

France softens tone on Assad's future

AFP, Paris
The departure of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is no longer necessary before any political transition in the war-torn country, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said in an interview published yesterday.
The comments mark a softening of Paris' position on the Syrian president as attention turns to the fight against the Islamic State group which staged a series of bloody attacks on the French capital last month, killing 130.
"The fight against Daesh is crucial, but it will only be totally effective if all the Syrian and regional forces are united," Fabius told the French regional newspaper Le Progres, using an Arabic acronym for IS.
"How is it possible that Bashar al-Assad is president, he who committed so many atrocities, and who has a large part of the population against him?" he said.
"A united Syria implies a political transition. That does not mean that Bashar al-Assad must leave even



Syrian men carry a victim following reported air strikes by government forces in the town of Jisreen in the rebel-held region of Eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of the capital Damascus, on Friday. At least 35 civilians were killed and dozens wounded in a series of Syrian regime raids on the rebel stronghold east of Damascus, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

NEWS IN brief

Caspian Sea oil rig fire kills 1; 30 missing

AFP, Baku
Thirty oil workers were missing yesterday after the rig they were working on in the Caspian Sea was engulfed by a fire, Azerbaijan's state energy firm SOCAR said. One person was killed in the blaze. SOCAR said in a statement that a storm had on Friday damaged a gas line on the platform causing the fire. Another 32 people were rescued. Bad weather is hampering efforts to control the fire and rescue operations.

Trump leads GOP race: poll

CNN ONLINE
Donald Trump is once again alone at the top of the Republican field, according to the latest CNN/ORC Poll, with 36% of registered Republicans and Republican-leaning independents behind him, while his nearest competitor trails by 20 points. According to the poll, Ted Cruz stands at 16%, former neurosurgeon Ben Carson at 14% and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio at 12%. All other candidates have the support of less than 5% of GOP voters in the race for the Republican Party's nomination for president.

Georgia revokes ex-leader's citizenship

AFP, Tbilisi
Georgia on Friday stripped former leader and reformer Mikheil Saakashvili of his citizenship as he had acquired a Ukrainian passport to serve as governor of the strategic Odessa region. Saakashvili, has angrily condemned the move as aimed at "blocking" him from standing in elections in Georgia. Georgia has issued an arrest warrant for Saakashvili on abuse of power charges that he insists are politically motivated.

Indian FM to travel Pakistan on Dec 8

TNN, New Delhi
Foreign minister Sushma Swaraj will travel to Islamabad on December 8 to attend the Heart of Asia security conference being held there, top government sources here confirmed. She will be accompanied by foreign secretary S Jaishankar. This will be the first significant engagement between the two countries since the Modi-Nawaz meeting in Ufa in July this year.

Twin blasts hits Guwahati

TNN, Guwahati
Assam's capital Guwahati witnessed twin bomb blasts yesterday afternoon. The blasts occurred around 3pm within three minutes of each other at the commercial hub at Fancy Bazar area of the city. According to initial reports, at least two people were injured in the blasts. No group has claimed responsibility so far, but Police said anti-talk Ulfa faction may be behind the act.

'Immediately withdraw troops' Says Ankara after Turkey deploys ground forces inside Iraq

AGENCIES
Baghdad yesterday demanded the immediate withdrawal of forces it said Turkey illegally sent into Iraq, which is struggling to assert its sovereignty while receiving foreign assistance against the Islamic State group.
Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu played down the military activity as "routine rotation activity" and "reinforcement against security risks", while also labelling any misinterpretation as a "provocation".
Turkish newspaper Hurriyet said that Ankara was "establishing a base in the Bashiqa region of Mosul with 600 soldiers".
The troops, which Baghdad said had tanks and artillery, were sent to the camp in Nineveh province, some 80 kilometres from the Turkish border, where Ankara's forces have been training Sunni fighters hoping to retake Mosul from the jihadists.
Turkey has other camps in Iraq, but

WAR ON TERROR
UK carries out second wave of strikes in Syria
Libya risks becoming IS haven: France

'US RUNNING OUT OF BOMBS'

As the US ramps up its campaign against the Islamic State terror group in Iraq and Syria, the Air Force is now "expending munitions faster than we can replenish them," Air Force chief of staff Gen Mark Welsh said in a statement. The bombing campaign has left the US Air Force with what an Air Force official described as munitions depot stocks "below our desired objective." The official told CNN that Air Force is developing plans to ramp up weapons production to replenish its stocks more quickly. More than 20,000 bombs have been used in the campaign, Welsh added.

