



US President Barack Obama and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif hold a meeting in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC, on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Sharif meets Obama, bags mixed response

AGENCIES

US President Barack Obama promised Wednesday to consider Pakistan's concerns in post-war Afghanistan, but stayed mum on a call by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to end drone strikes.

Obama welcomed Sharif to the White House after releasing \$1.6 billion in aid -- mostly for the military -- that had been blocked amid high tensions over the 2011 raid that killed Osama bin Laden.

The US president also implicitly accused Pakistan of exporting terrorism, PTI reported.

Obama ignored the drone issue altogether, but praised Sharif for his commitment in trying to reduce "incidents of terrorism inside of Pakistan's borders, and the degree to which these activities may be exported to other countries." Implicit in the remark was that Pakistan is a terrorism-exporting country, and the drone strikes were a legitimate US response in areas where Islamabad has no control and has ceded sovereignty.

The fact that Obama grilled Sharif over Islamabad's dodgy approach to terrorism, particularly in reference to India, was confirmed by the Pakistani prime minister himself. "He (Obama) asked, why the trial of the (Mumbai) terrorist attack in India has not started yet," Sharif told reporters soon after the meeting, adding, "He (Obama) has raised the issue of (Dr Shakil) Afridi. He spoke about cross-border movement. He also talked about Jamaat-ud-Dawa."

With US forces preparing to pull out of Afghanistan next year, Obama pledged to brief Sharif fully and to work toward an Afghanistan that is "stable and secure, its sovereignty respected."

"I'm confident that, working together, we can achieve a goal that is good for Afghanistan, but also helps to protect Pakistan over the long term," Obama told reporters at the Oval Office.

In a joint statement, Sharif and Obama urged the Taliban to engage in talks on a peace agreement with the Afghan government -- an initiative that quickly faltered after a first step in June.

'Pak leaders endorsed US drone strikes'

AFP, Washington

Pakistan for years secretly approved of US drone attacks on its territory despite public denunciations, The Washington Post reported Wednesday, citing secret documents.

Pakistani support for drone attacks has long been widely suspected, although strikes reported by the Post involved several years up to 2011 -- before a slowdown in strikes and Sharif's election in May.

The newspaper said that top-secret documents and Pakistani diplomatic memos showed that the Central Intelligence Agency had drafted documents to share information on drone attacks with Pakistan.

At least 65 drone strikes were marked for discussion with Pakistan, including through briefings at its embassy in Washington and in materials sent physically to senior officials in Islamabad. The article said that the documents also showed that the United States raised concerns that extremists were linked to Pakistan's powerful intelligence service.

The report came a day after Amnesty International said that the United States may have broken international law by killing civilians with drones.

For the first six months of 2011, 152 combatants were killed, according to a table cited by the Post that did not list any civilian casualties.

Spying row and Obama's G W Bush syndrome

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama must be used to the drill by now -- picking up the phone to get an earful from another foreign leader venting at rampant US spies.

On Monday, it was France. On Wednesday, Germany. No one knows which ally will be next with gripes at National Security Agency snooping on their emails and telephone calls.

The drip, drip, drip of revelations from fugitive contractor Edward Snowden is becoming more than just an irritant for the White House -- it is undercutting its claims to have rescued George W. Bush-tarnished ties with America's friends abroad.

Obama, once greeted as a hero across the Atlantic, is turning out, for many Europeans, to be not so different than the man he replaced.

A rebuke from German Chancellor Angela Merkel -- hardly prone to intemperate outbursts -- took the NSA snooping affair to a new level of diplomatic angst on Wednesday.

Merkel called Obama and told him that if the NSA had indeed tapped her cellphone, she would regard it as "a grave breach of trust," and demanded answers.

Her pique could be read as a logical political move -- given pressure she already faced over claims US spies monitored millions of foreign telephone calls and online exchanges as part of a sophisticated anti-terror sweep.

But it seemed to be something more.

Did the woman who grew up under the all seeing ears of East Germany's Stasi secret police take the claims, first reported by Der Spiegel, as a personal affront?

"I do think the relationship between her and Obama is going to be damaged,"

said Stephen Szabo of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

"I think she is personally offended."

Obama has spent considerable energy courting Merkel and privately speaks in glowing terms of her intellect and political nous.

But the White House account of the call will do little to quell anger in Germany.

Obama spokesman Jay Carney said his boss told Merkel that Washington "is not monitoring and will not monitor" her communications.

That left the clear implication that her conversations may indeed have been swept up in the past.

