



## Israel PM 'not correct' on Iran nuke issue

Says Kerry

US officials on Wednesday questioned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's judgment and said his outspoken condemnation of efforts to secure an Iranian nuclear deal had injected destructive partisanship into US-Israeli relations.

Netanyahu has criticised the US and others for "giving up" on trying to stop Iran obtaining nuclear weapons.

The Israeli PM "may not be correct", US Secretary of State John Kerry said after attending the latest Iran nuclear talks in Geneva.

Netanyahu will address Congress next week, after an invitation by Republican leaders criticised by the White House.

Kerry was reacting to a speech in which Netanyahu had said the US and others were "accepting that Iran will gradually, within a few years, develop capabilities to produce material for many nuclear weapons".

Having just concluded the latest round of nuclear talks with Iran in Geneva, Kerry told senators President Obama had made it clear the policy was not to let Iran get nuclear weapons and Netanyahu's might therefore not be correct.

The invitation for Netanyahu to speak before Congress has angered Democrats. US National Security Adviser Susan Rice had gone further and said Netanyahu's visit was "destructive to the fabric of the relationship".

Netanyahu was invited by House Speaker John Boehner in what is seen as a rebuke to US President Barack Obama's Iran policy.



A French navy HawkEye takes off from the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle operating in the Gulf, yesterday. French warplanes carried out their first strikes on Wednesday since the warship joined the fight against jihadists in Iraq.

PHOTO: AFP

## US wraps up Ebola mission in Liberia

AFP, Monrovia

The United States yesterday staged a military ceremony to end its five-month Ebola mission in Liberia, with the west African nation in recovery from the worst-ever outbreak of the virus.

A force that at one point reached 2,800 has been gradually scaled back since the epidemic began to recede, and the Pentagon has announced that "nearly all" troops will be gone by the end of April.

"The importance of the progress we see today means more than just the reduction in the number of new or suspected cases of Ebola," said mission commander Major General Gary Volesky.

"This progress is also about Liberians being able to get back to a normal way of life."

The Pentagon says around 100 US troops are to remain in the region to strengthen "disease preparedness and surveillance capacity" of local governments.

# Ukraine forces 'start weapons pullback'

US, Russia trade barbs over ceasefire violations

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine's military yesterday said it was starting the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the frontline, bolstering a stuttering peace plan as the United States and Russia traded barbs over the conflict.

The announcement of the pull-back -- a key part of a peace deal negotiated this month -- comes after a shaky truce that was meant to come into force February 15 finally took hold across the conflict zone in recent days.

"Ukraine is today (Thursday) beginning the withdrawal of 100mm cannons from the frontline," the army said in a statement.

The withdrawal of all weapons over a calibre of 100mm is meant to contribute to a buffer zone between the

two warring sides of between 50 and 140 kilometres, depending on the range of the arms.

Rebels insist they have already begun withdrawing artillery, rocket launchers and tanks from some areas.

Under the terms of the peace plan signed by both Kiev and the rebels this month, the withdrawal is meant to be completed within 14 days.

Fighting has died down dramatically over the past few days. Ukraine's military said for the second day running that there were no fatalities among its soldiers but that four had been wounded.

While fighting subsided, tensions between the West and Moscow swirled on unabated.

Addressing US lawmakers on Wednesday, Secretary of State John Kerry

said Russia and pro-Moscow rebels had failed to meet the terms of the ceasefire.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had put in place policies that "violate all the international norms with respect to territory and behaviour," Kerry said.

But Moscow says threats of new punishment are evidence that the West is not interested in the success of the latest effort to stop fighting that has cost at least 5,800 lives since April.

Russia has itself ratcheted up the pressure by warning it could cut off gas supplies to Ukraine -- and, by extension, to parts of the European Union.

The West says the best hope for a negotiated solution to the 10-month conflict lies with the truce, which last week won unanimous backing from the UN Security Council.

## 'Putin planned to annex eastern Ukraine'

Russia's roadmap 'leaked from Putin's office'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Moscow has been planning to annex parts of Ukraine for more than 12 months, according to sensational claims made in a Russian newspaper.

Vladimir Putin's office reportedly compiled a detailed roadmap of how a "pro-Russian drift" could allow it to seize Crimea and some eastern provinces, just a few weeks prior to the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich and the start of the Ukrainian crisis.

According to a document allegedly leaked to the Novaya Gazeta newspaper, Russia had identified Yanukovich as "politically bankrupt", and outlined a plan by which a "coup" would set in motion events ultimately leading to Russian expansion.

The extraordinary claims made by the



newspaper, which is one of the last independent media outlets in the country and was recently nominated for the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize for its investigations, could not be independently verified.

The alleged document, translated into English by the Kyiv Post, was reportedly provided to Mr Putin's office for consideration between 4 and 12 February 2014 -- the same month that Mr Yanukovich was removed by the Ukrainian parliament.

Novaya Gazeta reported in its introduction that the events that have followed in the past year in Ukraine resemble with "a great deal of correlation" the "step-by-step [guide to] the basis, political and PR logistics of Russia's interference into Ukrainian affairs and estrangement from Ukraine of Crimea and eastern provinces".

## RADICALISED ISLAM

# Europe scrambles to neutralise threat

AFP, Vienna

Austria's parliament on Wednesday passed a law banning foreign sources of financing to Muslim organisations and requiring imams to be able to speak German, in a move closely watched by other European nations facing growing problems with radical Islam.

