

US president calls for strong, united Europe

Announces more troops to Syria to help rebels fight IS

AFP, Hanover

US President Barack Obama made an impassioned plea for European unity in the face of rising populism and scepticism yesterday, warning this was a "defining moment" for the continent.

"A strong and united Europe is a necessity for the world," Obama said in the German city of Hanover, in a landmark speech that carried the tone of a blunt challenge to friends.

Visiting a region reeling from a migration crisis, economic stagnation and facing the prospect of Britain abandoning the European Union, Obama warned that "progress is not inevitable".

Contrasting the prosperity of Europe today with the wars and hardship of the last century, Obama called on Europeans to reject the "us-versus-them" politics that has fuelled the rise of the far right in countries from Poland to France.

"Perhaps you need an outsider, somebody who is not European, to remind you of the magnitude of what you have achieved," he said, a day after the anti-immigration far-right triumphed in a presidential vote in Austria.

Obama was in Germany for talks with Chancellor Angela Merkel, and both were to be joined later by the leaders of Britain, France and Italy in a meeting expected to focus on the fight against the IS in Syria and Iraq.

The US president also said the US would send up to 250 more special forces military trainers to Syria to help rebels fight Islamic State group jihadists.

"A small number of American special operations forces are already on the ground in Syria and their expertise has been critical as local forces have driven ISIL out of key areas," he said, using an alternative acronym for the militant group.

"So, given the success, I have approved the deployment of up to 250 additional US personnel in Syria, including special forces, to keep up this momentum," added Obama.

In an interview with the BBC aired Sunday, Obama said that "it would be a mistake for the United States, or Great Britain, or a combination of Western states to send in ground troops and overthrow the Assad regime."

He urged all parties "to sit down at the table and try to broker a transition".



A civilian looks out from a window of a damaged building at the site of a car bomb blast near the revered Shia shrine of Sayyida Zeinab in Damascus, Syria yesterday. At least seven people were killed and twenty people wounded in the blast. The bomb struck Al-Diyabiyah, a town that serves as one of the gateways for the many pilgrims from around the world who visit the Shia holy site. PHOTO: REUTERS

Kurdish PKK warns Turkey of long fight

AFP, Istanbul

The Kurdish rebel PKK movement is ready to step up its fight against Turkey in response to Ankara's blistering military campaign, its leader warned in a BBC interview released yesterday.

Since the collapse of a two-year ceasefire with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) last year, Turkish government forces have been carrying out operations against the group in the southeast of the country.

PKK leader Cemil Bayik said President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was "escalating this war". "The Kurds will defend themselves to the end, so long as this is the Turkish approach -- of course the PKK will escalate the war," he told the British broadcaster.

Erdogan said this month that 355 members of the security forces had been killed in fighting as well as over 5,000 PKK members -- although this could not be independently verified.

The PKK has been blamed for a string of attacks in Turkey in recent months. Ibrahim Kalin, spokesman for the Turkish presidency, yesterday criticised BBC for the interview with the PKK leadership, saying it was not journalism.

"It is nothing other than indirectly aiding terror propaganda," he said at a weekly press conference.

He asked what the reaction would be if a news agency interviewed Al-Qaeda jihadists after the London underground bombing in 2005.

The PKK is designated a terror organisation by Turkey, the EU and the United States. Its rebels are accused of trying to create a separate Kurdish state within Turkey -- but Bayik denied it.

Rivals reach 'stop-Trump' deal

AFP, Bridgeport

Ted Cruz and John Kasich have agreed to join forces to try to deny frontrunner Donald Trump the Republican Party's presidential nomination, their campaigns said Sunday.

The sudden alliance, revealed in short statements, arose due to the pressing timing of the Republican party's presidential primary season.

Five states vote today in the Republican race -- Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island -- and Trump leads in all of them.

Trump, a wealthy property developer and reality television star, has pushed quite close to amassing the number of delegates to the party convention in Cleveland in July that would ensure his status as the Republican standard-bearer.

But he is not there yet. And Cruz and Kasich know their only chance to stop him is a contested convention.

A candidate must secure 1,237 delegates to win the Republican nomination outright. Trump leads substantially in the delegate battle, with 846 dele-

gates compared to 563 for Cruz and 147 for Kasich. If Trump is to be denied, uncommitted delegates will have to go to Cruz.

