



### Encryption row Obama issues warning to tech leaders

President Barack Obama made a pilgrimage Friday to SXSW -- the tech world's Davos and Woodstock rolled into one -- making a government recruitment pitch even as he fanned a row over encryption. Obama traveled to Austin, Texas, ostensibly to open a "pipeline" of programmers, developers and other tech whiz kids to enter government service. "We need you," Obama said, receiving a rockstar welcome from a young and liberal crowd of 2,100.

But his charm offensive was tempered by the ongoing disagreement between his government and tech firms over the balance between smartphone privacy and national security. Obama's administration has gone to court to try and force Apple to unlock the iPhone of one of the San Bernardino terror attackers, insisting encryption must not be absolute.

Tech firms argue that if the government has access to a "back door" to encrypted information, all pretense of privacy would be lost. Obama told members of his otherwise receptive audience that they should not take an absolutist view on privacy, and warned against "fetishizing our phones above every other value."

"We make compromises all the time," he said, pointing to invasive airport security measures, police search powers and traffic stops. "And this notion that somehow our data is different and can be walled off from those other tradeoffs we make, I believe, is incorrect."

Israeli planes struck Hamas bases in the Gaza Strip early yesterday, killing a child living near one of the targets and injuring his sister, Gaza health ministry spokesman Ashraf al-Qudra said. Yasin Abu Khussa, 10, died in a raid on a base of the group's military wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassem Brigades, at Beit Lahiya in the north of the strip, he said -- one of four strikes the Israeli military said it carried out in response to four rockets fired into Israel on Friday night.

A North Korean submarine is missing, reports said yesterday. The unknown class of vessel had been reportedly operating off the North Korean coast earlier in the week when it disappeared. A South Korean defence ministry told AFP Seoul was investigating the reports. Pentagon officials declined to comment on the matter.

Hezbollah branded 'terror' by Arab League

The Arab League on Friday declared Iran ally Hezbollah a "terrorist" group, after Gulf monarchies adopted the same stance over the Lebanese Shiite movement's support for the regime in Syria's war. It comes a month after Riyadh cut ties with Tehran following demonstrations in which its embassy and a consulate were torched. Friday's decision was endorsed by the majority of foreign ministers of the Arab League body except for Lebanon and Iraq which expressed "reservations."

# Assad's ouster 'red line'

### Says Syria FM; opposition says regime clause stops talks before it starts

AGENCIES

The Syrian government yesterday ruled out discussion of the presidency at peace talks due to begin on Monday, calling President Bashar al-Assad a "red line" and saying the opposition was deluded if thought it could take power in Geneva.

Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualeem confirmed his government's participation in UN-led talks but said they would fail if the opposition had "delusions that they will take power in Geneva that they failed to take in battle".

The government delegation would reject any attempt to include presidential elections on the agenda, he said. "We will not talk to anyone who talks about the position of the presidency. Bashar is a red line, the property of the Syrian people," Moualeem said during a televised news conference in Damascus. "I advise them that if this is their thinking, they shouldn't come to the talks."

"They must abandon these delusions."

Moualeem said the government delegation would travel to Geneva today but would return to Damascus within 24 hours if the other side did not show up.

In response to Moualeem's comments, the main opposition council accused Damascus of halting the talks

**UN PEACE TALKS IN GENEVA**

UN envoy 'has no right' to discuss elections: regime

Kerry says difference must not derail talks

US, Russia to meet on alleged truce violations

before they had started. "I believe he is putting the nails in the coffin of Geneva, this is clear," Monzer Makhous, a member of the opposition High Negotiations Committee, told Al Arabiya Al Hadath TV.

"Moualeem is stopping Geneva before it starts."

UN peace envoy Staffan de Mistura said the talks would cover the formation of a new government, a fresh constitution, and UN-monitored presidential and parliamentary elections within 18 months.

But Muallem said de Mistura had "no right" to discuss future presidential elections or any agenda items. He also rejected the idea of a federal solution to the war.

On a diplomatic push ahead of the talks, US Secretary of State John Kerry said that US and Russian officials were to meet on Syrian opposition charges of truce violations by the regime.

But Kerry, who met Saudi Arabia's King Salman for talks on Syria, said that "perceived" violations of the ceasefire that went into effect on February 27 should not derail the UN-mediated peace talks.

"The level of violence by all accounts has been reduced by 80 to 90 percent, which is very, very significant. And what we want to do is continue to work to reduce these."

