

Hong Kong

Bid to end unrest

Govt 'withdraws' extradition bill that sparked HK protests

HONG KONG, Sept 4, (AP): Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced Wednesday the government will formally withdraw an extradition bill that sparked months of demonstrations, bowing to one of the protesters' demands in the hope of ending the increasingly violent unrest.

But lawmakers warned that the bill's withdrawal was not enough to end the turmoil, which has increasingly focused on alleged police brutality against protesters and democratic reforms.

The bill would have allowed Hong Kong residents to be sent to mainland China for trials. It has prompted massive protests since June that disrupted transport links and caused the airport to shut down earlier this month.

Lam said the government would not accept other demands including an independent inquiry into alleged police misconduct and the unconditional release of those detained. Instead, she named two new members to a police watchdog agency investigating the matter.

"The government will formally withdraw the bill in order to fully allay public concerns," she said in a recorded television message.

She said the persistent violence is damaging the rule of law and that moves to vandalize the national flag and emblem were a direct challenge to the "one country, two systems" policy and had put Hong Kong in a "highly vulnerable and dangerous situation."

"Our foremost priority now is to end violence, to safeguard the rule of law and to restore order and safety in society," she added, vowing to "strictly enforce the law against all violent and illegal acts."

Lam said it was clear that public frustration has gone far beyond the bill and that her government will seek a dialogue with aggrieved groups to "address the discontent in society and to look for solutions."

She said she would also invite community leaders, professionals and academics to examine deep-seated problems in the society and advise the government on solutions.

"Let's replace conflicts with conversations, and let's look for solutions," she said.

Lam made the announcement after meeting with pro-government lawmakers and members of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

Lawmaker Michael Tien, who was at the meeting, said the move would not change public sentiment if it isn't accompanied by other concessions.

"It is too little, too late. The focus now has completely shifted. Most people do not remember what the bill is about but are more concerned about the escalating violence and alleged police heavy-handedness against protesters," he said.

He said Lam rejected his call during the meeting for an independent inquiry which would have the power to summon witnesses, on the ground that it would overlap with the police watchdog probe.

Pro-democracy lawmaker Claudia Mo said the protesters are adamant that all their demands, including calls for direct elections, are fulfilled. She mocked Lam's bid to seek dialogue to address public grievances.

"She has been fast asleep these three months, this is just absurd," Mo said. "The scars and wounds are still bleeding, and she thinks she can just use some garden hose to put out the hill fire. That is not acceptable."

Pro-establishment lawmaker Starry Lee, however, urged protesters to accept the government's olive branch so the city can move forward.

The Hong Kong stock market soared 4%, boosted by reports of the bill's withdrawal.

Lam has come under withering criticism for pushing the extradition bill, which many in Hong Kong see as an example of the city's eroding autonomy since the former British colony returned to Chinese control in 1997.

She was elected as Hong Kong's chief executive by a pro-Beijing committee of Hong Kong elites, and the mainland government has spoken in support of her government and the city's police force throughout the protests.

Clashes between police and protesters have become increasingly violent, with demonstrators throwing gasoline bombs and rods at officers in protests last weekend. Authorities in turn have employed water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets and batons. More than 1,100 people have been detained.



Lam



Russian President Vladimir Putin (right), and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi shake hands prior to their talks at the 5th Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, Russia on Sept 4. Russian far-eastern city of Vladivostok hosts the Eastern Economic Forum on Sept 4-6. (AP)



Denmark's Queen Margrethe II watches a small robot beside Governor Daniel Günther (left), and director Jens Scholz (right), at the university hospital in Flensburg, Germany on Sept 4. (AP)

Asia

Duterte fires prisons chief: The Philippine president has fired the government's top prison official amid a public outcry over the release of hundreds of prisoners, including convicted rapists and drug traffickers, through a law rewarding good behavior in detention.

President Rodrigo Duterte said in a news conference Wednesday that Undersecretary Nicanor Faeldon of the Bureau of Corrections would immediately resign for disobeying his order to halt the release of convicted prisoners under the 2014 law.

Duterte said about 1,700 prisoners have been freed since the law took effect and that some may have paid their way to freedom.

The releases sparked an outcry over plans to release a former town mayor convicted in the killings of two students, including one who was gang raped before being shot. (AP)

S'pore countdown to elections: Singapore's next general election could be just months away, with the government announcing on Wednesday that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had formed a panel to review electoral boundaries, an initial step towards calling a vote.

Lee, the son of Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew, has held power since 2004 and is widely expected to step down after elections that must take place by early 2021.

The impending elections come as Singapore slashed its full-year economic growth forecast with global conditions worsening. Data last month confirmed

Britain

Johnson demands Oct 15 election
PM suffers defeat in Parliament

LONDON, Sept 4, (RTRS): British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Wednesday demanded an Oct 15 snap election after lawmakers seeking to prevent a no-deal Brexit dealt him a humiliating defeat in parliament which he cast as an attempt to surrender to the European Union.

Parliament's move leaves Brexit up in the air, with possible outcomes ranging from a turbulent no-deal exit to abandoning the whole endeavour - both outcomes would be unacceptable to swathes of the United Kingdom's voters.

An alliance of opposition lawmakers backed by 21 rebels from Johnson's Conservative Party defeated the government on Tuesday on a motion allowing them to try to pass a law which would force a three-month extension to Britain's EU exit date.

