

Obama a gunman?

White House releases his shooting photo
AFP, Washington

The White House has released a photo of President Barack Obama skeet shooting in an apparent bid to allay concerns by gun owners that he opposes firearms following a school massacre in December.

The photo was made public as Obama prepares to hit the road Monday to push his plan to curb gun violence as he presses Congress to enact sweeping gun restrictions.

The effort to ban assault rifles and high capacity magazines has become a centerpiece of the president's second term agenda after a disturbed man gunned down 20 children and six adults on December 14 in the once quiet town of Newtown, Connecticut.

But his measures -- both proposed legislation and executive orders -- face stiff opposition from the firearms lobby, as well as from politicians, critics and gun enthusiasts who contend they will infringe upon the constitutional right to bear arms.

In recent days, Obama has made efforts to show that he is no stranger to sports shooting despite his efforts to stem rampant firearms violence.

The president said last week that he had picked up skeet shooting as a hobby, telling The New Republic that he shot at clay pigeons "all the time."

Opposition chief under fire for talks with Assad allies

13 killed as missile hits Aleppo building

AGENCIES

Syria's opposition leader flew back to his Cairo headquarters from Germany yesterday to explain to sceptical allies his decision to talk with President Bashar al-Assad's main backers Russia and Iran, in hope of a breakthrough in the crisis.

The Russian and Iranian foreign ministers, and US Vice-President Joe Biden, portrayed Syrian National Coalition leader Moaz Alkhatib's new willingness to talk with the Assad regime as a major step towards resolving the two-year-old war, reports Reuters.

"If we want to stop the bloodshed we cannot continue putting the blame on one side or the other," Iran's Ali Akbar Salehi said on Sunday, welcoming Alkhatib's overtures and adding that he was ready to keep talking to the opposition. Iran is Assad's main military backer together with Russia.

Russia has blocked three UN Security Council resolutions aimed at pushing Assad out or pressuring him to end a civil war in which more than 60,000 people have died. But Moscow has also tried to distance itself from Assad by saying it is not trying to prop him up and will not offer him asylum.

Salehi welcomed Syrian opposition leader Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib's readiness to hold talks under conditions with the Syrian regime, reports AFP.

"It's a good step forward," Salehi said at the Munich Security Conference, where he said he had held a "very good meeting" with Khatib.

Meanwhile, at least 13 civilians were killed yesterday in a missile attack by the Syrian army on a rebel-held neighbourhood in the embattled northern city of Aleppo, a monitoring group said.



In this image released by The White House on Saturday US President Barack Obama shoots clay target on the range at Camp David, Maryland, on August 4, 2012.

PHOTO: AFP

Biden raises possibility of direct US-Iran talks

REUTERS, Munich

The United States is ready for direct talks with Iran if it is serious about negotiations, Vice President Joe Biden said on Saturday, backing bilateral contact many see as crucial to easing a dispute over Tehran's nuclear program.

Speaking at a security conference in Munich, Biden said Iran - which says it is enriching uranium for peaceful energy only - now faced "the most robust sanctions in history" meant to ensure it does not develop nuclear weapons.

"But we have also made clear that Iran's leaders need not sentence their people to economic deprivation and international isolation," Biden said. "There is still time, there is still space for diplomacy backed by pressure to succeed. The ball is in the government of Iran's court."

To date, fitful talks on Iran's nuclear program have been between Tehran and the EU's top diplomat representing six world powers including Washington. But analysts have suggested that with his re-election behind him, President Barack Obama might have more leeway to take on direct negotiations with Iran.



Joe Biden

France bombs Islamists after Hollande visit

AFP, Timbuktu, Mali

France said it carried out major air strikes yesterday near Kidal, the last bastion of armed extremists chased from Mali's desert north in a lightning French-led offensive, after a whirlwind visit by President Francois Hollande.

An army spokesman said 30 warplanes had bombed training and logistics centres run by Islamist extremists overnight in the Tessalit area north of Kidal, where French troops took the airport Wednesday and have been working to secure the town itself.

Residents said French and Chadian soldiers had patrolled the town for the first time Saturday as the rest of the country feted Hollande on his tour, a victory lap that came three weeks into a so far successful intervention to oust the Islamists who occupied northern Mali for 10 months.

