

UN VOTE Netanyahu calls in US envoy

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu summoned US Ambassador Daniel Shapiro on Sunday, two days after Washington abstained in a vote on a UN resolution against Israeli settlements.

Their meeting came after Israel earlier that day called in 10 representatives of 14 other states that voted for the resolution.

An official Israeli source confirmed only that Netanyahu and Shapiro had met, without elaborating on the content or outcome of their discussions.

The Haaretz daily's website said that for Israel to summon an American ambassador was "considered a most unusual step".

"Even more unusual is the fact that unlike the other envoys who were summoned on Sunday to the foreign ministry, Netanyahu will conduct the conversation himself at his office," it said ahead of the meeting.

The UN Security Council passed the measure on Friday after the US abstained, enabling the adoption of the first resolution since 1979 to condemn Israel over its settlement policy.

The resolution demands that "Israel immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including east Jerusalem".

By deciding not to veto the UN move, Washington took a rare step that deeply angered Israel, which accused US President Barack Obama of abandoning its closest Middle East ally in the waning days of his administration.

Netanyahu, who also holds the foreign ministry portfolio, had rejected the resolution as a "shameful blow against Israel".

He repeated Israel's claim that Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry were behind it.

"This is of course in total contradiction to the traditional American policy of not trying to impose conditions of a final resolution," he said, "and of course the explicit commitment of President Obama himself in 2011 to avoid such measures."



PHOTO: REUTERS

A boy stands at a partially damaged port, as strong waves hit the shore after Typhoon Nock-Ten struck Mabini, Batangas, in the Philippines yesterday. Inset, a passenger inter-island ferry Shuttle RoRo 5 is pictured after it was swept ashore in Mabini. The typhoon left at least four people dead and eight missing in the Philippine archipelago, spoiling the Christmas holidays.



China's aircraft carrier enters South China Sea

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan said yesterday it was closely monitoring the movements of China's sole aircraft carrier and five other warships, which earlier passed south of the island on an exercise held amid worsening cross-strait relations.

The LiaoNing and five escorts sailed 20 nautical miles outside Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and the Philippines on Sunday, the defence ministry said.

TENSION OVER TAIWAN



The ships continued sailing southwest after passing 90 nautical miles (150 kilometres) to the south of Taiwan's southernmost point Eluanbi yesterday morning. They later travelled to the southeast of the Dongsha Islands in the South China Sea, the ministry added.

"The military has been on guard and fully monitoring the LiaoNing. We urge the public to rest assured," it said.

Taiwanese media said an unspecified number of F-16 fighter jets and warships were deployed in Taiwan's ADIZ to closely watch the Chinese warships. The ministry declined to comment.

Japan's defence ministry said earlier that eight Chinese vessels, including the carrier and three destroyers, were spotted by one of its ships in the central part of the East China Sea on Saturday afternoon.

Chinese media has reported that the aircraft carrier was headed for the Pacific on exercise for the first time.

The navy drills are seen as a show of strength by Beijing at a time of rising tensions with Taiwan and the United States following a protocol-breaking telephone conversation between Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and US President-elect Donald Trump.

It was the latest in a series of recent exercises staged by China, after its military aircraft passed near Taiwan on December 10 for the second time in a month.

Taiwan's defence minister Feng Shih-kuan has called the timing of China's air exercises a coincidence, but warned the island still faces a military threat.

China views self-ruling Taiwan as part of its territory awaiting unification, by force if necessary, even though the two sides split in 1949 after a civil war.

Mass graves found in Aleppo: Russia

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Russian troops have found mass graves in Aleppo with bodies showing signs of torture and mutilation, the Russian defence ministry has claimed.

Major General Igor Konashenkov said the Russians "found mass graves of several dozens of Syrians who suffered atrocious torture and massacre". In a statement, he said some of the bodies had been mutilated and some had gunshot wounds.

Konashenkov also criticised opposition rebels, who controlled eastern Aleppo before they were pushed out earlier this month, for laying multiple booby traps and mines across the town, endangering the civilian population.

The Russian air force helped Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his allies retake Syria's largest city after weeks of brutal siege.

Russia has since dispatched military police to the city. The retaking of the city came as the UN special envoy for Syria warned that cessation of hostilities across the country is vital to avoid another battle like the bloody fight for Aleppo.

