



TERROR STRIKES ASIA, AFRICA

Clockwise from top, Egyptian security officials inspect the scene following a bombing inside Cairo's Coptic cathedral; an injured policeman lies on a stretcher at the site of an explosion in central Istanbul, Turkey; people carry the body of a victim at the scene of a car bomb attack near the port of the capital Mogadishu, Somalia; and relatives react during a funeral after terror attack in Istanbul. Story on page 1.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

ALLEGED RUSSIAN MEDDLING IN US ELECTION

'I don't believe it'

Trump joins Republicans in rejecting CIA reports

AFP, Washington

US President-elect Donald Trump rejected the CIA's reported conclusion that Russia intervened to help him win the US election, saying in an interview broadcast yesterday that the idea is "ridiculous."

"I think it's just another excuse. I don't believe it," Trump said in an interview with Fox News yesterday. "I think it's ridiculous," Trump said.

US intelligence had previously linked Russia to leaks of damaging email from Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton's campaign but saw it as a broad bid to undermine confidence in the US political process.

On Friday, however, the Washington Post reported that the CIA has concluded that the aim of the cyber intrusions was to help Trump win the election.

Trump dismissed the reports as an attempt by Democrats to excuse their election loss. He said there was "great confusion" within the intelligence agencies, whom he portrayed as fighting among themselves.

"Nobody really knows. And hacking is very interesting. Once they hack, if you don't catch them in the act, you're not going to catch them. They have no idea if it's Russia or China or somebody. It could be somebody sitting in a bed some place. They have no idea," he said.

Republicans on Saturday rejected reports of the secret CIA assessment finding. "The intelligence is wrong," Republican National Committee spokesman Sean Spicer told CNN. "It didn't happen."

However Senator Chuck Schumer, set to become Democratic minority leader in January, called for a congressional probe into the matter.

"That any country could be meddling in our elections should shake both political parties to their core," he said Saturday.

"It's imperative that our intelligence community turns over any relevant information so that Congress can conduct a full investigation."

The debate simmered as US media reported that ExxonMobil President and CEO Rex Tillerson -- a businessman with ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin -- is Trump's likely pick for secretary of state.



Paolo Gentiloni named as Italy's new PM

AFP, Rome

Paolo Gentiloni was yesterday named as Italy's new prime minister following reformist leader Matteo Renzi's resignation in the wake of a crushing referendum defeat.

Gentiloni, who served as foreign minister under Renzi, was asked by President Sergio Mattarella to form a new centre-left government that will guide Italy to elections due by February 2018.

A close ally of the outgoing premier, Gentiloni now has to put together his own government team ahead of a parliamentary approval vote expected on Wednesday.

In a brief statement, Gentiloni said there was an "urgent need for a fully functioning government" to address a series of pressing international, economic and social issues.

Chief among those is a looming crisis in the troubled banking sector and ongoing relief efforts after a series of deadly earthquakes between August and October.

Mattarella turned to Gentiloni after opposition parties rebuffed overtures about a possible national unity government. The president rejected opposition demands for an immediate election.

Renzi, who had been in power for two years and 10 months, resigned last week after voters overwhelmingly rejected a package of constitutional reforms on which

Either 'death or surrender'

Rebels left with no choices as thousands flee Aleppo fighting

AGENCIES

Syria's army pushed forward in Aleppo yesterday as thousands fled rebel-held areas but its forces lost ground to the south where the Islamic State group recaptured the ancient city of Palmyra.

After a sudden withdrawal by regime forces, IS jihadists made a lightning-fast advance across Palmyra, sparking new worries for its remaining ancient treasures.

Forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad have been focused since mid-November on second city Aleppo, where they have retaken about 85 percent of the one-time rebel bastion in the city's east.

Rebels now control only a small area of Aleppo that is full of civilians and under very fierce bombardment after pro-government forces took the al-Maadi district, a Turkey-based official with the Jabha Shamiya rebel group said yesterday.

Rebel groups in Aleppo had received no word about US-Russia talks to resolve the crisis in Aleppo, the

official said, warning that it would end "in a tragic way" without outside intervention and that they faced "death or surrender."

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said more than 10,000 people had fled the remaining rebel-held districts since midnight, heading to government-run west Aleppo and

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