



Clapper, US intel chief, resigns

AFP, Washington

US intelligence chief James Clapper, whose 2013 denial that the US collects personal communications data on millions of citizens led to the stunning Snowden spying expose, on Thursday announced his resignation.

After six years as Director of National Intelligence, Clapper told a congressional hearing that he would step down on January 20, the day Donald Trump is to be sworn in as US president.

Coming after rumors that he might stay on for a new term, his departure would leave another major position to fill for the incoming Trump administration.

Clapper, whose job was to coordinate the work of 17 disparate operations like the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency, said resigning "felt pretty good."

"I've got 64 days left and I think I will have a hard time with my wife for anything past that," he said.

One name circulating as a replacement for Clapper was former Defense Intelligence Agency director and former deputy director of national intelligence Lieutenant General Ronald Burgess.

Clapper was a career officer in the US Air Force, rising in the electronic intelligence wing to eventually become head of the Defense Intelligence Agency in 1991.

As US intelligence czar from 2010, Clapper was praised for improving the coordination of intelligence between often-competing and turf-sensitive agencies.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence was created after the September 11, 2001 attacks exposed weaknesses in assembling scattered intelligence from different agencies which might have prevented those attacks.



US, EU to stick together

Leaders vow to hold fast to transatlantic treaties amid Trump worries

AFP, Berlin

US President Barack Obama and European leaders yesterday pledged to maintain Nato cooperation, and vowed to keep up sanctions against Russia, in their first meeting since the shock election of Donald Trump sparked fears of drastic policy shifts.

During a fractious presidential campaign, Trump had appeared to call into question a near 70-year-old security shield for US allies under Nato, and vowed to withdraw from hard-fought deals on the climate and Iran's nuclear programme.

The US president-elect's friendly disposition towards Russian President Vladimir Putin has also raised questions over his attitude

toward Moscow's backing for President Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian war as well as Russia's role in the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

In the talks in Berlin during which jittery European partners sought reassurances from Obama, the six parties "agreed on the necessity of working collectively to move the transatlantic agenda forward", according to a statement from the White House.

The leaders agreed on the need to work together to stabilise the Middle East and North Africa, as well as securing diplomatic resolutions for the conflicts in Syria and eastern Ukraine.

But Obama also stressed the importance of a united Europe, and urged the bloc not to take for granted the transatlantic relationship that has been built up over decades.

The meeting between Obama and the leaders of Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain is the first of its format since Trump's election.

Obama's choice of Berlin as the stop for his European farewell tour has been interpreted by some observers as the passing of baton of the defence of liberal democracy to Merkel.

Giving a ringing endorsement for Merkel before she announces if she will run for a fourth term in next year's elections, Obama acknowledged that she would have heavy international burdens to shoulder.

"I wish I could be there to lighten her load somewhat. But she's tough," said Obama, in his sixth official visit to Germany, before heading off to Lima for a summit of Asia-Pacific leaders.

New non-Muslim force stokes fear in Rakhine

REUTERS, Sitawe

Ever since deadly attacks by alleged Muslim militants in Myanmar's troubled northwestern Rakhine State, Myint Lwin says he has been unable to sleep at night.

As rumours spread of fresh violence, even the sound of dogs barking frightened him. "No one in the village has had enough sleep since last month," said Myint Lwin, an ethnic Rakhine Buddhist from a Muslim-majority village in the north of the state.

"We were scared when we heard people shouting and dogs barking in the middle of the night." The 18-year-old motorbike taxi driver is one of 116 civilians to sign up for a new auxiliary police force in Rakhine State, part of the response by authorities to the latest spasm of violence that began with attacks on border police posts that killed nine officers on Oct 9.

Human rights monitors say arming and training non-Muslims will lead to further bloodshed in the divided state, but Myint Lwin sees it as necessary for self-defence.

"These Muslims are trying to abuse our Buddhist women and people, so I want to protect our country from them,"

he told Reuters, wearing his new police uniform with a badge bearing a white star on the shoulder.

Sixty-nine suspected insurgents and 17 members of the security forces have been killed, according to official reports since a military crackdown began last month along Myanmar's frontier with Bangladesh.

It is the most serious unrest in the state since hundreds were killed in communal clashes between Muslims and ethnic Rakhine Buddhists in 2012.

Residents and rights advocates have also accused security forces of killing and raping civilians and setting fire to homes in the area, where the vast majority of residents are Rohingya Muslims. The government of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and the army reject the accusations.

