

BREXIT DEAL

Cameron in last-ditch EU wrangle

David Cameron faces last-minute wrangling over his EU reforms ahead of a crunch summit today. Poland and three other countries are reported to be still resisting welfare curbs while France is thought to be against financial regulation changes.

But Germany's Angela Merkel said a lot of his demands were justified. Cameron is working on a separate plan to boost UK sovereignty aimed at getting sceptical Tories, including Boris Johnson, to get behind his reform deal.

Johnson - who is being touted as a possible leader of the out campaign - has met Cameron at Downing Street. "I'll be back," he told reporters yesterday as he left Number 10, adding: "No deal, as far as I know."

The London mayor, who is "pivotal" to Cameron's plans, would keep the PM waiting until he had returned from the summit before announcing which camp he would support, although his "no deal" comment was not thought to be a reference to his own concerns about sovereignty.

Sources close to Johnson say his decision on whether to back remaining or leaving the EU is "very finely balanced". They say the decision by Cameron to try and sell his proposed deal to Johnson underlines how crucial he is likely to be if the prime minister is to win the referendum.

"They are pretty determined to get him on board," the source added. Cameron's sovereignty plan is expected to suggest extra powers for the UK Supreme Court to protect UK law from challenges from the European Court of Justice, to assert the primacy of UK law over Brussels.



Smoke billows following reported air strikes by Syrian government forces on the town of Arbin in the eastern Ghouta region, a rebel stronghold east of the capital Damascus, yesterday. Inset, Aid trucks line a road before their departure for Damascus.

PHOTO: AFP

US planned cyber attack on Iran: NYT

REUTERS, Washington

The United States had a plan for an extensive cyber attack on Iran in case diplomatic attempts to curtail its nuclear program failed. The New York Times reported on Tuesday, citing a forthcoming documentary and military and intelligence officials.

Code-named Nitro Zeus, the plan was aimed at crippling Iran's air defenses, communications systems and key parts of its electrical power grid, but was put on hold after a nuclear deal was reached last year, the Times said.

The plan developed by the Pentagon was intended to assure President Barack Obama that he had alternatives to war if Iran moved against the United States or its regional allies, and at one point involved thousands of US military and intelligence personnel, the report said. It also called for spending tens of millions of dollars and putting electronic devices in Iran's computer networks, the Times said.

US intelligence agencies at the same time developed a separate plan for a covert cyberattack to disable Iran's Fordo nuclear enrichment site inside a mountain near the city of Qom, the report said.

The Times said it conducted separate interviews to confirm the outlines of the program, but that the White House, the Department of Defense and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence all declined to comment, saying that they do not discuss planning for military contingencies.

There was no immediate response to a request by Reuters for comment from the Pentagon.

The existence of Nitro Zeus was revealed during reporting on a documentary film called "Zero Days" showed

Call for no-fly zone grows

Russia rubbishes call; Turkey vows to keep shelling Kurds

AGENCIES

German Chancellor Angela Merkel called the situation in Syria "unacceptable" and renewed her call for a no-fly zone to protect civilians.

"The current situation remains unacceptable and it would be helpful if there was an area in Syria over which nobody could fly attacks," Merkel told the Bundestag lower house of parliament in a speech.

She said a no-fly zone, agreed between Syrian forces and anti-government rebels, would save lives and help the political process in Syria.

Meanwhile, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has criticized the United States for not backing Turkey's proposals to establish a no-fly zone in Syria.

Erdogan said a no-fly would have prevented Russia's air campaign in the region and thwarted thousands of civilian deaths.

Turkey has long pressed for a safe zone, backed up by a no-fly zone, inside Syria and has warned Kurdish forces it will not allow them to seize Azaz, which is held by rebel forces.

A senior Russian diplomat has shrugged off Merkel's proposal, saying it can only be done with Damascus' consent.

Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov said in remarks carried by the Interfax news agency yesterday that any no-fly zone would need to be approved by the Syrian government and endorsed by the UN Security Council.

Meanwhile, Erdogan yesterday vowed Turkey would not allow the creation of a Kurdish stronghold in northern Syria, saying there was no question of Turkish forces stopping their bombardment of Syrian Kurdish fighters.