"Having Donald Trump at the top of the ticket in November would be a sure disaster for Republicans. Not only would Trump get blown out by (Hillary) Clinton or (Bernie) Sanders, but having him as our nominee would set the party back a generation," Cruz's campaign manager Jeff Roe said in a statement.

"To ensure that we nominate a Republican who can unify the Republican Party and win in November, our campaign will focus its time and resources in Indiana and in turn clear the path for Governor Kasich to compete in Oregon and New Mexico."

Kasich's team put out a similar statement. A dismissive Trump said on Twitter: "Wow, just announced that Lyin' Ted and Kasich are going to collude in order to keep me from getting the Republican nomination. DESPERATION!"

Some influential party figures such as 2012 nominee Mitt Romney have aligned with a Stop Trump movement, which may or may not be benefiting Trump's chief rival Cruz, an arch-conservative US senator from Texas.



This combination of file photos shows Republican presidential candidates Ted Cruz, Donald Trump and John Kasich. PHOTO: AFP

Afghanistan's Ghani blasts Taliban 'slaves'

REUTERS, Kabul

President Ashraf Ghani said Afghanistan faced a terrorist enemy led by Taliban "slaves" in Pakistan in a sombre speech to parliament yesterday that nonetheless left the door open to resuming peace talks with parts of the Taliban.

Addressing a joint session of the two houses of parliament following a Taliban bomb blast that killed at least 64 people and wounded hundreds in Kabul on Tuesday, Ghani branded the insurgents criminals fighting the legitimate government.

But he stopped short of declaring a state of national emergency, pledging war against radical groups like Islamic State, usually known in Afghanistan as Daesh, or the Haqqani network while suggesting there was still some hope of compromise with at least some Taliban.

"The enemies of Afghanistan are Daesh, al Qaeda, the murderous Haqqani network and some of the Taliban who enjoy shedding the blood of countrymen," he said. He added that the doors of negotiation would remain open for those Taliban ready to stop bloodshed but added: "This opportunity will not be there forever."

He said Taliban leaders sheltering in the western Pakistani cities of Peshawar and Quetta were "slaves and enemies of Afghanistan who shed the blood of their countrymen" and he called on the government in Islamabad to wipe them out.

He did not say whose slaves he thought the Taliban were, but his predecessor, Hamid Karzai, frequently accused Pakistan of harbouring the Taliban and supporting other militant groups such as Haqqani network.



NEWS IN brief

India cancels visa to exiled Uighur leader

REUTERS, New Delhi

India yesterday said it had withdrawn a visa to an exiled Uighur leader whom China has long branded a terrorist, provoking criticism from the opposition that it had buckled to pressure from Beijing. China blames unrest that has killed hundreds of people in its far western province of Xinjiang on Islamist militants looking to establish an independent state for the mostly Muslim Uighur ethnic minority.

Aussie teen charged with terror plot

AFP, Sydney

Australian police yesterday charged a teenager over a "truly chilling and disturbing" planned attack on an Anzac Day service, as people across the nation and in New Zealand honoured their war dead. Reports said the 16-year-old had tried to get hold of a gun over the weekend, and was believed to be planning to target the solemn ceremonies that mark the anniversary of Gallipoli campaign during World War I.

Bombed Brussels metro station reopens

AFP, Brussels

The Brussels metro station hit by a suicide attack last month that killed 16 people reopened yesterday amid tight security, with a memorial board for passengers to write messages for the victims. Bomber Khalid El Bakraoui blew himself up at Maalbeek metro station near the EU headquarters at 0711 GMT on March 22, an hour after two other Islamic State suicide attackers targeted Brussels airport.

'Greedy wives to blame for graft'

AFP, Jakarta

An Indonesian minister has suggested an unusual reason for the scourge of corruption in the graft-ridden country -- men are just trying to please their greedy wives. Indonesia has struggled against graft for years, with the country's vast bureaucracy crippled by corruption. But rather than taking aim at the grasping officials themselves, Religious Affairs Minister Lukman Hakim Saifuddin suggested it was greedy wives who were fuelling corruption.

