



In this handout photo provided by UK Parliament, Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaks during Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons in London on Sept 16. UK lawmakers have criticized the government's handling of the COVID-19 testing crisis for a second day as opposition leaders say Prime Minister Boris Johnson lacked a cohesive plan to tackle the virus as the country faces a second wave in the pandemic. (AP)

Asia

New PM vows to push reforms: Japan's new Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga started his first full day in office Thursday with a resolve to push forward popular reforms.

"I'm determined to work hard for the people and get results so we can live up to their expectations," Suga told reporters as he walked into the prime minister's office.

Suga was formally elected Wednesday to replace Shinzo Abe, who announced last month that he planned to step down due to ill health.

While Suga won the backing of fellow ruling party lawmakers with a pledge to carry on Abe's policies and work on Abe's unfinished goals, he is also pushing for some policy changes of his own.

In a departure from Abe, Suga said he will discontinue cherry blossom-viewing parties. Abe was accused of using taxpayers' money to entertain constituents at the annual gathering.

Suga told reporters Thursday that there will be no longer a budget for such events. Suga did not say if he planned to investigate if cherry blossom party funds were properly handled in the past. (AP)



Suga

US envoy begins visit to Taiwan: US Undersecretary of State Keith Krach arrived in Taiwan on Thursday for the second visit by a high-level American official in two months, prompting a stern warning and threat of possible retaliation from China.

Beijing considers Taiwan its own and opposes all official contacts between other countries and the self-governing island. Krach arrived at an air force base in Taipei, the capital, for a three-day visit. Wearing a face mask, he bumped elbows in greetings with Taiwanese Deputy Foreign Minister Harry Ho-Jen Tseng.

Krach, the highest-level State Department official to visit the island in decades, is to meet Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and other senior officials, the island's foreign ministry said.

The visit by Krach, who is undersecretary for economic growth, energy and the environment, follows a high-profile trip in August by US Health Secretary Alex Azar, the highest-level US Cabinet official to visit since the US switched formal relations from Taiwan to China in 1979. (AP)

Close ties with Japan serve peace: Chinese President Xi Jinping has called for establishing "solid" relations with Japan as such a close relationship is warranted by modern times' requirements and can serve global peace.

The president, in a cable addressed on Wednesday to the newly-elected Japanese prime minister, Yoshihide Suga, on the occasion of taking the office, noted that cordial and stable ties between the two Asian nations would serve peace and stability in the region and the globe.

He also stressed that the two countries should adhere to previously crafted agreements.

The two nations already cooperate in diverse economic and investments sectors. (KUNA)

Subcontinent

India asks China to pull back troops: India's defense minister said Thursday the country faces challenges in its border dispute with China and urged Beijing to sincerely implement an understanding they reached previously to completely disengage forces from the Ladakh region.

Rajnath Singh told the upper house of Parliament that China has amassed troops and weapons in Ladakh in violation of agreements reached in the 1990s and is trying to alter the status quo in the region through aggressive actions.

He said that was not acceptable and that India is seeking a peaceful resolution through talks.

The two countries' foreign ministers met in Moscow a week ago and agreed to deescalate tensions in Ladakh, but Singh's words to Parliament suggested they have not significantly declined and that settling the impasse will be a long process.

He also said India has counter-deployed troops that have foiled "transgression attempts by China."

"We should be confident that our armed forces will handle the situation successfully," Singh said. (AP)

Woman, 3 suspected rebels killed: Three suspected rebels and a 45-year-old woman were killed Thursday during a gunbattle between government forces and anti-India rebels in the main city in disputed Kashmir, officials said.

The gunfight erupted shortly after scores of counterinsurgency police and soldiers launched an operation based on a tip about the presence of militants in a Srinagar neighborhood, Pankaj Singh, an Indian paramilitary spokesman, said.

Singh said the fighting left three militants dead and a paramilitary officer wounded. He said a local woman also was killed in the exchange of gunfire. No other details were immediately available about the civilian's killing.