Turkey on Tuesday called for foreign ground forces to deploy in Syria, part of a longstanding push by the Nato member for a more robust response to the conflict.

Earlier, Turkey Deputy Prime Minister Yalcin Akdogan said his country wants a secure strip of territory 10 km deep on the Syrian side of its border, including the town of Azaz, to prevent attempts to "change the demographic structure" of the area.

Turkey has accused the Kurdish militia of pursuing "demographic change" in northern Syria by forcibly displacing Turkmen and Arab communities. Ankara ultimately fears the creation of an independent Kurdish state occupying contiguous territories currently belonging to Iraq, Syria and



SYRIA CRISIS

UN aid arrives in besieged town

BBC ONLINE

The first of several convoys carrying badly-needed aid to besieged areas of Syria has arrived at its destination.

Thirty-five trucks have entered the rebel-held town of Muadhmiya, near the Syrian capital Damascus, the Syrian Red Crescent told the BBC.

Aid is heading as well to Madaya and Zabadani, also near the capital, and to the pro-government northern villages of Foah and Kefraya.

Almost 500,000 people live in besieged areas in Syria, according to the UN. The deliveries are part of an agreement that world powers hope will lead to a "cessation of hostilities" by Friday. The agreement, approved by the 17-member International Syria Support Group (ISSG), does not apply to the fight against Islamic State or al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate.

However, offensives by Syrian government forces and Kurdish militia fighters on rebel-held areas of the northern province of Aleppo have dimmed hopes for a truce.

Some 100 trucks left Damascus earlier yesterday, carrying food, non-food items, medical equipment and medicine.

A spokesman for the Syrian Arab Red Crescent told the BBC many Syrians were desperate for basic supplies.

Two more places - Kafr Batna and Deir al-Zour - are expected to receive aid later in the week.

Humanitarian supplies reached some of the areas last month amid reports of people starving.

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On Tuesday, UN special envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura said it was the "duty" of the Syrian government to allow aid to reach whoever needed it.

NEWS IN brief

- WHO launches \$56m Zika response plan**
AFP, Geneva
- The World Health Organization yesterday released its initial response plan to the Zika virus outbreak, launching a funding appeal for the \$56 million (50 million euros) operation. The unprecedented outbreak of the virus, first discovered in Uganda in 1947, has become a global concern, with Zika now strongly suspected of causing two serious neurological disorders, microcephaly and Guillain-Barre syndrome.**
- Egyptian journalist Heikal dies at 92**
AFP, Cairo
- Veteran Egyptian journalist Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, one of the Arab world's most prominent political commentators, died yesterday aged 92, state media reported. Heikal served as editor-in-chief of state-owned daily Al-Ahram from 1957 to 1974, and under his tenure it was considered the region's newspaper of record. He had been ill for three weeks, and suffered fluid in his lungs and kidney failure, Al-Ahram reported on its**
- IS attack on Yemen base kills 14 troops**
AFP, Aden
- A suicide bomber killed at least 14 soldiers in Aden yesterday, in the latest attack on Yemen's second city claimed by jihadists of the Islamic State group. The bomber, who was disguised as a soldier, attacked the Ras Abbas camp in the west of Aden. The troops were attending a training session run by Sudanese forces of the Saudi-led coalition, another military source said.**

Apple rejects FBI order to crack IS gunman's phone

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Apple's CEO Tim Cook has hit out at a court order that would force the company to write software allowing the FBI to crack encryption on its devices.

In a letter published on the company's website on Wednesday, Cook said the move would set a dangerous precedent and have implications for the privacy of its customers.

The US government wants to crack encryption software on a phone belonging to one of the San Bernardino attackers, Syed Farook, but Apple says doing so will compromise security on devices belonging to other customers.

"Compromising the security of our personal information can ultimately put our personal safety at risk. That is why encryption has become so important to all of us," Cook said in the letter.

The FBI wants software that bypasses the usual self-destruct mechanism that erases data when someone enters the wrong password too many times. Codebreakers want the ability to use as many combinations as possible at the same time to find one that lets them access the phone.

Cook said that releasing encryption-breaking techniques would create a back door that would roll back decades of security advancements in technology.