UN slams North Korea missile launch

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council echoed international condemnation Sunday of a submarine-launched ballistic missile test by North Korea, while US President Barack Obama dismissed Pyongyang's offer of a nuclear moratorium. Saturday's test was the latest in a series of provocative moves by Pyongyang that have further fuelled tensions on the divided Korean peninsula.



Indian paramilitary personnel stand guard to control a queue of voters as they wait to cast their ballots for the fourth phase of West Bengal Assembly polls at a polling station at the North 24 Parganas district on the outskirts of Kolkata yesterday. A total of 1.08 crore voters are expected to exercise their franchise in about 12,500 polling stations. PHOTO: AFP

Jordan queen calls for 'legal' refugee path to Europe

AFP, Lesbos

Jordan's Queen Rania yesterday called for "legal" paths into Europe for refugees, criticising the EU's controversial deal with Turkey which she said endangers lives.

"The deep concern is that many of the refugees...will now start to seek more dangerous routes," Queen Rania said in reference to the EU-Turkey deal agreed in March to stem the migration flow.

"It's absolutely crucial for us to look for legal alternatives and more safe and effective pathways to Europe and areas of safety," she said on the Greek island of Lesbos, the focal point of Europe's greatest migration challenge since World War II.

Under the EU-Turkey deal which went into force on March 20, all migrants whose asylum claims are rejected will be sent back to Turkey. More than 320 people have been expelled

so far, most of them Pakistanis, in expulsions which aid agencies such as Human Rights Watch have described as "abusive", raising questions about the fate of the deportees in Turkey.

Syrian refugees constitute ten percent of the population in Jordan, which counts a refugee camp as its fourth largest "city".

In comparison, wealthy Western countries have pledged fewer than 130,000 resettlement spots, and only around 67,100 people -- a mere 1.39 percent of the refugees -- have made it to their final destinations since 2013, British charity Oxfam said last month.

And last month's closure of borders along the Balkan migrant route has also sparked fears that more asylum-seekers will attempt the dangerous Mediterranean crossing to Italy.



REFUGEE CRISIS

FROZEN FUNDS RULING Iran threatens US with legal action

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday threatened to take legal action in the International Court of Justice against the United States if \$2 billion in frozen funds are "diverted" to compensate victims of attacks.

On Thursday, Tehran said the US Supreme Court's decision to deduct \$2 billion from its frozen assets to compensate American victims of "terror" attacks amounted to theft.

"We hold the US administration responsible for preservation of Iranian funds and if they are plundered, we will lodge a complaint with the ICJ for reparation," Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said.

He was speaking at a joint news conference with visiting Macedonian counterpart Nicolas Poposki. The US Supreme Court ruled on Wednesday that Iran must hand over nearly \$2 billion in frozen assets to survivors and relatives of those killed in attacks blamed on the Islamic republic.

These included the 1983 bombing of a US Marine barracks in Beirut and the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia. The decision affects more than 1,000 Americans.

PHILIPPINES' PRESIDENTIAL POLLS Duterte widens lead despite rape joke

AFP, Manila

A Philippine presidential candidate whose comments about rape provoked an international outcry has emerged as the "clear frontrunner" in the latest opinion survey, pollsters said yesterday.

Rodrigo Duterte sparked revulsion among women's groups, diplomats and the Catholic church when he told an audience that as the local mayor, he should have been at the front of the queue when an Australian missionary was attacked in a 1989 jail riot.

But far from damaging his prospects in next month's presidential vote, the remarks appear to have had little effect, with the latest opinion poll giving him a nine-point lead over his nearest rival.

Analysts say Duterte's profanity-

laced campaign resonates in a chaotic, high-crime society with limited opportunities for a vast underclass working for a tiny elite.

Duterte, the tough-talking mayor of the southern city of Davao, is the "clear frontrunner", research institute Social Weather Stations (SWS) said yesterday of its poll.

"Mayor Duterte has been steadily gaining ground. It's a clear lead. The joke could have affected him in such a way that his score could have even been higher had it not been for that news," SWS spokesman Leo Laroza told AFP.

More than 50 million people in the mainly Catholic nation are qualified to vote on May 9, when Duterte will face off against four other candidates, including the preferred successor of popular outgoing president Benigno Aquino.

