



Russia builds military 'zone of influence'

Says Nato's Stoltenberg
AFP, Berlin

Moscow is seeking to create a "zone of influence through military means", Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg said yesterday, adding that the alliance has observed major and aggressive manoeuvres on the Russian side. "We are observing massive militarisation at Nato borders -- in the Arctic, in the Baltic, from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea," Stoltenberg told Germany daily Bild in an interview. "Russia is trying to build up a zone of influence through military means," he said. "We are registering aggressive, unannounced, large-scale manoeuvres on the Russian side. Therefore we must act," said Stoltenberg, justifying the alliance's decision to deploy battalions to the Baltic states and Poland. "What we are doing is defensive, we do not want to provoke conflict, rather, we want to prevent conflict. We want to show our partners that we're there when they need us," added the Nato secretary-general. Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and its support for separatists in Ukraine has jolted Nato out of a post-Cold War complacency and forced it to bolster its eastern flank. Nato defence ministers on Tuesday approved sending four battalions of between 800 to 1,000 troops each to the three Baltic states and Poland just weeks before a landmark summit in Warsaw endorses a major build-up to counter a more assertive Russia.



People gather at Federal Square to show solidarity with the Orlando shooting victims, in Melbourne yesterday. The assault, which left 50 people dead including the shooter, is the worst mass shooting in modern US history, and has triggered an outpouring of grief but also defiance in the gay and lesbian community in the United States and around the world.

PHOTO: AFP

Bodies of 34 migrants found in Niger desert

AFP, Niamey

The bodies of 34 migrants, including 20 children, who were abandoned by people smugglers while trying to reach neighbouring Algeria were found in the Niger desert last week, authorities said Wednesday. "Thirty-four people, including five men, nine women and 20 children died trying to cross the desert," Niger's interior ministry said in a statement. "They probably died of thirst, as is often the case, and they were found near Assamaka," a security source told AFP, referring to a border post between Niger and Algeria. "(The migrants) were abandoned by people smugglers," the statement added, and only two of the bodies have so far been identified -- a man and a 26-year-old woman both from Niger. Temperatures in the region can reach a brutal 42 degrees Celsius (108 degrees Fahrenheit), with blinding sandstorms tearing across the desert. The hostile conditions mean that only a fraction of those who die trying to cross the area are ever found. Thousands of illegal migrants have arrived in Algeria in recent years, mostly

from neighbouring Mali and Niger. Libya used to play host to the majority of migrants in sub-Saharan Africa, but since that country descended into chaos following the ousting of Moamer Gaddafi, Algeria has become the main destination for the region's migrants. Many transit through Algeria headed for Europe, but more than 7,000 migrants from Niger, mostly women and children, were returned to their home country in 2015 as part of an agreement between the two countries' governments. Europe has recently turned its attention to trying to curb the number of illegal arrivals from Africa, after a deal with Ankara in March slashed the number of people trying to cross from Turkey. More than 2,814 people have drowned trying to reach Europe since January, according to the UN refugee agency, prompting urgent efforts to tackle the problem. A new proposal mooted last week involves using EU funds to promote private investment of up to 60 billion euros (\$68 billion) in countries where many migrants come from -- Ethiopia, Niger, Nigeria, Mali and Senegal, as well as Jordan and Lebanon.

You're wrong about Muslims: FBI to Trump

REUTERS, Washington

Muslim-Americans have repeatedly informed authorities of fellow Muslims they fear might be turning to extremism, law enforcement officials say, contrary to a claim by presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump this week. "They don't report them," Trump said in a CNN interview on Monday, in the wake of the mass shooting at an Orlando nightclub of 49 people by an American Muslim who claimed allegiance to Islamic State. "For some reason, the Muslim community does not report people like this." But FBI director James Comey said, "They do not want people committing violence, either in their community or in the name of their faith, and so some of our most productive relationships are with people who see things and tell us things who happen to be Muslim. "It's at the heart of the FBI's effectiveness to have good relationships with these folks," Comey said at a press conference following the Orlando shootings. Andrew Ames, a spokesman for the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Washington field office, told Reuters on Wednesday that the agency has a "robust" relationship with the local Muslim community. FBI agents operating in the area have received reports about suspicious activity and other issues from community members. Michael Downing, deputy chief of the Los Angeles police department and head of its Counterterrorism and Special Operations Bureau, said the city's Muslim community has been cooperative in reporting "red flags."

