

## International

# On anniversary of banned referendum, Catalan separatists keep up their fight

## Tensions run high between Madrid, separatists

**BARCELONA:** Separatist leaders in Catalonia yesterday pledged to keep up their struggle for independence on the second anniversary of an ill-fated independence referendum, prompting Spain's acting prime minister to warn them "not to play with fire". The banned referendum and the short-lived declaration of independence that followed plunged Spain into its biggest political crisis in decades. Madrid responded by imposing direct rule on the region for months, sidelining regional authorities.

"The road towards the Catalan republic is inevitable," Pere Aragonès, Catalonia's deputy head of government, said in a ceremony in Barcelona. "We want to build it peacefully and for everybody." Yellow balloons marked voting stations used in the referendum, held on Oct 1, 2017 despite being deemed illegal by Madrid. "Let's finish what we started," read one attached note.

In Girona, about 150 pro-independence protesters marched in streets, some hurling eggs at police and toppling garbage bins. State news agency Efe said the central government had sent extra riot police to Catalonia amid fears in Madrid of a repeat of last year, when protesters blocked highways and train tracks and about 180,000 people marched in Barcelona. The separatist movement's momentum has seemingly slowed in recent months as it finds itself divided over whether to take a hard line that could lead to another banned independence referendum, or more dialogue with Madrid.

But tensions have flared in recent days ahead of the verdict, expected in the next two weeks, of 12 separatist leaders on trial for their role in the 2017 independence bid. Spain's high court last week also jailed seven Catalan separatists with possessing explosives, with prosecutors saying they were planning violent action around the time of the verdict. The regional parliament responded to the

arrests by adopting a resolution backing civil disobedience. Acting prime minister Pedro Sanchez said yesterday Madrid was ready to again apply direct rule in Catalonia if the regional government broke any laws. He pointed to the refusal of separatist leaders to condemn the seven activists arrested last week. The leaders said Madrid was trying to paint separatists as a violent movement, a label they reject. "We urge the Catalan independence movement not to play with fire, not to make the worst possible mistake, which is to look the other way if there are signs of violence, as we have unfortunately seen in recent weeks," Sanchez said in an interview with broadcaster Cadena Ser.

### Worried about coming days

Laura Borrás, lawmaker for secessionist Junts per Catalunya, said in comments to Reuters that it was the Spanish government who had "set fire to Catalan society" with its actions. The separatist movement has so far been peaceful but the seven activists arrested last week were to be linked to the grassroots CDR, one of the organizers of the Girona protest. "We were born to defend a referendum. We grew to defend a republic. We will be who will make the enemy tremble. And we will win. Have no doubts," the CDRs said on Twitter.

Mass protests were scheduled to take place in Barcelona and elsewhere later on. Opposition politicians voiced concerns about the potential impact. "I'm very worried about the coming days," Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo of the conservative People's Party told radio station Onda Cero. An annual pro-independence rally in Barcelona gathered fewer people than usual last month, with organizers citing divisions among separatist parties and the lack of a clear plan for independence as the reason. — Reuters



**BRUSSELS:** Former Catalan premier Carles Puigdemont (2nd left) takes part in protest called '#DoNotStealOurVotes' two years after the Catalan referendum yesterday near the European Parliament in Brussels. — AFP

### News in brief

#### France's Sarkozy to stand trial

**PARIS:** Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy lost a final court appeal yesterday against an order that he stand trial on charges of illegal financing for his 2012 election campaign. Sarkozy, who already faces a separate trial for corruption involving a judge, is accused of spending nearly double the legal limit of 22.5 million euros (\$24.5 million) on his failed re-election bid. France's highest criminal appeal court rejected his attempt to avoid facing the charges, paving the way for a trial date to be set after multiple challenges by Sarkozy's legal team. Prosecutors claim the 64-year-old Sarkozy, who has spent the past few years fighting a barrage of corruption and campaign financing charges, spent nearly 43 million euros on his quest for a second term. In the end, he was beaten by the Socialist Party's Francois Hollande. Investigators claim that Sarkozy's campaign used fake invoices to get around the campaign spending limits. — AFP

#### 11 Afghan policemen killed

**BALKH:** At least 11 policemen were killed and over a dozen more taken prisoner yesterday when Taliban fighters stormed their headquarters in northern Afghanistan, officials said. A column of more than 400 Taliban fighters on motorbikes attacked Shortepa district police headquarters in Balkh province in the early hours, triggering a lengthy gunfight, provincial spokesman Munir Farhad said. "Eleven policemen were killed in the attack. The Taliban also suffered heavy losses," he said. Karim Khan, the Shortepa district chief, confirmed the toll and said the Taliban had captured 13 policemen and set their headquarters ablaze before leaving the area. The Taliban claimed responsibility, saying their fighters had overrun the district. In a later statement, Balkh police said security forces had regained control of the district. — AFP

