



Robinson named first US female combatant chief

BBC ONLINE

US Defence Secretary Ash Carter has nominated the first female in US military history to lead a combatant command.

General Lori Robinson has been nominated to lead the US Northern Command, Carter announced on Friday.

The position is one of the most senior in the US military and must be confirmed by the Senate.

She is currently commander for the Pacific Air Forces and enrolled in the Air Force in 1982.

"General Robinson, it just so happens, would also be the first ever female combatant commander," Carter said at an event in Washington hosted by Politico.

"That shows yet another thing - which is that we have, coming along now, a lot of female officers who are exceptionally strong. And Lori certainly fits into that category."

The US Northern Command oversees all of North America.

US media reported that Ms Robinson would be the likely choice in January. If appointed, she would replace Admiral Bill Gortney, who has had the position since 2014.

In December of last year Carter opened all combat roles in the US military to women.

"America's force of the future," he said, must be able to benefit from the "broadest possible pool of talent".

The move opened up about 220,000 positions to women.

Carter also announced Army General Vincent Brooks, the commanding general of US Army Pacific, would be nominated to become the next commander of US Forces in South Korea.



People take shelter inside a shop after an explosion on the pedestrian Istiklal Avenue in Istanbul, Turkey yesterday. Inset, a man is helped by emergency services. Four people, including the bomber, were killed and 20 others injured in a suicide attack on the major shopping street. The blast comes six days after a suicide car bombing in the capital Ankara which killed 35 people.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



It's a major blow to IS

Says French minister; Interpol urges extra vigilance at border controls

AFP, Paris

The arrest of Salah Abdeslam, the last major suspect wanted in connection with the November jihadist attacks in Paris, has dealt a "major blow" to the Islamic State group in Europe, a French minister said yesterday.

"The operations of the past week have enabled us to incapacitate several individuals who are clearly extremely dangerous and totally determined," Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said. "We will win the war against terrorism by acting without truce or let-up," he said.

Abdeslam, Europe's most wanted man who was captured in Brussels' gritty Molenbeek neighbourhood on Friday, allegedly helped plan the November 13 attacks in Paris claimed by IS in which 130 people were killed.

Cazeneuve was speaking after President Francois Hollande led a "defence council" with key cabinet ministers and security

officials to follow up on Abdeslam's arrest.

He praised the Belgian authorities for their "flawless" commitment to capturing Abdeslam as well as the "good cooperation" between France and Belgium in the operation.

Meanwhile, Interpol yesterday urged "extra vigilance at border controls".

"The capture of the 26-year-old Belgian-born French national... may encourage any accomplices to attempt to flee Europe, or elsewhere," the world police body warned its 190 member countries.

The lawyer of Abdeslam said the suspect will oppose his transfer to France and has been formally charged by the Belgian examining magistrate in connection with the November massacre.

"He will refuse his extradition at this stage," Sven Mary told reporters at federal police headquarters in Brussels, adding that his client had now been formally charged.



Footage shows Abdeslam (in a white hoodie) being dragged away by armed police officers.

PHOTO: MAIL ONLINE

MIGRANT CRISIS Amnesty hits out at EU over Turkey deal

BBC ONLINE

Amnesty International has accused European leaders of "double speak" over a deal to return migrants to Turkey.

The leading human rights charity said the deal failed to hide the EU's "dogged determination to turn its back on a global refugee crisis".

Under the plan, migrants arriving in Greece will be sent back to Turkey if they do not apply for asylum or their claim is rejected. In return, Turkey will receive aid and political concessions.

The State Department said the US views the deal to curb the influx of migrants into Europe as an "important step."

"We strongly endorse action to shut down the illegal smuggling operations that prey on and exploit vulnerable migrants," State Department spokesman John Kirby said Friday.

China offers drought relief for Mekong nations

ASIA NEWS NETWORK ONLINE

China has embarked on an unprecedented "water diplomacy" mission to alleviate the ongoing drought in Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam by discharging massive quantities of fresh water downstream from one of its dams in its southern region.

