VOA NEWS

March 12, 2018

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

In just two weeks, China has announced and has now voted with near unanimous approval to amend the country's constitution and give the party state's powerful leader Xi Jinping a mandate to stay in office indefinitely.

On Sunday, an amendment to cancel a two-term limit on the office of the president was approved along with 20 other changes. The amendments passed smoothly in the rubber-stamp National People's Congress.

Hong Kong saw low turnout numbers for an election Sunday to replace four lawmakers disqualified over oaths last year that the Chinese government declared improper.

Fifteen candidates are running to fill the four seats that were vacated when the oaths by pro-democracy lawmakers were declared invalid, a move that critics say was politically motivated.

China on Sunday said it does not intend to ignite a trade war with the U.S. because that would be disastrous for the entire world.

The Minister of Commerce Zhong Shan said at China's annual parliamentary session, "China does not wish to fight a trade war, nor will China initiate a trade war, but we can handle any challenge and will resolutely defend the interests of our country and our people."

All 11 people aboard a private Turkish jet died Sunday after the jet crashed into a mountainside and burst into flames during heavy rain in southern Iran.

On board were Turkish heiress Mina Basaran and seven of her friends, all flying back from a party ahead of her planned wedding next month.

This is VOA news.

Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis has warned Syria it would be "very unwise" to use gas as a weapon in its bombardment of rebel strongholds in eastern Ghouta.

Mattis said on Sunday that "right now" the United States is "getting reports" that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces are using chlorine gas in their three-week-long advance against the rebels outside the capital, Damascus. In that advance, nearly 1,000 people have died, 200 of them children.

People in Cameroon have freed 40 of the more than 100 women arrested while trying to ask President Paul Biya to negotiate a peaceful political transition. Biya has been in power for 36 years. They are also calling [him] on him to solve the crisis caused by separatist groups demanding the independence of the English-speaking from the French-speaking regions of the central African state.

Moki Edwin Kindzeka reports from Yaoundé.

Since November 2016, Biya has been battling with the unrest in the English-speaking northwest and southwest regions that started with teachers and lawyers, frustrated with having to work in French, took to the streets calling for reforms and greater autonomy. It degenerated with separatists' calls for independence.

Last October, secessionist groups declared the independence of the English-speaking southwest and northwest regions of Cameroon they call Ambazonia, declaring Ayuk Tabe Julius, who was in exile in Nigeria, as their president. Armed conflicts erupted prompting a crackdown of the military.

Biya has ruled Cameroon since November 1982. His party supporters have been calling on him to run for president again in elections expected by September this year.

Moki Edwin Kindzeka, for VOA news, Yaoundé, Cameroon.

Thousands stood in silent respect in the southern Macedonian city of Bitola Sunday to remember the victims of the Nazi Holocaust of Jews during World War II. All but a handful of Macedonian Jews were slaughtered by the Nazis.

Sunday was the 75th anniversary of the deportation of more than 7,000 Macedonian Jews to Nazi death camps in Poland.

German and Israeli visitors also joined Macedonians in a March for Life Sunday.

You can find more on these and other late breaking and developing stories, from around the world, around the clock, at voanews.com and on the VOA news mobile app. I'm Jonathan Jones from the world headquarters of the Voice of America in Washington, VOA news.

That's the latest world news from VOA.