

SYRIA, UKRAINE CRISIS EU extends sanctions on Russia

AFP, Brussels

European Union leaders piled pressure on Russia on Thursday, urging the Kremlin to protect civilians in Syria while taking steps to save a historic cooperation pact with Ukraine and extending sanctions against Moscow.

At the final summit of one of the most turbulent years in the EU's six-decade history, the bloc's 28 leaders also discussed preparations for Britain to become the first nation to leave the bloc.

EU President Donald Tusk said they had agreed to push Syria, Russia and Iran using "all diplomatic means necessary" to open humanitarian corridors under international supervision for civilians in Aleppo.

But after a meeting in which the leaders heard an emotional plea from the mayor of besieged eastern Aleppo, Tusk acknowledged that the bloc was largely powerless to intervene.

"We know we are not effective enough. Unfortunately I know who is effective enough, not in humanitarian assistance but in bombing," Tusk said.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the discussion on Syria was "very depressing" and that it showed the EU could not act politically in the way it wanted.

The summit also discussed the migration crisis triggered largely by the Syrian conflict.

The EU's impotence on Syria comes against a wider backdrop of how to deal with a resurgent Russia, particularly amid doubts about whether incoming US President Donald Trump may decide to cosy up to Russia's Vladimir Putin.

But it flexed the only muscle it does have, renewing for six months damaging economic sanctions imposed against Russia in 2014 over the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the EU leaders reached a deal with the Netherlands to stop the country torpedoing the bloc's crucial association agreement with Ukraine, which Dutch voters rejected in a referendum in April.



(From top, anti-clockwise) Russian soldiers inspect rebels and civilians who were evacuated from rebel-held eastern Aleppo, in the government-held area of al-Ramousah bridge, yesterday; a man bids farewell to a relative after boarding a evacuation bus; child waves through a bus window; and an injured girl sits at a hospital at Bab al-Hawa border crossing between Syria and Turkey after being evacuated from Aleppo.

PHOTO:
AFP, REUTERS

Obama vows retaliation Kremlin says Washington must prove accusations or shut up

AFP, Washington

Barack Obama vowed the United States would retaliate against Russian hacking after the White House accused Vladimir Putin of direct involvement in cyberattacks designed to influence the US election.

The outgoing US president's remarks on Thursday dramatically upped the stakes in a dispute between the world's leading nuclear powers over interference that may have swayed last month's tight election in which Republican billionaire Donald Trump defeated Democrat Hillary Clinton.

"I think there is no doubt that when any foreign government tries to impact the integrity of our elections that we need to take action," Obama told NPR radio.

"And we will, at a time and place of our own choosing."

Pointing the finger at the Russian president over meddling in the election also puts the White House on a collision course with Trump, who has become increasingly isolated in questioning Russian involvement in hacks of Democratic Party emails that appeared to have slowed the momentum of Clinton's campaign.

Obama is expected to be peppered with questions about the dispute and any subsequent action when he holds a news conference at 1:15 am today before leaving for a vacation in Hawaii.

"I don't think things happen in the Russian government of this consequence without Vladimir Putin knowing about it," one of his top advisers,

ALLEGED RUSSIAN HACKING IN



Ben Rhodes, said Thursday.

"Everything we know about how Russia operates and how Putin controls that government would suggest that, again, when you're talking about a significant cyber intrusion like this, we're talking about the highest levels of government," he told MSNBC television.

"And ultimately, Vladimir Putin is the official responsible for the actions

of the Russian government."

The Kremlin yesterday slammed Washington for pointing the finger at Putin.

"At this point they need to either stop talking about this or finally present some sort of proof. Otherwise this looks extremely scurrilous," Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists during a visit to Japan.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest echoed his comments, saying the decision by US intelligence agencies in October to blame "Russia's senior-most officials" was not meant to be "particularly subtle."

Trump caused outrage in July by suggesting that Russia find 30,000 missing emails related to Clinton's use of a private server when she was secretary of state. Surrogates dismissed it as a joke, but he repeated his call on Twitter.

"I don't think anybody at the White House thinks it's funny that an adversary of the United States engaged in malicious cyber activity to destabilize our democracy. That's not a joke," Earnest said on Thursday.

