VOA NEWS

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This is VOA news. I'm David Byrd.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Saturday that Russia and China have "blood on their hands" for vetoing a U.N. Security Council resolution to deliver aid from Turkey and Iraq to millions of Syrian civilians.

In a statement, Pompeo said that Russia and China's actions were "shameful" and pledged the United States would remain committed to helping what he called "the voiceless, the hungry, the displaced, and the orphaned."

The resolution would have extended for one year cross-border aid deliveries from Turkey and Iraq to four million civilians in Syrian who have been victimized by the conflict that began there in 2011.

Meanwhile, a war-monitoring group said Saturday at least 12 people were killed and several others injured in artillery and air strikes in Idlib province. The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 36 people were hurt in the strikes.

Since Thursday, at least 67 jihadists and 15 rebel soldiers have died. Fifty-seven government and loyalist forces have also been killed, including seven in a car bombing by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, a former Al-Qaeda affiliate.

Also Saturday, near simultaneous attacks hit three government-run oil and gas installations in Homs. It is believed the attacks were carried out by drones but no one has claimed responsibility.

A Pakistani court on Saturday convicted a Muslim professor of blasphemy and sentenced him to death for allegedly spreading anti-Islamic ideas.

Junaid Hafeez has been in jail for six years awaiting trial since he was arrested in 2013.

His defense attorney, Abdul Ahad, said the conviction was baseless and that the verdict would be appealed.

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The death toll continued to rise in India's Saturday as protests against a new citizenship law continued.

As Reuters' Emer McCarthy reports, the state of Uttar Pradesh has seen some of the worst rioting.

Officials said more than 1,500 protesters have been arrested since parliament passed the law on December 11, with India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, seeing the worst violence.

Rights activists in the state said police had raided their houses and offices to prevent them from planning fresh demonstrations.

Uttar Pradesh is ruled by Narendra Modi's nationalist party and had long seen clashes between majority Hindus and minority Muslims.

The law aims to grant citizenship to minorities faiths from Muslim-majority Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, deemed as suffering persecution there. But critics say it discriminates against Muslims and threatens India's secular ethos.

That's Emer McCarthy reporting.

A company that operates ships laying sections of a new German-Russian pipeline says it's stopping that work after President Trump signed legislation threatening sanctions. AP's Charles De Ledesma reports.

Trump on Friday signed the bill earlier passed by the Senate that provides the sanctions against individuals and companies involved in laying the Nord Stream 2 pipeline under the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany.

Now Switzerland-based Allseas has said in anticipation of the enactment of the National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA, it's suspended its Nord Stream 2 pipelay activities.

The U.S. has been an outspoken opponent of the pipeline, which will transport natural gas about 750 miles. Critics argue it will increase Europe's dependence on Russia for energy.

I'm Charles De Ledesma.

French President Emmanuel Macron has called on transport unions to suspend strikes over pension reform during the Christmas holidays to avoid travel disruption.

But as Reuters' David Doyle reports, Christmas travelers had an anxious wait at Paris's Saint Lazare train station on Saturday.

On the last weekend before Christmas, Saint Lazare station sees a surge of people as Parisians leave the capital to be with their families. But with the national rail operator running reduced services, including half the usual number of its high-speed trains, commuters were left staring hopefully at departure boards.

President Emmanuel Macron aims to streamline the generous state pension system and prod people to work until the age of 64, past the legal retirement age of 62. But talks have failed with French unions and on Thursday they said the strikes would continue over the Christmas holidays.

Negotiations are due to resume in January.

That's Reuters' David Doyle reporting.

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