

Michelle Obama helps kids track Santa Claus

AFP, Honolulu

First Lady Michelle Obama on Friday assisted the US military in tracking Santa Claus on his gift-bearing mission across the globe, in a popular Christmas Eve tradition begun more than half a century ago.

While on a 10-day vacation in Hawaii with her president husband and their two daughters, Obama fielded telephone calls for 40 minutes from children seeking information from the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) on Santa and his reindeer.

The US and Canadian defense command has set up a telephone line -- and since 1998 an official "Santa Tracker" on its website (www.noradsanta.org) in seven languages -- to find the current location and upcoming stops for Saint Nicholas.

Some of the hundreds of thousands of children placing calls on Friday were surprised to hear such a familiar voice on the other end.

US sanctions policy 'riddled with loopholes'

BBC ONLINE

US sanctions tend to be riddled with exceptions that are neither humanitarian nor democracy-related, a former US sanctions official has said.

Stuart Eizenstat, a deputy treasury secretary in the Clinton era, told the BBC World Service that such loopholes were created by lobbying groups.

A New York Times report found evidence of US firms trading legally with blacklisted countries such as Iran.

Loopholes and exemptions were exploited in a trade worth billions of dollars.

An office of the US treasury department granted nearly 10,000 licenses for deals involving blacklisted countries over the past decade, the newspaper said.

Most of the licenses were approved as agricultural and medical humanitarian aid exemptions but the law governing them had been written so broadly that allowable items came to include cigarettes, chewing gum, hot sauce and weight-loss remedies, the New York Times found.

Stuart A Levey, the Obama administration's point man on sanctions, responded by saying that to focus on the exceptions missed "the forest for the trees".

MORE SERIOUS DEALS

Permission for a US firm to bid on a pipeline job that would have helped Iran sell natural gas to Europe, even though the US opposes such projects

Permission for several US firms to trade with foreign companies believed to be involved in terrorism or weapons proliferation.

"No one can doubt that we are serious" about our sanctions, he said.

Mr Eizenstat told the BBC that some

exemptions were entirely appropriate, such as the export of software that Iranian opposition figures might use.

"But one of the problems is that our sanctions policies tend to be riddled with exceptions that are neither humanitarian nor related to democracy promotion but really are put in by particular industries or interests to create loopholes," he said.

Most exemptions are inserted into sanctions legislation by individual members of Congress acting in the interests of a particular state or industry, he said.

"In that case, the administration oftentimes has no choice but to accept them if it wants to pass the broader sanctions passed," he added.

Such exemptions are not a secret but could become a problem over time without proper oversight by the executive, Mr Eizenstat suggested.

It would be difficult, he added, for the US to rally support for international sanctions if its own policy looked ineffective.

"I don't like the word 'hypocrisy' but I think it implicates the integrity of the sanctions," the former US treasury official said.

US asks Yemen for 'forceful action' against al-Qaeda

AFP, Honolulu

The United States on Friday called on Yemen to step up its fight against al-Qaeda and terrorism one year after a botched attempt to blow up a US passenger plane by a Nigerian with Yemeni links.

Counter-terrorism advisor John Brennan called Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh "to emphasize the importance of taking forceful action against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in order to thwart its plans to carry out terrorist attacks in Yemen as well as in other countries, including in the US Homeland," the White House said in a statement.

Brennan stressed the need for cooperation between the two countries, "including the timely acquisition of all relevant information from individuals arrested by Yemeni security forces."

AQAP has been accused of being behind the attempted Christmas Day attack last year by a young Nigerian who had reportedly studied in Yemen.

It has taken credit for a foiled air cargo bomb plot in October, in which printer toner cartridges that had been rigged as bombs were shipped out of Sana'a and, according to investigators, set to explode over the United States.

One of the leaders of the group -- US-Yemeni citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, believed at large in Yemen's vast and lawless tribal areas -- is now viewed by Washington as a threat on par with al-Qaeda head Osama bin Laden.

US officials have linked Awlaki to Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who last Christmas tried to blow up a plane as it was landing in the US city of Detroit with explosives that he had sewn into his underwear.

'Eternal' solar plane's records confirmed

BBC ONLINE

The UK-built solar-powered Zephyr aeroplane has been confirmed as a record-breaker following its non-stop two-week flight this year.

The world governing body for air sports records, the Federation Aeronautique Internationale (FAI), gave Zephyr three records including longest time aloft.

Built by defence technology company QinetiQ, the craft completed its two-week flight in the US in July.

The company sees applications in surveillance and communications.

The July feat led to Zephyr being dubbed the "eternal plane".