US-BACKED OFFENSIVE IN MOSUL IS shows no sign of weakening

REUTERS, Baghdad

Islamic State fighters have stepped up counterattacks on Iraqi forces in Mosul amid bad weather as the US-backed offensive to capture their last major city stronghold in Iraq enters its third month.

With cloudy skies hampering coalition air surveillance, the militants carried out attacks in three districts of eastern Mosul, al-Quds, Ta'mim and al-Nur, over the past four days, residents and security officials said yesterday.

"We heard clashes and explosions and then somebody shouting on the loudspeaker of the mosque 'Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, the Islamic State is staying,'" said a Ta'mim resident.

The campaign that started on Oct 17 has turned into the biggest battle in Iraq since the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003.

The humanitarian situation of the besieged population is causing alarm amid reports of food, water and fuel shortages, while the fighting is making access to hospitals difficult.

Nearly 100,000 people have fled the city, according to the International Organization for Migration.

More than 100,000 Iraqi soldiers, Kurdish fighters and Iranian-backed Shia volunteers are taking part in the offensive. The latter are attacking the militants supply lines in a remote and semi-desert area west of Mosul to avoid fanning sectarian tensions with the city's Sunni population.

The Iraqi military estimate the number of militants in the city at 5,000 to 6,000. They are dug in amid the city's remaining population of about one million, moving through tunnels and using suicide car bombs, sharpshooters and mortar fire to slow the advance of the Iraqi forces.

Pak blames India of shelling school van

Driver killed, 8 kids hurt in Kashmir

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Pakistan yesterday accused India of hitting a school van in the disputed Kashmir region, killing the driver and wounding eight schoolchildren.

The incident occurred at Mohra village in Nakyal sector of Pakistani-administered Kashmir where officials said shelling by Indian troops was continuing.

"A shell fired by Indian troops hit a school van at LoC (Line of Control) in Nakyal sector. The van driver has been martyred and eight children wounded," Zeeshan Haider, a senior government official told AFP.

There was no immediate reaction from New Delhi. Nakyal lies on the Line of Control, the de facto border between India and Pakistan in the disputed Himalayan state.

Haider said the driver of the van, carrying pupils from a private school, was killed on the spot while the children, aged between 10 and 15 years, were taken to hospital amid heavy shelling.

Muhammad Nasrullah Khan, a doctor in Nakyal hospital told AFP that the children had shrapnel injuries but their condition was not life threatening.

Sardar Iftikhar, a police station house officer in Nakyal confirmed the incident and casualties and told AFP that the wounded children included five girls and three boys.



A fighter jet is lifting off from an aircraft carrier in the Bohai sea, China. Inset, A missile being fired from an aircraft carrier. China's military has carried out its first ever live-fire drills using an aircraft carrier and fighters in the northeastern Bohai Sea close to Korea, state media said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'I killed about 3 of them' Duterte says he killed criminals to protect country

REUTERS, Manila

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte yesterday said killings he maintains he committed while mayor of a southern city, sometimes cruising the streets on a motor bike looking for "encounters to kill", were part of legitimate operations against drug pushers.

Speaking to Filipino journalists traveling with him in Singapore, Duterte said he had killed three men during a hostage-taking incident in Davao City where he was mayor for more than 20 years.

"It was not because I was walking around that I killed," he said. "It was actually an event that was covered by the TV...I said I killed about three of them. I didn't really know how many bullets from my gun went through inside their bodies."

The firebrand leader told a gathering of business leaders at the presidential palace on Monday he had "personally" killed criminals and that he was prowling the city's streets on a big bike looking for "encounters to kill".



Senators have warned Duterte risks impeachment because of his statements about personally killing criminals in Davao.

Josh Earnest, a White House spokesman, said in Washington Duterte's statement about looking for chances to kill criminals while riding a bike were "deeply troubling".

During the election campaign early this year, the 71-year-old former prosecutor referred to the hostage-taking incident in Davao City to demonstrate toughness in fighting drug dealers.

Duterte said he was only after criminals and would not murder because of race, religion or political belief. "It's not genocide, it's about crime. It's not covered under the charter of the International Criminal Court," he said.

