

## COLOMBIA FORCES STRUGGLE TO ROOT OUT COCA

**LLORENTE:** Colombian forces sent to rip green coca plants from the earth to end a trade fueling violence complain the crops are being replanted as fast as they can destroy them. Colombia is ranked by the United Nations as the world's biggest producer of coca—the raw material for cocaine—which has funded armed groups in the more than half-century conflict.

In a new peace deal, the state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country's biggest rebel group, agreed to eradicate coca and replace it with safer crops like coffee and cacao. In Narino, a major coca-producing region in the southwest, those carrying out the eradication work are feeling exasperated. Sweat soaks the face of Ivan Hidalgo, a 19-year-old assistant police official, rifle on shoulder, who has spent the past two months uprooting coca plants in the sweltering settlement of Lorente. "You're tearing out the coca," he said, "and the farmers are planting it again behind your back."

### 'Too much coca'

The surrounding municipality of Tumaco had nearly 17,000 hectares in 2015, according to the latest UN figures. The Narino district overall has

nearly 30,000. Among so much coca, assistant police officials like Pablo Riveros are tearing out the plants with their bare hands. "There is too much coca," Riveros says. Authorities have since January eradicated 200 hectares by hand and a further 400 hectares by spraying them with chemical herbicide. But their efforts hardly seem to be making a dent in Narino. The mountains of the area are still blanketed in lush green coca leaves. "The community is always going to be there watching out for people coming to eradicate the crops," says Elvins Caldon, who sprays the coca with herbicide.

### Earning a living

Coca farmers complain they are getting a raw deal under the eradication agreement. They say the government has not delivered on promises to replace the crop, which yields four harvests a year. Coca growers in Narino have blocked roads and faced off with authorities in recent weeks, sparking clashes that have left at least one person dead and four injured. "We want a decent living for our children," the National Coca, Poppy and Marijuana Growers' Coordinator organization said in a statement. — AFP



**TUMACO:** Colombian policemen destroy a coca plantation in a rural area of Tumaco, department of Narino, Colombia. — AFP

## DAILY MAIL APOLOGIZES TO FIRST LADY MELANIA TRUMP

**LONDON:** Britain's Daily Mail newspaper yesterday apologized to US First Lady Melania Trump and agreed to pay her damages over an article that included allegations that she worked as an escort in the 1990s. "The defendant is here today publicly to set the record straight, and to apologize to the claimant for any distress and embarrassment that the articles may have caused her," Catrin Evans, the lawyer for Associated Newspapers, publisher of the Daily Mail and MailOnline, told the High Court in London.

Although the total amount of damages was not disclosed, the Press Association news agency said it was believed to be under \$3 million (2.8 million euros). John Kelly, Melania Trump's lawyer, said the article in the Daily Mail-Britain's second biggest-selling newspaper-in print and online in August last year "included false and defamatory claims". The allegations "questioned the nature of her work as a professional model, and republished allegations that she provided services beyond simply modeling," Kelly said.

The article stated that there was no support for the allegations and provided denials from her spokesperson and from Paolo Zampolli, who ran the modeling agency where she worked. But the allegations "strike at the heart of the claimant's personal integrity and dignity," Kelly added. Trump's lawyers launched a lawsuit against the Daily Mail in September in New York, asking for \$150 million in damages.

The paper had already published a retraction in September, saying it "did not intend to state or suggest that these alle-



**US First Lady Melania Trump**

gations are true". In documents filed in February, the US first lady said that because of the Daily Mail's allegations she and her brand had missed out on "multiple millions of dollars" in licensing, marketing and endorsement opportunities that would otherwise have been available to someone spending time as "one of the most photographed women in the world". She said the publication had prevented her from reaping the "once-in-a-lifetime" windfall to be had as a business lady married to new US President Donald Trump. — AFP

## PUTIN SAYS TRUST ERODES UNDER PRESIDENT TRUMP

### MOSCOW ICILY RECEIVES TILLERSON

**MOSCOW:** Vladimir Putin said yesterday trust had eroded between the United States and Russia under President Donald Trump, as Moscow delivered an unusually hostile reception to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in a face-off over Syria. Any hope in Russia that the Trump administration would herald less confrontational relations has been dashed in the past week after the new US leader fired missiles at Syria to punish Moscow's ally for its suspected use of poison gas.

Just as Tillerson sat down for talks, a senior Russian official assailed the "primitiveness and loutishness" of US rhetoric, part of a volley of statements that appeared timed to maximize the awkwardness during the first visit by a member of Trump's cabinet. "One could say that the level of trust on a working level, especially on the military level, has not improved but has rather deteriorated," Putin said in an interview broadcast on Russian television moments after Tillerson sat down with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in an ornate hall.