Myanmar to hold talks with rebels

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar will hold another round of talks with Kachin rebels today in a bid to end a conflict raging in the country's far north, a federation of ethnic minority groups said.

The two sides will attend an "emergency meeting" in the Chinese border town of Ruili to seek a breakthrough in the bloody conflict, Khun Okker, a spokesman for the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), said yesterday.

"China arranged it," he told AFP. "They (China) might want to give their views to both."

GM food breakthrough finally here?

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Scientists say they have seen the future of genetically modified foods and have concluded that it is orange or, more precisely, golden. In a few months, golden rice - normal rice that has been genetically modified to provide vitamin A to counter blindness and other diseases in children in the developing world - will be given to farmers in the Philippines for planting in paddy fields.

Thirty years after scientists first revealed they had created the world's first GM crop, hopes that their potential to ease global malnutrition problems may be realised at last. Bangladesh and Indonesia have indicated they are ready to accept golden rice in the wake of the Philippines' decision, and other nations, including India, have also said that they are considering planting it.

"Vitamin A deficiency is deadly," said Adrian Dubock, a member of the Golden Rice project. "It affects children's immune systems and kills around two million every year in developing countries. It is also a major cause of blindness in the third world. Boosting levels of vitamin A in rice provides a simple, straightforward way to put that right."

Recent tests have revealed that a substantial amount of vitamin A can be obtained by eating only 60g of cooked golden rice.

Golden rice was first developed in 1999, but its development and cultivation has been opposed vehemently by campaigners who have flatly refused to accept that it could deliver enough vitamin A, and who have also argued that the crop's introduction in the developing world would make farmers increasingly dependent on western industry. The crop has become the cause célèbre of the anti-GM movement, which sees golden rice as a tool of global capitalism.

Attack on Iraqi police HQ kills 33

REUTERS, Kirkuk

At least 33 people were killed in the Iraqi city of Kirkuk yesterday when a suicide bomber detonated a truck packed with explosives outside a police headquarters and gunmen disguised as officers tried to storm the compound.

The blast was the third major attack in weeks in or near the multiethnic city of Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen, at the heart of a dispute between Iraq's central government and the autonomous Kurdistan region.

Police said the bomber triggered the huge blast near a side entrance to the police building, demolishing part of a government office nearby.

"A suicide bomber driving a vehicle packed with explosives hit the entrance of the headquarters and after the blast gunmen in explosive vests attacked with AK47s and grenades," a police official said.

Blair warns against quitting EU

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The west's fight against al-Qaida is like the battle against revolutionary communism, says Tony Blair, who warns that it could last for a generation.

The former prime minister said yesterday that Britain was right to send troops to support the French effort in Mali to put down a terrorist attempt to overthrow the country's government.

David Cameron faced difficult decisions to fight terrorism, Blair said, but warned the cost of standing aside would be far greater.

Britain at least had to try to "shape" events in the Middle East, he added, telling the BBC's Andrew Marr Show that in Syria there was already a danger the more extreme elements of the opposition forces fighting President Bashar al-Assad's regime would take over.

Blair said: "I think we should acknowledge how difficult these decisions are. Sometimes in politics you come across a decision, which the choice is very binary, you go this way or that way and whichever way you go the choice is very messy. If we engage with this, not just militarily but over a long period of time, in trying to help these countries, it is going to be very, very hard but I think personally the choice of disengaging is going to be even greater."

He added: "We always want in the west, quite naturally, to go in and go out, and think there is a clean result. It's not going to happen like that. We now know that. It is going to be long and difficult and messy."

"My point is very simple though: if you don't intervene and let it happen, it is also going to be long, difficult and messy, and possibly a lot worse. It's a very difficult decision."



Tony Blair

DSE for raising funds

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set aside an allocation in the budget, which will squeeze funds for other development activities, hurting the private sector.

The government should draw up a plan to implement the project, making sure that it would not have a negative impact on the overall economy, Rakibur said.

Through offloading its stakes in different companies and wooing non-resident Bangladeshis in the stockmarket, the government can raise at least half of the fund needed for the project implementation, the DSE president said.

"The DSE is ready not

only to be part of the bridge implementation, but also a campaigner for the project," he added.

