

US spying on govts won't stop: Obama

AFP, Berlin

The US intelligence service will continue to spy on foreign governments, President Barack Obama said in an interview broadcast Saturday, although he assured Chancellor Angela Merkel that he would not let intrusive surveillance harm their relationship.

The frank admission comes a day after Obama curtailed the reach of mass US National Security Agency phone surveillance sweeps, but said bulk collection of data would go on to protect America from terrorists.

In Friday's long-awaited speech aimed at quelling international furore over the widespread eavesdropping revealed by Edward Snowden, Obama also said he had halted spy taps on friendly world leaders.

But Obama told German television ZDF's heute-journal that intelligence gathering on foreign governments will continue. "Our intelligence agencies, like German intelligence agencies, and every intelligence agency out there, will continue to be interested in the government intentions of countries around the world. That's not going to change," he told heute-journal.



TURKEY PROTESTS

Protesters chant slogans against newly proposed restrictions on the use of the internet and against the Turkish government during a protest on the Istiklal Avenue in Istanbul on Saturday. Turkish riot police fired tear gas and plastic bullets to break up the protest by an estimated 2,000 people against the embattled government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWSIN brief

Huge Ukraine rally defies anti-protest law

AFP, Kiev

Police and protesters clashed in the centre of the Ukrainian capital Kiev on Sunday after 200,000 turned up for an opposition rally in a show of defiance against strict new curbs on protests.

Hollande's partner leaves hospital

AFP, Paris

President Hollande's partner emerged from a week's stay in hospital Saturday as the French leader faced calls to clear up his personal life after his affair with an actress was made public. First Lady Valerie Trierweiler left the Paris hospital, where she had been admitted on January 10 suffering from nervous exhaustion and low blood pressure, for a presidential residence in Versailles, a source in her office told AFP.

Indo-Pak trade thru' Kashmir suspended

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Trade between India and Pakistan across the de facto border in Kashmir has been suspended following the arrest of a truck driver accused of smuggling 114 kilograms heroin, a Pakistani official said yesterday. He added that 49 Pakistani trucks and their drivers were being held on India's side of the border following the incident, while Pakistan had retaliated by holding 27 trucks.

4 killed as lightning strikes plane

AFP, Jakarta

A light aircraft crashed and burst into flames on a beach in eastern Indonesia yesterday after being hit by lightning, killing all four people on board and eyewitness said.

Sisi wins but youths alienated

AFP, Cairo

The approval of Egypt's constitution bolsters the powerful army chief but a large number of youths who helped topple two presidents within three years shunned the vote on the new charter.

Egyptian voters have approved the Tuesday-Wednesday referendum by 98.1 percent, officials announced Saturday, and the results are seen as nod to General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to run for president.

Sisi led the overthrow of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in July following massive protests against his one year-rule, which came after a popular uprising in 2011 toppled his predecessor Hosni Mubarak.

Youth movements at the forefront of protests that ended the rules of Morsi and Mubarak hardly objected when the military-installed authorities launched a deadly crackdown on Morsi's supporters.

Nor did they object when his Muslim Brotherhood movement was banned and designated a "terrorist" organisation. But they voiced their outrage when the military-backed authorities passed a law in November banning unauthorised demonstrations.

And this appears to have been clearly reflected during the voting.

Sisi had urged the youths to participate in the referendum, saying they formed "more than 50 percent" of

EGYPT CHARTER REFERENDUM

98.1%
voted
for new charter

38.6%
turnout reported

Egypt's 85-million strong population. Political analyst Hassan Nafea said turnout was "disappointing".

"The youth refused to participate in the referendum because they consider what is happening as a counter-revolution to the January revolution (against Hosni Mubarak)," said Nafea. Electoral commission head Nabil Salib announced the official results on Saturday and said turnout "reached 38.6 percent" of 53 million registered voters, with only 1.9 percent voting "no."

That turnout shows "that the revolution of June 30 was a popular revolution," said another government official, of the day when millions took to the streets across Egypt to demand Morsi's ouster.

But Salib also acknowledged that a certain percentage of youths had not voted as the referendum coincided with examinations otherwise "the turnout would have been higher".

The new charter replaces an Islamist-inspired one adopted in a December 2012 referendum under Morsi with about two-thirds of the vote and a 33 percent turnout.

Nafea said the result showed, however, an overall backing for Sisi to run for president because "a large segment of Egyptians see the Brotherhood as a threat to the society".

Sisi has said he would bid for the presidency only if there was a popular demand.

Syria opposition to join peace talks

Islamists reject move; Assad remains defiant

AFP, Istanbul

Western leaders have hailed a decision by Syria's opposition to attend an international peace conference next week alongside representatives of a regime they despise and remain determined to overthrow.

After weeks of hesitation and threats to boycott the talks, the deeply divided National Coalition said it will go to Switzerland next week, with the sole aim of toppling President Bashar al-Assad.

However, Islamic Front, a powerful alliance of Syrian Islamist rebels rejected upcoming peace talks yesterday, meaning that even if the talks reach an unlikely breakthrough in the three year old civil war, it will be harder to implement it on the ground.

Assad's government, which brands rebels fighting his regime as "terrorists", made concessions ahead of the conference that opens on Wednesday but said the president will not step down.

And a defiant Syrian President Bashar al-Assad yesterday said he had no plans to stand down, stressing that only the Syrian people had the right to determine the country's future.

Nearly three-years' war estimated to have killed more than 130,000 people and forced millions from their homes in Syria.

US Secretary of State John Kerry hailed the "courageous" decision by the National Coalition to attend the conference, describing it as a "path that will ultimately lead to a better future for all Syrians".

Britain, France and Germany were equally elated with the opposition's decision to overcome internal divisions and go to Switzerland. Russia also welcomed the move.