NIGHTCLUB MASSACRE No 'direct link' with foreign terror groups

Says CIA director; Obama to console grieving families in Orlando

REUTERS, Orlando

US President Barack Obama was yesterday set to visit Orlando to meet with survivors of the massacre at a gay nightclub and relatives of the 49 people killed, as a top intelligence official confirmed that no direct link had been found between the shooter and foreign terror groups. Omar Mateen, 29, a US citizen born in New York to Afghan immigrants, also wounded 53 people in a three-hour rampage inspired by Islamic State militants that stands as the deadliest mass shooting in modern US history. CIA Director John Brennan told a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing that the agency "not been able to uncover any direct link" between Mateen, who was shot dead by police, and foreign terror groups. Mateen claimed allegiance to a variety of militant Islamist groups, including some at odds with each other, in a series of phone calls to 911 emergency services and a local cable television news channel during his rampage. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has interviewed Mateen's second wife, Noor Salman, who knew of his plans, according to a law enforcement source, and prosecutors were preparing to present evidence against her to a federal grand jury. Salman has not commented publicly since the attack, which began around 2 am Sunday. "We're working with our law enforcement partners to find out everything that we can about what happened at the Pulse



nightclub," Lee Bentley, the US Attorney for Florida's middle district said on Wednesday. "We are using all law enforcement and legal tools to reconstruct not only the events of that night but the events of the past several months." Obama, accompanied by Vice President Joe Biden, was to travel to Orlando in the latest in a long list of trips he has taken to console victims of mass shootings during his 7-1/2 years in office. In December 2015, a married couple inspired by Islamic State shot dead 14 people in San Bernardino, California. "This will be, I think, an emotional trip," White House spokesman Josh Earnest told reporters. "The president recognizes that he is a symbol for the rest of the country. But it would be impossible for him not to be personally affected by these kinds of conversations." The mass shooting renewed debate in Washington about gun control. Some Republicans including presumptive presidential nominee Donald Trump and US Senator Pat Toomey, a Republican from Pennsylvania, suggested that people on federal watch lists who are banned from flying on commercial jets should not be allowed to purchase firearms.



Former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown addresses the audience at a 'Labour IN' event promoting the case to remain in the EU, in The Union building of Manchester Metropolitan University in Manchester, northern England yesterday.

EU leaders issue warnings as polls point to Brexit

AFP, London

European Union leaders yesterday warned against Brexit but said the EU would survive if Britain quits, as two new polls showed Britons tending towards a "Leave" vote in next week's referendum. "I know it's very difficult for us to be optimistic today, we know the latest polls," EU President Donald Tusk said on a visit to Helsinki, amid volatility on the financial markets that has hit the value of the pound. "The cost will be very high also for us," he said, adding however: "The EU will survive, I have no doubt, it is still much easier to survive when you are 27 member states than completely alone". At an economic forum in Russia, European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker made a similar point about the implications of a Brexit. "If Britain is leaving the European Union this will open a period of major uncertainty, both in Britain and in European Union and on a more global level and this should be avoided," Juncker said. But he added: "I don't think that the European Union will be in danger of death if Britain leaves because we continue the process of closer cooperation in Europe". If Britain voted to leave the EU, it would be the first country to do so in the bloc's six-decade history. The warnings came as an Ipsos Mori survey published yesterday showed 53 percent of voters backing a Brexit compared to 47 percent who wanted to stay in the European Union.

48-hr truce takes hold in Syria's battered Aleppo Jihadists still 'committing genocide' against Yazidis: UN probe

AFP, Aleppo

A 48-hour truce took hold in Syria's war-torn Aleppo city yesterday as key regime backer Russia blamed the United States for the lack of progress in peace talks. The local ceasefire came hours after US Secretary of State John Kerry warned Moscow that Washington's patience was running out over breaches of a nationwide truce. Aleppo has seen some of the worst fighting in a war that has killed more than 280,000 people, but there is deep scepticism that the latest halt to fighting in the northern city will last. Peace talks aimed at ending the five-year conflict have stalled and the February 27 countrywide ceasefire between the regime and non-jihadist rebels lies in tatters. "There is no progress in the political process," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said at an economic forum in Saint Petersburg, referring to Syria. He accused Washington, which supports Syrian rebels, of being "unable or unwilling to put pressure on its allies in the region". Nevertheless, direct contact between Russia and the United States about Syria have taken place "without any hysteria", he added. There have been repeated