Turkey downplays Russian sanctions

Seeks alternative sources for energy
AFP, Ankara
Turkey yesterday said it was seeking alternatives to Russian energy as relations with Moscow plunge over the downing of a warplane, with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowing his country will "not collapse" under sanctions.
Moscow has imposed a series of economic sanctions against Ankara after Turkish fighter jets shot down a Russian jet on the Syrian border on November 24, sparking the biggest crisis between the two countries since the Cold War.
Energy-hungry Turkey relies on Russia for 55 percent of its natural gas and 30 percent of its oil, but Erdogan indicated that Ankara is now seeking new suppliers in the wake of the plane crisis referring to Qatar and Azerbaijan.
The Turkish strongman visited Qatar this week and agreed a liquefied natural gas deal, while his Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu travelled to energy-rich Azerbaijan.
Russian President Vladimir Putin has vowed that Turkey will be made to regret the downing of the plane, with the Kremlin announcing wide-ranging sanctions targeting food, tourism and energy sectors.



before the transition, but there must be assurances for the future".
Until now, France, along with Washington and other Western powers fighting IS jihadists have long insisted Assad must step down as part of any political solution to the four-year Syrian conflict.
Paris has been adamant in its opposition to Assad, describing him as a "butcher" of his own people in a civil war that has so far claimed a quarter million lives and created millions of refugees, triggering the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War II.

'Prayers are not enough'

New York Times urges politicians on gun control in front page editorial
INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
The New York Times has run its first front-page editorial for almost a century to brand US politicians' repeated failure to tighten gun controls "a moral outrage and a national disgrace".
The newspaper, one of the most read and well-respected titles in America, published its plea to "end the gun epidemic" yesterday following a shooting massacre that killed 14 people in California.
"It is a moral outrage and a national disgrace that civilians can legally purchase weapons designed specifically to kill people with brutal speed and efficiency," the New York Times editorial said.
"These are weapons of war, barely modified and deliberately marketed as tools of macho vigilantism and even insurrection."
"America's elected leaders offer prayers for gun victims and then, callously and without fear of consequence, reject the most basic restrictions on weapons of mass killing."
Taking aim at the Second Amendment commonly used by the pro-gun lobby to fight the prospect of tighter controls, the newspaper said no right was "unlimited and immune from reasonable regulation".
The New York Times said that although a motive is the focus of the current investigation in San Bernardino, it does not matter to the victims, as it did not matter for those killed in recent massacres in Colorado, Oregon, South Carolina, Virginia, Connecticut and "far too many other places".
"Let's be clear: These spree killings are all, in their own ways, acts of terrorism," it said.

Progress reported on key issue of 'loss and damage'

BBC ONLINE
Negotiators are edging towards a compromise on one of the most divisive issues between countries at the COP21 climate change talks in Paris.
"Loss and damage" is the idea that compensation should be paid to vulnerable states for climate-related events that they cannot adapt to.
The issue has provoked heated arguments and walkouts at previous conferences. But here in Paris, negotiators from the US and small island states are said to be "closer" to an agreement.
While the vulnerable countries believe there are many impacts of climate change that they can adapt to, they have been seeking a mechanism that would compensate them for those events that they cannot cope with. They believe the developed nations bear a responsibility for the losses and damages that might be caused by extreme events in the future. The very idea is anathema to the US and the EU, among others. They are concerned that if liability and compensation were linked to this, it could become a massive legal and financial headache.
Poorer countries have come to COP21 looking to have loss and damage inserted in the legally binding text of the main agreement.
In an effort to find a compromise, the US has been meeting with the AOSIS group, representing 44 small island states.
Speaking at a news conference in Paris on Friday, US lead negotiator Todd Stern said that compensation and liability was a "line we can't cross" but also indicated that progress was being made.
The constructive spirit seems to be leading to a trade-off where the issue of loss and damage will be inserted in the main body of the agreement but the language will rule out issues of compensation.
"I think we can come up with something that allays the fears of the EU and US where liability and compensation is concerned without us giving up any rights that we currently enjoy under existing international agreements," another US negotiator said.