"This aircraft can help track pirates off the Horn of Africa, alert the authorities about where and how fast forest fires are spreading, and ensure that soldiers' communications remain unaffected when fighting in mountainous or hilly terrain," said QinetiQ's chief designer Chris Kelleher.

Ecuador recognises Palestine state

AFP, Quito

Ecuador formally recognized Palestine as an independent state on Friday, following the lead of its neighbours Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay earlier this month.

President Rafael Correa signed "the Ecuadoran government's official recognition of Palestine as a free and independent state with 1967 borders," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

The border mention refers to the territorial limits of the Palestinian territory before the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Ecuador's decision, the ministry statement said, "vindicates the valid and legitimate desire of the Palestinian people for a free and independent state" and will be a key contribution to a negotiated peaceful coexistence in the Middle East.

The Ecuadoran resolution was being provided to Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and the Palestinian representative to the United Nations, the ministry said.

IVORY COAST CRISIS

West African leaders threaten Gbagbo with force

BBC ONLINE

The West African regional bloc Ecowas has told incumbent Ivory Coast President Laurent Gbagbo to stand down or expect to face "legitimate force" yesterday.

The statement came at the end of emergency talks on the crisis sparked by a disputed election last month.

The 15-member bloc and other international bodies have recognised his rival Alassane Ouattara as winner.

The Ivory Coast's Constitutional Council says Mr Gbagbo was elected, citing vote-rigging in some areas.

The election was meant to unite the country after a civil war in 2002 split the world's largest cocoa producer in two.

On Thursday state television, one of the key elements keeping Mr Gbagbo in power, was taken off the air in areas outside Abidjan.

But amid the mounting international pressure, the incumbent president remained defiant, declaring illegal a decision by the West African central bank to give control of his country's account to Mr Ouattara.

Mr Gbagbo's spokesman Ahoua Don Mello read a communique on TV saying it was "illegal and manifestly outside the competence of the

West African Monetary Union", and there would be "serious consequences".

Another Gbagbo spokesman, foreign minister Alcide Djedje, told Reuters his government was prepared to meet Ecowas envoys on an as-yet undecided date when it would explain its position.

But Mr Djedje warned against military action.

"What will an intervention force do? Whom will they attack? Do they plan to assassinate President Laurent Gbagbo?" Mr Djedje asked.

Earlier Mr Ouattara urged the country's armed forces to play a "republican role" and protect civilians against attack from "the militias and foreign mercenaries that are spilling Ivorian blood".

He accused Mr Gbagbo of opening a new chapter of violence.

"Violence is returning to our towns and our city neighbourhoods. Serious human rights violations are reported from all corners," he said, quoted by AFP news agency.

He thanked the international community for the support it had given him so far.

He said perpetrators of recent violence would be prosecuted and invited investigators from the International Criminal Court to visit the country.



A UN helicopter flies over a UN peacekeeper at the OUNCI headquarters in Abidjan on Friday. Ivory Coast's internationally recognised leader Alassane Ouattara urged the army to desert his rival Laurent Gbagbo and to protect civilians against attacks by foreign fighters.

20 years of conflict resolution

Story of a Russian team working to prevent Amur tigers

BBC ONLINE

Living within the habitat of a dangerous animal is not easy.

But it is particularly challenging when that animal is the critically endangered Amur tiger.

If a tiger wanders into a remote Russian village it poses a threat, but also raises a difficult quandary: how can people protect themselves without resorting to killing a creature that is on very the brink of extinction?

A special Tiger Response Team in Russia has sought to solve that problem.

The World Conservation Society (WCS) and an anti-poaching patrol dubbed Inspection Tiger are working closely with the team.

It was set up by the government in 1999 to help resolve "human-tiger conflict".

Amur tigers live in the mosaic of forests in Russia's Far East - an expanse of more than 150,000 sq km of tiger habitat that is dotted with small human settlements.

"There's a grey area where both tigers and



humans co-exist," explains Dale Miquelle, director of the WCS Russia Programme.

"So, even though the tigers are incredibly scarce, they do pass through or close to villages on a regular basis."

When a tiger does come too close, it might prey on a domestic animal - most commonly a pet dog or a cow.

Much more rarely it might attack a human.

In the past 10 years, Amur tigers have killed at least 254 domestic animals, 160 of which were dogs.

Official records show 19 attacks on humans,

resulting in 11 injuries and two deaths.

And this is where the response team's very hands-on approach comes in.

When someone sees a tiger or discovers an animal that has clearly been mauled by one, they can alert the local authorities, who then contact the team.

"The local authorities assess the situation and, if necessary, a team is dispatched," explained Dr Miquelle.