As the fighting raged, many residents marched near the site in solidarity with the rebels and chanted slogans seeking an end to Indian rule over the region. Government forces fired shotgun pellets and tear gas at the stone-throwing protesters. (AP)

7 drown as boat capsizes: At least seven people drowned on Wednesday after a boat carrying Hindu pilgrims to a temple capsized in a river in central India, a government official said.

Krishan Kumar, a spokesperson for the National Disaster Response Force, said 22 pilgrims were rescued and a search was continuing for another 10 people still unaccounted for.

Seven bodies have been pulled out the river so far, Kumar said. Police are investigating the cause of the accident in the Chambal River in Rajasthan state.

Such accidents are common in India, with many overcrowded boats not having safety equipment. In September last year, 12 people drowned when a sightseeing boat capsized on the swollen Godavari River in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. In May 2018, 30 people were killed when a similar boat carrying local people capsized in the same region. (AP)

Protests

300 arrests and counting

Go after 'demonstrators' who cause violence: Barr

WASHINGTON, Sept 17 (AP) — In a private call with federal prosecutors across the country, Attorney General William Barr's message was clear: Aggressively go after demonstrators who cause violence.

Barr pushed his US attorneys to bring federal charges whenever they could, keeping a grip on cases even if a defendant could be tried instead in state court, according to officials with knowledge of last week's call who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity. Federal convictions often result in longer prison sentences.

The Trump administration's crackdown has already led to more than 300 arrests on federal crimes in the protests that erupted following the death of George Floyd. An AP analysis of the data shows that while many are accused of violent crimes like arson for hurling Molotov cocktails and burning police cars and assault on law enforcement, others are not — prompting criticism that at least some arrests are a politically motivated effort to stymie demonstrations.

"The speed at which this whole thing was moved from state court to federal court is stunning and unbelievable," said Charles Sunwabe, who's representing an Erie, Pennsylvania, man accused of lighting a fire at a coffee shop after a May 30 protest. "It's an attempt to intimidate these demonstrators and to silence them," he said.

Some cases are viewed as trumped up and should not be in federal court, lawyers say, like a teen accused of civil disorder for claiming online "we are not each other's enemy, only enemy is 12," a reference to law enforcement.

The Trump administration has seized on the demonstrations and an aggressive federal response to showcase what the president says is his law-and-order prowess, claiming he's countering rising crime in cities run by Democrats. Trump has derided protesters and played up the violence around protests, though the majority are peaceful.

Pockets of violence have indeed popped up in cities across the US, including Portland, Oregon, where protests devolved into clashes with law enforcement for weeks on end. Nights of looting and other unrest have occurred in other cities, including Rochester, New York; Minneapolis, Louisville, Washington and Chicago.

Federal officials were also called into to Kenosha, Wisconsin, after large protests and unrest following the shooting of Jacob Blake and the gunning down of two protesters and later arrest of a 17-year-old in their deaths. Notably, that teen has not been charged with any federal crimes. Neither was a man accused of shooting and killing a demonstrator in Louisville following the death of Breonna Taylor.

While Barr has gone after protest-related violence targeted at law enforcement, he has argued there's seldom reason to open sweeping investigations into the practices of police departments. The Justice Department, however, has opened a number of civil rights investigations into individual cases. Barr has said he does not believe there is systemic racism in police departments, even though Black people are disproportionately more likely to be killed by police, and public attitudes over police reforms have shifted.

Federal involvement in local cases is nothing new. Officials across the country have turned to the Justice Department for decades, particularly for violent crime and gang cases where offenders could face much stiffer federal penalties and there is no parole.

Police chiefs in several cities have pointed to the importance of their relationships with federal prosecutors to bring charges that can result in long prison sentences to drive down violent crime.