Washington, while telling allies like France and Germany that their concerns are "legitimate," hardly seems contrite over the activities of the secretive NSA.

The Obama administration has promised foreign leaders to seek ways to balance security and privacy, but has come nowhere near an apology for activity it says is vital to breaking up international terror networks.

Privately, officials say that every nation spies -- even on allies -- and that Merkel is fair game in the great espionage caper.

They also point to US cooperation with foreign intelligence agencies -- hinting that governments who publicly protest at US spying are in fact complicit in the game themselves.

"Since there are many such cases now in the news -- Brazil, Mexico -- I expect it will add to the general public anger aimed at the US among those already disposed to be angry," said Jackson Janes, president of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies at Johns Hopkins University.



PHOTO: AFP

A critically endangered Sumatran tiger is seen in its enclosure at Ragunan Zoo in Jakarta, on Wednesday. In the Greenpeace report "Licence to Kill" released on October 22, Greenpeace said that Singapore-based Wilmar, the world's biggest palm oil processor, was sourcing its oil from illegally cleared land and destroying the habitat of critically endangered Sumatran tigers. The palm oil sector is the largest driver of deforestation in Indonesia. According to conservationists about 400 Sumatran tigers are living in the wilds.

S Arabia warns women drivers

CNN ONLINE

Saudi Arabia's Interior Ministry issued a warning to women caught driving and anyone engaging in demonstrations Saturday, as activists have called on the country to defy a Saudi de facto ban on women driving.

Without outlining how laws would be applied and what punishment might be doled out to offenders, Saudi Arabia's Interior Ministry spokesman, Maj Gen Mansour Al-Turki said, "All violations will be dealt with -- whether demonstrations or women driving."

"Not just on the 26th. Before and after," added Al-Turki. "At all times."

Meanwhile, several Saudi women supporting the October 26th Women's Driving Campaign say they received threatening calls yesterday from men claiming to represent the Interior Ministry, according to women's rights activists who requested anonymity. The callers warned the women not to drive before, on or after Saturday, the activists said.

Some of the activists expressed doubt that the callers were actually from the Interior Ministry, and the Interior Ministry could not be immediately reached for a response.

No traffic law specifically prohibits women from driving in Saudi Arabia, but religious edicts there are often interpreted to mean women are not allowed to operate a vehicle.

In late September, an online movement was launched urging Saudi women to get behind the wheel. The October 26th Women's Driving Campaign quickly gained momentum, with its online petition having so far garnered more than 16,000 signatures.

Pilot dies fighting Australia bushfire

Army apologise for starting blaze

AFP, Springwood

A water-bombing aircraft tackling newly flaring wildfires in Australia crashed on yesterday, killing the pilot, as the military apologised for starting a huge blaze that has left residents living in fear.

Thousands of largely volunteer firefighters have been battling infernos for eight days across the state of New South Wales that have destroyed more than 200 homes, with the Blue Mountains region west of Sydney the focal point.

Cooler weather initially helped yesterday, but gusty winds saw two major blazes upgraded to the highest "emergency" level again, with authorities urging communities not to be complacent.

A pilot became the second person to die in the bushfire emergency when his fixed-wing aircraft went down in a remote area south of Sydney as it responded to a blaze near the town of Ulladulla.

Reports said a wing snapped off before the crash.

One of the biggest and fiercest infernos still alight -- which has a perimeter of more than 300 kilometres and has ripped through 47,000 hectares (116,000 acres) of land -- was started by the military, a fire service investigation found.

The huge blaze near the town of Lithgow, which flared again yesterday, was a major worry this week with authorities on Tuesday deciding to deliberately merge it with another nearby fire at Mount Victoria to prevent conditions from deteriorating.

The official investigation found it was started by exploding ordnance on a live firing range on Wednesday last week.

"It wasn't deliberate, it was a side-effect of a routine activity... and clearly there was no intention to see fire start up and run as a result of that activity," Fitzsimmons said, adding that the military had fully cooperated.

Acting Chief of Defence, Air Marshall Mark Binskin, apologised after a furious Blue Mountains mayor Mark Greenhill demanded answers.

Real-life aquaman

STAR DESK

In 2010, Danish freediver Stig Severinsen jumped into a pool filled with sharks and held his breath for 20 minutes and 10 seconds, breaking the previous Guinness World Record for the longest time breath held voluntarily.

Two years later, the fearless Stig did it again, somehow breaking his own remarkable record by holding his breath for a staggering 22 minutes. If there's such a thing as a real-life Aquaman, it's this guy.