There have been no reports of insurgent attacks on Buddhist civilians.

Only citizens were eligible for the posts, excluding the 1.1 million Rohingyas living in Rakhine State who are denied citizenship in Myanmar, where many regard them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Trump fear forges unity

200 nations reaffirm climate accord as summit closes

AFP, Marrakesh

A UN climate summit in Marrakesh tasked with implementing the hard-won Paris Agreement moved toward its scheduled close yesterday, dogged by Donald Trump's promise to abandon the landmark pact.

The 196-nation forum was stunned to see an avowed climate change denier capture the White House, and has been left to ponder the impact that could have on their collective effort to beat back the threat of global warming.

On Thursday, the conference sought to shore up their commitment with a rare united appeal.

"Our climate is warming at an alarming and unprecedented rate and we have an urgent duty to respond," the 196 nations, including the outgoing US administration, said in the "Marrakesh Action Proclamation".

"We call for the highest political commitment to combat climate change, as a matter of urgent priority."

The BASIC group of Brazil, South Africa, India and China, stressed they would "continue and strengthen" their own actions, while stressing "there can be no backtracking on commitments from developed countries and no attempt to renegotiate the terms of the agreement reached in Paris".

Many fear that US president-elect Trump -- who has described climate change as a "hoax"

perpetrated by China -- will act on his threat to withdraw from the Paris accord or its framework convention, which could roll back years of painstakingly negotiated political goodwill.

It would also deprive poor countries of billions of dollars in promised finance aid, to help them shift to clean energy and shore up defences against climate change impacts that can no longer be avoided.

The Paris pact sets the goal of limiting average global warming to 2.0 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) over pre-Industrial Revolution levels.

That can only be achieved by rapidly slashing greenhouse gas emissions generated by the burning of fossil fuels, scientists say. But Trump has vowed to boost oil and gas production, and to revive the sagging US coal industry, battered mainly by the rise of natural gas from fracking.

Experts say global warming over 2C will result in land-gobbling sea level rise, worsening storms and droughts, disease spread and conflict over ever-scarcer resources.

Highlighting the stakes, US government scientists said Thursday that the first 10 months of the year were the hottest in modern times -- and 2016 will likely surpass 2015 as the warmest year on record.

On current trends, the world is headed for warming of 3C or more, a recipe for human misery on a global scale, they warn.

Without the US, delegates and analysts say, the goal will be even harder to reach.



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UN CLIMATE CHANGE CONFERENCE



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2nd L) being welcomed by US President-elect Donald Trump (R) beside Ivanka Trump (C) and her husband Jared Kushner (L) in New York, on Thursday. Abe voiced confidence about Trump as he became the first foreign leader to meet the US president-elect, who was narrowing in on cabinet choices. PHOTO: AFP



Police use water cannon to disperse activists of the youth wing of India's main opposition Congress party during a protest against the government's decision to withdraw 500 and 1000 Indian rupee banknotes from circulation, according to a media release, in New Delhi, India, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

UN extends Syria gas probe

AGENCIES

The UN Security Council has approved a one-year extension of an international inquiry to determine blame for chemical weapons attacks in Syria, paving the way for a showdown over how to punish those responsible.

The report came as at least 49 people were killed in heavy government air strikes in the eastern part of Syria's largest city, Aleppo, witnesses and activists said yesterday.

The overnight bombardment, which began late on Thursday, was part of a wider military escalation by the Syrian government and its allies against opposition groups holed up in Aleppo.

With the latest victims, the total number of people killed in the besieged city since Bashar al-Assad's government launched its military offensive on Tuesday has climbed to 150.

Russia had said it wanted the UN inquiry to be broadened to look more at the "terrorist chemical threat" within the region, and the resolution to renew the mandate

included language to reflect that request.

The 15-member council unanimously adopted the US-drafted resolution.

The inquiry by the United Nations and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, or OPCW, set up by the council a year ago, has already found that Syrian government forces were responsible for three chlorine gas attacks and that Islamic State militants had used mustard gas.

Syria's government has denied its forces had used chemical weapons during the country's nearly six-year-old civil war.

Last week, the OPCW's executive body voted to condemn the use of banned toxic agents by the Syrian government and Islamic State militants.

