



Snowden not a whistleblower, says US panel

A US congressional intelligence committee on Thursday issued a scathing report accusing former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden of leaking information that "caused tremendous damage" to US national security, lying about his background and feuding with co-workers.

In a report endorsed by both its Republican and Democratic leaders, the House intelligence committee said Snowden was "not a whistleblower" as he has claimed.

Most of the material he stole from the NSA was not about invasions of privacy, but revealed intelligence and defense programs of great interest to America's foreign adversaries, it said.

The committee said that while the "full scope" of damage caused by Snowden's disclosures remains unknown, a review of materials he allegedly compromised "makes clear that he handed over secrets that protect American troops overseas and secrets that provide vital defenses against terrorists and nation-states."

The committee released only a four-page summary of what it said was a 36-page investigative report that remains Top Secret.

On Wednesday, prominent human rights advocates urged President Barack Obama to pardon Snowden before leaving office in January.

US officials have said Obama is not considering a pardon for Snowden, who is facing US criminal charges for providing classified information to unauthorized persons.

Ben Wizner, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union who represents Snowden, dismissed the House committee report as lacking substance.



The rubble-strewn Castello Road, the main route for humanitarian assistance in to divided Syrian city of Aleppo, pictured yesterday. UN yesterday failed to deliver aid to the besieged city due to lack of security despite a ceasefire deal that promised so.

PHOTO: AFP

US-RUSSIA CEASEFIRE DEAL ON SYRIA

Diplomatic tensions grow

US, Russia trade barbs over truce violations; aid plan stalls amid violence

AFP, Aleppo

Air strikes and clashes tested a fragile ceasefire in Syria yesterday as civilians waited for aid and the UN Security Council was to discuss whether to endorse the US-Russian truce.

The accord has been billed as the "last chance" to end the five-year war but it has been marred by a lack of aid deliveries, sporadic violence and friction between Moscow and Washington.

Russia, a key backer of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, said it was ready to extend the truce set to expire later yesterday by 72 hours, despite accusing the United States and rebels of not fulfilling the deal.

"We are prepared to extend the cessation of hostilities for a further 72 hours," senior Russian officer Viktor Poznikhir said.

UN Security Council members were to meet at 2130 GMT for closed-door consultations, diplomats said, after Russia's envoy to the United Nations said Moscow

wanted a UN resolution to endorse the deal.

On Friday, two children were among three civilians killed in air strikes on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhun in the northwest province of Idlib, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

DEVELOPMENTS

- UN Security Council to meet whether to endorse deal
- Obama gathers advisers amid unease over deal
- Russia says only regime respecting truce

Khan Sheikhun, like most of the surrounding province, is controlled by an alliance of rebels, hardline Islamists and jihadists such as the Fateh al-Sham Front, formerly al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate.

Under the truce deal, which took effect late Monday, fighting is to halt across the country except

where jihadists are present.

Experts say the deal will be particularly difficult to implement in areas where Fateh al-Sham has formed strong alliances with local rebels.

Earlier Friday, a barrage of rocket fire and shelling could be heard coming from the rebel-held east Damascus district of Jobar, an AFP correspondent said.

Both the Islamist faction Faylaq al-Sham and Fateh al-Sham are thought to be present there.

The United Nations has described the truce as a "critical window of opportunity" to deliver aid to rebel-held eastern districts of Aleppo city, where around 250,000 civilians are under siege.

The UN had hoped that 40 trucks of food -- enough to feed 80,000 people for one month -- could be delivered to east Aleppo as soon as possible.

But yesterday morning, the trucks were still waiting at the border with Turkey.

Under the truce deal, the main

route for humanitarian assistance into divided Aleppo, the Castello Road, would be demilitarised and aid convoys would enter from Turkey.

A military source said Syria's army "has carried out its pledge and handed over a number of points to the Russian monitoring teams", but that rebel groups had not withdrawn from their positions.

The US-Russian deal calls for the truce to be renewed every 48 hours, and for Washington and Moscow to begin unprecedented joint targeting of jihadists if it lasts a week.

