

# UK's May Plans Cabinet Changes as Brexit Enters New Phase

LONDON — British Prime Minister Theresa May is preparing to shuffle her Cabinet as she tries to bolster her authority ahead of a crucial new phase in Brexit negotiations.

May said she will re-jig government ranks "soon," with changes expected as early as Monday.

She did not indicate which ministers are set to lose their jobs. The Sunday Times reported that several senior ministers will stay in their posts, including Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and Brexit Secretary David Davis.

May's grip on power was



weakened by her Conservative Party's poor showing in a June election, which saw it reduced to a minority government.

She also lost a key Cabinet ally before Christmas, when deputy premier Damian Green was forced to resign for making misleading statements about pornography found on his office computer.

But the embattled British leader got a boost last month when the European Union agreed that talks on the U.K.'s departure had made enough progress to start discussing future trade relations. (AP)

## Israeli PM Backs Trump Critique of Palestinian UN Aid Agency

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says he "completely agrees" with President Donald Trump's critique of the U.N. agency aiding Palestinian refugees.

Netanyahu at his Sunday weekly Cabinet meeting also reiterated support for Trump's threat to cut aid to Palestinians.

The development comes after Israeli media indicated that despite public declarations, Israel is concerned about the ramifications of such a move. Netanyahu says the or-

ganization "perpetuates the Palestinian refugee problem" and the "right of return narrative, in order to eliminate the state of Israel."

The U.S. is the largest donor to UNRWA, the U.N. agency that assists Palestinian refugees.

Ending the American aid could precipitate a humanitarian crisis, particularly in the impoverished Gaza Strip, where the majority of residents are eligible for UNRWA's support. Israel could find itself footing the bill. (AP)

BERLIN — Chancellor Angela Merkel voiced optimism as she opened talks Sunday with Germany's second biggest party on renewing their alliance, in a new attempt at shaking Europe's biggest economy out of paralysis after September's inconclusive elections.

The week of meetings between Merkel's conservative alliance and the Social Democrats (SPD) will examine whether both sides have enough common ground to begin formal coalition negotiations towards a new government

by March or April.

"I am going into these talks with optimism. At the same time it is clear to me that we will have an enormous amount of work in front of us over the next few days but we are willing to take it on and to bring a good result," Merkel told journalists as she arrived at the SPD's headquarters for the meeting.

"I think that it can be done. We will work very swiftly and very intensively," she added.

The talks are not without pitfalls — including tricky

## Merkel 'Optimistic' in New Bid to End Political Impasse



questions surrounding the more than a million asylum seekers who have arrived in Germany since 2015. The far-right anti-immigration AfD capitalised on growing misgivings in Germany over

the new arrivals, winning more than 90 parliamentary seats in the watershed election. Merkel was left without a majority, while the centre-left SPD found itself with its worst post-war score. (AFP)

## Trump Says He Would 'Absolutely' Talk to North Korea's Kim on Phone



CAMP DAVID, Md. — U.S. President Donald Trump said on Saturday he would "absolutely" be willing to talk on the phone to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and that he hopes a

positive development results from talks between North Korea and South Korea. North Korea agreed on Friday to hold official talks with South Korea next week, the first in more than two years, hours af-

ter Washington and Seoul delayed a military exercise amid a standoff over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs.

Trump, answering questions from reporters at the presidential retreat at Camp David, Maryland, expressed a willingness to talk to Kim but not without preconditions. "Absolutely, I would do that," Trump said. "I have no problem with that at all." Trump and Kim have exchanged insults ever since Trump took office, with Trump repeatedly calling Kim "rocket man" for testing

nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Earlier this week Trump dismissed Kim's taunt that the North Korean leader has a nuclear button on his desk, saying he has a bigger button. The talks between North Korea and South Korea are expected to cover the Winter Olympics, to be held in South Korea next month, and inter-Korean relations. Trump suggested the talks might lead to an easing of tensions and took credit for the diplomatic breakthrough, saying it was a result of his steady pressure. (Reuters)

## N. Korea Names Delegates for Inter-Korean Talks

SEOUL — North Korea has named its delegation for a rare high-level meeting with the South this week, the unification ministry in Seoul said Sunday, as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe cautiously welcomed the talks.

The two Koreas agreed Friday to hold their first official dialogue in more than two years and are expected to discuss the North's participation in next month's Winter Olympics in South Korea.

