

US-led strikes hit Qaeda branch in Syria

AFP, Beirut

US-led coalition air strikes hit al-Qaeda's Syrian branch overnight, expanding the raids to jihadists outside the Islamic State group for only the second time, a monitoring group said yesterday.

The strikes against Al-Nusra Front in northwestern Syria killed several jihadists as well as two children, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Coalition aircraft carried out "several raids after midnight" targeting an Al-Nusra vehicle and one of its positions, the Observatory said.

The Observatory said that the coalition had also carried out strikes for the first time on another Islamist group, Ahrar al-Sham, near the Turkish border.

On the first day of the strikes they also hit a group of al-Qaeda veterans that Washington called "Khorasan", although analysts said the attack actually targeted Al-Nusra. There have been no reported strikes on groups outside ISIS since, but this second attack comes after Al-Nusra made gains against Western-backed rebel fighters in the northwestern Idlib region.



Protestors and families of 43 missing students from Guerrero State in Mexico march through the city to protest the government and demand answers of the missing students in Mexico City, Mexico, on Wednesday. The students have been missing since September 26, 2014 and are from the Atyotzinapa teaching college in Iguala, Mexico.

PHOTO: AFP

IRAN NUKE DEAL

Obama says he is not sure

AFP, Washington

The US has put forward a "framework" plan to meet Iran's energy needs, President Barack Obama revealed Wednesday, but warned it was unclear if a deal to curb Tehran's nuclear ambitions would be struck.

As a November 24 deadline for an historic accord between Iran and global powers looms, Obama said the coming weeks would test the true intentions of the Islamic republic after a decade of stop-start global efforts.

"We presented to them a framework that would allow them to meet their peaceful energy needs," Obama told reporters.

It was the first time the US has alluded to a completed framework being on the table, and came just days before John Kerry holds fresh negotiations with his Iranian counterpart.

But Obama again repeated Washington's long-held insistence that "no deal is better than a bad deal."

"Whether we can actually get a deal done, we'll have to find out over the next three to four weeks," Obama told reporters ahead of weekend talks in Oman between Kerry and Javad Zarif.

Kiev toughens stance on separatist rebels

Creates de facto border around trouble zone

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine yesterday announced passport controls around areas held by pro-Russian separatists in the latest step toward what resembles the breakup of the ex-Soviet republic, as heavy artillery fire erupted in Donetsk.

Ukraine's border guards service said anyone crossing in or out of rebel areas will have to present a passport. Foreigners will "be sent to filtration points to determine the purpose of their visit" and will have "to show a passport or the required visa," a statement said.

The rule was explained as a security measure to seal off the separatist region in the east, where artillery fire violated a tattered ceasefire deal on multiple occasions early yesterday.

However, the passport regime will create a de facto internal border, underscoring the Russian-backed guerrillas' success in carving out two self-declared statelets centred on Donetsk and Lugansk. Already, Ukraine has

lost control of its real border with Russia, which is in the hands of separatist guerrillas and Russian troops.

In another sign that Ukraine's government has given up regarding control of the east anytime soon, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk said Wednesday that subsidies and social payments, including pensions, would be halted to rebel-controlled areas.

The developments in Kiev came against a background of almost constant ceasefire violations, raising fears of a total breakdown in a peace plan signed in September.

Almost non-stop artillery fire rained down around the outskirts of Donetsk, where a shell killed two teenagers late Wednesday while they were playing football.

Russia's investigative committee said it had opened a criminal case against Ukrainian forces over the incident, while Ukrainian military spokesman Andriy Lysenko said a case had been opened against the separatists.

UKRAINE CRISIS

With or without Congress

Obama vows to pursue his core agendas after polls debacle

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama yesterday pledged to work with Republican lawmakers after their midterm election win but warned he would act without them to protect his core agenda, starting with immigration reform.

The US leader stopped short of accepting direct responsibility for his Democratic party's colossal defeat at the hands of opponents who successfully turned the election into a repudiation of his policies.

