

Edward Snowden a 'serial fabricator' Says a US Congressional report

AFP, Washington

A scathing US Congressional report released Thursday branded intelligence leaker Edward Snowden a "serial exaggerator and fabricator" and said he has had continual contact with Russian intelligence services.

The partially redacted report, released by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, portrays Snowden as a disgruntled government contractor rather than a legitimate whistleblower.

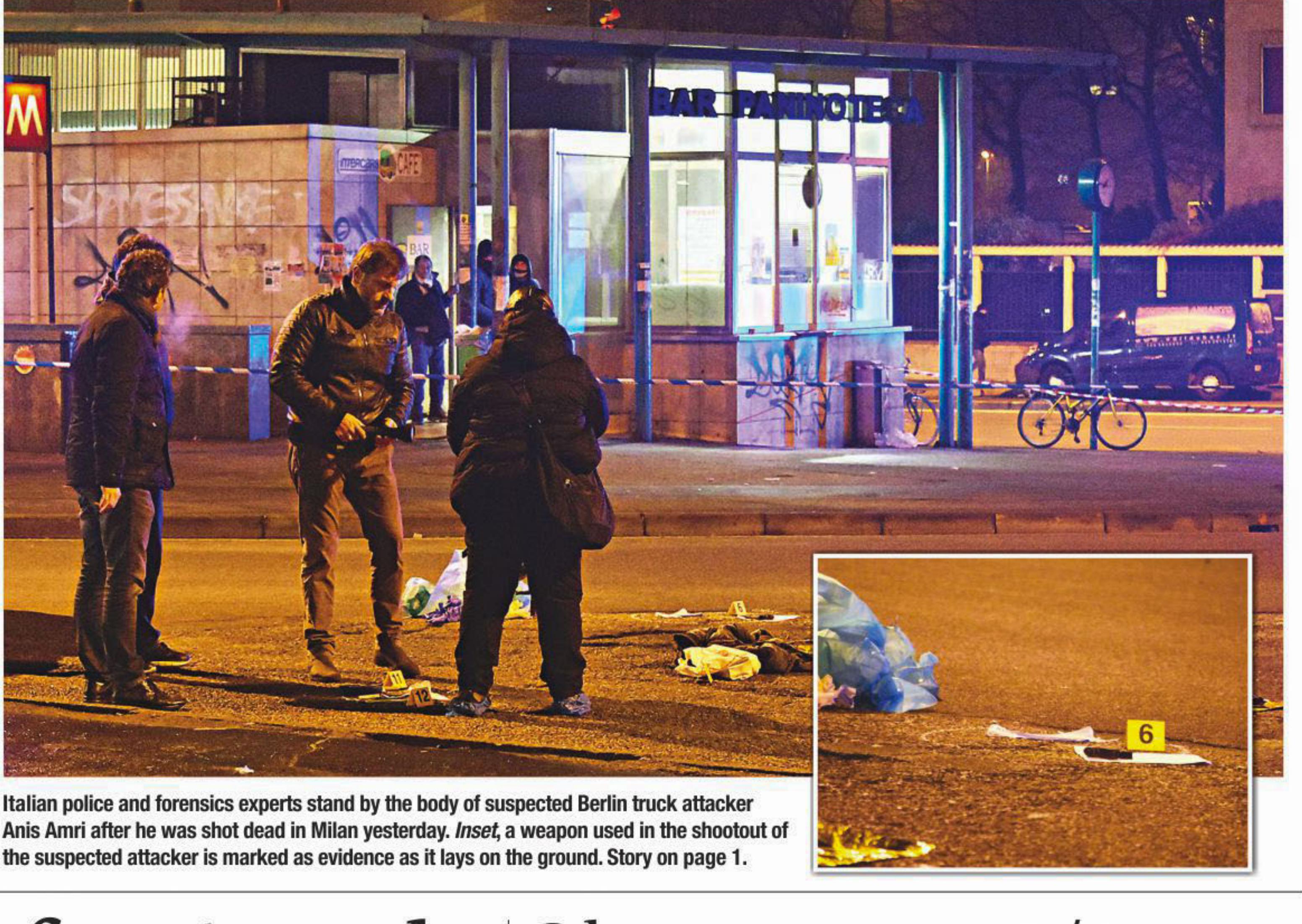
The former National Security Agency contractor leaked thousands of classified documents to the press in 2013, revealing the vast scope of US surveillance of private data that was put in place after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

According to the report, Snowden swiped about 1.5 million documents and those he leaked to the press were "merely the tip of the iceberg."

