

BRIEFLY

Prince Andrew to step back from public duties

LONDON — Britain's Prince Andrew said Wednesday he is stepping back from public duties with the queen's permission.

Andrew said it has become clear to him in recent days that his association with the late convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein has become a "major distraction" to the royal family's work.

He said he regrets his association with the former U.S. businessman and that he "deeply sympathizes" with his victims.

The prince said his mother Queen Elizabeth II had given him permission to step back from royal duties.

Andrew has been heavily criticized for his performance in a TV interview Saturday in which he failed to express concern for Epstein's victims.

He seemed to show no remorse for his close association with a convicted sex offender who had abused many underage girls.

Some charities that he has worked with as a patron have said they were reviewing their association with the prince because of his actions.

Epstein was awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges when he was found dead in his cell, robbing his alleged victims of a chance for their day in court. His death on Aug. 10 in a New York prison has been ruled a suicide by the city's medical examiner.

Israel heads toward 3rd election in 12 months

JERUSALEM — Israeli kingmaker Avigdor Lieberman on Wednesday refused to endorse a candidate for prime minister, virtually guaranteeing the country will be forced into a new election, the third in less than a year.

Lieberman's comments came ahead of a midnight deadline for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's

rival, Benny Gantz, to form a coalition.

A September election left both Netanyahu and Gantz short of securing a required parliamentary majority to form a government, with Lieberman holding the decisive votes.

But after weeks of negotiations, Lieberman said he could not endorse either side.

"I made every effort. I turned over every stone," he said.

Lieberman had called for a national unity government between Netanyahu's Likud party and Gantz's Blue and White. But the two leaders could not agree on a power-sharing agreement.

Gantz has until midnight to try to seek other partners, but without Lieberman, that appears impossible.

Gantz was given the opportunity to form a government last month after Netanyahu failed in the task.

North Carolina county removes Confederate statue

PITTSBORO, N.C. — A Confederate statue has been removed overnight from a historic North Carolina courthouse.

Chatham County officials issued a news release late Tuesday night saying work had begun to take down the soldier that stood in front of the courthouse in Pittsboro since 1907.

News outlets report that a subdued crowd of several dozen watched the work. Even the base of the statue was gone before dawn.

It has been rare for public officials to take down Confederate statues in North Carolina since the enactment of a 2015 state historic monuments law restricting the removal of public monuments.

But county officials argued in court that the monument was private property, owned by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and a judge hearing the group's challenge declined to block the removal.

— Associated Press

PG&E begins power shutoff over fire danger

By JANIE HAR
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Pacific Gas & Electric Co. turned off electricity Wednesday for about 120,000 people in Northern California to prevent power lines from sparking wildfires as the region faced a new bout of windy and warm weather.

The utility originally said that about 150,000 customers, or about 375,000 people, would be affected by the outages but significantly lowered that number after some areas got rain or increased humidity that lowered the fire threat.

PG&E spokeswoman Ari Vanrenen said about 35,000 more people were told they could lose power later Wednesday if weather conditions do not improve in their communities. People who lost power were expected to get it back Thursday.

A virtually rainless fall has left brush bone-dry and forecasts called for low humidity and winds gusting



AP Photo/Elias Funez

Grass Valley's Dionicio Torres looks at the gas can selection before taking the last 5-gallon gas can on the shelves at B&C Ace Home & Garden Center in Grass Valley, Calif., on Tuesday in preparation of Wednesday's planned public safety power shutdown.

at times to 55 mph, which could fling tree branches or other debris into power lines, causing sparks that could set catastrophic fires in the region, PG&E officials said.

The blackout is the latest in a series of massive outages by the country's largest utility, including one last month that affected nearly 2.5 million people and outraged local officials and

customers who accused the utility of overkill. Officials have accused the company of using the blackouts as a crutch after years of failing to harden its infrastructure to withstand fire weather.

PG&E CEO Andy Vesey acknowledged the outages have been "terribly disruptive" and said the company is taking steps to avoid them in the future, but for now, "we won't roll the dice on

public safety." Meanwhile, California's utility regulators are demanding answers from wireless, internet and land-line providers whose equipment failed during previous outages, leaving hundreds of thousands of people without a way to get emergency alerts or make 911 calls.

Statewide, about 3% of cell towers failed at one point in late October, but the numbers were much higher in northern counties, such as Marin, which had 57% of its towers out and Sonoma, which had 27% out.

In some cases, public safety workers had to drive for an hour to see if they needed to check in, said John Kennedy of the Rural County Representatives of California. Fire departments lost contact with fire trucks and some had to rely on radios because download speeds were so slow or out of service, he said.

More than 450,000 people were left without communications, according to the group.

Sondland: Trump directed Ukraine 'quid pro quo'

By LISA MASCARO, MARY CLARE JALONICK AND ERIC TUCKER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Ambassador Gordon Sondland declared to impeachment investigators Wednesday that President Donald Trump and his lawyer Rudy Giuliani explicitly sought a "quid pro quo" with Ukraine, leveraging an Oval Office visit for political investigations of Democrats. But he also came to believe the trade involved much more.

Besides the U.S. offer of a coveted meeting at the White House, Sondland testified it was his understanding the president was holding up nearly \$400 million in military aid, which Ukraine

badly need with an aggressive Russia on its border, in exchange for the country's announcement of the investigations.

Sondland conceded that Trump never told him directly the security assistance was blocked for the probes, a gap in his account that Republicans and the White House seized on as evidence the president did nothing wrong. But the ambassador said his dealings with Giuliani, as well as administration officials, left him with the clear understanding of what was at stake.

"Was there a 'quid pro quo?'" Sondland testified in opening remarks. "With regard to the requested White House call and White House meeting, the answer is yes." The rest, he said, was

obvious: "Two plus two equals four."

Sondland, the ambassador to the European Union and a major donor to Trump's inauguration, was the most highly anticipated witness in the House's impeachment inquiry into the 45th president of the United States.

In often-stunning testimony, he painted a picture of a Ukraine pressure campaign that was prompted by Trump himself, orchestrated by Giuliani and well-known to other senior officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Sondland said he raised his concerns about a quid pro quo for military aid with Vice President Mike Pence — a conversation a Pence adviser vigorously denied. Pompeo also dismissed

Sondland's account.

However, Sondland said, "Everyone was in the loop. It was no secret."

The ambassador said that he and Trump spoke directly about desired investigations, including a colorful cellphone call this summer overheard by others at a restaurant in Kyiv.

Trump himself insists daily that he did nothing wrong and the Democrats are just trying to drum him out of office.

As the hearing proceeded, he spoke to reporters outside the White House. Reading from notes written with a black marker, Trump quoted Sondland quoting Trump to say the president wanted nothing from the Ukrainians and did not seek a quid pro quo.

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