violations of the February 27 truce in Aleppo, with rebels pounding regime-controlled neighbourhoods with rocket and artillery fire and the regime hitting rebel areas with airstrikes. The new 48-hour ceasefire was announced by Moscow late Wednesday in a bid to halt violence in the city, split since 2012 between a regime-held west and a rebel-controlled east. Meanwhile, United Nations rights investigators said yesterday Islamic State jihadists are still committing genocide against the Yazidi minority in Iraq and Syria. "Genocide has occurred and is ongoing," Paulo Pinheiro, head of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) for Syria, said in a statement. "ISIS has subjected every Yazidi woman, child or man that it has captured to the most horrific of atrocities," he added, using another acronym for the jihadist group. The Yazidis are neither Muslims nor Arabs and follow a unique faith despised by IS. The Kurdish-speaking minority is mostly based around Sinjar mountain in northern Iraq. In 2014, IS jihadists massacred Yazidis in Sinjar, forcing tens of thousands of them to flee, and capturing thousands of girls and women as spoils of war to be used as sex slaves.



UNREQUITED LOVE This time woman throws acid on man

AFP, Multan

A Pakistani woman who allegedly threw acid on her boyfriend causing life-threatening injuries after he refused to marry her, officials said yesterday, was arrested in a rare case of a woman attacking a man. Momil Mai, a married mother-of-four, had been in a relationship with 25-year-old Saddaqa Ali, who was also married, for several years, police near Multan city in Punjab province told AFP. Mai was demanding Ali make her his second wife, officials said. Polygamy is legal though rare for men in conservative Muslim Pakistan, however a woman would have to divorce before being allowed to marry again. "On Wednesday night, Ali went to see Mai as usual and she threw acid on his body after he once again refused to marry her," Bashir Ahmed, a local police official, told AFP. Ali had time to turn, he said, with the acid burning his back but not his face. Ashiq Malik, medical superintendent at the government hospital in Multan where Ali is being treated, said that the victim received burns to around 60 percent of his body. Doctors are fighting to save Ali's life, he said. A criminal case was registered against Mai, whose current husband is a labourer, after a complaint by Ali's family. Acid attacks, which disfigure and often blind their overwhelmingly female victims, have long been used to settle personal or family scores in Pakistan, with hundreds of cases reported each year. It is rare for a woman to attack a man.



UAE: War over for its troops in Yemen

AFP, Abu Dhabi

The United Arab Emirates has said war is over for its troops in Yemen after a nearly 15-month intervention as part of a Saudi-led coalition in which around 80 lost their lives. The announcement by a government minister, which the crown prince of the UAE's richest emirate Abu Dhabi then posted on his official Twitter account, came with large swathes of the country, including the capital Sanaa, still in the hands of Iran-backed rebels. "Our standpoint today is clear -- war is over for our troops, we're monitoring political arrangements (and) empowering Yemenis in liberated areas," state minister for foreign affairs Anwar Gargash said. His comments came in a speech late on Wednesday to foreign ambassadors and senior Emirati officials, including Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. Sheikh Mohammed is also deputy supreme commander of the UAE armed forces. The UAE was a mainstay of the Saudi-led coalition which intervened in Yemen in March 2015 as the Iran-backed rebels threatened to overrun the whole country, prompting President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi to flee into exile. The coalition succeeded in pushing the rebels out of southern cities, where Hadi's government has set up base, but the rebels remain in control of most of the central and northern highlands as well as the Red Sea coast.

What's so great about people walking the ramp in a fashion show? Nothing unless they were once Obese and had difficulty in walking, literally and metaphorically, in life. And now after their dramatic weight loss after bariatric surgery, they are walking the ramp with confidence! Amongst them is a dancer who is now teaching others to dance! There is an actor who once got only comic roles and now exhibits versatility in his performance. Amongst them is a social worker who is walking an extra mile to help people. There is a housewife who is now managing herself too while managing her home! Yes, Bariatric surgery gives a second chance in life to those who struggle with obesity, diabetes, joint pain, snoring, heart disease, etc.

Show of confidence

Dr. Sarfaraz Baig MS, FRCS, FIAGES
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