The new law aims to promote what conservative Integration Minister Sebastian Kurz calls an "Islam of European character" by muting the influence of foreign Muslim nations, organisations and funding at a time when concerns are rising about the spread of extremist Islam.

The legislation also offers Austrian Muslims a mix of increased rights and obligations in practising their faith in the central European country.

But the law has generated opposition from several quarters, including Austrian Muslim groups that call it "discrimination" that imposes restrictions on Islam that other religions aren't saddled with.

Earlier this month French Prime Minister

Manuel Valls raised the notion of banning foreign funding of Islamic organisations. Kurz says officials in Germany and Switzerland have also expressed interest in the legislation.

Meanwhile, France set out a package of reforms on Wednesday aimed at better integrating Muslims and preventing radicalisation in the wake of the recent jihadist attacks in Paris.

It outlined plans to set up a "dialogue forum", tapping leading associations, intellectuals and other notable figures from the Muslim community for regular talks with the government.

Much of the focus will be on the training of Muslim preachers, trying to "encourage the emergence of a generation of imams fully engaged in the Republic", an interior ministry source said.

Radicalisation in prisons is also central to the reform efforts.

France's strict secularism laws make it illegal to count people by their religion or ethnicity, but a report on prisons by an opposition MP last year estimated that 60 per cent of the prison population were Muslim.



## ANGER SIMMERS IN

# GAZA

A Palestinian woman hangs out laundry in her home in the Gaza Strip town of Beit Hanun on Wednesday. For six months, Gazans left homeless by last year's war have waited patiently to be rehoused. But with no relief in sight and thousands still in UN shelters, tempers are fraying. More than 100,000 homes in the Gaza Strip were damaged or destroyed in Israeli bombardment during the 50-day conflict.

PHOTO: AFP

## Massive black hole challenges theories

AFP, Paris



Astronomers said Wednesday they had detected an "impossibly large" and ancient black hole that challenges theories about how these phenomena grew in the early Universe.

With a mass 12 billion times that of our Sun, the black hole formed about 900 million years after the Big Bang that created the Universe 13.7 billion years ago -- a very short period in galactic history, the surprised team reported in the journal Nature.

"Forming such a large black hole so quickly is hard to interpret with current theories," study co-author Fuyan Bian of the Australian National University

said in a statement.

Matter-sucking black holes are extremely dense regions in spacetime with a gravitational force so strong that even light cannot escape.

They grow in size by feasting on stars and other matter around them, releasing energy that can be seen from Earth as the bright objects called quasars.

This particular black hole lay at the heart of an ultra-luminous quasar -- the brightest object yet discovered from that period, the team said.

They had picked the quasar to look at because of its unusual red colour, from a survey of over 500 million objects in the northern skies.

## US regulators adopt 'net neutrality'

AFP, Washington

US regulators yesterday approved landmark Internet rules that would prevent broadband providers from separating online traffic into slow and fast lanes.

The Federal Communications Commission's 3-2 vote in favor of so-called "net neutrality" followed an intense debate in Washington pitting backers of online services like Netflix, Twitter and Yelp against big Internet service providers like AT&T and Verizon.

FCC chairman Tom Wheeler said the plan would foster a free and open Internet where broadband services cannot be "gatekeepers" for what is available online.

"The Internet is the ultimate tool for free expression," Wheeler said ahead of the vote.

"The Internet is too important to allow broadband providers to be making the rules."

Commissioner Mignon Clyburn, who voted in favor of the plan, said

it would "give those with deep pockets as well as empty pockets the same opportunity to succeed."

Also voting for the plan was Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel, who said, "We cannot have a two-tiered Internet that speeds the traffic of the privileged and leaves the rest of us lagging behind."

The plan unveiled earlier this month by Wheeler regulates broadband Internet service providers as "public utility" carriers, revamping the agency's rules struck down by a federal court last year.

In response to a court decision which said it lacked authority, the FCC reclassified Internet service providers as "common carriers" under a 1934 telecom law, while promising to steer clear of rate regulation and other provisions of that law.

The new rule also applies the concept to mobile Internet carriers, preventing them from blocking or throttling content for competitive reasons.

The vote comes after the FCC

received an unprecedented four million comments, and after President Barack Obama urged the agency to adopt rules enshrining the concept of "net neutrality."

The plan prohibits service providers from blocking lawful content or slowing one service such as streaming video operator Netflix, to support a rival like Hulu.

But the years-long battle may not end with the FCC vote. The ruling is likely to face fresh court challenges, and the Republican-controlled Congress could seek to overturn or modify the regulations.

Critics say the plan amounts to old-style regulation based on a 1934 law regulating telephone companies, and that the FCC will be hard-pressed to selectively enforce provisions of the law for Internet firms.

Commissioner Ajit Pai, one of the two dissenters, said the plan "marks a monumental shift toward government control of the Internet."

And he warned that taxes and fees

under the law, along with rate regulation, would eventually be applied to broadband, despite promises to the contrary.

"Read my lips: more new taxes are coming, it's just a matter of when," he said.

Dissenting Commissioner Michael O'Rielly called the effort a "power grab" and said it amounted to "back door rate-setting authority."

In a statement issued after the vote, telecom and cable giant Verizon -- which filed the challenge resulting in last year's court ruling -- criticized the decision, saying it would "encumber Internet services with badly antiquated regulations" and would lead to "uncertainty for consumers, innovators and investors."

But Harold Feld at the consumer activist group Public Knowledge, called the vote a win for Internet users.

"It means the Internet is not going to be like your cable service, where the provider decides what package you get and what you can see," Feld told AFP.