The North Korean delegation for Tuesday's meeting in the border truce village of Panmunjom will be led by Ri Son-Gwon, head of the North's agency handling inter-Korean affairs, the ministry said. Pyongyang informed the South that four other officials will accompany Ri, it added, including those in charge of sports. The tentative rapprochement comes after the North's leader Kim Jong-Un warned in his New Year speech that he had a nuclear button on his desk, but also said Pyongyang could send a team to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. (AFP)

## Syrian Gov't Allocates 138 Mln USD for Reconstruction Projects in Aleppo

DAMASCUS — The Syrian government has allocated 60 billion Syrian pounds (roughly 138 million U.S. dollars) for the reconstruction of public service and the implementation of development projects in the northern city of Aleppo, state news agency SANA reported on Saturday.

The projects include rebuilding destroyed schools, clinics, and water and electricity networks as well as implementing agricultural projects, rebuilding soils and other infrastructure rehabilitation work. Syria Prime Minister Imad Khamis, who is currently on a visit to Aleppo, said Saturday that the development and service projects have started in Aleppo a year ago, following the Syrian army's recapture of the former rebel-held part in eastern Aleppo, according to SANA, which said that the new budget is for completing the projects.

Khamis said that the government has a plan to accelerate the wheels of production in Aleppo, stressing keenness of his government to adhere to the demands of the merchants and industrialists in the city.

Khamis and other government members have visited Aleppo to check on the situation there, stressing that the Syrian government has started a new chapter in the process of rebuilding Aleppo. The prime minister also declared the re-operation of the power station of Bustan al-Qasr in Aleppo with a capacity of 66/20 KV after the completion of rehabilitation work at a cost of 3 billion Syrian pounds. Aleppo used to be Syria's economic powerhouse that has seen ferocious battles between the Syrian government forces and an array of militant groups, some of which were affiliated with the al-Qaida terror network. (Xinhua)

## Nuclear Envoys of China, Japan Visit Seoul

SEOUL — The top nuclear envoys of China and Japan have been visiting South Korea since last week, ahead of the scheduled high-level talks between Seoul and Pyongyang, Tuesday.

The visits amid speculation that the cross-border dialogue, the first in over two years, are expected to reshape security on the Korean Peninsula and influence its shareholders, including China and Japan. On Monday, Japan's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Director General Kenji Kanasugi will come to Seoul and meet with his counterpart Lee Do-hoon. Kenji's visit will come after Kong Xu-



anyou, China's assistant minister of foreign affairs and special representative on Korean Peninsula affairs, met Lee here last week. Kenji and Lee are anticipated to discuss regional security as well as three-way cooperation with the United States on North Korea's nuclear threats. Japan welcomed

Pyongyang's move for change but said it will remain unchanged in its sanctions and pressure against the repressive state in line with international efforts. On Friday, Kong and Lee shared thoughts on measures to be taken over the North's nuclear and ballistic missile program. (Agencies)

## Bulgaria to Help EU, Turkey Improve Ties

ISTANBUL — Visiting Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov pledged on Sunday to exert more efforts to help normalize relations between Turkey and the European Union. "Turkey is the EU's largest neighbor and has the largest army in the region," Borisov said at the reopening ceremony of a historic Bulgarian church in Istanbul, calling on all sides to do their best to make 2018 a year in which Ankara and the bloc fix and normalize their relations.

Bulgaria holds the EU's rotating presidency for the next six months. For his

part, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim voiced hope for additional cooperation opportunities to emerge during Bulgaria's presidency. Saying Turkey is determined to pursue EU membership, he said, "I believe that during Bulgaria's EU term presidency, additional cooperation opportunities will emerge and will gain momentum." "Bulgaria holds the rotating EU presidency," Erdogan said in Istanbul. "Having this reopening ceremony at this period would deliver an important message to the international community." (Xinhua)

## Sweden Sees Drop in Asylum Seekers in 2017

STOCKHOLM — Sweden saw a drop in asylum seekers last year, compared to the two previous years, new figures from the Swedish Migration Agency showed.

In 2017, around 25,000 people sought asylum in Sweden, down from around 29,000 in 2016. In 2015, during the refugee crisis, there were around 163,000 asylum seekers, Swedish Radio reported Sunday, quoting statistics from the agency.

According to Fredrik Bengtsson of the Migration Agency, the fact that Sweden receives fewer asylum seekers now is a result of policy changes "at the national and EU level" rather than of improved conditions in unstable countries like Syria and Iraq. "Millions of people are still on the run. What has changed are the possibilities of making it to Sweden and Europe," Bengtsson told Swedish Radio on Sunday.

