

Gates for tight military media rules

BBC ONLINE

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates has ordered a tightening of the rules covering the US military's dealings with the media.

The move comes in the wake of the sacking of the US commander in Afghanistan, Gen Stanley McChrystal, over a Rolling Stone magazine article.

Gen McChrystal and his aides had mocked and criticised top US officials.

In a memo to key Pentagon civilian and military officials, Gates criticised the recent "lax" approach.

US officials said the new order was planned well before the McChrystal incident and was not linked to it. They also said it was not meant to be a gag on the Pentagon.

Gates wrote in the three-page memo entitled Interaction with the Media: "I am concerned that the department has grown lax in how we engage with the media."

"We have far too many people talking to the media outside of channels, sometimes providing information which is simply incorrect, out of proper context, unauthorised, or uninformed by the perspective of those who are most knowledgeable."

Gates added: "The leaking of classified information is against the law, cannot be tolerated, and will, when proven, lead to the prosecution of those found to be engaged in such activity."

But Pentagon media secretary Geoff Morrell said that Gates was still committed to an open approach with the press, who were "not the enemy".

The order was "designed to get our department much more disciplined", Morrell said.

The new order requires top officials to clear interviews "or any other means of media and public engagement with possible national or international implications" with the office of Assistant Defence Secretary Douglas Wilson.



A crane lifts the crashed helicopter out from the sea onto its barge in Victoria Harbour, Hong Kong yesterday. Thirteen people were plucked to safety after a private helicopter plunged into Hong Kong harbour, police said. Two passengers were slightly injured in the crash. The cause of the crash -- which occurred about 300 metres (yards) from land near the city's glittering financial district -- was not immediately known and the spokesman said an investigation had been launched.

Otunbayeva sworn in as Kyrgyz president

BBC ONLINE

Interim leader Rosa Otunbayeva has been sworn in as president of the troubled republic of Kyrgyzstan.

Otunbayeva took power after bloody street riots in April, which ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiyev.

The former foreign minister becomes the first female president of an ex-communist Central Asian country.

The inauguration comes days after a referendum on a new constitution, which will create the region's first parliamentary democracy.

She took the oath of office at a Soviet-era concert hall in the capital Bishkek.

Kyrgyzstan's Central Election Commission said that more than 90% of ballots cast in Sunday's referendum were in favour of the constitution.

In April thousands of homes and businesses were destroyed and an estimated 400,000 people - many of them from the minority ethnic Uzbek community - were displaced.

The official death toll from the violence that tore through Osh and Jalal-Abad currently stands at around 300, according to the AP news agency.



Rosa Otunbayeva

Asylum seekers are next priority

Says new Australia PM

AFP, Sydney

New Australian leader Julia Gillard vowed yesterday to provide "solutions not slogans" on the sensitive issue of boatpeople as she works to shore up her position ahead of looming elections.

Gillard secured her first policy victory Friday by sealing a compromise with the powerful mining industry on a proposed profits tax, just one week after ousting predecessor Kevin Rudd in a bloodless party-room coup.

Rudd's divisive two-month war with the key resources export sector delivered a fatal blow to his standing in the opinion polls, prompting the ruling centre-left Labor party to dump him in favour of Gillard, his deputy.

The former lawyer moved swiftly to end the impasse, and described as a "breakthrough" her compromise with the miners, which included slashing the headline rate from 40 to 30 percent and doubling the threshold to 12 percent.

She said her attention was now focused on the steady stream of asylum-seeker boats, and promised to make an announcement on the issue this week.

"This is an area where you can have a slogan, and you can beat your chest, and people do that for political advantage," Gillard told reporters on Saturday.

"I'm not going to offer a slogan. And I'm going to say to people this is a complex problem. There is no simple fix. Anybody who pretends to you that a slogan and a bit of chest-beating is going to fix it simply isn't telling the truth."

Immigration is a sensitive issue in Australia, where boatloads of refugees arrive after perilous voyages from Asia, often in rickety fishing vessels, as they escape countries such as Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.

Rudd suspended claims for asylum from Sri Lankans for three months and Afghans for six as a temporary solution, and the Sri Lankan freeze is due for review this week, in Gillard's first major policy challenge on the issue.

