near-certain today to select the 70-year-old real estate mogul as the 45th US president.

Its detractors—and they are many—have denounced an electoral system that flies in the face of the venerated "one man, one vote" principle, and which perversely encourages presidential candidates to campaign in only a few key states while ignoring whole swaths of the country. But despite the torrent of criticism this method has faced for decades, no reform attempt has ever succeeded.

When American voters cast their ballots on November 8, they did not in fact directly elect the next occupant of the White House. Instead, they picked 538 "electors" charged with translating their wishes into reality. Trump won a clear majority of those electors — 306, with 270 needed for election—despite dramatically losing the popular vote to his Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton.

A similar scenario took place in 2000, when George W. Bush became president even though Democrat Al Gore won more popular votes. However, the gap is far more dramatic in 2016, with Clinton scoring nearly three million extra votes over Trump.

Today, electors will convene in each of the 50 states, plus the District of Columbia, to officially designate the next president and vice president. Following an extraordinarily vitriolic campaign, this step in the electoral process—normally little more than a formality—has been thrust into the spotlight.

'Faithless electors'

Historically, electors only rarely defy the

expressed wishes of the majority of voters in their district. And never have the votes of these "faithless electors" changed the outcome of a presidential election.

Still, some Democrats—who see a Trump presidency as presenting an existential danger to American democracy—are clinging to the slender hope that a few dozen Republican electors might decide not to vote for their party's populist leader.

Yet, should that happen, it would be up to the House of Representatives to designate the successor to Barack Obama. And Republicans hold a strong majority there. An online petition calling on electors to reject Trump, has collected some five million supporters. Hollywood stars including Martin Sheen ("President Bartlet" on the popular television series "West Wing") recently released a video to goad electors to take that step.

"You have the position, the authority and the opportunity to go down in the books as an American hero who changed the course of history," the celebrities say, addressing electors who have been thrust overnight from the shadows into the spotlight.

But these efforts appear to have almost no chance of succeeding: There is no evidence that the requisite 37 Republican electors will decide to abandon Trump. To date, only one of them, Christopher Suprum of Texas, has publicly announced his intention to stage such a revolt.

The final result may not be known today, as states are given several days to report their numbers. The Congress will, in any case, announce the name of the official winner on January 6, two weeks before the next president is to be inaugurated in a solemn and pomp-filled ceremony outside the Capitol.

A 'disaster' or bit of 'genius'?

Asked about it at his final news conference of the year before leaving for a Hawaiian vacation, Barack Obama acknowledged that the system was "a vestige, it's a carry-over from an earlier vision of how our federal government was going to work," and that it could disadvantage Democrats.

Still, the outgoing president urged his camp to draw needed lessons from their electoral failure and develop a strategy for the future rather than bemoaning the 2016 loss or trying to overturn it. "The truth of the matter is that if we have a strong message, if we're speaking to what the American people care about, typically, the popular vote and the Electoral College vote will align," he said in a clear allusion to his own presidential victories in 2008 and 2012.

David Pozen, a professor at Columbia Law School, sees at least one silver lining to the intense focus on the Electoral College: it will draw attention to the urgent need for change. "Either way, the renewed public interest in the Electoral College underscores the need to do away with this antiquated and fundamentally undemocratic institution," he said in an op-ed article in the New York Times.

In November 2000, Hillary Clinton, then the newly elected Democratic senator from New York, issued a clear call for an electoral reform that would result in direct, universal suffrage.

Trump, for his part, has radically changed his stance on the matter in just four years. "The Electoral College is a disaster for a democracy," he tweeted in November 2012. Last month, just days after a victory that seemed to stun even him, he sounded a rather different note: "The Electoral College is actually genius in that it brings all states, including the smaller ones, into play. Campaigning is much different!" —AFP



NEW YORK: This United Nations photo shows UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as he addresses a press conference, his last at United Nations headquarters, as his term of office draws to a close at the end of the year on December 16, 2016. —AFP

PROSECUTORS: FBI AGENT LEAKED INFO IN TRADING CASE TO MEDIA

NEW YORK: Federal prosecutors say an FBI agent has acknowledged leaking confidential information to reporters about an insider trading investigation involving a professional gambler.

The US attorney in New York told a federal judge Friday that the unnamed agent confessed to being a source for The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times regarding Las Vegas gambler William Walters. Walters had asked the judge to

determine the source of the leaks. The letter from US Attorney Preet Bharara says the matter has been referred to oversight offices in the US Justice Department and the FBI.

Walters has pleaded not guilty to charges he made millions of dollars in illicit stock trades, including one involving golfer Phil Mickelson. Mickelson was spared criminal charges and agreed to repay the money. —AP

BIDEN, MOURNERS PAY TRIBUTE TO JOHN GLENN, AMERICAN HERO

COLUMBUS: The nation's vice president and a retired Marine Corps general were among the dignitaries, family members and other mourners who chocked up Saturday during a memorial tribute to the late space hero John Glenn. Roughly 2,500 people gathered at Mershon Auditorium on the Ohio State University campus for "a celebration of life" for the former fighter pilot, history-making astronaut and longtime Democratic US senator from small-town Ohio. He was remembered not only for bravery, but for his thoughtful consideration for others, his integrity and his patriotic optimism. "I think John defined what it meant to be an American, what we were about, just by how we acted," said Vice President Joe Biden, a former colleague of Glenn's in the US Senate. "It was always about the promise. We were a country of possibility, opportunity, always a belief in tomorrow."

