

International

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2017



Britain and European Union partners clash

Despite abuses, expelled Ethiopians still eye Saudi

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BARCELONA: Spanish police vans are decorated with Spanish and Catalan flags by protesters during a demonstration called by 'Societat Civil Catalana' (Catalan Civil Society) to support the unity of Spain. —AFP

Catalonia crisis goes down to the wire; protests but no talks

Catalan leader could declare independence today

BARCELONA: The Spanish government and its Catalonia region showed no signs of compromise yesterday, a day after hundreds of thousands of pro-Spain unionists protested in Barcelona against Catalan leaders' plans to declare independence as early as this week. Spain fears the Catalan parliament could declare independence today, when the regional government's leader is due to speak to the assembly in the wake of a banned referendum on Oct 1. Catalan officials say people voted overwhelmingly for secession. However, on the eve of Tuesday's parliamentary session, neither Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy nor Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont showed signs of entering into talks, with each buoyed by large protests on both sides of the independence divide.

The Catalan crisis has presented Spain with its biggest political challenge since it became a democracy four decades ago. Losing Catalonia, which has its own language and culture, is almost unthinkable for Madrid. It would deprive Spain of a fifth of its economic output and more than a quarter of its exports. A stream of Catalonia-based firms, including its two largest banks, have moved their legal bases outside the region.

There is widespread opposition to a Catalan breakaway among people in the rest of the country and also among a large section of the Catalan population. The majority of the region's unionists boycotted the Oct 1 referendum, which was banned by Madrid

and disrupted by a violent police crackdown. The European Union has also shown no interest in an independent Catalonia, despite an appeal by Puigdemont for Brussels to mediate in the crisis. France, which borders Catalonia, said yesterday it would not recognize a unilateral independence declaration.

On Sunday, a crowd estimated by local police to number 350,000, took to the streets of the Catalan capital Barcelona, waving Spanish and Catalan flags and carrying banners saying "Catalonia is Spain" and "Together we are stronger". The show of support for Madrid helped calm Spanish markets on Monday, along with comments on Friday from credit rating agencies Moody's and DBRS that they expected Spain to remain united. Spanish borrowing costs fell to a one-week low and the main share index touched a week high.

Protests, no talks

With Puigdemont under pressure to back down, there is speculation he may balk at moving an independence motion on Tuesday, or that he might call

snap regional polls, turning them into a de facto, legal referendum on independence. Spanish Prime Minister Rajoy has not ruled out removing Catalonia's government and calling fresh regional elections himself if the region claims independence. He says he could also suspend the region's existing autonomous status. The Catalan authorities say more than 90 percent of those

who voted backed secession, but opinion polls on the issue suggest the region is more closely divided. A turnout for the referendum was 43 percent.

Sunday's anti-independence demonstration, which included Catalans and people from other parts of Spain, underlined how the dispute has riven the region itself. A month

France says won't recognize unilateral independence

ago, a million people rallied in the city to support independence. "We feel both Catalan and Spanish," Araceli Ponce, 72, said during Sunday's rally. "We are facing a tremendous unknown. We will see what happens this week but we have to speak out very loudly so they know what we want." Puigdemont will address the Catalan parliament at 6 p.m. (1600 GMT) on

Tuesday on "the current political situation" amid speculation he could ask the assembly to declare independence.

Puigdemont said in an interview broadcast on Catalan television on Sunday that a law passed by the Catalan parliament preparing the way for the referendum called for a declaration of independence in the event of a "yes" vote. "We will apply what the law says," he said, according to a partial transcript released by TV3. Puigdemont said he had not been in contact with the Madrid government for some time because Spain refused to discuss independence. "What is happening in Catalonia is real, whether they like it or not. Millions of people have voted, who want to decide. We have to talk about this," he said. Rajoy has said repeatedly he will not talk to the Catalan leaders unless they drop their plans to declare independence.

Madrid sent thousands of national police to the region to prevent the vote. About 900 people were injured when officers used rubber bullets and batons against voters in scenes that shocked Spain and the world, and escalated the dispute. The political standoff has pushed banks and companies to move their legal headquarters outside Catalonia. The boards of Catalonia-based infrastructure firm Abertis, telecoms company Cellnex and property group Inmobiliaria Colonial will meet on Monday to discuss moving, sources said. Major lenders Caixabank and Sabadell have already resolved to leave the region.—Reuters

Iran promises 'crushing' response if US designates Guards terrorist group

LONDON: Iran promised yesterday to give a "crushing" response if the United States designated its elite Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist group. The pledge came a week before President Donald Trump announces final decision on how he wants to contain Tehran. He is expected on Oct 15 to "decertify" a landmark 2015 international deal to curb Iran's nuclear program, a step that by itself stops short of pulling out of the agreement but gives Congress 60 days to decide whether to reimpose sanctions.

Trump is also expected to designate Iran's most powerful security force, the Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, as he rolls out a broader US strategy on Iran. "We are hopeful that the United States does not make this strategic mistake," foreign ministry spokesman Bahram Qasemi was quoted as saying by the state news agency IRNA at a news conference. "If they do, Iran's reaction would be firm, decisive and crushing and the United States should bear all its consequences," he added. Individuals and entities associated with the IRGC are already on the US list of foreign terrorist organizations, but the organization as a whole is not.

IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari said on Sunday "if the news is correct about the stupidity of the American government in considering the Revolutionary Guards a terrorist group, then the Revolutionary Guards will consider the American army to be like Islamic State all around the world." Jafari also said that additional sanctions would end the chances for future dialogue with the United States and that the Americans would have to move their regional bases outside the 2,000 km (1,250 mile) range of IRGC's missiles.

'Malign activities'

The foreign ministry spokesman Qasemi also denied US accusations that Iran had cooperated with North Korea. In an interview that was aired on Saturday night, Trump accused Iran of "funding North Korea" and "doing things with North Korea that are totally inappropriate." Qasemi called the accusations "baseless".

"Israel and some specific countries are raising these accusations to create Iranophobia." In his first speech to the UN General Assembly in September

Trump called Iran "a corrupt dictatorship", and the nuclear deal negotiated by his predecessor Barack Obama "an embarrassment". The deal, which was also supported by Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China, saw Iran agree to curbs on its nuclear program in return for the lifting of international sanctions that had damaged its economy.

The Kremlin said yesterday that any US withdrawal from the nuclear deal would have "negative consequences." British Prime Minister Theresa May, who supports the nuclear deal, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who opposes it, agreed in a phone call yesterday that they need to be "clear-eyed" about the threat Iran poses to the Middle East. "They agreed that ... the international community should continue working together to push back against Iran's destabilizing regional activity," May's spokesman said in a statement.

Washington still maintains its own more limited sanctions on Iran over its missile program and over accusations Tehran supports terrorism. The Trump administration is seeking to put more pressure on the IRGC, especially over recent ballistic missile tests and what Washington has called its "malign activities" across the Middle East. US sanctions on the IRGC could affect conflicts in Iraq and Syria, where Tehran and Washington both support warring parties that oppose the Islamic State militant group (IS).

The US government imposed sanctions in July on 18 entities and people for supporting the IRGC in



TEHRAN: Iran's President Hassan Rouhani gives a speech during a ceremony at Tehran University marking the beginning of new Iranian academic year. —AFP

developing drones and military equipment. In August, the US Congress overwhelmingly approved the "Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act" which imposed new sanctions on Iran for its ballistic missiles program. The act, signed by Trump, also imposed sanctions on North Korea for its nuclear weapons development and on Russia for its alleged efforts to interfere in the 2016 US election.—Reuters