Nigerian tanker blast kills 13

AFP, Kano

At least 13 people were killed and nine others suffered severe burns in northern Nigeria when a tanker truck carrying fuel exploded after skidding off the road, road safety officials said on Saturday.

The accident occurred on Friday when the driver of the truck loaded with 33,000 litres of petrol from Nigeria's commercial capital Lagos lost control on a bend in the northern city of Gombe.

The truck tipped on its side and spilt fuel, which burst in flames, head of Gombe state Federal Road Safety (FRSC) Felix Osakwe told AFP.

"We recorded 13 deaths in the accident while nine people sustained serious burns."

The fire spread and destroyed about 40 houses, five cars and 89 motorcycles," Osakwe said by telephone from Gombe.

Amnesty challenges China on Xinjiang riot account

BBC ONLINE

Amnesty International has challenged the official Chinese version of events in Xinjiang a year ago, when nearly 200 people were killed in ethnic clashes.

China blamed the violence in the regional capital Urumqi on the local ethnic Uighur population, saying most of the recorded dead were Han Chinese.

But the human rights group says police used unnecessary force against Uighurs, followed by mass arrests and torture.

The claim comes as thousands of CCTV cameras have been put up across Urumqi.

The cameras, which have a "riot-proof" protective shell, have been set up across the city, including at bus and railway stations, schools and shops.

Last year's violence, China's worst in decades, erupted on 5 July and only ended after huge numbers of troops were deployed.

Xinjiang, a resource-rich region that borders Central Asia, has more than eight million Uighurs.

Many are unhappy about the large influx of Han Chinese settlers, which they say has increasingly marginalised their interests and culture.

Amnesty International (AI) says it has newly gathered testimonies from Uighurs who fled China after the unrest.

They allege that demonstrators were attacked by the security forces, shot in the back or denied protection.

Iran moves radar to Syria: US official

AFP, Washington

Iran has moved radar to Syria that could provide early-warning against a possible surprise Israeli air attack against Tehran's nuclear sites, a US defence official said on Friday.

The radar transfer was first reported in the Wall Street Journal on Thursday and prompted the State Department to voice concerns about cooperation between Syria and Iran.

The sophisticated radar were deployed in Syria last year, the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told AFP.

The move could bolster Iran's position amid long-running speculation that Israel might stage a bombing raid against Tehran's nuclear enrichment facilities.

Information from new radar also could potentially help the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah with its missile arsenal and air defences.

Israel and the United States have refused to rule out military action against Iran over its nuclear program, which Washington says is designed to secure atomic weapons.

Iran has insisted its enrichment effort is purely peaceful and aimed at generating electricity.

State Department spokesman Philip Crowley on Thursday said Washington had concerns about the relationship between Iran and Syria.

"We don't believe that Iran's designs for the region are in Syria's best interest," Crowley told reporters.

Nato's door still open for Ukraine: Hillary

AFP, Kiev

The door to Nato membership remains open for Ukraine but the strategic ex-Soviet state does not need to choose between Russia and the West, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in Kiev Friday.

Hillary is the highest ranking US official to visit Ukraine since the election as president of Viktor Yanukovich, who scrapped his predecessor's staunchly pro-Western stance in favour of closer ties with Russia.

In addition to Ukraine, Hillary is to visit several other ex-Communist countries in Russia's backyard on a major tour taking place against the backdrop of the discovery of an alleged Cold War-style Russian spy ring in the United States.

Russian spy suspects reveal true identity

AFP, Alexandria

A couple detained in the US-Russia spy scandal confessed to being Russian citizens living under fake identities, prosecutors said, as they prepared to reveal new evidence of the 11 suspects' alleged conspiracy against the US government.

The government said its charges were now backed by "well over" 100 decrypted messages between conspirators compared just a handful of other such messages presented earlier.

Bail has meanwhile been denied to the couple Richard and Cynthia Murphy, who were accused of secretly garnering high-level contacts since the mid-1990s while posing as a suburban New Jersey couple.

The nine suspects face up to 25 years in prison for money laundering as well as another five years for conspiring to work for a foreign government. Chapman faces lesser conspiracy charges.