### Assad's enemies

Putin doubled down on Russia's support for Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, repeating denials that Assad's government was to blame for the gas attack last week and adding a new theory that the attack may have been faked by Assad's enemies. Moments earlier, Lavrov greeted Tillerson with unusually icy remarks, denouncing the missile strike on Syria as illegal and accusing Washington of behaving unpredictably. "I will not hide the fact that we have a lot of questions, taking into account the extremely ambiguous and sometimes contradictory ideas which have been expressed in Washington across the whole spectrum of bilateral and multilateral affairs," Lavrov said.

"And of course, that's not to mention that apart from the statements, we observed very recently the extremely worrying actions, when an illegal attack against Syria was undertaken," Lavrov also noted that many key State Department posts remain vacant since the new administration took office—a point of sensitivity in Washington. One of Lavrov's deputies was even more undiplomatic. "In general, primitiveness and loutishness are very characteristic of the current rhetoric coming out of Washington. We'll hope that this doesn't become the substance of American policy," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told Russia's state-owned RIA news agency. "As a whole, the administration's stance with regards to Syria remains a mystery. Inconsistency is what comes to mind first of all."

Tillerson kept to more calibrated remarks, saying his aim was "to further clarify areas of sharp difference so that we can better understand why these differences exist and what the prospects for narrowing those differences may be." "I look forward to a very open, candid, frank exchange so that we can better define the US-Russian relationship from this point forward," he told Lavrov. After journalists were ushered out of the room, Lavrov's spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, wrote on her Facebook page that US journalists travelling with Tillerson had behaved as if they were in a "bazaar" by shouting questions to Lavrov.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tillerson might meet Putin later on Wednesday if the two top diplomats decided it would be useful to brief the Russian president on their talks. But Peskov too did not hold back his criticism, saying calls from Western powers for Russia to cut support for Assad amounted to giving terrorists a free hand. Moscow's hostility to Trump administration figures is a sharp change from last year, when Putin hailed Trump as a strong figure and Russian state television was consistently full of effusive praise for him.

### Cover-up

The White House has accused Moscow of trying to cover up Assad's use of chemical weapons after the attack on a town killed 87 people last week. Trump responded to the gas attack by firing 59 cruise missiles at a Syrian air base on Friday. Washington warned Moscow, and Russian troops at the base were not hit. Moscow has stood by Assad, saying the poison gas belonged to rebels, an explanation Washington dismisses as beyond credible. Putin said that either gas belonging to the rebels was released when it was hit by a Syrian strike on a rebel arms dump, or the rebels faked the incident to discredit Assad.

Trump came to the presidency promising to seek closer ties with Russia and greater cooperation fighting against their common enemy in Syria, Islamic State. Tillerson is a former oil executive who was awarded Russia's Order of

Friendship by Putin. Last week's poison gas attack and the US retaliation upended what many in Moscow hoped would be a transformation in relations between the two countries, which reached a post-Cold War low under Trump's predecessor Barack Obama. The United States and its European allies imposed financial sanctions on Russia in 2014 after Putin seized territory from neighboring Ukraine.

Washington is leading a campaign of air strikes in Syria against Islamic State fighters and has backed rebels fighting against Assad during a six-year civil war, but until last week the United States had avoided directly targeting the Syrian govern-

ment. "We're not going into Syria," he said in excerpts of the interview on the station's website. "But when I see people using horrible, horrible chemical weapons ... and see these beautiful kids that are dead in their father's arms, or you see kids gasping for life ... when you see that, I immediately called (Defense Secretary) General Mattis." Tillerson travelled to Moscow with a joint message from Western powers that Russia should withdraw its support for Assad after a meeting of the Group of Seven industrialized economies also attended by Middle East allies.

Some of Washington's allies had been wary of Trump, who spoke during his election campaign



**MOSCOW:** Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (right) welcomes US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson before a meeting in Moscow yesterday. Tillerson meets Lavrov as Washington confronts Moscow about its support for the Syrian regime. — AFP

ment. Russia, meanwhile, intervened in the civil war on Assad's side in 2015 and has troops on the ground, which it says are advising government forces. Both Washington and Moscow say their main enemy is Islamic State, although they back opposing sides in the wider civil war which has killed more than 400,000 people and spawned the world's worst refugee crisis.

In an interview with the Fox Business Network, Trump said he was not planning to order US forces into Syria, but that he had to respond to the images of dead children poisoned in the gas

of seeking closer ties with Moscow and questioned the value of US support for its traditional friends. Tillerson's mission sees the Trump administration taking on the traditional US role as spokesman for a unified Western position. Trump's relations with Russia are also a domestic issue, as US intelligence agencies have accused Moscow of using computer hacking to intervene in the election to help Trump win. The FBI is investigating whether any Trump campaign figures colluded with Moscow, which the White House denies. — Reuters



**PRETORIA:** Tens of thousands of opposition parties and civil society organization members take part in a march to Union Buildings to protest against South African president Jacob Zuma and ask for his resignation yesterday in Pretoria, South Africa. — AFP

## RIVAL SOUTH AFRICAN PARTIES UNITE AT ANTI-ZUMA PROTEST

**PRETORIA:** Rival South African opposition parties joined forces yesterday when several thousand demonstrators marched through the capital Pretoria calling for President Jacob Zuma to resign. The march to Union Buildings, the official seat of government, was organized on Zuma's 75th birthday and came after nationwide rallies against the president last week. Zuma's recent sacking of respected finance minister Pravin Gordhan has fanned years of public anger over government corruption scandals, record unemployment and slowing economic growth.