"Most of the material he stole had nothing to do with Americans' privacy, and its compromise has been of great value to America's adversaries and those who mean to do America harm," Democratic Congressman Adam Schiff said.

Snowden was quick to disparage the report, taking to Twitter to decry its "obvious falsehoods."

"After three years of investigation and millions of dollars, they can present no evidence of harmful intent, foreign influence, or harm. Wow," he wrote.



Italian police and forensics experts stand by the body of suspected Berlin truck attacker Anis Amri after he was shot dead in Milan yesterday. Inset, a weapon used in the shootout of the suspected attacker is marked as evidence as it lies on the ground. Story on page 1.

PHOTO: AFP

Major boost for Assad

Civilians move into ruined streets as army takes full control of Aleppo

AGENCIES

Syrian troops cemented their hold on Aleppo yesterday after retaking full control of the city, as residents anxious to return to their homes moved through its ruined streets.

Syria's army announced on Thursday it had recaptured the former rebel stronghold of east Aleppo following a landmark evacuation deal that saw thousands of opposition fighters and residents bussed out.

It was the biggest victory for President Bashar al-Assad's forces in nearly six years of civil war and a major win for his foreign backers, with key ally Russia hailing the recapture as "very important" step.

Braving the cold, war-weary residents crossed districts that had become infamous front lines, eager to return to neighbourhoods they had not seen in years.

An AFP correspondent saw civilians wrapped in coats trekking through the cold, some rolling their belongings on wheelbarrows.

"I came to check on my house, which I haven't seen in five years," resident Khaled al-Masri said. "I really hope my home wasn't badly damaged."

The evacuation operation ended more than four years of ferocious fighting inside Aleppo, which had been divided between government forces in the west and rebels in the east.

Opposition forces remain in control of areas west of Aleppo and yesterday at least one civilian was killed in the first wave of rebel rocket fire on the city since it fell under government control, the Syrian Observatory for

WAR IN SYRIA

IS burns Turkish troops alive

Russia sends military police to Aleppo

Rebels shell Aleppo after withdrawal; three killed

Human Rights said.

Meanwhile, Turks reacted angrily yesterday on social media to a video released by the Islamic State group purportedly showing two captured Turkish soldiers being burned alive, while awaiting an official reaction from the government.

The 19-minute video, showing two uniformed men being hauled from a

cage before being bound and torched, was posted on jihadist websites and supposedly shot in the IS-declared "Aleppo Province" in northern Syria.

Russia has sent a battalion of military police to keep order in Aleppo, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said yesterday, after the Syrian regime took full control of the ravaged city.

"We sent in a battalion of military police yesterday evening to maintain order in the liberated territories," Shoigu told Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Syrian rebels shelled Aleppo yesterday, killing three people, state television reported, a day after insurgents finished withdrawing from their last pocket of territory in the city, reports Reuters.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based war monitor, said about 10 shells had fallen in Al-Hamdiya district in southwest Aleppo.

Rebels seeking to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad have frequently shelled the areas of Aleppo that have been under government control throughout the conflict, which began in 2011.

Trump was asked on Wednesday whether

Obama scraps 9/11-era register for Muslims

REUTERS, Washington

The Obama administration is canceling an inactive registry program for visitors from countries where extremist groups are operating, a plan similar to a Muslim registry considered by President-elect Donald Trump.

The Department of Homeland Security is formally ending the National Security Entry-Exit Registration Systems program, known as NSEERS, by removing outdated regulations, spokesman Neema Hakim said on Thursday.

The rule change was set to be published in the Federal Register yesterday and takes effect immediately.

DHS concluded that the program, which was suspended in 2011, was redundant and inefficient and did not provide increased security. Begun a year after the Sept. 11, 2001 al Qaeda attacks on the United States, the program expanded within a year to require registration from visitors from 25 countries, most of them with majority-Muslim populations.

"The intervening years have shown that NSEERS is not only obsolete but that its use would divert limited personnel and resources from more effective measures," Hakim said.

Trump was asked on Wednesday whether

he would support a Muslim registry, similar to the dormant DHS program, and he would not confirm or deny his plans to do so.

Several Trump transition aides have told Reuters the incoming Trump administration will not resurrect the program, although a key Trump immigration adviser, Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, has advocated the idea.