The GOP snatched control of the Senate, tightened its grip on the House of Representatives and won key Democrat governorships, in an election Obama admitted was "a good night" for Republicans.

"To everyone who voted, I want you to know that I hear you," Obama said.

Congress's two top Republicans said the new legislature would focus on jobs and the economy, and move to repeal Obama's signature achievement -- the health care bill known as

Obamacare, which provides medical insurance for millions who lack it.

Democrats suffering from the whiplash of their overwhelming defeat were left to contemplate what went wrong.

Some Republicans nevertheless acknowledged they need to find avenues of cooperation with Obama so they are

seen as capable congressional stewards ahead of the 2016 presidential race.

In a lengthy White House news conference, Obama insisted he was "eager to work with the new Congress to make the next two years as productive as possible."

Obama said he would also ask the new Congress for help in battling the

spread of Ebola in west Africa and beyond, and to endorse US-led military action against jihadists in Iraq and Syria.

But, in the absence of a strong legislative base for the remaining two years of his presidency, Obama said he would press ahead with plans on immigration reform.

He said he would take executive action this year, without waiting to see whether the new Congress makes progress toward a comprehensive bipartisan immigration reform bill.

Despite Obama insisting he was optimistic about America's future, exit polls Tuesday confirmed the pessimistic mood that several Republican winners had capitalized on. Voters are convinced the nation is headed in the wrong direction and are skeptical of the abilities of the president and his Democrats to turn things around.

Analysts say one of the biggest consequences of the Republican victory in the senate this week is that Barack Obama will be spending a lot more time on world affairs.



PHOTO: AFP



Australian PM vows to confront Putin

AFP, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott yesterday warned Vladimir Putin he will not be able to avoid a "conversation" over the loss of Australian lives in the downing of Flight MH17 over Ukraine which killed 298 people on board.

Last month Abbott vowed to "shirtfront" the Russian president at the G20 summit in Brisbane next week, although Moscow has yet to respond to his request for a bilateral meeting.

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev responded to the rhetoric by saying Putin was a judo black-belt and that "serious politicians should choose their words carefully".

Shirtfronting is an Australian Rules Football sporting term in which a player charges an opponent. "He won't be able to avoid the conversation, so one way or another we're going to have the bilateral - whether it's in the corridor or in a more formal setting," Abbott told The Australian newspaper.

However, he said he did not want the G20 to be overshadowed by their rift.

BURKINA FASO CRISIS Army agrees to arrange polls in Nov 2015

AFP, Ouagadougou

Burkina Faso's army, politicians and civil society leaders agreed to a one-year political transition with elections in November 2015 following highly charged crisis talks on Wednesday.

The talks, mediated by three west African presidents and also attended by religious and tribal chiefs, failed to name a new leader to head the transitional government. But a statement after the meeting said all parties had agreed that an "eminent civilian personality" should take the job.

The trio of presidents had travelled to the capital to press for the swift return of civilian rule after the military appointed one of its own, Lieutenant-Colonel Isaac Zida, to run the country following last week's ouster of president Blaise Compaore.

Libya chaos deepens

Violent clashes as SC nullifies parliament

AFP, Tripoli

Libya's supreme court yesterday invalidated the internationally recognised parliament, setting the stage for deepening political chaos in the violence-wracked North African nation.

The ruling, which cannot be appealed, prompted celebratory gunfire in the capital Tripoli where Islamist-led militias have been in control since August, an AFP correspondent reported.

The Tripoli court also nullified a constitutional amendment that led to elections on June 25, thereby invalidating the polls and all decisions that resulted from them.

The internationally supported government of Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thani is sheltering in the remote eastern town of Tobruk near the Egyptian border and has almost no control over Libya's three main cities.

The legislature's legal committee called an emergency meeting to review the court ruling. "Lawmakers will not recognise a verdict decided under the gun," Tobruk-based parliamentarian Issam al-Jehani wrote on Facebook.

Libyan authorities have struggled to assert control across a country awash with weapons and powerful militias that ousted longtime autocratic leader Muammar Gaddafi in a 2011 revolt.