"If you are fighting drug addicts and criminal, I can go as many as I want and for as long as there are drug pushers in the streets in my country... this campaign will go on until the last day of my term."

WWII ISLAND DISPUTE Putin, Abe signal no resolution

AFP, Tokyo

Russia and Japan yesterday signalled there was no resolution after a two-day summit to a decades-long territorial dispute that has blocked them from achieving a peace treaty to formally end World War II hostilities.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe held talks in Abe's ancestral hometown and in Tokyo, in the latest attempt to secure a deal.

"It would be naive to think we can solve this problem in an hour," Putin said at a joint press conference with Abe.

"There must be an end to this historic ping-pong," he said. "The fundamental interests of Russia and Japan require a long-term deal."

Abe concurred, but said the effort would continue despite the "difficult path ahead".

The Soviet Union seized four islands off Japan's northern coast in 1945 in the closing days of the war.

The dispute over the islands, known as the Southern Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan, has prevented the two sides from fully putting the conflict behind them.

Philippines will not protest china actions

REUTERS, Manila

The Philippines would not protest China's moves to militarise its man-made islands in the South China Sea, Foreign Minister Perfecto Yasay said yesterday, amid Manila's efforts to improve ties with Beijing.

China has deployed anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems on the artificial islets it has built in the disputed Spratly Islands, the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies said in findings reported by Reuters this week.

Speaking to reporters in Singapore during an official visit by President Rodrigo Duterte, Yasay said the government will not issue any diplomatic protest to China via a "note verbale".

"We will make sure that there will be no further actions that will heighten the tensions between the two countries, particularly in the Scarborough Shoal," Yasay said, referring to another group of

disputed islets.

"Let them take whatever action is necessary in the pursuit of their national interest... and we will leave it at that, for the Philippines, we have our bilateral engagements with China," he said, adding that other countries could deal with any issues.

Whereas the Scarborough Shoal was disputed solely by China and the Philippines, several countries, including China and the Philippines, have rival claims in the Spratly Islands.

Yasay's remarks contrast with those of Defence Minister Delfin Lorenzana, who on Thursday described China's latest actions in the Spratly Islands as a "big concern" for the international community.

Meanwhile, China's military has carried out its first ever live-fire drills using an aircraft carrier and fighters in the northeastern Bohai Sea close to Korea, in a show of strength.

NEWSIN brief

China upset as Dalai Lama meets Pranab

REUTERS, Beijing

China expressed dissatisfaction yesterday after exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama met Indian President Pranab Mukherjee, saying it hoped India would recognise the Nobel Peace Prize winning monk as a separatist in religious guise. Mukherjee hosted the Dalai Lama and other Nobel Peace laureates at a conference on children's rights at the presidential palace on Sunday.

Thai junta passes cyber-crime law

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's rubber-stamp parliament yesterday passed a controversial cyber-crime law that critics say strengthens the junta's ability to police the web and squeeze out criticism. Despite strong public criticism, the junta-appointed parliament voted to unanimously pass an updated version of the Computer Crimes Act, with 167 yes votes and five abstentions.

Last ruler of remote Buddhist kingdom dies

AFP, Kathmandu

The last king of the isolated Himalayan region of Upper Mustang died yesterday in Kathmandu, eight years after he lost his royal title when the centuries-old Buddhist monarchy was abolished. Jigme Dorje Palbar Bista, who was 86, reigned over the arid kingdom high on the Tibetan plateau for more than half a century before stepping down in 2008 when Nepal abolished its own monarchy.

Trump picks Friedman as Israel envoy

AFP, Washington

President-elect Donald Trump on Thursday nominated David Friedman -- an attorney and campaign adviser who backs moving the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem -- as ambassador to the Jewish state. During the campaign Friedman, a bankruptcy lawyer, voiced support for settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank.

Polish media boy- cott House after snub

AFP, Warsaw

More than twenty Polish media outlets including two major dailies refused to cover parliament yesterday, to protest planned restriction of their work there. The planned new rules grant access to parliament's press gallery to only two journalists per outlet and ban them from shooting still pictures or video. The restrictions prevent media from recording images of lawmakers when they break the rules.