The announcement came as a growing number of prominent tech companies including Facebook, Twitter and Apple have told various news organizations that they would not help the Trump administration build a Muslim registry.

Earlier this month, employees at dozens of technology companies also signed an online pledge vowing not to help Trump build a data registry to track people based on their religion or assist in mass deportations. The petition has been signed by more than 2,500 employees.

The Obama administration's decision to formally end the program drew praise from critics who said it was discriminatory.

"I applaud President Obama for his decision to dismantle NSEERS, the idle and ineffective federal registry that targeted Muslims and undermined our core values," New York Attorney General Eric T. Schneiderman said in a statement.



People raise their hands as they shout 'banzai' or cheer, as Japan's Emperor Akihito, inset, appears on a balcony of the Imperial Palace after delivering an address marking to celebrate his 83rd birthday in Tokyo, Japan, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Med migrant deaths in 2016 pass 5,000

AFP, Geneva

The number of migrants and refugees who have perished while trying to cross the Mediterranean this year has passed 5,000, the UN said yesterday after two more deadly shipwrecks.

The latest incidents happened Thursday when an estimated 100 people drowned in the Mediterranean Sea after two rubber dinghies collapsed, the UN refugee agency said, citing reports from the Italian coastguard.

In October, UNHCR declared 2016 the deadliest year ever for migrants trying to reach Europe on the Mediterranean route, when the fatality mark hit 3,800.

Deaths have surged this year because migrant smugglers are increasingly using poor quality vessels while also trying to pack more people on boats, possibly to raise profits, UNHCR has said.

"An average of 14 people have died every day in the Mediterranean Sea during 2016," UNHCR said in a statement.

The higher death rate has come despite a drop in the number of migrants crossing the sea this year compared to 2015.

Last year, more than a million people reached Europe via the Mediterranean, but crossings this year were below 360,000, the International Organisation for Migration said yesterday.

Numbers began dropping dramatically following a March deal between Turkey and the European Union to stem the migrant tide towards the Greek islands.

TERROR ATTACK THREAT Security forces across Asia on Christmas alert

REUTERS, Jakarta

Security forces across Asia were on alert yesterday ahead of the Christmas and New Year holidays, as police in Australia and Indonesia said they had foiled bomb plots and Malaysian security forces arrested suspected militants.

Australian police said they had prevented attacks on prominent sites in Melbourne on Christmas Day that authorities described as "an imminent terrorist event" inspired by Islamic State.

The announcement came after an attack in Berlin in which a truck smashed through a Christmas market on Monday, killing 12 people. The suspect was killed in a pre-dawn shoot-out with police in Milan yesterday, Italy's interior minister said.

In Indonesia, where Islamic State's first attack in Southeast Asia killed four people in Jakarta in January, at least 14 people were being interrogated over suspected suicide bomb plots targeting the presidential palace in Jakarta and another undisclosed location, police said.

Anti-terrorism police killed three suspects in a gunfight on Wednesday on the outskirts of the capital, Jakarta.

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, would deploy 85,000 police and 15,000 military staff for the Christmas and New Year period, police said.

Moderate Indonesian Muslim groups were helping authorities secure Christmas celebrations amid heightened religious tension after the Christian governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, went on trial on a charge of blasphemy against Islam, which he denies.

Hardline group Islamic Defenders Front swept into shopping centres in the city of Surabaya, in East Java, last week to make sure Muslim staff were not forced by employers to wear Santa hats or other Christmas gear.

In West Java, a group stopped a Christmas event as it was being held in a public building rather than in a church.

MOSUL OFFENSIVE 4m letters of 'empathy' dropped

AFP, Washington

The Iraqi air force dropped four million letters over Mosul on Thursday, the US-led coalition said, in a move aimed at providing "empathy and support" for residents of the Islamic State-held city.

The air drop comes after the international Institute for War and Peace Reporting started a campaign called "Letters to Mosul" on October 17, the day Iraqi forces began their operation to recapture Mosul from IS jihadis.

"The letters of empathy and support for Mosul residents were written by Iraqis from all over the country," the coalition said in a statement.

"This initiative by the people of Iraq reassures the residents of Mosul, held hostage by ISIL (IS) for more than two years, that they have not been forgotten and that the rest of Iraq is standing with them, waiting to welcome them back in solidarity when ISIL is defeated."

According to the coalition, the letters are based on 2,160 hand-written notes penned in the days since the Mosul offensive began.