Meanwhile, an eight-member committee formed by DSE held its first meeting yesterday to discuss how to turn around the ailing stockmarket.

Following the meeting, the DSE president named the panel as "stockmarket coordination committee".

"We do not want to create any expectation about the market, we want a solution if there is a lack of coordination among market stakeholders such as regulators, banks, merchant banks, listed companies

and insurance firms," said Rakibur, coordinator and spokesman of the committee.

The panel in its first meeting decided that each stakeholder would play a role from their positions.

"We will also go to Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission, Bangladesh Bank, National Board of Revenue, finance ministry and, if necessary, to the premier for the implementation of our recommendations," Rakibur said, adding the panel would sit once in a month on a regular basis and more than once if necessary.

Iran space monkey photos raise doubts



A combo shows an image (top) obtained from the official Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) which was also published by other local news agencies and claimed to have been taken on January 28, 2013, showing a man holding a live monkey with light fur and a mole above its right eye, before being sent in a capsule during for a sub-orbital flight. The image (bottom) obtained from the Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA) and taken on January 30, 2013, which has darker fur and no mole above the eye, being shown during a press conference in Tehran after the return of the capsule. The announcement by Iran that it successfully sent a monkey above the Earth's atmosphere, has provoked questions on social media sites pointing out the differences between the official images of the primate before the launch and when it returned to earth.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Marxist claims US embassy attack

AFP, Ankara

A radical Turkish Marxist group has claimed responsibility for the suicide bomb attack at the US embassy in Ankara, according to a statement posted on the Internet on Saturday.

The Revolutionary People's Liberation Front (DHKP-C), which the Turkish authorities had already blamed for Friday's bombing, accused the United States of being the "murderers of the world", according to a statement on the Halkin Sesi (The Voice of the People) website.

Washington Post hit by hackers

AFP, Washington

The Washington Post disclosed Saturday that it had suffered a cyberattack and suspects Chinese hackers were behind it, joining Twitter and major US media outlets that have endured intrusions.

The Post said in a front page story that the attack was detected in 2011. It said Post company officials would not comment on the circumstances, duration of the intrusion or apparent origin of the online attack.

The paper quoted Post spokeswoman Kris Coratti as saying the paper worked with a security company to detect, investigate and resolve the situation "promptly" at the end of 2011.

Cuba starts military drill

AFP, Havana

Cuba's armed forces on Saturday began holding military exercises aimed at preparing the Communist-ruled island to defend itself against any possible attack from the United States, media reported.

Military units from across the island "began this weekend to prepare for Cuba's defense... which would combine the participation of the armed forces and the people," the government-run Prensa Latina reported.

Clashes outside Morsi palace

AFP, Cairo

Sporadic clashes broke out overnight between protesters demanding the ouster of Egypt's Islamist President Mohamed Morsi and security forces outside the presidential palace, witnesses said yesterday.

There were no immediate reports of casualties from the confrontations which follow violent clashes on Friday outside the presidential palace

UK PM to host Pak-Afghan talks

AFP, London

British Prime Minister David Cameron was Sunday to begin meeting with the leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan for talks on supporting the Afghan peace process, as Britain prepares a withdrawal of troops.

Cameron was to host a private dinner with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari at his Chequers country retreat near London on Sunday evening before holding trilateral talks at the same venue today.

Malala recovering after operations

BBC ONLINE

A Pakistani schoolgirl who was shot in the head by the Taliban has undergone surgery in Birmingham.

Malala Yousafzai, 15, was attacked in October after campaigning for girls' rights to education.

A bullet was removed from her head by surgeons in Pakistan, before she was flown to the UK for further treatment.

Birmingham's Queen Elizabeth Hospital said a titanium plate and cochlear implant were successfully attached in two operations on Saturday.

Quakes hit off Solomon, Japan

AFP, Sydney

A series of strong earthquakes struck off the Solomon Islands in rapid succession yesterday, seismologists said, but no damage was reported and no tsunami warnings were issued.

The strongest of the three tremors, at 5:58 am had a magnitude of 6.1, with the other two each measuring 5.1, according to the US Geological Survey.

Meanwhile, a powerful 6.9 magnitude earthquake struck northern Japan on Saturday, causing strong tremors across Hokkaido island but no damage to

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