



In this photo released on Dec 25, Britain's Queen Elizabeth sits at a desk in the 1844 Room at Buckingham Palace, after recording her Christmas Day broadcast to the Commonwealth, in London. (AP)

Queen Elizabeth II, Markle, royals attend Christmas service

Queen Elizabeth II and senior members of the royal family — along with newcomer Meghan Markle, Prince Harry's American fiancée — attended a Christmas church service on Monday as a crowd of local residents gathered.

Markle smiled and gave a brief wave in her first public appearance with the queen. She and Harry stopped to talk with several locals on their way back to the queen's residence.

The queen was joined by her husband, Prince Philip, and close family members including grandson Prince William and his wife, Kate, who is expected to give birth to the

couple's third child in the spring.

William and Kate also stopped to talk with area residents who had waited in the cold for a chance to give flowers to the royals.

The crowd was larger than in past years, perhaps because of curiosity about Markle.

Elizabeth, 91, and Philip, 96, missed last year's church service because they were suffering from the flu, but they seemed in good health during Monday's brief appearance. Philip walked back to the queen's house with other royals, but Elizabeth opted to be driven.

Elizabeth planned to use her annual Christmas message to pay tribute to the way the cities of London and Manchester pulled together after extremist attacks earlier this year.

Remarks pre-recorded by the monarch were televised later on Christmas Day in the United Kingdom and the 51 other Commonwealth countries.

Excerpts released by Buckingham Palace indicate Elizabeth praises Manchester, hit by a suicide bomber in May, and London, which endured attacks on Parliament, London Bridge and other landmarks. (AP)

term were complicated when initial talks to build an alliance between her conservative bloc, the liberal Free Democrats and the Greens collapsed in November.

She is now hoping for a re-run of her current left-right "grand coalition" with the second biggest party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which is however reluctant to govern in her shadow again after a dismal election result.

SPD leader **Martin Schulz**, facing a sceptical party base, has only agreed to "open-ended" talks that could also lead to the toleration of a Merkel minority government — an option she however rejects.

In the end, the labour party's rank-and-file members will get to vote on whether to enter into a new coalition with Merkel — or head into opposition, as Schulz had vowed to do straight after the September election loss. (AFP)



Schulz

'Italy forces from Iraq to Niger':

Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni said on Sunday he would propose to parliament transferring some of the country's troops stationed in Iraq to Niger to fight people smuggling and terrorism.

Gentiloni said Italy's 1,400-strong military presence in Iraq could now be reduced after victories against Islamic militants and instead deployed in the Sahel region of West Africa.

"We have to continue to work, concentrating our attention and energies on the threat of people trafficking and terrorism in the Sahel," he said aboard the Italian ship Etna used in the European Union's "Sophia" operation to counter people smuggling in the Mediterranean.

"For this reason, part of our forces in Iraq will be deployed to Niger in coming months — this is the proposal the government will make to parliament," Gentiloni said.

He did not specify how many people would be sent to Niger. Newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* wrote on Sunday that the contingent would be "at least 470" as part of a commitment made to French President Emmanuel Macron.

Macron has thrown his weight behind a French-backed West African force known as the GS Sahel, which includes the armies of Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad, which was set up in October to tackle Islamist militants.

To give the force a boost, Macron held a Paris summit on Dec 13 attended by the leaders of the five participating countries, Germany and Italy as well as Saudi and Emirati ministers.

The Italian parliament is expected to be formally dissolved by the end of this year ahead of March elections. But it will continue to meet for "ordinary administration" and could approve Gentiloni's request for the transfer of military personnel. (RTRS)

Italian lawmakers snub vote: A controversial bill that could grant Italian citizenship to about 800,000 children born in the country if they have spent five years in school was defeated in the Senate, newspapers said Sunday.

Under the bill called "right of the soil" or *Ius soli*, children under 12 who have spent five years in school would qualify to be naturalised. The rule would also apply to children born to non-Italians.

The Senate was near empty during the vote on Sunday, newspapers said. Currently, foreigners born in Italy can only apply for citizenship when they turn 18 and if they have lived in the country since birth.

Only 116 of the 319 Senators were present in the house and the vote was deferred to Jan 9, by which time parliament is likely to have been dissolved ahead of legislative elections in March.

The proposed law mooted by the government of Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni has seen fierce debate and sparked violent reactions, especially from the far-right New Force (Nuovo Forza) party and the anti-immigration Northern League. (AFP)

Moscow bus accident kills 5: Five people were killed when a city bus ploughed into a pedestrian underpass in western Moscow on Monday, traffic police said.

"A bus drove into a pedestrian underpass," a traffic police spokesman, Artyom Kolesnikov, told AFP.

"According to preliminary information, five people died."