RESTAURANT ATTACK Taliban reject US' call to lay down arms

DPA, Kabul

The Afghan Taliban yesterday rejected a call by the United States to put down their weapons and start peace talks with the Afghan government.

The White House on Saturday urged the insurgent group to lay down its arms. The call was part of a condemnation of a Taliban attack on a Kabul restaurant which claimed the lives of 21 people, including two American professors.

"We strongly reject the American demand," Taliban said in a statement. "If America truly wants peace and stability for Afghanistan, then it should immediately withdraw all its forces from our land and leave the Afghans to their own wills and aspirations," it added.



Flying car spreads its wings

AFP, Bratislava

Mankind's primordial dream of flight is taking off with a new twist as a Slovak prototype of a flying car spreads its wings.

Inspired by the dreamy books about flying by French authors Jules Verne and Antoine de Saint Exupery, Slovak designer and engineer Stefan Klein has been honing his flying machine since the early 1990s. Klein has designed cars for BMW, Volkswagen and Audi.

His elegant blue-and-white vehicle for two is six metres (20 feet) long so it fits neatly in a parking space or a garage and tanks up at any filling station. But once it reaches an airport it can unfold its wings within seconds becoming a plane.

Klein's dream took to the skies in September when he piloted the Aeromobil during its first wobbly test flight. Once airborne, the it can reach a top speed of 200km/h and travel as far as 700 km, consuming 15 litres (4 gallons) of petrol per hour.



PHOTO: AFP

Demonstrators shout slogans during a march in support of an Indonesian maid who was allegedly tortured by her employer in Hong Kong, yesterday. The alleged maltreatment of Erwiana Sulistyaniingsih by her employer over the course of eight months renewed concerns over abuse of foreign domestic helpers in the southern Chinese city.

SUNANDA DEATH PROBE

Husband offers full cooperation

PTI, New Delhi

Indian Union minister Shashi Tharoor recorded his statement before the subdivisional magistrate yesterday who is investigating the death of his wife Sunanda Pushkar under mysterious circumstances in a five-star hotel here.

During his over half-an-hour long deposition at SDM Alok Sharma's office in south west Delhi, Tharoor is understood to have narrated events prior to the death of his wife Sunanda.

52-year-old Sunanda was found dead in a south Delhi hotel suite on Friday night, two days after her twitter spat with a Pakistani journalist Mehr Tarar over an alleged affair with Tharoor. However, Sunanda and Tharoor had issued a joint statement declaring they were happily married. Investigators said the couple had



reportedly altercations in the past and even on Thursday night they had a heated spat which continued till around 4.30 on Friday morning.

Earlier, in a letter to Indian Home Minister Sushilkumar Shinde, Tharoor offered his full cooperation in the probe into the death of his wife and said he was "horrified to read the reckless speculation rampant" in the media.

In the letter, Tharoor said the relevant authorities be asked to expedite the investigation and come to a rapid conclusion so that the truth emerges at the earliest regarding Sunanda's death. After the postmortem, doctors on Saturday had said that Sunanda died a "sudden unnatural death" and her body bore several injury marks.

Police sources said that it could be a case of drug overdose.

Floods displace thousands in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

More than 30,000 Indonesians have fled their homes in the capital due to flooding that has left five dead, officials said yesterday, with people using rubber dinghies and wading through waist-deep water to reach safer ground.

Many parts of Jakarta were under murky, brown water after days of torrential rain produced the city's first significant floods of the months-long rainy season.

Buildings in some parts of the sprawling capital, which has a population of more than 10 million and is regularly afflicted by floods, were half submerged, with roads unpassable in many areas. Five people have so far been killed in the past week due to flooding.

Modi mocks Congress over PM candidate

Says Sonia saved Rahul by not naming him for the post

AFP, New Delhi

India's opposition prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi yesterday mocked the ruling Congress party for refusing to name Rahul Gandhi as its choice for premier in upcoming elections.

In a speech in the capital, Modi said Congress president Sonia Gandhi did not want to sacrifice her son Rahul politically at the general elections in coming months, which the party is widely tipped to lose.

"I see a very human, sensitive reason for their (Congress's) decision. Would any mother sacrifice her son?" Modi told hundreds of officials from his opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"The mother thought 'no, save my son'," Modi said to laughter and applause from BJP leaders, who have been meeting in New



Delhi to prepare for the general elections.

Sonia Gandhi on Friday batted away pleas from her Congress supporters during a mass meeting to name Rahul as their candidate for the polls due by May.

With Prime Minister Manmohan Singh retiring after two terms, the party had been expected to nominate Rahul, a

Congress MP who has generally shunned the limelight, as its choice for premier at the meet.

A survey last week said that only 14 percent of voters believed Rahul Gandhi would make the best prime minister while 58 percent opted for Modi.

But Modi, a pro-business reformer with a reputation for running a relatively clean administration, is also known for his Hindu nationalist leanings and is accused by critics of turning a blind eye to savage anti-Muslim riots in his state in 2002.

AAP faces flak over minister's vigilantism

IANS, New Delhi

The three-week-old AAP government in Delhi faced all-round criticism after its law minister mounted a vigilante-style raid on African residents here, alleging that they were running a "sex and drug ring". The minister's post-midnight raid was widely condemned and could cast a shadow on India's diplomatic and economic ties with Africa.

Accusing a group of African nationals of running a "sex and drug racket" on the basis of some complaints he had received from residents, Delhi Law Minister Somnath Bharti, accompanied by party cadres, rounded up some African women in the early hours Thursday and forced them to go for a medical test. Noted lawyer Harish Salve told NDTV that one of the women was allegedly forced to give a urinary sample in public for a drug test.

India's foreign ministry yesterday said it has reassured ambassadors of some 20 African nations that authorities are not targeting their nationals.