VOA NEWS

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From Washington, this is VOA news. I'm Jonathan Smith reporting.

The director of the American Central Intelligence Agency Mike Pompeo said Thursday North Korea is just months away from perfecting its nuclear weapons capabilities.

"They are closer now than they were five years ago, and I expect they will be closer in five months than they are today, absent a global effort to push back against them."

Pompeo told a forum in Washington he is "deeply worried" about the advancing threat from North Korea and the possibility it could spark a nuclear arms race across East Asia.

The Taliban has attacked and killed Afghan soldiers at an army camp in the southern Kandahar province.

Dawlat Waziri is a spokesman for the Defense Ministry. "The enemies of our country attacked one of our camps in Maiwand district. In that attack, 43 army personnel were murdered, 9 wounded, 6 others are missing. And we only have two survivors. In total, there were 60 personnel in that camp. All the vehicles and equipment have been destroyed in the camp."

Waziri said the attack late on Wednesday involved two suicide car bombs and set off hours of fighting.

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's office said there will be a special cabinet meeting Saturday to talk about an article of Spain's constitution that gives the government the power to take away some or all of its autonomy.

Hours earlier, Catalonia's leader [Carl] Carles Puigdemont said the Catalan parliament will go forward with the vote on independence if the Spanish government does not engage in dialogue and follows through on its threat to strip the region of its autonomy.

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Puerto Rico's Governor Ricardo Rossello asked President Trump on Thursday for equal treatment for the hurricane-devastated island, repeatedly reminding him that Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens.

"I am confident that with your commitment and with your support, Mr. President, with your team's support, we will be able to come out of this in the long-haul together with Puerto Rico, give the U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico the adequate resources, treat us the same as citizens in Texas, in Florida and elsewhere, we will come out of this stronger."

The two met at the White House, Trump defending the federal government's response to the devastation left a month ago by Hurricane Maria. He said the government should get "a 10" on a scale of 1 to 10.

The Turkish Parliament passed legislation Wednesday allowing imams to perform marriages. The reform has been strongly condemned by women's rights groups, who warn it would exacerbate the problem of underage marriages.

The new law comes amid wider concerns over the erosion of women's rights under emergency rule.

Correspondent Dorian Jones reports from Istanbul.

"We won't be silenced," women chanted protesting in the heart of Istanbul over legislation allowing imams to conduct marriages.

Since Turkey is a secular state, only state officials were allowed to carry out marriages. The new law met stiff opposition in parliament. Senal Sarihan, parliamentary deputy for the main opposition CHP Party, says the new law undermines secularism, which helps to protect women's rights.

The reform has the fears it will exacerbate the problem of underage marriages. Women's rights groups emphasize that imams already are carrying out marriages involving underage girls in unofficial religious ceremonies. But Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who is seeking to consolidate his religious voting base ahead of presidential elections, has strongly backed the reform, dismissing criticism as alarmist.

Dorian Jones, of VOA news, Istanbul.

Former U.S. President George W. Bush on Thursday deplored the country's political divisiveness, saying that "at times it can seem like the forces pulling us apart are stronger than the forces binding us together."

Bush is the country's 43rd president, a Republican like Donald Trump. He served two terms in office from 2001 to 2009.

He never mentioned Trump by name in his speech in New York. But his message seemed aimed at him for his frequent Twitter taunts against political rivals, his attempts to curb immigration into the United States and the president's abandonment of international trade deals.

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That's the latest world news from VOA.