How a 'terrorist' entered US?

TNN, Washington
She was so private and conservative that there are no photographs of her even though she operated a Facebook account under a false name. Even her in-laws never saw her outside a full-faced orthodox burka. And nursing a newborn infant at home didn't stop her from stocking up an arsenal at home, under cover and possibly with help from a husband, who she likely radicalized.
In a dramatic twist to the San Bernardino shooting case that resulted in 35 casualties, including 14 dead, investigators are now focusing on Tashfeen Malik, the 27-year Pakistani wife of Syed Rizwan Farook, who reportedly pledged allegiance to IS on the day of the carnage through a fake Facebook account. The Pakistani media is also reporting that US officials have found Tashfeen had ties to clerics of the Lal Masjid in Islamabad, an extremist hub.
US special envoys are said to have briefed Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in London and demanded action against the extremists, ARY TV reported on Friday, suggesting there was a great deal of panic in the Pakistani government over its coddling of terrorism over many years.
Meanwhile, US investigators are starting to piece together the sequence of events that allowed Tashfeen Malik to infiltrate the US.
Reports say Tashfeen Malik came to the United States in July 2014 on a fiancée (K1) visa after marrying US citizen of Pakistani origin Syed Farook. K1 allows foreigners to come to US to marry the person with whom they are engaged. Like all K1/Fiancee visa applicants, Tashfeen was vetted for extremist connections but there were no red flags, according to the State Department.
Sketchy reports about Tashfeen's background indicates that she lived in Saudi Arabia from the time her father moved there when she was a child. She returned to Pakistan to study pharmacy at the Bahauddin Zakariya University in Multan. It is not clear yet whether she got radicalized here or in Saudi Arabia, or both.
Following Tashfeen's arrival in the US, it appears Farook may also have become radicalized (by her). One co-worker told CBS that the wife definitely radicalized him and he essentially "married a terrorist".
Always devout (according to his father), he also grew a beard, and, according to some reports, got into frequent arguments with co-workers on religion and politics. According to one account, Farook wrangled with a co-worker, a Messianic Jew named Nicholas Thalasinis, who was a strong votary of Israel and frequently criticized Islam. Thalasinis was one of the 14 victims killed in the carnage. They may have gotten into arguments in the days leading up to the carnage and even on the day of the massacre.



Chennai grapples with flood aftermath

AFP, Chennai
Residents in India's southern Tamil Nadu state yesterday were grappling with the aftermath of devastating floods as authorities stepped up relief work following the worst deluge in decades that killed over 250 people.
Thousands of people in Chennai took to the mud-filled streets to buy essentials as authorities worked to restore communication and road networks after Tuesday's record rains worsened weeks of flooding, leaving hundreds of thousands of residents marooned in the state capital.
Residents jostled at grocery stores, petrol stations and cash machines, with the city reeling under a severe shortage of supplies, including drinking water, after the rains finally stopped on Thursday.
Mobile communication services were badly hit by damage to power infrastructure and a shortage of fuel. The authorities said shortages of essential goods will start to ease as road and rail links are restored and dozens of special trains were running to bring in relief material.
Chennai's international airport was opened for relief flights, four days after planes and the runway were submerged. Officials hope commercial services will resume today.
Hundreds of flood-hit cars and motorcycles remained piled up in the streets of Chennai, which were coated with a thick layer of mud.
Forecasters expect dry weather next week, ending a long spell of torrential rain. Experts blamed poor urban planning for the devastation in India's fourth-largest city, home to nearly 4.6 million people, which has grown rapidly in the last few decades to become a major IT and automobile hub.



India's state-run Press Information Bureau has faced online mockery after tweeting an edited image of PM Narendra Modi (right) surveying deadly Chennai floods. The bureau on Friday initially retweeted the prime minister's photo of himself looking through a plane window, with submerged fields and buildings visible (left). Hours later, they tweeted the same image again, but with a much clearer scene crudely pasted on to the window. The tweet was deleted but not in time to prevent social media ridicule.

PHOTO: BBC