Steffan de Mistura said thousands of people evacuated from rebel-held areas of Aleppo after a crushing government offensive could suffer a similar fate in their new refuge outside the city.

"Many of them have gone to Idlib, which could be in theory the next Aleppo," de Mistura warned.

Evacuees from Aleppo had expressed concerns about being taken to Idlib and a senior European diplomat said earlier this month that this would suit Russia, as it would put "all their rotten eggs in one basket".

The Syrian President has declared that the war is far from over and said his armed forces would march on other rebel-held areas.

RUSSIAN MILITARY JET CRASH

Focus is on faults, not terrorism

Says transport minister; search ops
underway to retrieve bodies

AP, SOCHI

A pilot error or a technical fault - not terrorism - is likely to be the cause of the plane crash into the Black Sea, Russia's transport minister said yesterday as the nation held a day of mourning for the victims.

All 84 passengers and eight crew members on the Russian military's Tu-154 plane are believed to have died Sunday morning when it crashed two minutes after taking off from the southern city of Sochi. The passengers included dozens of singers in Russia's world-famous military choir, nine Russian journalists and a Russian doctor known for her charity work in war zones.

Yesterday, the search operation involved more than 3,500 people on 45 ships - including 135 divers flown in from across Russia - sweeping a vast crash site at sea and along the shore, according to the Defense Ministry.

Five helicopters and drones were being used to help spot bodies and debris. Two deep-water submersibles arrived yesterday in Sochi to aid the operation, which went on all through the night thanks to powerful searchlights.

The Black Sea search area - which covers over 10 square kilometers (about 4 square miles) - is plagued by underwater currents that can carry debris and body fragments into the open sea.

The search party has not yet found the plane's black boxes. Emergency Situations Minister Vladimir Puchkov told Russian news agencies. Transport Minister Maxim Sokolov said earlier that the plane's flight recorders did not have radio beacons, so



A picture shows candles and flowers laid next to a picture of an airplane at a memorial on a pier outside Sochi, Russia yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

locating them on the seabed was going to be challenging.

Speaking on television yesterday, Sokolov said that terrorism was not among the main theories for the crash cause, and that authorities were looking into a possible technical fault or a pilot error.

Still, several aviation experts noted factors that could suggest a terror attack, such as the crew's failure to report any malfunction and the fact that debris from the plane was scattered over a wide area.

"Possible malfunctions ... certainly wouldn't have prevented the crew from reporting them," Vitaly Andreyev, a former senior Russian air traffic controller, told RIA Novosti.

The plane was taking the Defense Ministry's choir, the Alexandrov Ensemble, to perform at a New Year's concert at Hemeimeem air base in Syria's coastal province of Latakia. It had originated from Moscow's military airport of Chkalovsky and stopped in Sochi for refueling.

Despite the Syrian connection, Sokolov said the government sees no need to heighten security measures at Russian airports.

Queen 'backed Brexit' in run-up to referendum

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The Queen supported EU withdrawal in the run-up to the referendum, it has been claimed.

Laura Kuenssberg, the BBC's political editor, said she was told about the alleged comment months before the eventual appearance of The Sun's "Queen backs Brexit" headline in March.

The front page story caused one of the biggest rows of the referendum campaign, leading to a successful complaint to press regulator Ofcom by Buckingham Palace, which said it was "misleading".

The Sun stood by its story, saying it had two sources for the claim that the Queen had "let rip" at then deputy prime minister Nick Clegg about Europe at a lunch at Windsor Castle.

Clegg has named then justice secretary Michael Gove as the source of the story, but Gove has never confirmed the allegation.

Kuenssberg said that her "jaw hit the



floor" when an unnamed contact told her that the Queen had told a private lunch that she could not see why Britain could not simply leave the EU.

The BBC political editor told BBC Radio 4's Today programme: "In a casual chat with one of my contacts, they said 'Do you know what? At some point this is going to come out, and I'm telling you now and I don't know if the BBC would touch it, but the Queen told people at a private lunch that she thinks that we should leave the EU'.

"Apparently at this lunch she said 'I don't see why we can't just get out. What's the problem?'

And a row ensued. "My jaw hit the floor. Very sadly, I only had one source. I spent the next few days trying to prove it. I couldn't find the evidence."