Retired USMC Gen. John Dailey said Glenn was "never in

it for himself," but always acted for the nation's greater good. Like many others, he recalled Glenn's humility and basic kindness. "We had John for 95 great years and it still wasn't enough," Dailey said.

A man of firsts

Glenn died Dec. 8 at age 95. He was the first American to orbit the Earth in 1962, and then in 1998 became the oldest person in space at 77. Thousands of people, including Democratic US Secretary of State John Kerry, visited the Ohio Statehouse on Friday as Glenn lay in honor. A solemn funeral procession through the center of the capital city carried his casket past more mourners willing to withstand cold and ice.

Ethel Kennedy, widow of close Glenn ally Robert F. Kennedy, and their son Robert F. Kennedy Jr., were among the mourners present, along with Ohio political leaders

including Gov. John Kasich and former Govs. Ted Strickland and Richard Celeste.

The service was preceded by recordings of hymns, arias and popular songs. Some — including Nat King Cole's "Smile" and Susan Boyle's version of "Impossible Dream" — nodded to Glenn's trademark optimism. Others, including "You Are My Sunshine," "Moon River" and Shirley Jones singing "Goodnight, My Someone" — recalled Glenn's long love affair with wife, Annie, who survives him.

Their marriage was cited frequently as a source of Glenn's strength and an inspiration to those who have known and watched the couple for 73 years. US Sen. Sherrod Brown, a fellow Democrat who first met Glenn when he was a teenage Eagle Scout, called Glenn "an FDR Democrat" who believed in the power of government and the importance of public service — through his military and space career and his tenure in the Senate.

"He was a work horse, never a show horse," Brown said. "He labored over the details of non-proliferation and environmental cleanup of nuclear disposal sites, grunt work to some, but John was content to spend his time not on collecting instant headlines but achieving lasting results that would leave the world better than he had found it."

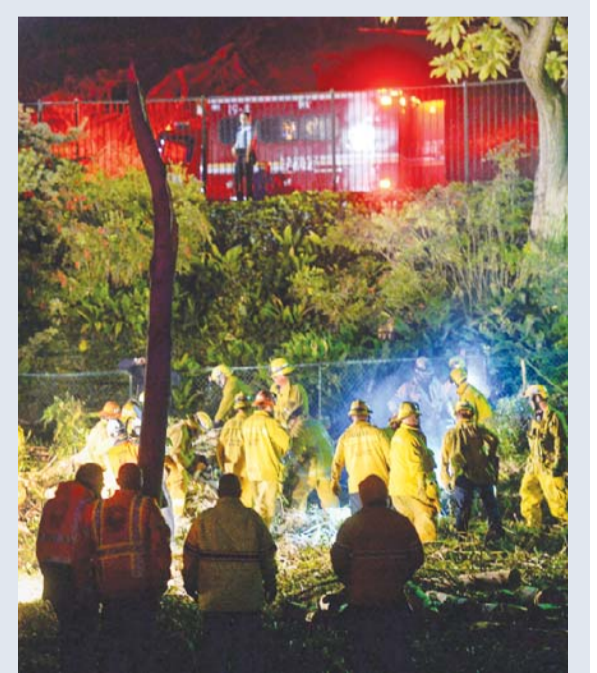
Brown's wife, journalist Connie Schultz, recalled his tenderness when their grandson was curious about how astronauts urinate in space. She saw it as example for the nation. "If American icon John Glenn could take the time to treat a child with such respect, surely we can find the time to listen to one another," she said.

NASA Administrator Charles Bolden Jr. said the US space program remains indebted to Glenn. "It was courage, grace and humility John displayed throughout his life that lifted him above the stars," Bolden said. "As the current head of NASA, I can say unequivocally that we are standing on John Glenn's shoulders as we pursue a human journey to Mars, a journey that would not be possible without his bravery and selfless dedication."

Glenn's son, David, said his father let him find himself and make his own mistakes — even when he came home with long hair and wearing bell bottom pants. "He might have blinked twice, or his face twitched or something like that. But that was it," he said. Daughter Lyn said she wanted an "atta girl" for some good grades she brought home at age 8, to which Glenn replied, "Yes, but what have you done for your country today?" She said Glenn refused a deal worth as much as \$5 million to have his photo placed on a Wheaties box because he saw it as making money from government service. —AFP



COLOMBUS: The casket of John Glenn is carried out of the Ohio Statehouse by Marines during his funeral procession on Saturday. —AP



WHITTIER, California: Los Angeles County Fire Dept. firefighters work at the scene where a large tree fell on a wedding party on Saturday. —AP

WOMAN DIES AFTER TREE FALLS ON WEDDING PARTY IN CALIFORNIA

WHITTIER, California: A woman was killed and five others were injured when a large eucalyptus tree fell on a wedding party taking photographs at a Southern California park Saturday, authorities said.

Several people were trapped under the tree at Whittier's Penn Park, the Los Angeles County Fire Department said. Video from the scene showed fire crews using chain saws to cut through the downed branches.

Four of the injured suffered scrapes and bruises, officials said. A 4-year-old girl was listed in critical condition due to head trauma, the Los Angeles Times reported. Witnesses described hearing a loud crack and seeing people run from the area.

The tree could have been weakened by California's ongoing drought and recent heavy rain could have contributed to its fall, officials said. An arborist will assess the area on Sunday, officials said. No other details were immediately available. —AP