"To our dear people ... we are with you in everything and our hearts to you, and we feel what you feel of cold, hunger, and the harshness of days and you should be patient and endure that victory is close, God willing," one letter states, according to the coalition.

Some 100,000 people have fled Mosul since the Iraqi operation against IS began, and aid organizations have said they fear it could result in the displacement of more than a million people.

The government has encouraged civilians in Mosul -- where a million or more people may still live -- to stay in their homes if possible.

NEWS IN brief

40 killed in DR Congo anti-Kabila protests

AFP, Geneva

At least 40 people have been killed and another 460 arrested in the Democratic Republic of Congo this week during protests against President Joseph Kabila's refusal to leave office, the UN said yesterday. "The UN Joint Human Rights Office in the DRC (UNJHRO) has documented at least 40 killings of civilians in Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, Boma and Matadi," the UN human rights office said in Geneva.

Chinese schoolboy driver kills pedestrian

AFP, Shanghai

An 11-year-old Chinese schoolboy, who learned to drive by looking up lessons online, killed a pedestrian after stealing a car in eastern China, local media reported yesterday. The boy stole an unlocked vehicle from a car park in the city of Taicang near Shanghai on Monday and hit a man while attempting to overtake another driver, the Taicang Daily reported.

Thai police bust huge loan shark racket

AFP, Bangkok

Thai police have broken up the country's biggest loan shark syndicate with nationwide raids on a network of creditors who circulated some \$11 million to tens of thousands of debtors, authorities said yesterday. Thailand is wracked with high levels of household debt and unscrupulous lenders are notorious for preying on the poor with exorbitant interest rates.

ISRAELI SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY Egypt agrees to delay vote on UN resolution

AFP, Cairo

Egypt said yesterday it agreed to delay a vote on a UN Security Council resolution against Israeli settlements during a phone call between President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and US President-elect Donald Trump.

Egypt on Thursday requested that the vote be postponed a day after it submitted the draft text to the council, which prompted Israel to reach out to Trump to block a resolution.

Israel had asked Trump to intervene after learning that Washington, in a reversal of its policy under President Barack Obama, would not veto the resolution, an Israeli official said.

Trump, who issued a statement demanding that Washington exercise a veto, called Sisi.

In a statement yesterday, the Egyptian presidency said the phone call "touched on the draft resolution... on Israeli settlements".

"The two leaders agreed on the importance of giving the new administration a chance to deal comprehensively with all the aspects of the Palestinian cause to achieve a comprehensive settlement," it said.

The Egyptian turnaround surprised many but follows repeated expressions of admiration for Trump from Sisi, a former military chief who overthrew his Islamist predecessor in 2013 leading Obama to temporarily suspend military aid.

Ukraine rebels agree to new armistice

AFP, Kiev

A top Ukrainian insurgent said yesterday the rebels had agreed to an indefinite ceasefire negotiated by Russia and Ukraine that would go into effect this weekend.

The latest truce was hammered out with the help of European monitors and comes amid a surge in fighting that claimed the lives of eight Ukrainian soldiers this week.

Russia denies backing the rebels but the West and Kiev view them as Moscow proxies who initiated a 31-month conflict in Ukraine's industrial east to throw Kiev's pro-Western government off balance.

Japanese birth rate to drop below 1 million for first time

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The number of annual births in Japan is set to fall below 1 million this year for the first time since data became available in 1899, reflecting a fast-ageing society and the high cost of childcare, Japanese media reported.

The total number of births is expected to be between 980,000 and 990,000 this year, reports in the Nikkei business daily and the Kyodo news agency said, down from slightly more than 1 million last year.

Kyodo cited unidentified government sources, while the Nikkei did not indicate the source of its information.

Births hit a record high of 2.696 million in 1949.

A shrinking population of women in their 20s and 30s - about 13.66 million in October or 20 percent fewer than a decade ago - is a key factor in the falling number of births, the Nikkei said. So is a low fertility rate.

Japan's fertility rate was 1.45 in 2015, up 0.03 points from a year earlier, helped by an economic recovery, and is recovering

from the record low of 1.26 hit in 2005. However, it is still far from the government's goal of 1.80.

Japan will again post a natural population decline this year as deaths outpace births, its 10th consecutive drop, the Nikkei said.

On Thursday, Japan's cabinet approved a record \$830 billion spending budget for fiscal 2017, which includes child-rearing support.

The health ministry plans to release its estimate of the number of this year's births this week, a ministry official said.

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