"Lo and behold, a couple of months later, someone else did. Of course then ensued a huge row between that newspaper and the Palace over what had really been said or not said."



People inspect damage caused on highway 5 south on Chiloe Island off the Pacific coast of southern Chile, by a 7.7-magnitude earthquake on Sunday. The strong Christmas Day quake triggered initial tsunami fears and evacuations, but no deaths were reported.

Israel defies UN to approve new settler homes

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Jerusalem's planning committee is expected to approve the construction of hundreds of homes in east Jerusalem, despite a UN Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements across the Green Line as a "flagrant violation" of international law.

The Jerusalem Local Planning and Construction Committee is expected to approve permits to build 618 new homes in Jewish neighbourhoods across the Green Line on Wednesday, Haaretz reports.

While the meeting's agenda was set before the UN Security Council resolution, the number of construction plans approved for east Jerusalem has sharply increased over the last two years.

Around 140 homes will be approved in Pisgat Ze'ev, 262 in Ramat Shlomo and 216 in Ramot, according to Haaretz, and additional permit requests may be added for Pisgat Ze'ev and Ramot.

The Committee is also expected to debate the construction of around 5,600 new homes beyond the Green Line, Israel Hayom reports.

It will debate plans for 2,600 new homes in the neighbourhood of Gilo, 2,600 in the Givat Hamatos neighbourhood, and 400 in the Ramat Shlomo neighbourhood.

"We remain unfazed by the UN vote, or by any other entity that tries to dictate what we do in Jerusalem," deputy Jerusalem mayor Meir Turgeman told the paper.

"I hope the Israeli government and the new US administration will support us, so we can make up for the lack [of construction] during the eight years of the Obama administration."

OBAMA'S EXIT INTERVIEW

Hope, change can still win polls

CNN ONLINE

Arguing that Americans still subscribe to his vision of progressive change, President Barack Obama asserted in an interview recently he could have succeeded in this year's election if he was eligible to run.

"I am confident in this vision because I'm confident that if I had run again and articulated it, I think I could've mobilized a majority of the American people to rally behind it," Obama told his former senior adviser David Axelrod in an interview for the "The Axe Files" podcast, produced by the University of Chicago Institute of Politics and CNN.

"I know that in conversations that I've had with people around the country, even some people who disagreed with me, they would say the vision, the direction that you point towards is the right one," Obama said in the interview, which aired yesterday.

"In the wake of the election and



Trump winning, a lot of people have suggested that somehow, it really was a fantasy," Obama said of the hope-and-change vision he heralded in 2008. "What I would argue is, is that the culture actually did shift, that the majority does buy into the notion of a one America that is tolerant and diverse and open and full of energy and dynamism."

Neither Donald Trump nor Hillary Clinton won a majority of the vote in the 2016 contest. Clinton beat Trump

India test-fires nuke capable Agni-V

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Further boosting its nuclear deterrence, India yesterday successfully test-fired its longest range nuclear-capable Agni-V missile, that has a range reaching up to Europe, at an island off the coast of eastern state of Odisha.

The full range test-flight of the missile has further boosted the indigenous missile capabilities and deterrence level of the country. All the Radars, tracking systems and Range Stations tracked and monitored the flight performance and all the Mission objectives were successfully met," an official statement said.

'Over 2,000 Saudi jihadists abroad'

AFP, Riyadh

More than 2,000 Saudis are fighting abroad with jihadist groups, with over 70 percent of them in Syria, the kingdom's interior ministry was reported as saying yesterday.

"The number of Saudis proven to be in conflict areas is 2,093," interior ministry spokesman General Mansour al-Turki told daily newspaper Al-Hayat.

He said that 1,540 of them were in Syria, where jihadists have flocked since the Islamic State group seized control of vast areas in mid-2014.

Another 147 were in Yemen, which is the base of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, considered by Washington as the most dangerous affiliate of the global terror network.

Another 31 were believed to be in Afghanistan or Pakistan, Turki said.

Only five were believed to be in neighbouring Iraq, where IS also seized significant territory in 2014.

Turki said 73 Saudis had also been detained abroad "on charges related to acts of terrorism."

The Saudi Arabia has a tangled history with jihadist movements. During the 1980s and '90s, it supported militants in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia and elsewhere, based on the belief that they were defending Muslim causes.