Supporters of the radical leftist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the main opposition Democratic Alliance (DA), and smaller parties mingled at yesterday's demonstration in a display of unity. Police said the event had begun peacefully. "I came because Zuma has to step down. He sold the country. I don't want him anymore," Mavis Madisha, a 37-year-old EFF supporter said. Gordhan's sacking triggered unprecedented criticism from senior figures within the ruling African National Congress (ANC), including from Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa. The ANC has since tried to close ranks behind Zuma and has vowed to defeat a no-confidence vote against him in parliament. The vote is scheduled for next Tuesday but may be delayed due to a legal tussle over whether it should be a secret ballot.

### 'Moment of crisis?'

"At this moment of crisis, we, as political

parties, put our differences aside for one common cause to save South Africa from Jacob Zuma," said John Moodey, DA leader in Gauteng province, which includes Pretoria and Johannesburg. "(Zuma's supporters) will do everything to stay in power, even intimidating MPs. With a secret ballot, we could put Zuma out by a huge majority. "Even if it doesn't succeed, I can guarantee you that we will have a coalition government in 2019." Zuma, who came to office in 2009, is due to step down as head of the ANC in December, and as national president ahead of the 2019 general election.

He is seen as favoring his ex-wife, former African Union chief Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, to succeed him. Protesters yesterday held placards reading "Zuma must fall", "Hamba tsotsi" ("Go away thief"), and "Zuma liar". Zuma has been accused of being in the sway of the wealthy Gupta business family, allegedly granting them influence over government appointments, contracts and state-owned businesses. The Constitutional Court last year found Zuma guilty of violating the constitution after he refused to repay taxpayers' money used to refurbish his private rural house. He is also fighting a court order that could reinstate almost 800 corruption charges against him over a multi-billion dollar arms deal in the 1990s. The dismissal of Gordhan saw the Fitch and Standard & Poor's agencies cut South Africa's sovereign credit rating to junk status due to fears of political instability and growing corruption. — AFP

## NIGERIAN POLICE THWART ATTACK TARGETING US, BRITISH EMBASSIES

**ABUJA:** Nigerian security officials said yesterday they have thwarted plans by Islamic State group-linked Boko Haram members to attack the embassies of the United States and Britain. A statement by the Department of State Services said that late last month it broke up a ring that had "perfected plans to attack" the embassies along with "other Western interests" in Nigeria's capital, Abuja. The statement said five suspects who had been based in Benue state and the Federal Capital Territory were arrested. It gave no further details, and officials with the department could not immediately be reached.

The US embassy did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The State Department on April 5 issued an updated travel warning for Nigeria, warning that Boko Haram has targeted government installations and other venues in the past in the Federal Capital Territory and elsewhere. One faction of Boko Haram is allied with the Islamic State group. Nigeria's president late last year declared the Boko Haram insurgency "crushed," but its fighters continue to threaten the vast region around Lake Chad in defiance of a multinational force. It has increasingly used children, especially girls, as suicide bombers. Boko Haram's seven-year Islamic uprising has killed more than 20,000 people and driven 2.6 million from their homes, with millions facing starvation.

### Using kids as bombers

Radical Islamic militants from Boko Haram

are increasingly forcing children to carry out bombings, with the number of attacks since January already nearly reaching the total for all of last year, according to a report released yesterday by the UN children's agency, UNICEF. At least 117 attacks have been carried out by youth in the Lake Chad basin region since 2014, with nearly 80 percent of the bombs strapped to girls, who were sometimes drugged before their missions. The very sight of children near marketplaces and checkpoints is sparking fear, according to Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF's regional director for West and Central Africa. As a result, nearly 1,500 children were detained last year across Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chad. "These children are victims, not perpetrators," Poirier said. "Forcing or deceiving them into committing such horrific acts is reprehensible." Children have been used to carry out 27 attacks in the first three months of this year, after 30 such attacks last year.

The new report coincides with this week's third anniversary of the mass abduction of Chibok schoolgirls by Boko Haram, which has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. The mass abduction of 276 girls from a boarding school in Nigeria in 2014 mobilized an international campaign to find and free the girls, many of whom were forced into marriages with fighters and became pregnant. Dozens quickly escaped, and 21 were freed in October through negotiations with Boko Haram mediated by the Swiss government and the International Committee of the Red Cross. — Agencies