

'Internal error' downs NSA website

AFP, Washington

The National Security Agency's website went down for several hours Friday, but the US spy service known for hacking into computer networks blamed the outage on a technical mistake.

The website, NSA.gov, went down in the afternoon, setting off speculation on Twitter that the site may have suffered a denial of service attack by hackers.

But an NSA spokesperson denied the claims, saying they were "not true."

The website was operational again around 10:30 pm (0230 GMT Saturday).

The hacker group

Anonymous joked about the incident in a tweet, without saying if it had played any role. "Aw don't panic about nsa.gov being down. They have a backup copy of the internet," it said.

The loosely organized, international hacker collective has frequently clashed with US authorities over file-sharing as well as allowing banks to handle donations to the anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks.

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Meanwhile, German spy chiefs will travel to the United States next week to demand answers following allegations that US intelligence has been tapping Chancellor Angela Merkel's mobile phone, as a row over US snooping threatened to hurt transatlantic ties.

Documents leaked by former US intelligence contractor Edward Snowden showing sweeping US surveillance on ordinary citizens' Internet searches and telephone records have already sparked outrage worldwide.

But the furore has intensified after allegations that world leaders including the presidents of Brazil and Mexico have been among spying targets.

This week, the scandal widened to Europe, with allegations that Merkel's phone was being tapped, prompting Berlin to summon the US ambassador -- a highly unusual move between the close allies.

The spying row has prompted European leaders to demand a new deal with Washington on intelligence gathering that would maintain an essential alliance while keeping the fight against terrorism on track.

The 28 leaders also warn that while the bloc and the United States share a "close relation-

ship", it must "be based on respect and trust".

Germany and Brazil are also working on a UN General Assembly resolution to highlight international anger at US data snooping in other countries, diplomats said Friday.

The resolution would not mention the United States but would call for extending the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to Internet activities.

"The aim is to send a message to those who abuse the system," said a UN diplomat involved in the talks.

Meanwhile, Michael Morell, who served as

deputy director and acting director of the CIA, told CBS television's "60 Minutes" programme that Snowden was a traitor to his country.

"I think this is the most serious leak -- the most serious compromise of classified information in the history of the US intelligence community," he said.

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Elsewhere an army ambush killed about 24 rebels on the outskirts of Damascus, said the Observatory. SANA put the toll at 40.

UN and US officials have expressed concern about besieged Damascus suburbs, following reports of severe food shortages and rising malnutrition.

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The Observatory described a similarly dire situation in the central city of Homs, where it said some 3,000 civilians were trapped in an area sealed off by regime forces for more than a year.

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Yarubia border crossing with Iraq at dawn after clashes with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, the Al-Nusra Front and other rebels," the Syrian Observatory for

Human Rights said, citing activists.

The Kurds have been struggling to carve out an autonomous northeastern region similar to one in northern Iraq, further complicating the Syrian war.

Rebels fighting to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad have increasingly turned their guns on each other in the past few months, with jihadists clashing with the mainstream Free Syrian Army in the north, where the rebels control vast swathes of territory.

Fighters from both sides were killed in the border clashes, which came a day after Syria's government and its opponents traded blame for a car bomb attack on a mosque that left dozens dead.

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AFP, Maiduguri

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Army spokesman

Mohammed Dole said that "74 suspected militants" were killed in the assault outside the Borno capital Maiduguri, where Boko Haram was founded more than a decade ago. The operation followed an assault Monday on Boko Haram camps in another part of Borno, which the military said left 37 Islamists dead.

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