During the refugee crisis, the Migration Agency had a hard time keeping up with the influx in asylum applications and many migrants have had to wait a long time for their cases to be processed. In the past two years, the Migration Agency has made over 200,000 asylum decisions and its prognosis submitted to the government in October, the Agency stated that the target for 2017 was to process 80,000 cases. That target was reached, according to a statement published on the Agency's website, and 56 percent of those 80,000 people were granted asylum. (Xinhua)

## Neighbor News

### China Punishes 159,100 in Anti-Graft Campaign in 2017

BEIJING — A total of 159,100 people were punished in 2017 for violating the Party's code of conduct and corruption in China, according to the top anti-raft body of the Communist Party of China (CPC).

They were involved in 122,100 cases, of which 48,700 were related to poverty alleviation work, said the CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI).

Some 61,000 officials were punished for violating the Party's eight-point frugality code from January to November last year in 43,400 cases.

In order to have a deterrent effect, the CCDI also made public 670 cases of violating the Party's code of conduct and corruption on its website last year, based on

reports from local Party disciplinary commissions.

A recent public opinion poll showed that 93.9 percent of those surveyed in 2017 were satisfied with the Party's anti-raft work, up from 2012's 75 percent.

Moreover, since the start of 2017, 1,300 fugitives have returned to China, including 347 Party members and state functionaries, as well as 14 who are on the list of 100 "red notice" corruption suspects. Around 980 million yuan (151 million U.S. dollars) of illicit money has been recovered in the process.

China also held more than 50 consultations with foreign law enforcement departments in 2017 on major cases involving fugitives and illicit money, according to the CCDI. (Xinhua)

### Top Security Official: Iran Not to Allow 3rd Parties to Affect Ties with Pakistan

TEHRAN — Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani underlined that his country stands against any moves by other states to darken relations between Tehran and Islamabad by sending weapons and terrorists to the two countries' shared borders.

"We will not allow certain countries to affect the relations between Iran and Pakistan by sending weapons and hiring terrorists to foment insecurity at the borders," Shamkhani said in a meeting with Pakistan's National Security Advisor Nasser Khan Janjua in Tehran on Sunday.

He also blasted the new US national security strategy which increases insecurity and instability in the world, and said that Washington's hypocritical and double-standard policy against the Muslim states, including Iran and Pakistan, requires more

vigilance, deterrent measures and cooperation among the Islamic countries.

Janjua, for his part, underscored his country's willingness to further broaden its security and economic cooperation with Iran.

Janjua's visit to Iran came as Pakistani Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif said Islamabad is not in alliance with the US.

"We do not have any alliance," Asif said during an interview with the Wall Street Journal. "This is not how allies behave," he added, referring to US President Donald Trump's administration's decision to suspend its entire security assistance to Pakistan. The suspension of security assistance for Pakistan — announced last week — comes as the Trump administration seeks more cooperation from Islamabad as part of its strategy in Afghanistan. (FNA)

### Pakistan Does Not Have an Alliance with the US, Claims Khawaja Asif

ISLAMABAD — Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif on Friday claimed that Pakistan does not have an alliance with the United States (US).

"We do not have any alliance," Asif said during an interview with the Wall Street Journal. "This is not how allies behave," he added, referring to US President Donald Trump's administration's decision to suspend its entire security assistance to Pakistan.

The suspension of security assistance for Pakistan — announced last week — comes as the Trump administration seeks more cooperation from Islamabad as part of its strategy in Afghanistan.

State Department Spokesperson Heather Nauert said during the announcement that the suspension would remain in effect until Pakistan "takes decisive action" against groups such as the Taliban that are "destabilizing the region and targeting US

personnel". During his interview with the Journal, Foreign Minister Asif said that Pakistan had made a "huge mistake" when it agreed to join America's campaign in Afghanistan in 2001, in the wake of the 9/11 terror attack.

He added that the move had engendered a terrorist backlash against Pakistan.

Asif maintained that Washington has turned Islamabad into a "whipping boy" for its failures in Afghanistan.

While speaking about the successes of Pakistan's recently launched counter-terrorism operations, Asif said that Islamabad would not allow the Afghan war to be fought on Pakistan's soil.

"We have relative calm in Pakistan at the moment," Asif said. "But if we go against these people [Afghan insurgents], then the war will again be fought on our soil, which will suit the Americans." (Monitoring Desk)