Even before the unrest earlier this year, the Justice Department was stepping in to bring charges in states where the government believes justice isn't being fully pursued by local prosecutors. In January, for example, the department brought federal hate crime charges against a woman accused of slapping three Orthodox Jewish women in one of several apparently anti-Semitic attacks reported throughout New York during Hanukkah.

It's not clear whether protest-related arrests will continue apace. Demonstrations have slowed, though not necessarily because of the federal charges. Wildfires in the West and hurricanes in the South have dampened some of the conflict.

While many local prosecutors have dismissed dozens of low-level protest arrests, some are still coming down hard. A Pennsylvania judge set bail at \$1 million for about a dozen people in a protest that followed the death of a knife-wielding man by police.

Even some Democrats, including District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser, have called for the Justice Department to pursue federal charges against violent demonstrators, going as far as accusing the Trump administration of declining to prosecute rioters.



Barr



Hungarian MEP Katalin Cseh wears a protective face mask with a message as she attends a plenary session at the European Parliament in Brussels, Wednesday, Sept. 16, 2020. (AP)



Raab



Koestinger

Europe

UK defends Brexit deal: The British government struggled Thursday to overcome American opposition to its plans to breach the Brexit withdrawal agreement with the European Union, after Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden became the latest US politician to express alarm.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's move to break parts of the EU divorce deal relating to Northern Ireland has triggered fears it could undermine the 1998 Good Friday peace accord that ended decades of violence between Irish nationalists and British unionists.

Britain and the EU jointly promised in the Brexit agreement to ensure there are no customs posts or other obstacles on the Northern Ireland-Ireland border. The open border is key to the stability that underpins the peace settlement.

British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab is in Washington this week, and has been trying to assuage American concerns that a pending government bill would undermine Northern Ireland peace, if passed by lawmakers. (AP)

'No, we do not live in forests': The Austrian government has spoken up to correct US President Donald Trump's "forest cities."

Trump recently cited Austria and other European countries as models of good forest management that US states like California, which has seen devastating wildfires lately, should learn from.

Calling in to Fox News on Tuesday, Trump said, "You look at countries, Austria, you look at so many countries. They live in the forest, they're considered forest cities. So many of them. And they don't have fires like this. And they have more explosive trees."

In an article Thursday for the London-based Independent, Austria's agriculture minister sought to set the record straight.

"There have been both serious and humorous conversations on social media about the 'exploding trees' (Trump) mentioned, as well as the fact that he claimed we live within 'forest cities' which never catch fire," Elisabeth Koestinger wrote. "As Austrians, fortunately blessed with a healthy sense of humour, we normally take such clichés about our country in our stride." (AP)

European Parliament urges talks: The European Parliament Thursday adopted a resolution with 601 votes in favour, 57 against and 36 abstentions saying a solution in the Eastern Mediterranean can only be found through dialogue, diplomacy and negotiations.

Coronavirus

Rising COVID-19 infections

Some UK bars to close early

LONDON, Sept 17, (AP) — Britain imposed tougher restrictions Thursday on people and businesses in parts of northeastern England as the nation attempts to stem the spread of COVID-19 before the colder winter months.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock told the House of Commons that the new measures would include a ban on residents socializing with people outside their own households, ordering leisure and entertainment venues to close from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. and restricting bars and restaurants to table service only.

He also promised 2.7 billion pounds (\$3.5 billion) to support the National Health Service this winter.

"The battle against coronavirus is not over, and while we strain every sinew to spring free from its clutches, with winter on the horizon we must prepare, bolster our defenses and come together once again against this common foe," Hancock said.

The comments came after British Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned that authorities will have to impose tougher measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 and "protect" the Christmas holidays. In a piece published in The Sun newspaper, he said that the only way to be certain the country can enjoy the winter holidays "is to be tough now."

"So if we can grip it now," Johnson said, Britain can "stop the surge, arrest the spike, stop the second hump of the dromedary, flatten the second hump."