Footage broadcast on national television showed a bus driving down the stairs, running over several pedestrians.

It was not immediately clear what caused the accident but Russian news agencies said that the driver had been detained.

"There are dead and wounded," tweeted Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyanin. "We are providing emergency aid," he said, offering condolences to families of the victims. (AFP)

Poll officials bar Navalny: Russian election officials on Monday formally barred Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny from running for president, prompting calls from him for a boycott of next year's vote.

The Central Election Commission decided unanimously that the anti-corruption crusader isn't eligible to run.

Navalny is implicitly barred from running for office because of a conviction in a fraud case which has been viewed as political retribution. He could have run if he was given a special dispensation or if his conviction was cancelled.

Incumbent Vladimir Putin is running for a fourth term in office and is widely expected to win the March 18 election.

Over the past year, Navalny has mounted a grassroots campaign which reached out to the most remote corners of Putin's heartland. Navalny is the most serious challenger that Putin has faced in all his years in power, and the court cases against him have been viewed as a tool to keep him from running for office.

In a pre-recorded message that was released minutes after the Election Commission handed down the decision, Navalny called on his supporters to boycott the vote.

"The procedure that we're invited to take part in is not an election," he said. "Only Putin and the candidates he has hand-picked are taking part in it."

"Going to the polls right now is to vote for lies and corruption." (AP)

Spain

King addresses Catalonia

Catalans 'urged' to avoid confrontation

MADRID, Dec 25, (AFP): Spain's **King Felipe VI** in a Christmas speech on Sunday urged Catalan lawmakers to respect their region's diversity and avoid another confrontation over independence.

Felipe's remarks came three days after separatist parties, led by ousted president Carles Puigdemont, won an absolute majority of seats in a parliamentary vote.

The wealthy northeastern region's newly elected parliament must "face the problems that affect all Catalans, with respect to plurality and bearing in mind their responsibility to the common good," the monarch said.

"The road cannot lead again to confrontation and exclusion, which as we already know generate nothing but discord, uncertainty and discouragement," he said at his Madrid residence, flanked by Spanish and EU flags.

Spain's central government called the election after sacking Puigdemont's cabinet, dissolving the Catalan parliament and stripping the region of its treasured autonomy following an independence declaration on October 27.

The declaration rattled a Europe already shaken by Brexit, and inflamed passions across Spain.

It followed a banned independence referendum on October 1, which saw a brutal police crackdown that focused the world's attention on the Catalan crisis.

Two days after the referendum, Felipe made a rare televised speech, condemning the separatists' "unacceptable disloyalty".

On Christmas Eve, he reiterated his call for unity, though his tone was more conciliatory.

He called on the region's leaders to help "Catalonia's society — diverse and plural as it is — to recover its serenity, stability and mutual respect, in such a way as to ensure that ideas ... do not separate families and friends from each other".

Spain is now "a mature democracy, where any citizen can ... defend, freely and democratically, his opinions and ideas; but not impose his ideas in a standoff with the rights of others", the king said in his fourth Christmas speech since his accession to the throne.

Supporters of Catalan unity with Spain accuse their separatist rivals of creating a gulf pitting the pro- and anti-independence camps.

Throughout the crisis over independence, Spain's worst since democracy was reinstated following the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, the government in Madrid has repeatedly warned of the economic risks posed by a bid for secession.

More than 3,100 firms have moved their legal headquarters out of Catalonia since the referendum. Tourism, a key industry for the Mediterranean region, has also been hit by the crisis.

With their leaders in jail or exile, separatists now face the challenge of forming a government.

In Belgium, Puigdemont called on Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy to hold talks in Brussels or any other European location — barring Spain where he faces arrest.

Rajoy rejected the call, however, as his government urged Catalonia's leaders to work within the framework of the law and abandon "unilateral decisions".

Britain

'Christmas help' provides some cheer

UK homelessness 'crisis'

LONDON, Dec 25, (AFP): Volunteers at a drop-in centre in north London hand out food, healthcare and advice to homeless people as they do every Christmas — except that this year, the numbers needing help have reached crisis point.

At a school emptied of children for the holidays, visitors are offered a hot meal and a chat, dental and medical check-ups, and even a sewing repair service for damaged sleeping bags.

The pop-up centre is among 13 set up across Britain by homelessness charity Crisis to provide some festive cheer to an estimated 4,500 people who might otherwise be on the streets.

Among those stopping by for a cup of tea before Christmas was Paula, a 48-year-old former care worker who spent three months living in her car after being evicted following problems with her landlord.

"My car was my safest bet because I could lock the doors, but it wasn't warm — luckily it was summer," she told AFP.

It was also deeply uncomfortable and exacerbated an existing back problem, to the point that she collapsed and had to be taken to hospital.

