

Call for fresh Catalan polls

Spanish National Police clash with pro-referendum supporters in Barcelona

Madrid
Spain appeared to offer Catalonia's separatists a last-minute way out of their standoff with the central government on Wednesday, suggesting fresh elections in the region could resolve the country's worst political crisis in decades.

Hours before Catalan president Carles Puigdemont faces a 10:00 am (0800 GMT) Thursday deadline to say whether or not he is declaring independence, a government source said that elections "could be considered a return to legality".

The government had earlier warned Puigdemont that unless he backs down, Madrid will start proceedings to take direct control over the semi-autonomous region.

With its own language and

culture, Catalonia is proud of its autonomy but its 7.5 million people are deeply divided over independence.

There are fears that moving to impose direct rule could inflame tensions in a crisis that has already sparked huge street rallies, prompted hundreds of companies to decamp to other parts of Spain, and rattled EU neighbours.

Spain has been in limbo since Catalonia held a banned independence referendum on October 1, which prompted a heavy police crackdown that drew international condemnation.

Puigdemont issued a cryptic "suspended" declaration of independence following the vote, saying he wanted time for talks with the central government

-- a prospect Madrid has rejected.

"All I ask of Mr Puigdemont is that he acts with good sense," Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy told parliament Wednesday as the government threatened to trigger Article 155 of Spain's constitution, a never-before-used provision that would allow it to suspend Catalan autonomy.

But there were increasing indications that elections are being considered as a way to steer clear of these uncharted waters.

Elections sanctioned by Madrid -- unlike the referendum, which the Constitutional Court ruled illegal -- would allow Catalan voters to have a say on how to move forward. (AFP)

#PollToday



Pakistani anti-corruption court indicts Nawaz Sharif. Do you think the former Pakistani PM is guilty of his charges?

Yes No Cant Say



"The recent sanctions package adopted by the U.S. Congress was openly designed to push Russia out of European energy markets and to force Europe to switch to more expensive liquefied natural gas from the United States, even though the volumes there are not yet sufficient,"

-Vladimir Putin
Russian President

Rest in sight

Fire breaks out at Indian highrise building



A major fire broke out at a highrise office building in the eastern Indian city of Kolkata.

Flood, landslide fatalities in Vietnam surge to 77

Flash floods and landslides triggered by heavy rain in Vietnam's northern and central regions since early last week have killed 77 local people.

4.5 tons of drugs seized in southern Albania

Some 4.5 tons of cannabis sativa were seized by Albanian police in a village in Vlora, a coastal city in southern Albania

15 injured in blast in SW Pakistan

At least 15 people were injured as a blast hit Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province.

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North Korea threatens 'unimaginable' strike on US

Seoul
North Korea has threatened to launch an "unimaginable" strike on the US, accusing the Trump administration and its South Korean "puppet" allies of seeking to "ignite a war on the Korean peninsula at any cost".

The statement released by the *Korean Central News Agency*, Pyongyang's official's mouthpiece, predicted "imminent catastrophic disaster" in the region.

Using typically hyperbolic

language, it vowed to "mercilessly smash the war frenzy of the US and South Korean puppet warmongers to get rid of the abyss of ruin through dangerous war gambling and inflict the most miserable death on the invaders."

The threat came in response to joint US-South Korea military drills in waters east of the Korean peninsula involving the USS Ronald Reagan, a nuclear powered aircraft carrier. (*The Independent*)

Manhunt in Maryland shooting ends with arrest



Police investigate the scene of a shooting in Delaware

Washington

A man with a lengthy criminal past who showed up for work at a countertop company on Wednesday and shot five of his co-workers has been arrested, authorities said. Three of them were killed and two critically wounded.

Less than two hours later, Radee Labeeb Prince drove to a used car lot about 55 miles (90 kilometers) away in Wilmington, Delaware, and opened fire on a man with whom he had "beefs" in the past, wounding him, police said.

The shooting rampage set off a manhunt along the Interstate 95 Northeast corridor. Police cruisers were stationed in medians, and overhead highway signs displayed a description of Prince's sport utility vehicle and its Delaware license plate. The FBI assisted state and local authorities in the manhunt.

Prince was "apprehended a short time ago in Delaware by ATF and allied law enforcement agencies," the Harford County Sheriff's Office in Maryland tweeted Wednesday night. (AP)

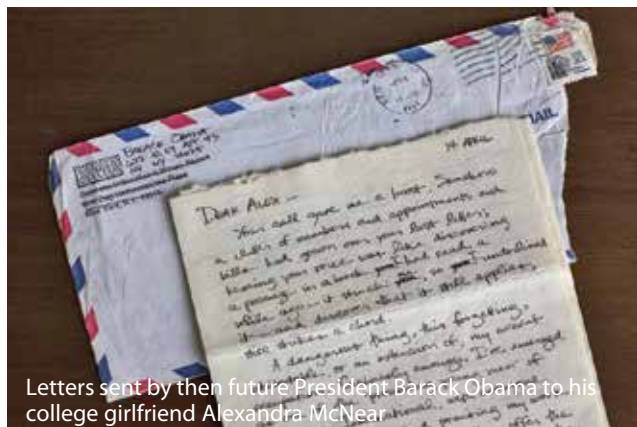
Obama's love letters to college girlfriend made public

New York

Letters written by former U.S. President Barack Obama in 1980s to his college girlfriend were made public yesterday by a private research university, revealing a young man grappling with his place in the world.

The nine full letters, sent by young Obama to Alexandra McNear, are now part of the collection of the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library at Emory University in metropolitan Atlanta, the southeastern U.S. state of Georgia, according to an article titled "Love, Barack" by Laura Douglas-Brown, posted Thursday on the Emory's website.

The 30 pages of letters are available to scholars and students by appointment, and there will be an opportunity to view facsimiles of the letters



Letters sent by then future President Barack Obama to his college girlfriend Alexandra McNear

on Friday, from 2pm to 4pm in the Woodruff Commons of the Rose Library, it said.

Beautifully composed, the letters "reveal the search of a young man for meaning and identity," Rosemary Magee, Rose Library director was quoted as saying. "While intimate in a philosophical way, they reflect primarily

a college student coming to terms with himself and others."

"In fact, they show the same kind of yearnings and issues that our own students face - and that students everywhere encounter," Magee said. "Thus they will serve as sources of both inspiration and reassurance to people of all ages and backgrounds." (*Xinhua*)