#### Iran sentences 'spy' to death

**DUBAI:** Iranian courts have sentenced one person to death for spying for the CIA and jailed two others for 10 years for the same crime, as well as imprisoning a fourth person for 10 years for spying for Britain, the judiciary said yesterday. The verdicts come amid spiraling tensions between Tehran and the United States since President Donald Trump last year withdrew from Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with major powers and reimposed sanctions that have crippled Iran's economy in order to force Tehran to renegotiate the pact. It was not immediately clear if any of the cases were linked to Iran's announcement in July that it captured 17 spies working for the CIA. "One person has been sentenced to death for spying for America's intelligence service ... but the ruling has been appealed," judiciary spokesman Gholamhossein Esmaili was quoted as saying by the judiciary's news website Mizan. — Reuters

#### 5 anti-jihadist fighters killed

**KANO:** Jihadists killed five members of a civilian militia during an attack on a town in conflict-hit northeast Nigeria over the weekend, security sources said yesterday. Fighters aligned to the Islamic State group on Sunday launched an assault on Gubio in eight pickup trucks fitted with machine guns, sparking an hour-long firefight. "Five of our comrades were killed in the attack," anti-jihadist militia leader Babakura Kolo said. Militia leaders and a military officer dismissed a claim from the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) group that it had killed and wounded 18 soldiers in the weekend attack. More than 100 vigilantes and local hunters from the region had been sent to the town in recent days to protect it against incursions from ISWAP. The redeployment came amid a new strategy by the military that has seen soldiers pulled back into "super camps" in a move critics say leaves towns more vulnerable to attack. — AFP

## Giuliani subpoenaed for documents; Trump attacks US Democrats

**WASHINGTON:** President Donald Trump attacked the Democratic lawmaker spearheading the impeachment inquiry on Monday as congressional committees subpoenaed his personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, for documents related to his dealings with Ukraine. As Trump lashed out at Democratic congressman Adam Schiff, suggesting he should be arrested for "treason," Australia confirmed that the president asked for help with an inquiry into special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation of Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

Trump also attacked the whistleblower whose complaint about his phone call with the leader of Ukraine led to the opening of the impeachment probe in the Democratic-led House of Representatives. "We are trying to find out about a whistleblower, when you have a whistleblower that reports things that were incorrect," the president told reporters. The whistleblower, reportedly a CIA officer, raised concerns about the July phone call during which Trump asked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate Trump's potential 2020 White House opponent Joe Biden and his son, Hunter, who served on the board of a Ukrainian gas company.

Giuliani was at the center of the effort to get Ukraine to conduct a probe of the Bidens, who have not been officially accused of any wrongdoing. Schiff, chairman of the Intelligence Committee, and the chairmen of two other Democratic-led House committees issued a subpoena to Giuliani asking him to turn over Ukraine-related documents by October 15. "The committees are investigating the extent to which President Trump jeopardized national

## Jail them! Brexit divisions rise on fringes of meet

**MANCHESTER:** Shouts of "jail them!" rang out at the UK Conservative party conference, as talk turned to the lawmakers who voted against Prime Minister Boris Johnson's strategy on Brexit. Leading eurosceptic Steve Baker said his former colleagues "acted against the national interest", sparking calls for criminal action from the crowd—although he urged restraint. The flash of hostility in an otherwise largely upbeat and disciplined annual conference in Manchester, northwest England, reveals how deep tensions are running in the governing party.

Johnson last month expelled 21 MPs for voting with opposition parties to stop him possibly leaving the European Union without a divorce deal on October 31. Few of the rebels are at this week's party meeting, where ministers fill the main stage and the airways with promises to "Get Brexit done", and moderates are consigned to the fringes. Former finance minister Philip Hammond said he was staying away as he no longer recognized a party of "ideological puritanism that brooks no dissent and is more and more strident in its tone."

### 'Party of Trump'

But in a small, packed meeting room away from the main venue Monday, three expelled former ministers defended their stance to a largely supportive crowd. They repeated their warnings that leaving the EU, Britain's closest trading partner, at the end of this month without agreeing divorce terms first would be a disaster. They say they are not trying to block Brexit but argue that as Conservatives, the party should be more cautious. Former justice minister David Gauke said the Tories had become a "more confrontational, much more aggressive party". "We are no longer the party of (wartime leader Winston) Churchill, we are more the party of (US President Donald) Trump," he said. His comments sparked shouts of "no!" and "rubbish" from the audience, but there was also prolonged applause.

