



Australian towns among hottest spots on Earth as heatwave sizzles

Terrified civilians hide, send their farewells, during Nairobi siege



LONDON: A video grab from footage broadcast by the UK Parliament's Parliamentary Recording Unit (PRU) shows Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May (3R) reacting as opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn (bottom L) suggests she has been 'acting in the interests of her own Party', whilst he moves a motion of "No Confidence" against the Government, in the House of Commons. —AFP

'Zombie PM' May battles on alone

Toxic Brexit issue is dissolving traditional political bonds

LONDON: Isolated British Prime Minister Theresa May once again proved her stoicism by battling on in the face of humiliating defeat for her Brexit deal, but she is running out of allies in her epic political struggle. May suffered the biggest government defeat in modern British history when the House of Commons rejected by 432 votes to 202 the deal she struck with Brussels last year after 18 months of negotiation.

Moments later, she vowed to limp on and fight a parliamentary no-confidence vote, scheduled for Wednesday at 1900 GMT. May has already survived a party no-confidence vote in December, displaying characteristic determination when backed into a corner. She has also been protected by the inability of any serious challengers to form alliances and depose her, with the toxic Brexit issue dissolving traditional political bonds.

May made it her mission to carry out the wishes of voters who backed the Brexit referendum in June 2016 when she became premier the following month. But Brexit backers have always been suspicious of having a Remain supporter — which May was before the referendum — leading negotiations. And MPs who

opposed Brexit want her to stick tighter to the EU or call for a second referendum that could potentially nullify the first one's result.

Despite carrot-and-stick attempts to cajole her colleagues to back her, she was on Tuesday once again forced into a making a chastening address after her humiliating defeat. Shortly before Christmas, she was forced to acknowledge the weakness of her position, telling Conservative colleagues she would not fight the next scheduled election in 2022 as she uncomfortably defeated the internal coup.

It was a rare concession by a prime minister praised by her supporters as resilient but accused by critics of ploughing on oblivious to the changing circumstances around her. The party challenge came shortly after she had to tell the House of Commons that the vote on her deal was being postponed as the scale of potential defeat became clear. Critics from all sides rounded on the leader on Tuesday, with Remain supporting journalist Matthew Parris calling her a "zombie prime minister", and the Leave supporting Daily Telegraph warning that she was "out of allies, out of time".

'Difficult woman'

May took over after her predecessor David Cameron quit following the shock vote for Brexit in June 2016, winning by default after her rivals fought among themselves or withdrew. She had campaigned to stay in the EU, but has repeatedly stressed the importance of implementing the verdict. Yet her plan's provision for a 'backstop' to prevent a hard Irish border, which could keep Britain indefinitely tied in a customs union with the EU, has angered Brexit supporters.

Despite the near constant criticism, May has kept at it and compares herself to her cricketing hero Geoffrey Boycott, who was a byword for doggedness as a batsman. The vicar's daughter has also gleefully seized on a putdown by a party elder that she was a "bloody difficult woman". May eschews gossip and networking, proving herself through hard work, spending six years in the tough job of interior minister before entering Downing Street. But her reserved nature often makes for stilted relations with world leaders and voters, while her style of repeating phrases and avoiding direct

questions earned her the media nickname "Maybot".

'Goody two shoes'

May, 62, described herself in a 2012 interview as a "goody two shoes" whose Protestant faith defined her upbringing. She knew she wanted to become a politician when she was just 12, and once said the naughtiest thing she had done was running through a field of wheat. May studied geography at the University of Oxford, where she met her husband Philip, who became a banker, after reportedly being introduced by future Pakistan premier Benazir Bhutto.

The couple never had children and May devoted herself to a life of public service that saw her become Conservative Party chairwoman in 2002. The apparent ease with which May positioned herself to become prime minister after the referendum drew praise for her political skills — but this evaporated the following year. Faced with an apparently unassailable poll lead, she called a snap election in June 2017 to bolster her position and Brexit plan — only to lose the Conservatives' majority in the Commons. —AFP

Syria buffer zone: A creation long sought by Turkey

BEIRUT: Since the start of the Syrian conflict, Turkey has pushed for the creation of a buffer zone on its border to protect refugees and prevent the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region. The "safe zone" or "security zone" would be on the Syrian side of the 900-kilometre (560-mile) Syria-Turkey frontier. After receiving backing from US President Donald Trump, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said this week that Turkey would go ahead with the plan, prompting angry reactions from both the Kurds and Damascus. Here is some background.