Severinsen -- who has a Ph D in medicine and a master's degree in biology, is known for participating in the most extreme challenges, including swimming in freezing water.

Before setting his first breath holding world



record, he swam 236 feet -- about 72 meters (14.5 more meters than Wim Hof, the previous record holder), in the below-zero waters

of the North Sea. After taking a few breaths of air, he dived first through a hole carved in the ice. As soon as he was in the water, he started swimming to the next hole wearing only in his signature blue Speedos.

The triangle-shaped hole was 72 meters away and there wasn't another escape route mid-way, which made the challenge extremely dangerous. After reaching his destination in just 96 seconds, the 40-year-old daredevil lingered in the freezing hole a little longer, as if to prove the cold didn't affect him very much.

MERKEL'S PHONE TAPPING

Germany summons US ambassador over claims

BBC ONLINE

Germany summoned the US ambassador in Berlin over claims that the US monitored German Chancellor Angela Merkel's mobile phone.

Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle will meet US envoy John Emerson later in what is seen as an unusual step between close allies.

Merkel has demanded a "complete explanation" of the claims, which are threatening to overshadow an EU summit.

She discussed the issue with US President Barack Obama on Wednesday.

President Obama told Merkel the US was not monitoring her calls and would not in future, the White House said.

However, it left open the question of whether calls had been listened to in the past.

On Monday, France summoned the US ambassador over reports in Le Monde newspaper that the US National Security Agency (NSA) had spied on millions of French phone calls. A day later, Le Monde reported that the NSA had spied on French diplomats in Washington and at the UN.

French President Francois Hollande had already called for the issue to be put on the

agenda of the summit, where EU leaders are due to discuss Europe's digital economy, economic recovery and immigration.

Other leaders are also likely to want further clarification from Washington over the activities of its NSA in Europe, says BBC Europe Editor Gavin Hewitt.

"It's really not on for friends to spy on each other," said Chancellor Merkel as she arrived at the EU summit in Brussels.

The German government has not said how it received the tip about the alleged US spying. But news magazine Der Spiegel, which has published stories based on material from former CIA contractor Edward Snowden, said the information had come from its investigations.

State-monitoring of phone calls has a particular resonance in Germany - Merkel herself grew up in East Germany, where phone-tapping was pervasive.

Gunther Krichbaum, the chairman of the European affairs committee in Germany's Bundestag, told the BBC that "if it turns out to be true this... is a real scandal".

Krichbaum said he was convinced that he and his colleagues would "not go ahead" with negotiations over a major trade treaty with the US before finding out what had happened.

Army officers back Sisi for Egypt president

REUTERS, Cairo

Anxious over months of turmoil in Egypt, military officers are pushing popular army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to run for president, after a 2011 popular uprising had inspired hopes for democratic change in a country long dominated by generals.

Sisi ousted Egypt's first freely-elected president, Mohamed Mursi, the man who appointed him, in July after mass protests against the Islamist leader's rule.

Since then Egypt, whose political transition has repeatedly stumbled, has been rocked by near-daily protests, bombings and clashes in which hundreds have died in the worst civil violence in the nation's modern history.

A military man back in power would alarm international human rights groups and Western allies such as the United States, and raise the prospect of more violence by Sisi's foes.

"In accordance with international law, we view any process undertaken after the coup as illegitimate and unrepresentative of the Egyptian people," said Salma Ali, a media relations officer in London for Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood.

Senior military officers have over the past three months told Sisi of their fears about the political upheaval in a series of meetings, army sources said.

"We told him that we need to maintain stability. He is needed for Egypt and the people love him and want him. Besides, who else can run but him? There is no one else as popular as him," said one army officer, who asked not to be named.



ODDLY enough

Mothers' instincts

MAIL ONLINE

Two Argentine mothers have been reunited with their newborn daughters after spending three weeks unknowingly nursing and caring for each other's children who had been switched at birth.

For Maria Lorena Gerbeno, 37, the suspicion rose when doctors said her baby weighed in at 6lbs 8 ounces at birth, but was sent home with a girl weighing 8lbs 4 ounces.

Both she and Veronica Tejada gave birth to healthy girls September 30 at a private clinic in San Juan.

In a twist of fate straight out of a Bollywood film, Gerbeno ran into Veronica Tejada at the clinic when the two came in for a checkup.

The new moms struck up a conversation and soon realized that the birth weights of their respective infants matched up to the ounce.