### Turkey strikes Kurds in Iraq; 67 killed

AFP, Ankara

Turkey's army yesterday said it killed 67 Kurdish militants in air strikes on camps and ammunition storage sites in neighbouring northern Iraq on Wednesday.

Jets targeted sites at Qandil, Metina, Avasin, Haftanin and Basyan used by Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militants, the armed forces said. Separately, a bomb blast blamed on PKK militants hit an armoured police vehicle near Turkey's border with Iraq on Friday injuring two special force police officers.

A ceasefire between the PKK and the state collapsed in July and attacks on Turkey's security forces have increased amid a surge in violence in the predominantly Kurdish southeast, killing hundreds of people.



## Activists who lit Syria revolt now refugees abroad

AFP, Beirut

When hopeful pro-democracy activists in Syria took to the streets in 2011, they couldn't have imagined that five years later they might end up living as refugees in Europe.

Using smartphones to keep up with the news from camps and relatives' homes thousands of kilometres (miles) away, they mourn a revolt that gave way to an internationalised war.

"When I arrived in Germany, I felt like I was living with an open wound, like I'd lost my soul. I felt guilty for leaving everything behind," says Jimmy Shahinian, a 28-year-old activist with sharp features and jet-black hair.

"We had made a promise that we would change things," he tells AFP by phone from his new home, an apartment he shares with five other young men in Genthin, about 100 kilometres (62 miles) west of Berlin.

Syria's conflict erupted on March 15, 2011, when protesters massed on the streets to demand that President Bashar al-Assad step down.

Activists took the lead, using Facebook and Skype to organise protests, speak with international journalists, and broadcast clever slogans calling for the regime's downfall.

Shahinian, a Christian, joined the movement, and was subsequently jailed and tortured.

When the jihadist Islamic State group took over his native city Raqa in 2013, he began receiving terrifying death threats.

Smuggled into Turkey in an ambulance, Shahinian became one of nearly five million Syrians who have fled the country since the conflict began.

But even in Turkey, where at least three young anti-IS activists have been assassinated in recent months, he felt unsafe.

"I had no choice but to leave," he says.

Ahmad al-Rifai, a 24-year-old who spent months taking photos in opposition strongholds across northern Syria, is also in Germany -- where more than one million asylum requests were registered last year.

He blames the Syrian government but also the international community for the transformation of the revolt into a war that has killed 270,000 people.

"In the good old days, the people would decide when and where to protest, or when to go on strike," Rifai says.

"Now, the Syrian people have no decision-making power at all. Syria has become a playing field for major powers like Russia, the United States and Iran."



South Korean and US soldiers take positions during an annual joint military landing exercise in Pohang, on South Korea's southeast coast, yesterday. Participation in the joint exercises -- known as Key Resolve and Foal Eagle -- has been bumped up this year to involve 300,000 South Korean and around 17,000 US troops, as well as strategic US naval vessels and air force assets. PHOTO: AFP

## NEWS IN brief

### Israeli air strike kills child in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

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AFP, Seoul

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## 'Hope is future generation'

### Dalai Lama urges edu reform to end human cruelty

AFP, Geneva

The Dalai Lama called Friday for dramatic education reforms to put more emphasis on values such as compassion.

"Frankly speaking, our generation, not much hope," the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader told a packed auditorium in Geneva, lamenting that the 21st century looked as if it would be every bit as bloody and heartless as the 20th.

But, he stressed, "our hope is the future generation, if we start now with education ... that teaches us how to create healthy minds".

Speaking at an event on the sidelines of the UN Human Rights Council alongside other Nobel Peace Prize laureates, he said he and others were working on a "first draft" of a more "holistic" curriculum, which should be ready by the end of the year.

"Basic human nature is compassionate," he insisted, adding, however, that concrete action was needed to help people retain the empathy they naturally displayed as children.

"I'm a Buddhist monk. My daily practice includes prayer," he said, adding though that "I'm quite sceptical, of (whether) prayer (can) bring world peace... Peace must come through action."

The 1989 Nobel laureate, who has been

branded a dangerous separatist by Beijing despite his repeated statements condemning violence, reiterated Friday his assertion that Tibet should remain part of China.

Also on the podium Friday was Tawakkol Karman, a 37-year-old Yemeni journalist and activist who won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for her participation in the Arab Spring uprisings.

She too emphasised the importance of non-violent resistance, stressing that the peaceful Arab Spring protests had initially been massively successful, forcing out several long-time dictators.

"Every great revolution is followed by a counter-revolution..."