Humanitarian protection

In November 2011, just months into Syria's devastating conflict, Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, said a buffer zone could be imposed on the border, with international backing, in case of a massive outflow of refugees. The idea had already been proposed in the Turkish media as a means to protect civilians from a harsh crackdown by forces backing President Bashar Al-Assad. The Syrian National Council, the

main opposition coalition, had also mooted a no-fly zone or secure area to protect civilians.

Against the Kurds

In July 2012, the Syrian army withdrew from certain parts of the country's north where Kurdish militants were deployed. Erdogan accused Damascus of "allotting five provinces to the Kurds", posing a threat to Turkey, and threatened to respond by creating a border security zone. Turkey sees Syria's main Kurdish force, the People's Protection Units (YPG) as a "terrorist" offshoot of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) which has for decades waged a deadly insurgency in Turkey. But the YPG has been a key US ally in the fight against the Islamic State (IS) group, leading a coalition that ousted the jihadists from key parts of northern Syria including Manbij, Raqa and the border town of Kobane.

Civilian safe havens

In August 2012 Davutoglu urged the UN Security Council to set up civilian safe havens inside Syria, saying Ankara was struggling to cope with the thousands of people crossing into Turkey each day. "The UN should initiate the establishment of IDP (internally displaced people) camps within Syria without delay. Needless to say these camps should have full protection," Davutoglu said. But UN officials and major powers said such camps would face major diplomatic, legal and military hurdles.

Free of 'terrorism'

Turkey's next foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, said in 2014 that a buffer area inside Syria was needed in order to defeat IS as well as for humanitarian reasons. But the proposal met with a guarded international response. In 2015 Erdogan again called on world leaders to rally behind "a safe zone cleared of terror," implying it would be rid of both IS and Syrian Kurdish fighters. In February 2017, he said the aim was to establish an area of at least 4,000 square kilometers "free from terrorism".

Under Turkey's control

In January 2017, incoming president Trump raised the idea of "safe zones in Syria for the people" in an interview with ABC News. Turkey welcomed his shock December 2018 announcement that US troops would be withdrawn from Syria, but the two NATO allies quickly fell into a row over future of US-backed Kurdish forces. Trump later proposed setting up a 30-kilometre safe zone along the border, but did not say who would create, enforce or pay for it, or where it would be located. On January 14, Trump spoke to Erdogan, who later said he had reaffirmed that a 20-mile security zone along the Syrian border "will be set up by us". It would be "controlled by Turkey", his spokesman added. Syrian Kurds rejected the idea, Damascus denounced Ankara's "language of occupation and aggression", and regime backer Russia said the Syrian government must have full control of its north. —AFP

Egypt university overturns expulsion of student over hug

CAIRO: An Egyptian university has overturned its decision to expel a male student over hugging his female friend on campus, in an incident that sparked controversy in the conservative country. The young man appeared in a video carrying a bouquet of flowers kneeling before a woman and then hugging her, in what was meant to be a marriage proposal.

The footage was widely circulated online earlier this month and initially prompted the expulsion of both students from their respective universities. But late Tuesday the Mansoura University in northern Egypt, where the video was shot, reversed its decision to exclude the male student for two years. The student's appeal against the expulsion included "his apology for the act committed, a pledge to not repeat it and to commit to the university's values and ethics," a university statement said.

It cited the student's young age, concern for his future and his unfamiliarity with the university's rules, deciding instead to ban him from taking the semester's exams. On Sunday he was interviewed by telephone by a prominent talk show host on channel MBC Masr, and said that he had brought the flowers to propose to the woman. "We were supposed to be engaged but after what happened her parents are refusing this completely," said the young man, a first year law student who was identified only by his first name Mahmoud.

A day later, Al-Azhar university in Cairo scrapped the expulsion decision against the young woman who appeared in the video. The move followed the intervention in her favor of Egypt's top Muslim cleric, Ahmed al-Tayeb, who is the institution's grand imam. Issuing a lesser penalty, the university said the female student would be prevented for taking the first half of her exams. Al-Azhar is the most prestigious seat of Sunni Islamic learning in Egypt, a predominantly Muslim country which is largely a conservative society. Al-Azhar is touted as standing for Islamic moderation, but critics often accuse the institution of failing to modernize its teachings in order to counter extremism. —AFP