

September 2017

INTERNATIONAL

Caribbean

Sept. 20—Puerto Rico takes a direct hit from Hurricane Maria, the 2nd Category 5 storm to strike the Caribbean in 2 weeks. Hurricane Irma devastated islands including Barbuda and St. Martin Sept. 5 and 6, then sideswiped Puerto Rico before causing extensive damage throughout Florida. Maria knocks out Puerto Rico's electrical grid for the entire island of 3.4 million people; authorities warn that power might not be restored in some areas for months. The humanitarian crisis comes amid a fiscal collapse: the US territory, which owes \$74 billion to lenders, was forced to declare bankruptcy in May and had neglected infrastructure maintenance for years. Maria caused some \$95 billion in damage, according to a preliminary estimate.

BRAZIL

Sept. 5—Chief prosecutor Rodrigo Janot files criminal charges against former Presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff of the left-wing Workers' Party, accusing them of running a scheme to collect kickbacks from companies for government contracts. Rousseff was impeached and removed from office in 2016. Da Silva was convicted in a separate corruption case in July and sentenced to nearly 10 years in prison.

Sept. 14—Just before leaving office, Janot indicts incumbent President Michel Temer, accusing him of obstructing justice and racketeering in a corruption scheme that crossed party lines. Temer, who belongs to the centrist Brazilian Democratic Movement Party, cannot be brought to trial on those charges unless the Congress, where he is supported by a coalition of parties, agrees to forward the indictment to the Supreme Court. It declined to act on an indictment that Janot filed against Temer in June.

GERMANY

Sept. 24—Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) comes out on top in elections for the lower house of parliament, the Bundestag, positioning her for a 4th term as chancellor. The CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union, will remain the largest bloc in the legislature, but take just 32.9% of the vote, down from 41.5% in the 2013 elections and their worst result since 1949. The far-right, anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) more than doubles its vote total to 13%, and becomes the 3rd-largest party. It is the first overtly nationalist party in the Bundestag in decades. Merkel is expected to try to form a coalition government with 2 smaller parties, the Greens and the Free Democrats; her current coalition partner, the center-left Social Democratic Party, says it will go into opposition after taking just 20.8% of the vote.

IRAQ

Sept. 25—Voters in the predominantly Kurdish region of northern Iraq give overwhelming approval to a nonbinding referendum proposal for independence from Baghdad. Officials with the Kurdistan Regional Government, which sponsored the referendum, said they do not intend to act on it for now but will use it as the basis for a dialogue with Baghdad. But Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi rejects the call for talks, asserting that the referendum is illegal and reiterating Iraq's right to use force to keep the Kurdish region from seceding. The referendum is also widely condemned internationally; the US, a close ally of the Kurds, warned them not to hold the vote. Turkey threatens the Iraqi Kurds with the shutdown of a key oil pipeline and a possible military intervention.

ISRAEL

Sept. 3—Police arrest David Sharan, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's former chief of staff, along with the retired head of the navy and 4 other people in an ongoing investigation into alleged corruption surrounding a \$3 billion purchase of submarines from the German manufacturer ThyssenKrupp. Sharan is arrested on suspicion of accepting bribes, fraud, breach of trust, and conspiracy. Netanyahu is not a suspect in the case, but several people close to him have been caught up in it, including David Shimron, his cousin and personal lawyer.

KENYA

Sept. 1—By a 4-2 vote, Kenya's Supreme Court annuls the Aug. 8 presidential election due to irregularities in the transmission of results from polling places. The court orders authorities to hold a new election within 60 days. The ruling is in response to a petition filed by opposition candidate Raila Odinga, who alleged widespread fraud after he came in 2nd with 44% of the vote; President Uhuru Kenyatta won with 54%. Kenyatta says he will honor the court's ruling, but calls the judges "crooks" and demands reforms of the judiciary. Although several dozen people were killed in election-related violence, the August vote did not precipitate a recurrence of the mass violence that cost 1,300 lives after the 2007 election, and international observers generally praised the voting process.

MYANMAR

Sept. 11—Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, the UN high commissioner for human rights, denounces the ongoing forced exodus of the Rohingya minority from Myanmar as "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing" and a flagrant violation of international law. More than 300,000 members of the Muslim ethnic group have fled, mostly into neighboring Bangladesh, since Aug. 25, when a Rohingya militant group attacked police posts and an army base, prompting a retaliatory offensive by the military. The de facto leader of the elected civilian government, Aung San Suu Kyi, winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, has drawn international criticism for failing to intervene on behalf of the Rohingya.

NORTH KOREA

Sept. 3—Seismic instruments indicate that North Korea has conducted its 6th test of a nuclear weapon, the most powerful yet. State media claim it was a hydrogen bomb small enough to fit in a warhead on a ballistic missile.

Sept. 11—In response to the test, the UN Security Council approves increased sanctions on North Korea, including a limit on oil imports and bans on its textile exports and new visas for its overseas workers, both important revenue sources for the country. The US had called for harsher sanctions including a total ban on oil imports, but settled for less after China and Russia objected.

Sept. 19—In his 1st speech before the UN General Assembly, US President Donald Trump vows to "totally destroy North Korea" if it forces the US to defend itself.

SAUDI ARABIA

Sept. 26—In a royal decree read live on state television, the government announces that as of June 2018, women will no longer be barred from driving in the kingdom. The move is in line with social and economic reforms pushed by the recently anointed crown prince, 32-year-old Muhammad bin Salman. In 2015, women were allowed to vote and run for seats in local council elections. ■