"But we're dealing with a vast area, so it can take several days to reach the village."

Once there, the response team has a number of options.

The most straightforward is to scare the tiger away, using rockets or flares. But sometimes it is necessary to capture the animal.

"We do that quite often," says Dr Miquelle. "What we do once we capture it depends on the situation."

"Sometimes we'll put a radio collar on it and put it back where it is."

"Sometimes we'll move it to another location - if we think that will reduce the likelihood of it [returning to the village]."

Zimbabwe seeks prosecution over leaks

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe will appoint a commission to investigate the "treasonous collusion" that led to several embarrassing reports being released by WikiLeaks, the country's attorney-general said yesterday.

"With immediate effect, I am going to instruct a team of practising lawyers to look into the issues that arise from the WikiLeaks," Attorney-General Johannes Tomana told the state-owned Herald newspaper.

"The WikiLeaks appear to show a treasonous collusion between local Zimbabweans and the aggressive international world, particularly the United States."

Tomana was this week slapped with sanctions and an asset freeze by the United States, making him the latest ally of long-ruling President Robert Mugabe to be black-listed by the US government.

WikiLeaks suspect Bradley Manning's health 'declining'

BBC ONLINE

The only person to visit WikiLeaks suspect Pte Bradley Manning in custody other than his lawyer says his health has declined in the past four months.

Pte Manning, a US soldier, is being held in solitary confinement in a high-security military prison at Quantico marine base, Virginia.

US journalist David House, who has been visiting him since September, told the BBC World Service he looked "frazzled".

The Pentagon has denied it is mistreating Pte Manning.

A Marine Corps spokesman said the military was keeping him "safe, secure and ready for trial".

Pte Manning faces up to 50 years in jail if convicted of leaking secrets.

The 23-year-old was arrested earlier this year and charged with stealing secret information. One accusation is that he handed WikiLeaks video of an Apache helicopter killing 12 civilians in Baghdad in 2007.

However, there has been no formal indictment and no date for a trial has been set, according to Mr House.

"He is being kept in a kind of punitive fashion before his trial and it is definitely weakening his mental state," the journalist said.

Pte Manning is confined to his cell 23 hours a day and is not allowed to exercise or have access to media, Mr House told the BBC.

Deadly blasts in Nigeria kill 38

REUTERS, Jos/maiduguri

Explosions in Nigeria's central region killed 32 people on Christmas Eve and six people died in attacks on two churches in the northeast of Africa's most populous nation, officials said yesterday.

On Friday night, a series of bombs were detonated during Christmas Eve celebrations in villages near the central city of Jos, killing at least 32 people while 74 were in a critical condition, the state police commissioner said.

Nigeria's army chief said the blasts were not part of religious clashes which flare up sporadically as tensions bubble under the surface in a country where the population is split roughly equally between Muslims and Christians.

"It (Jos explosions) was caused by a series of bomb blasts. That is terrorism, it's a very unfortunate incident," Azubuike Ihejirika said in the southern city of Port Harcourt.

The attacks come at a difficult time for President Goodluck Jonathan, who is in running a controversial campaign ahead of the ruling party's primaries on January 13.

A ruling party pact says that power within the People's Democratic Party (PDP) should rotate between the mostly Muslim north and largely Christian south every two terms.

Jonathan is a southerner who inherited office when President Umaru Yar'Adua, a northerner, died during his first term this year and some northern factions in the ruling party are opposed to his candidacy.

Jonathan faces a challenge from former Vice President Atiku Abubakar for the ruling party nomination, and some fear any unrest in Africa's most populous nation will be exploited by rivals during campaigning.

In a separate incident, at least six people were killed in what appeared to be religiously motivated attacks on two churches in the northeastern city of Maiduguri.



An Acehese young boy holds paper flowers provided by Japanese people from Kobe as part of the 6th earthquake and tsunami anniversary in Banda Aceh yesterday.

Quake causes small tsunami in south Pacific

REUTERS, Sydney

An undersea earthquake yesterday caused a minor tsunami in the South Pacific but islanders said there were no reports of large-scale fluctuations in sea level or of damage or injuries.

Earlier, the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center had issued a tsunami warning for Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji after the 7.6 magnitude quake.

"An earthquake of this size has the potential to generate a destructive tsunami... Authorities in the region should take appropriate action in response to this possibility," it said.

The center later canceled the warning after reporting a small tsunami had occurred.

"Sea level readings indicate a tsunami was generated. It may have been destructive along coasts near the earthquake epicenter," it said.

Residents in Vanuatu and New Caledonia said they felt the quake but there were no large waves.