### Foul traitor

Gauke appeared alongside former attorney general



**In this file photo, US President Donald Trump (left), Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly (2nd left), Reed Cordish, Director of Government Initiatives, and others listen while former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani (right) speaks during a meeting on cyber security in the Roosevelt Room of the White House. — AFP**

security by pressing Ukraine to interfere with our 2020 election," the chairmen said in a letter to Giuliani.

"Our inquiry includes an investigation of credible allegations that you acted as an agent of the President in a scheme to advance his personal political interests by abusing the power of the Office of the President," they said. Trump said on Monday that the call with Zelensky - which a senior State Department official confirmed was listened to by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo - was "perfect" and the whistleblower "reported a totally different statement." In fact, the rough transcript of the call released by the White House matched the whistleblower's account. Trump criticized Schiff for his depiction of the call during a con-

gressional hearing last week. Schiff opened the hearing with a parody imitation of Trump speaking like a mob boss to pressure Zelensky to investigate the Bidens. "It bore NO relationship to what I said on the call," Trump tweeted of Schiff's remarks. "Arrest for Treason?"

Trump also raised eyebrows by retweeting comments made by a Baptist pastor, Robert Jeffress, to Fox News warning of the dangers of "civil war" if the president was impeached. "If the Democrats are successful in removing the President from office (which they will never be), it will cause a Civil War like fracture in this Nation from which our Country will never heal," Trump paraphrased Jeffress as saying. An Australian government spokesman meanwhile confirmed that Trump asked Prime Minister Scott Morrison to help US Attorney General Bill Barr gather information for a probe into the Mueller inquiry.

Australia "has always been ready to assist and cooperate with efforts that help shed further light on the matters under investigation," the spokesman said in a statement. "The PM confirmed this readiness once again in conversation with the President." The Times said the White House restricted access to the transcript of the Trump-Morrison call in a manner similar to what was done with Trump's call with Zelensky. The original FBI probe into Russian election meddling - which was taken over by Mueller - was launched after the bureau received a tip from Australian officials. One new poll out Monday suggested that Americans were split down the middle over whether they support impeachment of the 73-year-old real estate tycoon. If Trump were impeached by a simple majority vote in the 435-member House, he would face a trial in the Republican-led Senate, where a two-thirds majority would be needed to convict and remove him from office.

Few Republican lawmakers have criticized Trump since the Ukraine scandal emerged, but former Republican senator Jeff Flake urged them on Monday to speak up. "Trust me when I say that you can go elsewhere for a job," Flake said. "But you cannot go elsewhere for a soul." — AFP



**In this file photo, US President Donald Trump (left), Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly (2nd left), Reed Cordish, Director of Government Initiatives, and others listen while former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani (right) speaks during a meeting on cyber security in the Roosevelt Room of the White House. — AFP**

Dominic Grieve, who has led parliament's battles with the government since the 2016 referendum. Grieve wants a fresh poll on Brexit, saying people are now more informed about the complexities—and particularly the dangers of "no deal". "In my mind being a party loyalist always means putting country before party when that is necessary," he said. "And we are at the moment 30 days away from a possibly catastrophic event in our country's peacetime modern history." Grieve has been subjected to abuse, and read out a new message on his phone to the meeting, which accused him of being a "foul traitor". "This sort of atmosphere... is being currently, I'm sorry to say bluntly, encouraged by the leader of the Conservative party," he said, referring to Johnson.

### 'Like it or get off'

The law the rebels helped pass demands that Johnson seek to delay Brexit if he cannot agree a divorce deal by a

Brussels summit later this month. The prime minister has called it a "surrender act", saying it would allow the EU to decide Britain's fate—and undermine the chances of getting a deal. Former junior foreign minister Alistair Burt, who originally opposed Brexit, said he wanted a divorce agreement but said his party had become obsessed. "I've lost the argument—the party has decided it wants to leave the EU," he said. "But I've seen that process become an obsession to the point of irrationality, that really, really worries me."

Johnson has yet to show he can get a deal to allow Brexit on October 31, or how he can get around the law requiring him to delay if he fails. But opinion polls indicate his tough talk is winning over pro-Brexit voters. Linda Topping, 63, a local party chairwoman from Watford, north of London, said Conservatives should accept they must adapt with the times. "We are supposed to be representing the voters and the voters are changing," she said. "If you don't like it, get off." — AFP