

FIGHT AGAINST IS IN LIBYA

France waging 'secret war'

REUTERS, Paris

French special forces and intelligence commandos are engaged in covert operations against Islamic State militants in Libya in conjunction with the United States and Britain, the French newspaper Le Monde reported yesterday.

It said President Francois Hollande had authorized "unofficial military action" by both an elite armed forces unit and the covert action service of the DGSE intelligence agency in the conflict-ridden North African state, which has two rival governments and largely ungoverned desert spaces.

What Le Monde called "France's secret war in Libya" involved occasional targeted strikes against leaders of the ultra-radical Islamist group, prepared by discreet action on the ground, to try to slow its growth in Libya.

The defense ministry declined comment on the substance of Le Monde's story but a source close to Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said he had ordered an investigation into "breaches of national defense secrecy" to identify the sources of the report.

Hollande said that France was at war with Islamic State after it claimed responsibility for a wave of attacks on bars, restaurants, a concert hall and the national soccer stadium in Paris on Nov 13 last year, killing 130 people.

Le Monde said specialist bloggers had reported sightings of French special forces in eastern Libya since mid-February. It quoted a senior French defense official as saying: "The last thing to do would be to intervene in Libya. We must avoid any overt military engagement, but act discreetly."



Migrants cry next to a border fence at the Macedonian-Greek border in Gevgelija, Macedonia, yesterday. Hungary will hold a referendum on whether to accept mandatory EU quotas for migrants, Prime Minister Viktor Orban said yesterday, protesting that Brussels has no right to "redraw Europe's cultural and religious identity."

PHOTO: REUTERS

MIGRANT CRISIS EU-Turkey summit on March 7

AFP, Brussels

EU leaders will hold a special summit with Turkey in Brussels on March 7 to push forward a deal aimed at stemming the flow of migrants into Europe, a European source said.

"It will be in the form of a working lunch," the source told AFP, confirming the date for a summit that European Union president Donald Tusk had announced last week for early March.

Ankara and Brussels signed a deal in November under which Turkey agreed to curb the number of refugees crossing to Greece in return for three billion euros (\$3.2 billion) in aid and the speeding up of its EU membership bid.

But pressure to enforce the plan is growing as EU officials say thousands of migrants are still crossing the Aegean daily, after more than one million people made the perilous journey to Europe last year.

REPUBLICAN'S RACE TO WHITE HOUSE NOMINATION Trump wins big in Nevada

AFP, Las Vegas

Donald Trump won the Nevada Republican caucuses by a huge margin, chalking up his third straight triumph in the party's presidential nominating process and building momentum ahead of a critical multi-state vote next week.

With about 90 percent of the votes counted, US media gave Trump about 46 percent, with senators Marco Rubio of Florida and Ted Cruz of Texas trailing by more than 20 points in a tight race for second.

"This is an amazing night," Trump told cheering supporters in a victory speech after Tuesday's vote.

"We weren't expected to win too much and now we're winning, winning, winning the country," Trump said. "And soon the country is going to start winning, winning, winning."

The result underscored the enormous challenge Trump's rivals face as the candidates head into next week's all important "Super Tuesday" contests involving 11 states.

CNN and Fox News had Rubio in second place in Nevada with 23.7 percent of

the vote and Cruz in third with 21.5 percent.

An ecstatic Trump said his win was broadly based, including strong support among Hispanics. He angered many early in the campaign by saying Mexico sends rapists across the border to the US.

"We won the evangelicals. We won with young. We won with old. We won with highly educated. We won with poorly educated," he said. "I love the poorly educated. We're the smartest people. We're the most loyal people."

The remaining two candidates for the Republican presidential nomination, retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson and Ohio Governor John Kasich, lagged far behind in the single digits.

The contest was the fourth for the Republican presidential candidates, with Trump also winning in New Hampshire and South Carolina. He came second in Iowa.

Although the caucus in Nevada is not expected to have a significant impact on the overall race -- only 30 delegates or slightly more than one percent of the total are up for grabs -- it was the first contest for the Republicans in the US West.



Russia looks to seal gains with truce

REUTERS, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin's apparent determination to seal a ceasefire in Syria shows Moscow is keen to cement its gains after saving Bashar al-Assad and forcing its way back to the heart of international diplomacy, analysts say.

When Moscow blindsided the West by launching a high-risk air campaign last September, Assad's army was crumbling and the Kremlin was being given the cold shoulder over the conflict in Ukraine.

Now, some five months and 8,000 bombing sorties over Syria later, regime forces backed up by Moscow's firepower have scored a string of victories and Washington is having to deal with Putin to try to solve the world's worst conflict.

"The conversation about a ceasefire comes exactly when Russia can talk from a position of strength after the significant military progress by Assad's forces," Maria Lipman, a Russian political analyst affiliated with George Washington University, told AFP.