Over the past three days, opposition lawmakers have criticized Johnson's handling of the COVID-19 crisis and said his government lacked a cohesive plan to tackle a second wave of the pandemic. A shortage of testing capacity is a particular concern, with people around the country complaining they were unable to book appointments for tests or directed to testing centers far from their homes.

Widespread testing is seen as crucial to controlling the spread of the virus because it allows those who are infected to self-isolate while helping

health officials to identify hot spots and to trace people who were potentially exposed.

Daily infection rates recently rose to levels not seen since late May, forcing the British government to impose limits on public gatherings.

Figures released late Wednesday showed 3,991 new confirmed cases during the previous 24 hours, up from 3,105 a day earlier.

Hancock said the government decided to impose tighter restrictions in northeastern England at the request of local officials.

"We agree with the local councils that we must follow the data ... and the data says we must act now," he said.

Newcastle City Council leader Nick Forbes said the controls are seen as "preventative" measures that will help avoid a full-scale lockdown.

Local leaders are concerned that the rise in infections is starting to affect older people who are more susceptible to the disease, Forbes told the BBC.

"Last week, 60% of the people that were being tested were between the ages of 18 and 30. That is now starting to reach into older age groups as well," he said. "We know that when it starts to affect older people, that's when you start to get the hospitalizations and, sadly, also the mortality, too."

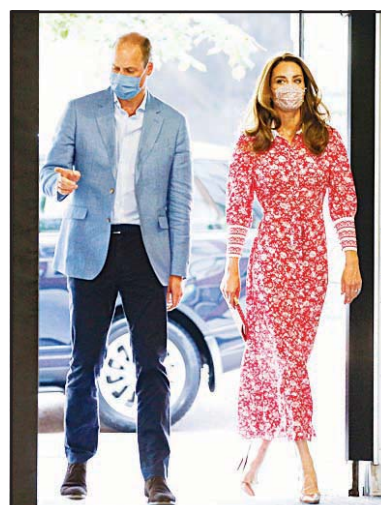
Local leaders elsewhere in the country are also demanding the government increase testing capacity to stave off a second wave of infections.

London Mayor Sadiq Khan called for action to counter "chaos and confusion." He told London Assembly members that testing problems were "putting lives and livelihoods in jeopardy."

"We've known for months now that come the autumn demand for testing would increase," Khan said. "This crunch point should have been foreseen and then avoided. And unless the government massively ramps up testing capacity in London, we'll be back to where we started: trying to halt the spread of the virus in the dark."

The resolution calls on all actors involved, especially Turkey, to commit to an urgent de-escalation by withdrawing their military forces from the area.

It welcomed Turkey's decision to withdraw one of its seismic research vessels from the area on 12 September as the first step towards easing tensions, but condemned at the same time Turkey's plans to



Britain's Prince William and Kate, Duchess of Cambridge arrive for a visit to the London Bridge Jobcentre in London on Sept 15, 2020. (AP)

extend the term of duty of another drilling ship.

The EP called on both Turkey and the EU member states to support the political dialogue in Libya and to adhere to the arms embargo imposed by the UNSC.

It deplored the negative impact that current Turkish foreign policy and other actions in the Mediterranean are having on the stability of the region, including Syria. (KUNA)

German hospital hacked: German authorities said Thursday that what appears to have been a misdirected hacker attack caused the failure of IT systems at a major hospital in Duesseldorf, and a woman who needed urgent admission died after she had to be taken to another city for treatment.

The Duesseldorf University Clinic's systems have been disrupted since last Thursday. The hospital said investigators have found that the source of the problem was a hacker attack on a weak spot in "widely used commercial add-on software," which it didn't identify.

As a consequence, systems gradually crashed and the hospital wasn't able to access data; emergency patients were taken elsewhere and operations postponed.

The hospital said that "there was no concrete ransom demand." It added that there are no indications that data is irretrievably lost and that its IT systems are being gradually restarted. (AP)