The United States accused Syria of blocking aid and warned it will not boost military cooperation with Russia unless Damascus honours the truce agreement.

Obama was due to gather top national security aides later Friday with the shaky ceasefire set to dominate a meeting ostensibly about countering the Islamic State group.

IS propaganda chief killed in Syria: US

REUTERS, Washington

The Pentagon yesterday said that a US-led coalition air strike on Sept 7 killed an Islamic State leader who oversaw the militant group's propaganda.

Pentagon spokesman Peter Cook said in a statement that the air strike took place near Raqqa, Syria, and targeted and killed Wa'il Adil Hasan Salman al-Fayad, also known as Dr Wa'il.

The Pentagon said Wa'il was minister of information and prominent member of Islamic State's Senior Shura Council, or leadership group.

Wa'il was a close associate of Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the ISIL spokesman and leader for plotting and inspiring external terror attacks. On Aug 30, Islamic State said Adnani was killed in a US air strike in Syria.

Islamic State controls parts of Iraq and Syria and has broadcast its beheadings of journalists and aid workers over the past few years.

Post-Brexit EU in 'critical situation'

Warns Merkel as leaders gather for talks

AFP, Bratislava

German Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday warned that the EU faces a "critical situation", as European leaders sought to plot the bloc's post-Brexit future at a summit without Britain.

The 27 leaders -- minus British Prime Minister Theresa May -- gathered at Bratislava's towering castle overlooking the River Danube, determined to respond to the challenges of mass migration, security, globalisation and a stuttering economy.

The aim was to thrash out a "roadmap" of reforms during talks in the Slovak capital's towering hilltop castle, and a boat trip down the Danube.

Merkel said the bloc simply had to improve but her influence as leader of the EU's biggest economy has been undermined by her unpopular decision to open Germany's doors last year to nearly a million refugees.

"We are in a critical situation. We have to show with our actions that we can get better," Merkel said as she arrived at the special summit.

French President Francois Hollande was equally blunt.

"We face either break-up, weakening -- or we choose the opposite, together giving Europe a purpose," said Hollande, who has made common cause with Berlin on boosting EU defence cooperation.

The leaders want to launch a "Bratislava Process" of reforms at this summit, to be further discussed in Malta early next year and then agreed in Rome in March 2017 to mark the 60th anniversary of the founding of the EU.



Swedish court upholds arrest warrant for Julian Assange

AFP, Stockholm

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange faced another setback in his legal stand-off with Sweden yesterday after an appeals court rejected his request to lift an arrest warrant for him over a 2010 rape accusation.

The Stockholm appeals court upheld a district court's ruling to maintain the European arrest warrant, and also rejected Assange's request to hold a hearing over the matter.

Assange "is still detained in absentia", the court said, adding that it "shares the assessment of the district court that Julian Assange is still suspected on probable cause of rape... and that there is a risk that he will evade legal proceedings or a penalty."

Assange's lawyer Per Samuelson told AFP he would appeal against the ruling.

The 45-year-old Australian has been holed up in the Ecuadoran embassy in London since June 2012, seeking refuge

there after exhausting all his legal options in Britain against extradition to Sweden.

Assange has refused to travel to Stockholm for questioning over the rape allegation, which he denies, due to concerns Sweden will extradite him to the United States over WikiLeaks' release of 500,000 secret military files on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This is the eighth time the European arrest warrant has been tested in a Swedish court. All of the rulings have gone against Assange.

The appeals court said Assange's four-year embassy sequestration "is not a deprivation of liberty and shall not be given any importance in its own right in the assessment of proportionality."

Assange's lawyers had urged Sweden to follow the non-binding ruling of a UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which said his confinement in the embassy amounted to arbitrary detention by Sweden and Britain.



Activists light candles during the candle light vigil for victims of the extra judicial killings in the drug war of the government in front of a church in Manila, yesterday. The Philippines faced calls to investigate its fire-brand president after a self-confessed hitman alleged Rodrigo Duterte ordered killings of numerous opponents and criminals when he was a city mayor.