The emergency water supply from the Chinese Jinghong hydropower station will last one month from March 15 until April 10, marking the first time China has informed downstream countries in advance of its water-discharge schedule, said Nuanla-or Wongpinitwarodom, director of the Mekong River resources management office at the Department of Water Resources.

China had sent letters to all four member-countries of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) of its water-discharge plan to help ease the shortage of fresh water in downstream countries. The MRC consists of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, while China and Myanmar are dialogue

partners.

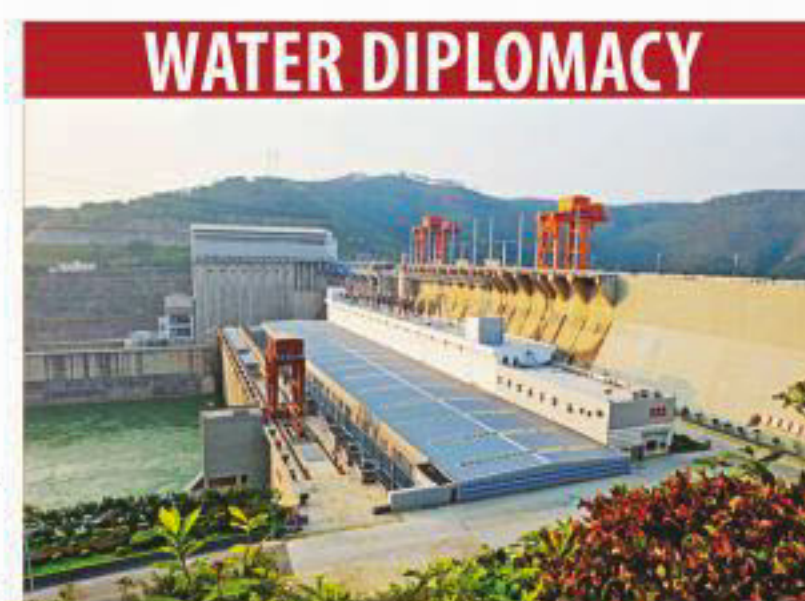
China has never before informed MRC countries of its water resource management plan, she said, adding Chinese authorities also had expressed an intention to work more closely with downstream countries to solve their problems.

"Previously, we only learned of changes in the water level when told by residents in Chiang Saen [which borders Laos and other neighbouring countries]," said Nuanla-or.

China also assigned its diplomats in those countries to inform each government of the water discharge.

According to the Thai official, China has

become more transparent in managing the cross-border water resources. Previously, downstream countries were critical of the lack of Chinese cooperation and transparency in water resources management as many dams were built upstream in Chinese territories, affecting water flow downstream.



WATER DIPLOMACY

Risk of nuclear war in Europe growing

Says Russian ex-minister referring Ukraine crisis

REUTERS, Brussels

The East-West standoff over the Ukraine crisis has brought the threat of nuclear war in Europe closer than at any time since the 1980s, a former Russian foreign minister warned yesterday.

"The risk of confrontation with the use of nuclear weapons in Europe is higher than in the 1980s," said Igor Ivanov, Russia's foreign minister from 1998 to 2004 and now head of a Moscow-based think-tank founded by the Russian government.

While Russia and the United States have cut their nuclear arsenals, the pace is slowing. As of January 2015, they had just over 7,000 nuclear warheads each, about 90 percent of world stocks, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

"We have less nuclear warheads, but the

risk of them being used is growing," Ivanov said at a Brussels event with the foreign ministers of Ukraine and Poland and a US lawmaker.

Nato's secretary general Jens Stoltenberg has warned Russia of intimidating its neighbors with talk about nuclear weapons, publicly voicing concerns among Western officials.

Ivanov blamed a missile defense shield that the United States is setting up in Europe for raising the stakes.

Part of that shield involves a site in Poland that is due to be operational in 2018. This is particularly sensitive for Moscow because it

brings US capabilities close to its border. However, the United States and Nato say the shield is designed to protect Europe against Iranian ballistic missiles and is neither targeted at Russia nor capable of downing its missiles.