And we are facing a very ugly counter-revolution," said Karman, whose country has since been plunged into civil war. But she remained hopeful: "In the end, who will win? The people."

Karman meanwhile voiced harsh criticism of the international community for not doing more to support the peaceful protesters as oppressive powers cracked down on them, in Yemen, Egypt and especially Syria.

She charged that Western "silence" allowed protests five years ago to spiral into the horrific conflict still ripping Syria apart, and paved the way for extremists like the Islamic State group.



### N Korea vows to wipe out enemies

REUTERS, Pohang

US and South Korean troops staged a big amphibious landing exercise yesterday, storming simulated North Korean beach defences amid heightened tension and threats by the North to annihilate its enemies.

The landing and assault drills on South Korea's east coast were part of eight weeks of joint exercises between the allies which the South has said are the largest ever. The North has denounced the exercises as "nuclear war moves" and threatened to respond with an all-out offensive.

About 55 US marine aircraft and 30 US and South Korean ships, including the USS Bonhomme Richard and USS Boxer, which carry AV-8B Harrier attack jets and V-22 Osprey aircraft, took part in the assault on beaches near Pohang city, the US navy said.

## Machine defeats man

AFP, Seoul

A Google-developed computer programme won its best-of-five match-up with a South Korean Go grandmaster yesterday, taking an unassailable 3-0 lead to score a major victory for a new style of "intuitive" artificial intelligence (AI).

The programme, AlphaGo, took a little over four hours to secure its third consecutive win over Lee Sedol -- one of the ancient game's greatest modern players with 18 international titles to his name.

Lee, who has topped the world ranking for much of the past decade and had predicted an easy victory when accepting the AlphaGo challenge, now finds himself fighting to avoid a whitewash in the two remaining dead rubbers on Sunday and Tuesday.

"I don't know what to say, but I think I have to express my apologies first," a crestfallen Lee told a post-game press conference.

"I apologise for being unable to satisfy a lot of people's expectations. I kind of felt powerless," Lee said, acknowledging that he had "misjudged" the computer programme's abilities.

For AlphaGo's creators, Google DeepMind, victory went way beyond the \$1.0 million dollar prize money, to prove that AI has far more to offer than superhuman number-crunching.

"To be honest, we are a bit stunned and speechless," said a smiling DeepMind CEO Demis Hassabis, who stressed that Lee's defeat in Seoul should not be seen as a loss for humanity.

Previously, the most famous AI victory to date came in 1997 when the IBM-developed supercomputer Deep Blue beat Garry Kasparov, the then-world class chess champion, in its second attempt.



### Brazil president rejects calls to resign over scam

AFP, Brasilia

Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff dug in Friday against a swirling political crisis, rejecting calls to resign and closing ranks with her embattled predecessor, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

With money-laundering charges against Lula adding to the pressure on her administration, Rousseff vehemently defended her mentor.

She said she would even be proud to have him in her cabinet -- a move that could be used to protect the president.

It would also protect him from criminal charges in ordinary court. Under Brazilian law, cabinet ministers can only be tried before the Supreme Court. Some media reported, however, that Lula had refused a cabinet post.

Rousseff is facing an impeachment drive, a bruising recession, a scandal at state oil company Petrobras, and a probe into alleged electoral violations.

But the leftist president said her opponents' calls for her to resign showed they lacked the evidence to remove her through impeachment.

Lula, a powerful former president, was charged with money laundering on Wednesday over his alleged ownership of a luxury condo linked to dirty cash from the Petrobras scandal. Lula denies the charges.

A former steelworker and labor leader, Lula led Brazil through an economic boom from 2003 to 2011.

## Trump's rally called off amid violence

AFP, Chicago

Donald Trump is under fire from rivals who blamed his incendiary rhetoric for a violent outbreak Friday between protestors and supporters at the Republican frontrunner's rally in Chicago.

