VOA NEWS

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This is VOA news. I'm Tommie McNeil.

The outer bands of Hurricane Florence have begun lashing the North Carolina coast as officials continue their appeal for people to evacuate.

The National Hurricane Center says the storm is located about 250 kilometers east of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, with maximum sustained winds of 155 kilometers per hour.

New Hanover County Emergency Management Director Steven Still says storm surge is the biggest concern in that area.

"Storm surge to the torrent of nine to 10 feet inner barrier island areas, sound areas, ??? areas and inland river areas. Again winds in excess of 100 miles per hour for a duration of no less than 24 hours. And again the potential rainfall amounts of 20 to 30 inches."

Florence is expected to lash the coast of North and South Carolina for days, with lingering rains aggravating the problems.

U.S. President Trump is hearing bipartisan criticism after rejecting the government's official number that Hurricane Maria killed nearly 3,000 people in Puerto Rico.

AP Washington correspondent Sagar Meghani.

George Washington University researchers found the storm killed nearly 3,000 people, sharply up from the earlier estimate of 65.

The president says it's not true and blames the number on a Democratic plot to make him look bad.

House Speaker Paul Ryan is among those disagreeing.

"There is no reason to dispute these numbers."

Democrat Luis Gutiérrez, whose parents were Puerto Rican immigrants, calls the president "delusional."

"The number is based on facts and the truth."

But GOP Senator Chuck Grassley wonders about the sharp increase.

That's AP correspondent Sagar Meghani reporting.

U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions instructed Department of Justice lawyers in a memo Thursday to resist the nationwide injunctions issued by federal judges that have hindered or halted some of the Trump administration's signature policies, including the border separation of families.

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Myanmar de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi has defended her country against criticism of last week's conviction of two Reuters journalists on charges of violating the country's colonial-era Official Secrets Act.

Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were arrested last December after meeting with two police officers at a restaurant and (being) given a stack of documents. They were investigating the massacre of 10 Rohingya Muslims by police and soldiers in the village of Inn Din last year.

The two journalists were sentenced to seven years in prison.

A senior U.N. official reports a readiness plan has been developed to assist hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped in Syria's northern province of Idlib, while [diplomatic moves to] diplomats move to prevent all-out war.

Lisa Schlein reports for VOA.

The U.N. Regional Coordinator for the Syrian Crisis says he has appealed for the protection of civilians in Idlib to countries of influence attending a Humanitarian Task Force meeting in Geneva.

Panos Moumtzis says he has received assurances from the Russian and U.S. co-chairs that everyone was intent on finding a peaceful way forward.

"Diplomacy, prevention, humanitarian diplomacy, is taking place at the moment at all levels to make sure that everybody works for the same objective to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe. And, our fear that the worst may still be ahead of us that this will not happen."

Since early September, aerial bombardment and shelling by Syrian and Russian forces have increased. The United Nations reports dozens of people, including women and children have been killed and wounded, and several hospitals and schools have been attacked and put out of service.

Lisa Schlein, for VOA news, Geneva.

The United States has imposed sanctions on two North Korean-controlled information technology companies based in China and Russia. They are accused of moving illicit funds to North Korea.

The sanctions come at a time when the U.S. is maintaining pressure on the North Korean government and its negotiations to denuclearize the Korean peninsula.

U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un signed an agreement during a historic summit in Singapore in June for the North to dismantle its nuclear program. But the two sides are at an impasse over the pace of North Korea ending its nuclear and missile development programs.

Pope Francis on Thursday accepted the resignation of a U.S. bishop accused of sexually harassing adults just ahead of discussing wide-ranging sexual abuse allegations in the American church with U.S. Catholic leaders.

The resignation of West Virginia Bishop Michael Bransfield comes just as the top leaders in U.S. church sat down with the pontiff to consider the burgeoning scandal that has rocked the church in several countries. Bransfield will now face a Vatican investigation.

Meanwhile, Chilean authorities raided four dioceses Thursday as part of their investigation into clerical sex abuse.

I'm Tommie McNeil, VOA news.