Igor Ivanov



Migrants warm themselves around a bonfire, at a makeshift camp at the Greek-Macedonian border, near the village of Idomeni yesterday where thousands of refugees are stranded.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

UN condemns N Korea missile launches

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Friday strongly condemned North Korea over its ballistic missile launches and demanded Pyongyang to refrain from further violations of UN resolutions. Backed by China, Pyongyang's ally, the council said in a unanimous statement that "all these launches were unacceptable" and "constituted a clear violation of UN Security Council resolutions."

Prince Harry arrives in quake-hit Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Britain's Prince Harry arrived in Nepal yesterday for the start of a five-day visit to meet with survivors of last year's devastating earthquake and Gurkha soldiers who helped in rescue efforts. The prince was welcomed at Kathmandu airport by Nepali government officials on his first visit to the country, which comes as Nepal and Britain mark 200 years of joint relations.

UN envoy visits Yemen for talks with rebels

AFP, Sanaa

UN envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed arrived yesterday in Yemen's rebel-held capital to try to restart peace talks between Iran-backed insurgents and the internationally recognised government. The Mauritanian diplomat met Ali Hajar, a foreign affairs representative of the Huthi rebels, Sanaa airport director Khaled al-Shayef told AFP.

Travelling library!

Two Indians on a road trip to promote books

BBC ONLINE

What is the most amount of books you have carried while travelling? Whatever your record, it's unlikely that you have beaten Satabdi Mishra and Akshaya Ravtaray.

The two friends are on an ambitious 10,000 km (6,213 miles) road trip in their minivan, and have taken an eye-popping 4,000 books with them.

"They say they are on a "mission" to promote book reading across towns, cities and villages because they believe that "more Indians need to read books".

The duo began their journey in early December 2015 from Bhubaneswar in the eastern state of Orissa.

The BBC caught up with them in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh which was the 16th stage of their trip.

It has been an tiring but exhilarating ride for the two, who told the BBC they "achieved what we set out to do".

They have met hundreds of people, ranging from writers to book lovers to first-time book buyers.

"We have sold around 2,000 books so far. And we keep getting our stock replenished

in big cities," Mishra says. But selling books is not their primary goal. They also lend them out, and say their biggest ambition is actually to engage people in conversations about the importance of reading.



Muslim cowherds hanged to death in India

REUTERS, New Delhi

Police have arrested five suspects in the hanging to death of two Muslims herding cattle in India, in an incident that led to violent protests sparked an outbreak of violence in the eastern state of Jharkhand amid reports the attackers were Hindu vigilantes.

The bodies of the two cattle traders were found hanging from a tree in Jharkhand's Latehar district on Friday, stoking violence that injured six policemen, the Hindustan Times reported yesterday.

Mazlum Ansari, 32, and Imteyaz Khan, the 13-year-old son of another cattle trader, were residents of Balumath, 110 km from Ranchi, it said. The area saw clashes between Hindus and Muslims over the eating of beef three months ago. "Police have arrested five persons and are looking for others involved in the incident," Latehar police chief Anoop Birtharay said by telephone.

US PRESIDENTIAL RACE

Romney to vote for Cruz in primary

AFP, Washington

Mitt Romney, the 2012 Republican nominee for the White House, said Friday he will vote for Ted Cruz in next week's Utah primary, all but endorsing the arch-conservative senator as he seeks to derail Donald Trump's nomination bid.

Romney, who has led the charge among party elites to prevent the celebrity billionaire from becoming the Republican standardbearer, said on Facebook that he was encouraging others to vote for Cruz as a firewall against what he called "Trumpism."

"Through the calculated statements of its leader, Trumpism has become associated with racism, misogyny, bigotry, xenophobia, vulgarity and, most recently, threats and violence. I am repulsed by each and every one of these," Romney said.

"The only path that remains to nominate a Republican rather than Mr. Trump is to have an open convention," Romney added, referring to the rare situation in which delegates gather for their party convention with no candidate having the majority needed to seize the nomination outright.



Mitt Romney

Ted Cruz