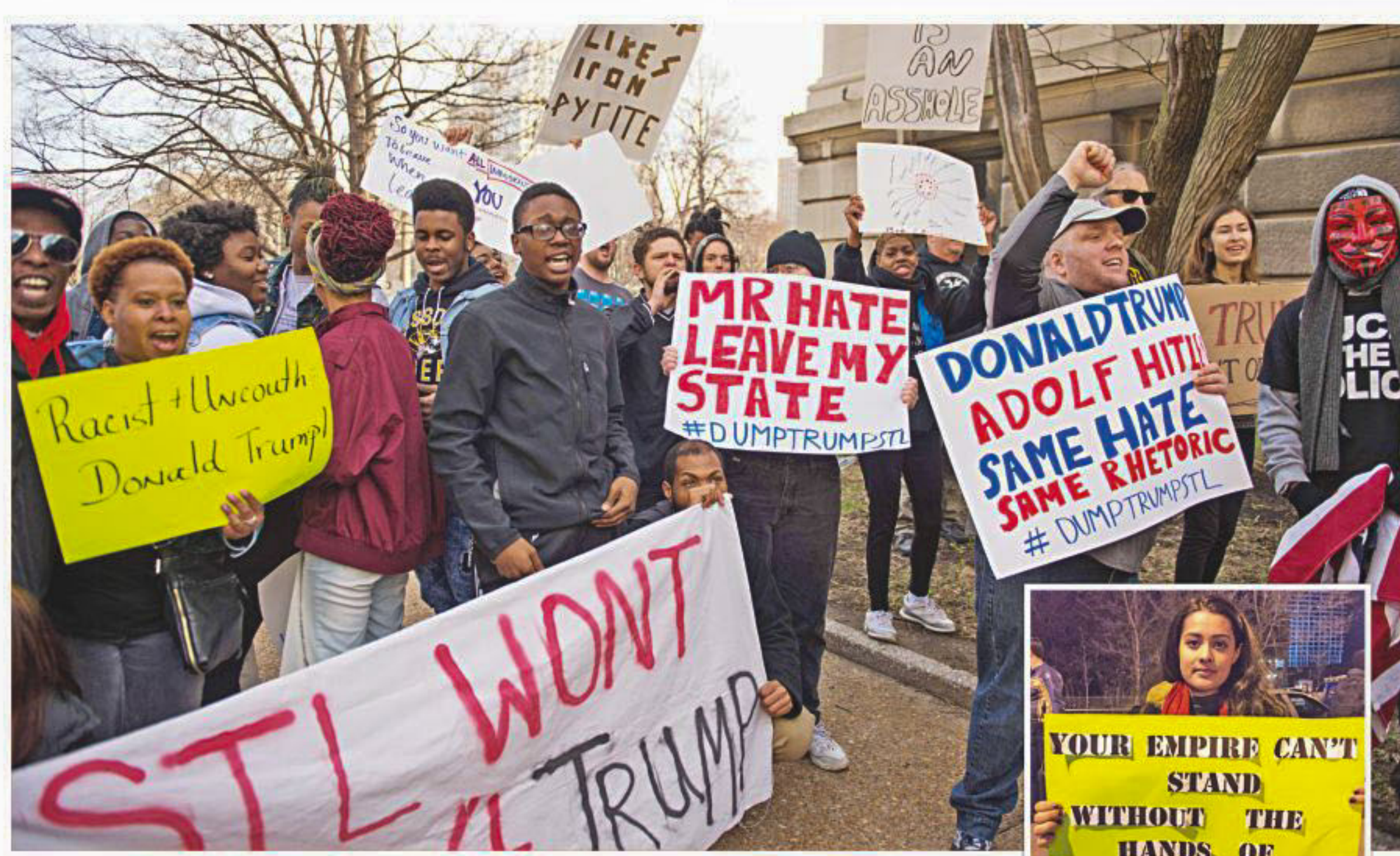
Trump cancelled the event after demonstrators scuffled with his supporters and police struggled to maintain order, with hundreds of protestors showing up.

Thousands of protestors, many of them blacks and Latinos angered by Trump's incendiary anti-immigrant rhetoric, had massed outside and inside the venue in Chicago, mingling with the candidate's supporters.

Pundits said the chaos at the rally was reminiscent of violent protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, also in Chicago, held when the United States was torn apart by opposing views on the Vietnam War.

A Trump rally scheduled for Sunday in Cincinnati, Ohio has also been cancelled, with the local spokesman for the campaign telling US media that Secret Service supporting the campaign could not complete preparation work in time.

The chaotic scenes come just days before the states of Florida, Ohio, Illinois and Missouri vote in the party primaries on March 15. Many in the party see next Tuesday's votes as the last best chance to derail the insurgent candidacy of the billionaire mogul, who has so far won 15 of 24 primary races.



Anti-Trump protesters gather prior to a Trump Rally at the Peabody Opera House in St. Louis, Missouri, on Friday. Inset, A woman holds a banner protesting the GOP frontrunner's anti-immigrant stance. PHOTO: AFP