She has since found a new place to live, but Crisis warned that cases like hers are increasingly common, estimating that thousands of people across Britain are forced to sleep in cars, trains, buses and tents.

These "hidden" homeless are in addition to the more than 9,000 people living on the streets in England at any one time, up 134 percent since 2011, according to a scathing report by lawmakers published this week. The MPs said the growth was "appalling", adding: "The extent of homelessness across England is a national crisis."

Opposition Labour lawmaker Jeremy Corbyn highlighted the plight of rough sleepers in his Christmas message on Sunday, as well as that of an estimated 78,000 households who are living in temporary, often sub-standard accommodation.

He has previously described it as a "national disgrace".

Crisis chief executive Jon Sparkes said there were numerous reasons why people lost their homes, including the breakdown of relationships, but the biggest recent factor has been the ending of a private sector tenancy.

"What's becoming really clear to us is that the impact of not building social houses, the impact of spiralling cost of housing, the impact of welfare reform and cuts to benefits is creating and driving a really worrying growth in rough sleeping and broader homelessness," he told AFP.

The MPs said the government's attitude in the face of a growing problem had been "unacceptable complacent".

They too warned about the impact of a lack of affordable, decent homes, calling for a "renewed focus" on housing policy.

Challenged on the subject earlier this month, Prime Minister Theresa May said the government was investing £500 million (563 million euros, \$668 million) in tackling homelessness.

Speaking in the House of Commons, she also noted measures announced in last month's annual budget to increase the supply of affordable housing.

"We are going to be a government who put a clear focus on housing, on building the homes that people need, on ensuring that people are given help to get into those homes, and on acting to prevent homelessness before it happens," she said.

SPD, which is about to start negotiations on governing for another four years in coalition with Chancellor **Angela Merkel's** conservatives, as his target.

The man was taken to hospital for treatment for superficial injuries to his head. Nobody else was hurt. Police launched an arson inquiry and state security services were also investigating. (RTRS)

'Don't fear political uncertainty':

German President **Frank-Walter Steinmeier** urged citizens not to fear the uncertainty of the country's months-long political stalemate, speaking in his traditional Christmas address.

Chancellor Angela Merkel won elections three months ago without a clear majority and has since been struggling to form a new coalition, while staying on as head of a caretaker government.

Steinmeier said that "not everything unexpected must scare us, and that includes the formation of a government which, in an unusual way, is dragging on".

"I assure you the state is operating according to the rules which our constitution has for a situation like this one, even if these rules were not needed in the past few decades," said the head of state in his pre-recorded speech on national TV.

"Therefore, we can have trust." Merkel's hopes for a fourth four-year



Prince Harry and his fiancée Meghan Markle arrive to their traditional Christmas Day service, at St Mary Magdalene Church in Sandringham, England on Dec 25. (AP)



Merkel



Steinmeier

Europe

150 trapped in Alps ski lifts: Around 150 skiers in the French Alps were rescued after being trapped for several hours when their ski lift broke down on Sunday.

The rescue operation lasted about two hours, Franck Lecoutre, head of the tourism office in the Chamrousse ski resort, near Grenoble, told AFP.

"They will all be in time for Christmas Eve," he said, noting that no one had been hurt. The weather was clear for the rescue operation.

The breakdown, whose cause was unknown, occurred around 1400 GMT on the ski lifts which link the resort of Chamrousse, located at 1,650 metres (5,400 feet) above sea level, with the summit of Croix Chamrousse at 2,250 metres. The weather was clear.

The incident affected 70 gondolas, each capable of carrying 10 people, rescuers said.

The operation involved two helicopters, with rescuers lowered on top of the gondolas to help the trapped skiers descend to the slopes with the help of ropes. David Gendre, a member of the rescue team, told AFP.

The Croix de Chamrousse ski lift was set up in 2009 to replace a cable car and two chair lifts. (AFP)

Driver rams SPD HQ: A man drove a car at the entrance of the Berlin headquarters of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) late on Sunday evening, lightly injuring himself, later telling police that he had intended to commit suicide.

Police said the car, which crashed through the first set of glass doors of Willy Brandt House, the SPD's headquarters, was laden with petrol canisters and gas cartridges. The building's sprinkler system extinguished the resulting blaze.

Authorities did not identify the man, in part because of a policy of limiting public communications in cases involving suicide, attempted or otherwise, saying only that he was 58 years old.

A police spokeswoman said investigators found nothing to cast doubt on the man's claim that he had been attempting

to commit suicide. The incident did not appear to be an attack, she added.

It was unclear why he had chosen the



This general view shows the Christmas tree known as 'Spelacchio' at The Piazza Venezia in Rome on Dec 24. (AFP)