Johnson cast the rebellion as an attempt to surrender to the EU, vowed never to delay Brexit beyond Oct 31 and challenged opposition Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn to agree to an Oct 15 election.

"Can I invite the leader of the opposition to confirm, when he stands up shortly, that if that surrender bill is passed, he will allow the people of this country to have their view on what he is proposing to hand over in their name with an election on October the 15th," Johnson told parliament.

However, needing the backing of two-thirds of lawmakers, Johnson's bid for an election is set to be initially thwarted as opposition parties are united in wanting to prevent a no-deal Brexit before agreeing to a vote.

Johnson said his strategy was to get a Brexit deal by an EU summit

on Oct 17 and "get Brexit done". He said the British government was making substantial progress and would succeed in removing the Irish border backdrop.

The showdown between prime minister and parliament continues on Wednesday with a dizzying array of events planned including a vote on the attempt to block no deal, a vote on Johnson's election bid and weekly questions to the prime minister.

As the three-year Brexit crisis approaches a crescendo, the United Kingdom was edging towards an election as most British politicians see no other way to break the impasse.

One scenario is for opposition parties to defeat Johnson's bid for an election until they have passed their bill blocking a no-deal Brexit. Once in law, opposition parties could then agree to an election.

The government has scheduled a vote on an election after about 1800 GMT on Wednesday.

Opposition parties and rebels in his own party said they would not allow a no-deal Brexit to be "smuggled" through under the cover of an election.

"We're not going to dance to his tune," said Keir Starmer, the opposition Labour Party's point man on Brexit.

"We're not going to vote with Boris Johnson today to deprive ourselves of the opportunity to complete the business that we've just seized control of the house to do," he said.

Beyond the frantic push and shove of British politics, the United Kingdom fundamentally has three main Brexit options: leave with a deal, leave without a deal or cancel Brexit altogether.



Duterte



Faeldon

Singapore's slowest growth rate in a decade amid mounting fears of recession in the wealthy city-state.

"The current administration has been actively thinking about not just short-term issues but also long-term challenges that the economy faces," said Jeff Ng, an economist at Continuum Economics.

Lee's People's Action Party (PAP) has dominated politics over the five decades since the republic's independence, winning all elections with significant majorities. (RTRS)

Europe

Pompeo sought 'reset': US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo sought on Tuesday to re-establish friendlier ties with the incoming leaders of the European Union and mark an end to troubled relations since President Donald Trump took office, a senior US diplomat said.

Framed as a "reset" in the relationship, Washington's envoy to Brussels told reporters that Pompeo's meetings with the new four top officials on Monday night and on Tuesday went "extraordinarily well".

"The secretary made this trip solely and exclusively to see the four EU leaders with the objective of resetting our relationship," US Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland said.

"Our relationship had reached multiple impasses on multiple fronts and resulted in a lot of uncomfortable, cranky conversations," he said, saying Trump endorsed Pompeo's trip.

From his support for Britain's departure from the bloc to a brief downgrade of the EU's status in Washington, Trump's disdain for Brussels and his withdrawal from agreements backed by the EU have soured ties and divided traditional allies.

The meetings signal a change in approach. In late 2018, Pompeo warned in a speech in Brussels that Trump's "America First" policy was reshaping the post-World War Two system on the basis of sovereign states, not institutions like the EU.

But Sondland said the new team chosen to run the bloc's three institutions of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council had grown used to Trump's leadership style and were ready to work with him.

"There's a recognition that we share the same objective but we have different tactics," Sondland said.

The EU institutions declined to comment. (RTRS)

Conte to unveil new cabinet: Italy's head of state is set to sign off on a new government on Wednesday after two rival political parties agreed an unlikely coalition that is expected to improve ties with the European Union and adopt a softer stance on immigration.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, who led the outgoing administration, is expected to unveil his new cabinet lineup and seek a new mandate from President Sergio Mattarella as early as Wednesday morning.

The alliance between the anti-establishment 5-Star Movement and the centre-left Democratic Party (PD), formerly sworn enemies, followed a month of political upheaval triggered by the sudden collapse of the previous ruling alliance.

The far-right League party of outgoing Interior Minister Matteo Salvini pulled out of its coalition with the 5-Star party, declaring it unworkable and calling for early elections in the hope that Salvini could return to power a prime minister.

Salvini's gambit backfired badly, ushering in a new alliance that is expected to soften his confrontational stance on EU budget rules, which he blamed for Italy's weak economy, and his crackdown on migrants arriving by boat from Africa. (RTRS)

Greece moves migrants: A ship carrying more than 780 asylum-seekers who had been in a camp on the eastern Aegean island of Lesbos arrived in Greece's northern mainland port of Thessaloniki Tuesday morning, as part of government efforts to ease severe overcrowding and tackle a recent increase in new arrivals on the islands.

The ship docked in Thessaloniki a day after the arrival of another ship with more than 630 people, mostly Afghan families, who had also been staying in Lesbos' Moria camp.

Slightly more than half of the new arrivals are being taken to a temporary camp in Nea Kavala, in northern Greece, from where authorities said they will be moved next month to a camp currently under construction. The rest will head to other facilities in northern Greece. (AP)



Pompeo

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CHAPTER TWO

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