Chlorine's use as a weapon is prohibited under the Chemical Weapons Convention, which Syria joined in 2013. If inhaled, chlorine gas turns to hydrochloric acid in the lungs and can kill by burning lungs and drowning victims in the resulting body fluids.



Protests as Marcos given hero's burial

AFP, Manila

Ex-Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos was buried in a secretive ceremony at the national heroes' cemetery yesterday, triggering street protests as opponents denounced what they said was the whitewashing of his brutal and corrupt rule.

The burial at the "Cemetery of Heroes" was another stunning development in the remarkable political comeback of the Marcos family, a phenomenon given fresh energy by the clan's strong alliance with new President Rodrigo Duterte.

The Supreme Court last week endorsed a decision by Duterte to lay the dictator to rest at the heroes' cemetery, three decades after millions of people took to the streets in the famous "People Power" revolution that ended Marcos's reign.

The military honoured Marcos at the ceremony with a 21-gun salute as soldiers in parade dress and ceremonial rifles stood to attention.

Marcos ruled the Philippines for 20 years, during which time he, his family and cronies amassed an estimated \$10 billion in ill-gotten wealth, a commission found. Tens of thousands of suspected communist rebels and political foes were killed.

'Me, Myself and Killfie'

India tops ranking for selfie deaths

AFP, New Delhi

Next time you're at the Taj Mahal, find yourself standing on a precarious cliff or see an approaching train, maybe just enjoy the moment rather than trying to capture the perfect selfie.

These are just three of the ways that 76 selfie-takers in India have lost their lives, according to a study published by US-based Carnegie Mellon University and Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology Delhi.

In the quest for the coolest selfie, more people have died in India in the past two years than the total number of selfie-related deaths in the rest of the world, according to the study titled "Me, Myself and My Killfie: Characterizing and Preventing Selfie Deaths".

Using special search techniques to trawl the internet and social media, the researchers identified 127 confirmed selfie deaths since March 2014.

They blamed people's desire for more "likes" and comments on social media for driving increasingly risky selfie-taking.

Iraq dumps books of violence

REUTERS, Qayyara

The school walls have a fresh coat of paint and classrooms are crammed, but it will take longer to undo the damage done to thousands of Iraqi children who lived under Islamic State for more than two years.

Although the school term began officially in September, only this week have pupils in the northern town of Qayyara been re-issued with standard Iraqi textbooks, which the militants replaced with their own in an attempt to brainwash a generation.

Islamic State was driven from the town three months ago in the early stages of a campaign to recapture the city of Mosul, which lies about 60 km (40 miles) to north and is now under assault by Iraqi security forces backed by a US-led coalition.

As Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliphate is eroded, a clearer picture is emerging of the group's project and the enduring mark left on those who lived through it.

When the militants overran the area in the summer of 2014, they allowed schools to run

as normal, local people said. But later they banned subjects they considered un-Islamic such as geography, history and civic education, and used boys' schools as a recruiting ground.

The following school year, beginning in 2015, Islamic State imposed an entirely new curriculum to inculcate children with their ideology. Maths exercises were expressed in terms of weapons and ammunition: "one bullet plus two bullets equals how many bullets?"

At that point, most parents stopped sending their children to school, and many pupils who were old enough to make up their minds left voluntarily.

As a result, most children have been set back by two grades, and since some teachers have been displaced by the violence, there is only one teacher for roughly every 80 pupils at the girls' school in Qayyara.

"The biggest impact is on children," said a teacher named Mahjoub, whose school was hit by an airstrike several months ago. "Children are malleable; you can change their opinion and beliefs quickly."



Mozambique TANKER EXPLOSION Probe launched after 56 killed

AFP, Maputo

Authorities in Mozambique were yesterday investigating whether locals were taking petrol from a tanker that exploded in the country's west killing at least 56 people and injuring more than 100.

Officials had originally put the death toll at 73 following the massive blast on Thursday in Tete province, in the country's remote western region near Malawi.

By yesterday, officials had counted 56 bodies in mortuaries as searching continued and three days of national mourning were announced.

"In the accident, 108 people were injured, 96 of whom are still being kept in for treatment at Tete Provincial Hospital," government spokesman Mouzinho Saide said at a press conference in Maputo.

Authorities suggested that residents may have been taking petrol after the vehicle had crashed or been abandoned by drivers who fled when they feared it could explode.

Photographs from the hospital in Tete showed badly burned children arriving for emergency care.

Hospital staffing has been reinforced to help deal with the large numbers of injured.