None were charged with the more serious

offence of espionage.

Suspects "Michael Zottoli" and "Patricia Mills" -- a married couple ordered by a judge in Alexandria to be kept detained along with suspect Mikhail Semenko -- confessed in post-arrest statements that their given names were fake and that they in fact were Russian citizens, the prosecutors said.

"Zottoli" admitted his true name was Mikhail Kutzik and that his real birth date was different to the one given under his cover, they said, with "Mills" confessing her real name to be Natalia Pereverzeva.

Both have family members still living in Russia, they said.

The court was unlikely to grant the three suspects even temporary freedom, with US authorities still sweating over the disappearance in the spy saga of eleventh suspect Christopher Metsos, who was arrested in Cyprus but vanished after posting a 26,500-euro (32,330-dollar) bond and surrendering his passport.

US, Poland sign missile shield deal

AFP, KRAKOW

The United States and Poland yesterday signed a deal on a future US anti-missile shield in Europe which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said would help ward off threats from Iran.

The document amends an accord signed in Washington in August 2008 after the administration of President Barack Obama modified the plan for a US anti-nuclear missile shield in Europe.

The original plan envisaged the installation of a powerful radar in the Czech Republic and 10 interceptors for long-range missiles in Poland.

But following Russian objections that its security was threatened, the Obama government modified the blueprint and opted for medium- and short-range missile interceptors in Poland.

The agreement was signed in the Polish city of Krakow in the presence of Clinton and her Polish counterpart Radoslaw Sikorski.

She said the shield "will help protect the Polish people and all in Europe our allies and others from the... threats posed by Iran," and exhorted Russia to join get onboard.

"We believe the threats that we all face are common ones and therefore we hope that Russia will orient itself more toward working with all of us and meet those common threats," she said.

Weakened Alex leaves 7 dead in Mexico

AFP, Monterrey

Heavy rains unleashed by Alex, the first hurricane of the Atlantic season, caused the deaths of at least seven people in northeast Mexico, the Nuevo Leon state governor said on Friday.

Alex was downgraded to a tropical storm just hours after roaring ashore late Wednesday as a Category Two hurricane south of the eastern US-Mexico border, in Tamaulipas state.

But heavy rainfall caused mayhem as the storm weakened across northeast Mexico, with rivers gushing beyond their banks, trees uprooted and buildings losing their roofs.

"We've had reports of seven people who sadly lost their lives in situations directly or indirectly linked to the storm," Governor Rodrigo Medina told a news conference.



Overview of a sector heavily damaged by the overflowing of the Santa Catarina river, during heavy rains due to Hurricane Alex, in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon state, Mexico on Friday. Alex was downgraded to a tropical storm after roaring ashore late Wednesday as a Category Two hurricane slightly south of the eastern US-Mexico border.

Amendment needed

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remarks while speaking as the chief guest at a workshop on "Draft law, 2010 to prevent sexual harassment at educational institutions and work places", "Amendment of the existing law regarding eve teasing as well as sexual harassment" and "Amendment of the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000" in the city.

Bangladesh Law Commission and Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) jointly organised the workshop at BRAC Centre Inn at Mohakhali yesterday.

The law minister said the adolescent boys take to stalking at the academic and work places as there are no sufficient recreation centres and playgrounds for them.

The law ministry will help the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs to enact law or update the existing law to protect women from stalking, Shafique said.

The minister also said the government is planning to

make a fresh law to protect the victims and witnesses of the cases, as they don't want to appear at the courts for fear.

Atwar Rahman, a law commission official, in a written statement said often the accused are exempted from the cases filed under the women and children repression prevention act as the offences brought against them are not proved.

"As per a field survey, a total of 7123 cases were pending with five women and children repression prevention tribunals in Dhaka till January this year. On an average, 430 cases are filed with each of the tribunals and 258 are disposed every year," he said.

The function was presided over by the Law Commission Chairman Justice MA Rashid, while two High Court Judges, Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain and Justice Quamrul Islam Siddiqui, Law Commission member Prof M Shah Alam, BNWLA president Fawzia Karim Feroze among others addressed the session.