"There may be a lot of doubt about whether the ceasefire will hold... but nonetheless we can see in it a desire by Russia to move towards ending its operation and more importantly Russia's attempt to cement its position as a power on a level with the US."

Putin has pledged to do "whatever is necessary" to make sure Assad -- Moscow's longest-

standing Arab ally -- respects the truce deal that he sealed with US President Barack Obama and yesterday went on an offensive with calls to Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel.

Analysts say that the Kremlin strongman is keen to see fighting die down as concerns have spiralled recently of a dramatic escalation in the conflict, especially after fierce Assad opponent Turkey raised the possibility of a ground operation into Syria.

SYRIA CRISIS: DEVELOPMENTS

Lavrov lashes out at Kerry's 'Plan B' threat

Assad assures Putin over ceasefire

Turkey says ceasefire could benefit Assad

Moscow yesterday appeared to clash with Assad over the strongman setting parliamentary elections for April, insisting that a vote should be held once the regime agrees a new constitution with its opponents.

Yesterday, Assad assured Putin of his readiness to respect a ceasefire agreement as the Kremlin strongman launched a diplomatic offensive to get the deal off the ground.

But some US officials have expressed doubt over whether Russia will respect the ceasefire.

Secretary of State John Kerry said Tuesday that Washington was considering a "Plan B" over Syria if Damascus and Moscow do not keep their end of the bargain.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday took a job at the naysayers as Moscow said it was not aware of any "plan B" and warned Washington not to jeopardise the deal.

"Literally on the day when the presidents of Russia and the United States approved a joint initiative on a cessation of hostilities in Syria, voices calling into question the viability of this agreement began to be heard in capitals of US allies and Washington itself," Lavrov said.

"We would like to say openly that a desire for and call to war and not peace can be heard in these voices," state news agency RIA Novosti quoted him as saying.

Meanwhile, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan yesterday accused the West, Russia and Iran of all seeking to further their own interests in Syria and said he feared a US-Russian ceasefire plan would do little more than benefit President Bashar al-Assad.

"If this is a ceasefire that is up to the mercy of Russia, which has brutally attacked the moderate opposition and aligned with Assad under the pretext of fighting Islamic State, we fear that the fire pouring over the innocent people will never stop," Erdogan said.

Beijing deploys jets to contested island

AFP, Washington

China has deployed fighter jets to the same contested island in the South China Sea to which it also has sent surface-to-air missiles, US officials said.

Citing two unnamed US officials, Fox News said US intelligence services had spotted Chinese Shenyang J-11 and Xian JH-7 warplanes on Woody Island in the disputed Parcel Islands chain over the past few days.

Navy Captain Darryn James, a spokesman for US Pacific Command, confirmed the report but noted that Chinese fighter jets have previously used the island.

Woody Island, which is also claimed by Taiwan and Vietnam, has had an operational airfield since the 1990s but it was upgraded last year to accommodate the J-11.

"We are still concerned that the Chinese continue to put advanced arms systems on this disputed territory," James said Tuesday.

Asked about the jets at a regular briefing yesterday, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying neither confirmed nor

denied their existence.

Hua said only that China's activities in the Parcels all fell within the scope of its sovereign territory and were therefore "in accordance with the principles of heaven and earth,

ons there?" she asked.

The deployment was reported as US Secretary of State John Kerry hosted his Chinese counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in Washington.

are looking at the possibility of reaching agreement on a draft resolution and passing it in the near future," Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said at a joint news conference with US Secretary of State John Kerry.

China and the United States have not entirely seen eye to eye on how strong the response should be to North Korea since the nuclear test, Pyongyang's fourth, with Washington urging harsh punitive measures and Beijing emphasizing dialogue.

Neither man was willing to describe what the potential UN Security Council resolution might say and both emphasized a willingness to resume so-called six-party talks on reining in the North's nuclear program.

China, North Korea's most important ally and largest trading partner, has historically been reluctant to put undue pressure on its southern neighbor for fear of destabilizing the country and unleashing a flood of refugees across their border.

SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW



and beyond reproach".

"While you're paying attention to China, have you also paid attention to all the other coastal countries that have occupied China's islands and reefs in the past decades and deployed radar and advanced weap-

Meanwhile, China and the United States signaled on Tuesday they were near agreement on a UN resolution against North Korea for its Jan 6 nuclear test.

"Important progress has been made in the consultations and we

FIGHT AGAINST TERROR FINANCING Black list threat useful: watchdog

AFP, Paris

A threat to add countries who are slow to combat terrorism financing to a public black list has proved effective in pushing them into action, a top executive at an international task force said ahead of G20 talks on the topic opening Friday.

Since the Paris attacks in November, some 50 countries have responded to a new call by the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF) for concrete steps to choke the funding of terrorist organisations, the body's executive secretary, David Lewis, told AFP.

The threat of inclusion on the FATF's black list of governments failing to comply has been instrumental to get this response, he said in an interview, as states tried to avoid being named and shamed.