PHOTO: AFP



Trump's hair put to the test on US TV show

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump's hair -- crusty, complex, yellowish affair that has become one of the enigmas of a very weird US presidential race -- got messed with big time on Thursday.

The usually brash presidential candidate talked in subdued tones and played the good sport as he appeared on one of America's most popular late-night broadcasts, "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon."

Fallon did his very popular impression of Trump's speaking style, ribbed him right and left and concluded his interview with a request.

"Can I mess up your hair?" Fallon said.

The comic explained that this might be the last time he could ask to do something un-presidential with Trump, lest he win election in November against Hillary Clinton.

The crowd went nuts over the idea. Trump grinned and agreed.

Fallon reached out with his right hand and mussed Trump's hair with a vigorous, repeated rub. The Republican nominee endured it with a broad smile.

Trump, 70, has an elaborate hair-do centered on what seems to be an ambitious comb-over.

Nothing fell off with Fallon's intervention but the result was not very pretty as Trump's long locks ended up pointing messily every which way.

Gold toilet opens for public at Guggenheim museum

AFP, New York

The streets may be paved with gold in heaven but in New York, it's a gold toilet providing creature comfort - and an eyeful for visitors to the city's Guggenheim museum.

The working toilet, cast in brightly gleaming gold, has been installed in a fourth-floor bathroom for the private use of the public, taking the notion of an intimate setting for art to a new level.

The installation, "America," is the first piece that Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan has exhibited since his 2011 retrospective at the Guggenheim.

Starting yesterday, it can be used as if an ordinary unisex toilet by the



museum's visitors, Katherine Brinson, curator of contemporary art at the museum, told AFP.

Visitors "will have a remarkably intimate and unusual encounter with this particular artwork," she said.

A guard will be posted outside the bathroom door, said the museum, which has refused to put a dollar value on the piece.

Brinson said the work had "many layers, many possible interpretative lenses that one can bring to it."

"One can see the title as a critique but also as idealistic. After all this is a work about creating access and opportunity for all for a very wide public, even though it is this lavish luxury item."

Israel has '200 nukes all pointed at Iran'

Reveal leaked Colin Powell emails

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Israel has 200 nuclear weapons, according to the latest revelation hidden in a cache of Colin Powell's leaked emails.

The former US secretary of state revealed the information in an email he sent to a colleague last year, which was obtained by the hacking group DCLeaks and published on LobeLog, a foreign policy blog.

Israel has a policy of nuclear ambiguity even if it has been an "open secret" that the US ally is well armed. Some Israel watchers estimate the country has as many as 400 weapons but Powell is one of the most authoritative sources to date. He was writing to business

partner and democratic donor Jeffrey Leeds regarding Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to US Congress, warning them against the nuclear deal with Iran. The deal was nonetheless finalised last summer.

"Negotiators can't get what he wants," wrote Powell in the email.

"Anyway, Iranians can't use one [a nuclear weapon] if they finally make one. The boys in Tehran know Israel has 200, all targeted on Tehran, and we have thousands. As Akmdinijad (sic) [said], "What would we do with one, polish it?" I have spoken publicly about both nK and Iran. We'll blow up the only thing they care about - regime survival. Where, how would they even test one?"

Yazidi slave becomes UN ambassador

AGENCIES

A young Yazidi woman who survived trafficking and gang-rap by so-called Islamic State militants is to be appointed a UN ambassador.

Nadia Murad, who is also a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, will become the UNODC Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking.

Her "appointment marks the first time a survivor of atrocities is bestowed with this distinction," the UN said.

Ms Murad was captured in Iraq in 2014. Six of her brothers were murdered.

The 23-year-old told the BBC she had also been subjected to sexual and physical abuse.

"Under their rule, a captured woman becomes a spoils of war if she is caught trying to escape. She is put in a cell and raped by all the men in that compound. I was gang-raped."

She said she had been bought and sold several times by the militant group. She, however, managed to escape. Since her escape, she has been advocating for the end of human trafficking.