REFUGEE CRISIS

Austria sets asylum limit

AFP, Vienna

Austria yesterday announced a daily limit for the number of asylum requests as eastern EU members set a mid-March deadline for a German-backed plan on Turkey sealing its borders to migrants to bear fruit.

On the eve of an EU summit, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel meanwhile urged a "common stance" in the 28-nation bloc, saying that the Turkey plan "offers a good solution".

The Austrian government announced a daily cap of 80 asylum claims and said it would grant entry to a daily total of 3,200 migrants seeking asylum in a neighbouring country, effective Friday.



Indian activists shout slogans against Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and the late Kashmiri separatist Mohammed Afzal Guru at a protest outside the university in New Delhi, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

China sends missiles to contested island

Say US, Taiwan; Obama urges restraint

REUTERS, Taipei/washington

China has deployed an advanced surface-to-air missile system to one of the disputed islands it controls in the South China Sea, Taiwan and US officials said, ratcheting up tensions even as US President Barack Obama urged restraint in the region.

Taiwan defence ministry spokesman Major General David Lo told Reuters yesterday the missile batteries had been set up on Woody Island. The island is part of the Paracels chain, under Chinese control for more than 40 years but also claimed by Taiwan and Vietnam.

A US defence official also confirmed the "apparent deployment" of the missiles, first reported by Fox News.

US Secretary of State John Kerry said the United States expected to have "very serious" talks with China about militarization of the South China Sea.

The Chinese defence ministry told Reuters in a statement that defence facilities on "relevant islands and reefs" had been in place for many years, adding that the latest reports about missile deployment were nothing but "hype".

China claims most of the South China Sea, through which more than \$5 trillion in global trade passes every year, and has been building runways and other infrastructure on artificial islands to bolster its title.

The United States has said it will continue conducting "freedom of navigation patrols" by ships and aircraft to assure unimpeded passage through the region, where Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and Taiwan have rival claims.



JNU sedition row boils over

Lawyers beat up arrested student in court

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian student leader arrested on a controversial sedition charge was attacked yesterday when police brought him into court, as anger over a case that has sparked mass protests boiled over.

An AFP correspondent saw men inside the court set upon Kanhaiya Kumar, who was arrested on Friday over a rally at Delhi's prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University where anti-India slogans were chanted.

The 32-year-old student union leader's arrest has sparked a major row over freedom of expression in India, where some rights campaigners say the Hindu nationalist government is using the British-era sedition law to clamp down on dissent.

Sedition carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment and convictions are rare. Kumar denies he was among those chanting anti-India slogans at last Tuesday's rally to mark the 2013 hanging of Kashmiri separatist Mohammed Afzal Guru over a deadly 2001 attack on the Indian parliament.

The student leader was yesterday sent to judicial custody until March 2. Amnesty International called for the immediate release of Kumar and S A R Geelani, a former Delhi University lecturer arrested Tuesday on the same charge in connection with another event marking Guru's death.

Trump won't be president

Says Obama, claims Republican campaign rhetoric troubling to outside world

AGENCIES

US President Barack Obama on Tuesday hammered home his belief that Republican White House hopeful Donald Trump would not be elected, knocking his reality show past and penchant for drawing media attention.

"I continue to believe that Mr Trump will not be president. And the reason is because I have a lot of faith in the American people. And I think they recognise that being president is a serious job," he told reporters in California.

"It's not hosting a talk show or a reality show. It's not promotion. It's not marketing. It's hard," he said on the sidelines of a summit with leaders and representatives of 10 Southeast Asian nations.

"It's not a matter of pandering and doing whatever will get you in the news on a given day. And sometimes it requires you making hard decisions, even when people don't like it," Obama continued. He also noted the need to be "able to work with leaders around the world in a way that reflects the importance of the office."

"I think foreign observers are troubled by some of the rhetoric that's been taking place in these Republican primaries and Republican debates," he said.

"He may up the ante in anti-Muslim sentiment, but if you look at what other Republican candidates have said, that's pretty troubling too," Obama added.

Obama reiterated his confidence that ultimately Americans would reject billionaire Trump.

The 69-year-old Trump was scornful of Obama's remarks, reports AFP. "This man has done such a bad job, he has set us back so far," the real estate magnate said in a



Barack Obama



Donald Trump