The supreme court had been asked by an Islamist lawmaker to rule on the constitutionality of the legislature that approved Thani's government, one of two rival administrations in the oil-rich country.

Former rebels who fought Gaddafi have formed powerful militias and seized control of large parts of turmoil-gripped Libya over the past three years.

Most lawmakers who are boycotting the internationally recognised parliament support Fajr Libya, an Islamist-led militia alliance that has formed a parallel government known for its Islamist sympathies. Libya's elected parliament is dominated by anti-Islamists.



A member of the pro-government Libyan forces fires from the top of a building during an attack on districts held by Islamist militias around the port of eastern Libya's restive city of Benghazi.

PHOTO: AFP



British comedian Russell Brand (C) joins anti-capitalist protesters during the "Million Masks March" in London on Wednesday. The activists called for revolution and scuffled with police in central London and outside Buckingham Palace after marching on parliament. The protest was held on the night of Britain's Guy Fawkes Night, and many of the marchers wore the white masks of the man who plotted to blow up parliament in 1605, now associated with Anonymous.

PHOTO: AFP



Mia Love, the Obama of the GOP?

AFP, Los Angeles

Even her name is media friendly. Mia Love instantly became the darling of the Republican Party on Wednesday, after being elected as its first black female member of Congress -- and she is a Mormon to boot.

She has also rapidly drawn comparisons with Barack Obama, not least since she wowed her party's 2012 national convention with a tale of rags-to-political-riches, much like the young Senator Obama did in 2004.

Born Ludmya Bourdeau in Brooklyn to Haitian-American parents, Love catapulted herself into Washington's political spotlight by winning the Mormon-dominated western US state's Fourth Congressional District.

Damon Cann, politics professor at Utah State University, said Love is bound for greater things in Washington.

"Since the election of Barack Obama, the Republicans have been more serious about trying to showcase the diversity within the Republican Party," he told the Salt Lake Tribune.

"And Mia Love is potentially the poster child for diversity in the party," he added. Commentators agreed that Love is a real asset for the Republicans.

US speeds up Guantanamo releases

AFP, Kuwait City

The United States is preparing to release more than a dozen Guantanamo detainees as President Barack Obama works towards his long-promised goal of closing the controversial military prison, an US defense official said Wednesday.

The news comes the same day the Defense Department sent home one of two remaining detained Kuwaitis, bringing the total population at the jail on a US naval base in Cuba to 148.

Fawzi al-Odah, 37 -- who spent nearly 13 years in US detention -- took off in a Kuwaiti government plane at 5:30 am (1030 GMT). Lieutenant Colonel Myles Caggins told AFP.

He was headed to a rehabilitation center in his home country created for former Guantanamo detainees -- one of which 10 Kuwaitis have already passed through.

Al-Odah's release leaves 79 Guantanamo inmates cleared for release -- never charged or tried for any crime and who have been approved by a special committee to be freed.

But efforts to send them home or to third party countries have languished as Obama has been thwarted by domestic and international obstacles.

Al-Odah was the first inmate freed since late May, when five Taliban Guantanamo detainees were swapped for US Army sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, a move that infuriated Republican lawmakers who protested they hadn't been informed in advance.

The Obama administration said Wednesday it plans to speed up the releases in the coming months.

"The Department of Defense hopes to transfer more than a dozen detainees to countries in South America and Europe, in the next two months, through the winter," a Pentagon official told AFP.

The official, who asked not to be named, said countries have agreed to take around 20 Guantanamo inmates, though the deals were not yet finalized. Six are supposed to be sent to Uruguay, but their transfer has been blocked for political reasons there.

Meanwhile, the rocky situation in Yemen, the home country of many of the remaining detainees who have been cleared, means the Obama administration must find alternative destinations.

"Closing Guantanamo is a priority for the defense department," Caggins told AFP.

"The Defense Department is working diligently to transfer the remaining detainees from Guantanamo," he said, adding that the Pentagon will "notify Congress prior to any transfer in accordance with statutory requirements."