"The prospect of the FATF taking such action has led to more than 50 countries amending legislation or being in the process of doing so," Lewis said. "So we see countries act very quickly to ensure that they do not get onto that list."

The FATF's current black list includes North Korea, Afghanistan and Syria.

G20 countries asked the FATF to evaluate progress on measures against illicit money flows ahead of their meeting in Shanghai this week which will discuss the fight against terrorism financing. The FATF has found that governments' responses are still woefully inadequate measured against the threats, Lewis said.

NEWS IN brief

US probes 14 new sex-transmitted Zika cases

AFP, Miami

US health authorities are investigating 14 new cases of Zika virus that may have been transmitted sexually, suggesting a larger role than previously considered for the spread of the mosquito-borne virus. The agency reiterated its call for people to use condoms or practice abstinence when living in or traveling to the more than 20 nations and territories in Latin America and the Caribbean affected by the Zika virus.

Fiji cyclone death toll rises to 42

AFP, Suva

The death toll from the Fiji super-cyclone hit 42 yesterday, officials said, with fears it will rise further as relief teams reach isolated communities. Severe tropical cyclone Winston lashed the Pacific nation overnight Saturday, packing wind gusts of 325 kilometres per hour and leaving a trail of destruction.

Morales loses fourth term bid in Bolivia

AFP, La Paz

Bolivia's President Evo Morales, 56, has lost his bid to seek a fourth term, his first direct election defeat since taking office in 2006, according to official results released Tuesday. While refusing to concede until the very end, Morales has promised to respect the official results of Sunday's vote on a constitutional reform that would let him run for re-election to extend his time in office to 19 years. His current term ends in 2020.

Facebook rolls out expanded 'reactions'

AFP, San Francisco

Now you can do more than just "like" something on Facebook.

The social media giant yesterday rolled out its new expanded "reactions" feature which allows its users to express a range of emotions -- "like, love, haha, wow, sad or angry."

Facebook had been testing ways to expand the "like" button amid user complaints that it was not always appropriate, especially in cases of tragic events. "We've been listening to people and know that there should be more ways to easily and quickly express how something you see in News Feed makes you feel," said product manager Sammi Krug in a blog post.

"That's why today we are launching Reactions, an extension of the Like button, to give you more ways to share your reaction to a post in a quick and easy way."

The familiar "like" button with a thumbs-up image will still be there, alongside the new emoticon icons.

"We understand that this is a big change, and want to be thoughtful about rolling this out," Krug said.

The expanded reactions had been tested in several markets and is now rolling out globally, he added.

EX-ENCLAVE PEOPLE Bill placed in Lok Sabha for voting rights

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

A bill was yesterday introduced in the Lok Sabha, the lower House of Indian parliament, to amend two electoral laws to give voting rights to people who became Indian citizens following the exchange of enclaves with Bangladesh.

The Election Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2016, seeks to amend Section 11 of Delimitation Act, 2002 and Section 9 of Representation of the People Act, 1950 to give the voting rights to an estimated 14,000 people who opted for India as their home after the land boundary agreement was enforced last year.

Two more JNU students arrested

AFP, New Delhi

Indian police yesterday said they had arrested two students wanted in a sedition case that has sparked major protests after the pair gave themselves up following nearly two weeks on the run.

Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya surrendered to police at midnight on Tuesday after a court refused to grant them protection from arrest over a rally at their university, at which a group allegedly shouted anti-India slogans.

The pair is accused of being among the organisers of the event at the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. The February 9 rally was held to mark the hanging of Afzal Guru over a deadly attack on India's parliament in 2001. Guru denied plotting the attack carried out by Kashmiri separatists and some say he was not given a fair trial.

They face the same charge as JNU student union leader Kanhaiya Kumar, whose arrest earlier this month has brought thousands of students and

teachers onto the streets.

The two students have said they went into hiding out of fear for their safety following the attack on Kumar, but were ready to face justice.

They accuse Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government of misusing the British-era

SEDITION ROW IN INDIA



Student activist Umar Khalid (C) and Anirban Bhattacharya (L) pictured at JNU campus on Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP

sedition law to crack down on dissent.

Rights activists have long urged India to repeal the law, which carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment

and has frequently been used against critics of the government of the day.

Many were outraged when Kumar was assaulted by right-wing lawyers as he appeared in court for a preliminary hearing last week in an apparently orchestrated attack.

The latest arrests come amid mounting concern about freedom of speech in India. Several authors last year returned a prestigious award in protest at what they called government inaction over the murder of atheist scholars and the lynching of a Muslim man suspected of eating beef.

Khalid and Bhattacharya were scheduled to be produced before the court later yesterday.

The case has caused outrage at both ends of the political spectrum. On Wednesday the student wing of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came out on the streets to defend the government's actions.

The left-leaning Congress party has been particularly vocal in support of the JNU students.