

Trump plans 'many big things'

Says top-aide to US president-elect

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump is planning to do "many big things" after being sworn in as president, his communications director said Sunday, adding that his boss has no intention to stop stouping Twitter.

Asked by ABC News what "one big thing" the public should expect from the president-elect once he takes office on January 20, spokesman Sean Spicer replied: "It's going to be not one big thing. It's going to be many big things."

Spicer said the Republican billionaire would immediately sign a series of executive orders to "repeal a lot of the regulations and actions that have been taken by this administration over the last eight years that have hampered both economic growth and job creation."

He also confirmed that Trump would institute a five-year ban on senior officials leaving government to become lobbyists, and a lifetime ban "on anyone who wants to serve a foreign government."

When ABC interviewer Jonathan Karl asked whether Trump would continue his highly unusual -- and deeply controversial -- approach of making major policy statements over Twitter, Spicer replied, "Sure, why not."

"With all due respect," he continued, "I think it freaks the mainstream media out that he has this following of over 45-plus million people that follow him on social media, that he can have a direct conversation."

Spicer added: "Business as usual is over... There's a new sheriff in town."

Karl asked Spicer repeatedly whether Trump might reverse President Barack Obama's steps -- including the expulsion of 35 Russian agents -- aimed at punishing Moscow for interfering in the US election.

While suggesting that Obama's action might have been "political retribution" and thus too harsh, Spicer would only say that Trump would delay any decision until he receives an intelligence briefing on the matter.



Iraqis inspect a charred vehicle on the site of a bomb attack in Sadr City, a majority Shia neighbourhood in the northeast of the capital Baghdad, yesterday. Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the suicide car bomb attack that killed at least 32 people. PHOTO: AFP

Baghdad suicide blast kills 32

Dozens injured; IS claims responsibility

AFP, Baghdad

A suicide car bomb attack in a densely-populated neighbourhood of Baghdad yesterday killed at least 32 people and left dozens wounded, police and hospital officials said.

Many of the victims were daily labourers waiting for jobs at an intersection in Sadr City, a sprawling majority Shia neighbourhood in the northeast of the capital that has been repeatedly targeted.

Pictures posted on social media shortly after the explosion showed a huge plume of black smoke billowing into the sky and seriously injured people being evacuated.

According to a police colonel, at least 32 people were killed and 61 wounded in the blast, the second major attack in Baghdad in three days.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the suicide car bomb attack. The jihadist organisation via its propaganda agency Amaq claimed the "martyrdom operation" had killed around 40 people.

At least 27 people were killed by twin explosions in a busy market area in central Baghdad on Saturday, in what was the deadliest such attack in the Iraqi capital in two months.

"The terrorists will attempt to attack civilians in order to make up for their losses, but we assure the Iraqi people and the world that we are able to end terrorism and shorten its life," Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi told reporters after meeting with visiting French President Francois Hollande.

The caliphate IS proclaimed in 2014 is shrinking steadily and jihadist fighters are defending Mosul, their last major urban stronghold in Iraq.

IS battle prevents attacks at home: French president

AFP, Baghdad

Western support for military action against Islamic State jihadists is key to preventing attacks at home, French President Francois Hollande said yesterday in Iraq, where yet another bombing killed dozens.

France, one of the most active members of the US-led coalition fighting the Sunni extremist group, is particularly concerned over the return of a large contingent of French jihadists from Syria and Iraq.

"Taking action against terrorism here in Iraq is also preventing acts of terrorism on our own soil," Hollande said at a base where French soldiers have been training elite Iraqi forces.

Hollande, the only major Western head of state to have visited Baghdad since the coalition was set up in 2014, stressed that supporting Iraq was one of the surest ways of securing Europe.

Of European countries targeted by terror attacks claimed or inspired by IS, France has been the worst hit, but attacks have also been carried out in Belgium and Germany.

Besides the defeated jihadist fighters who are expected to return to Europe in the coming months, radicalised children who grew

up in the "caliphate" IS proclaimed in 2014 are also seen as ticking bombs.

"We will have to deal with the issue of the return of foreign fighters... who committed crimes, who brought their families with them, including in some cases very young children," Hollande said.

Since it joined the United States in the coalition in September 2014, France says its warplanes have conducted 5,700 sorties, around 1,000 strikes and destroyed more than 1,700 targets.

France has 14 Rafale fighter jets that are stationed in Jordan and the United Arab Emirates and taking part in coalition operations.

It also has 500 soldiers training and advising elite Iraqi forces and CAESAR artillery vehicles stationed south of Mosul to provide for ongoing operations to retake the city.

Australia, Britain and Italy are also part of the 60-member coalition supporting Iraq's efforts against IS.

Hollande said the recapture of Mosul, Iraq's second city and the jihadists' last major bastion in the country, was a matter of weeks but warned efforts should then focus on Raqqa in Syria.



Foreigners majority of victims

AFP, Istanbul

Foreigners, including many nationals of Arab countries, made up the majority of the victims in the New Year shooting rampage at an Istanbul nightclub, officials said.

A total of 39 people were killed in the assault claimed by the Islamic State group at the exclusive Reina club on the shores of the Bosphorus and 65 injured, officials said.

According to Turkish press reports, 11 Turks were killed in the attack alongside 27 foreigners. One victim is still unidentified.

Riyadh's consulate in Istanbul said that Saudis were among the victims, but gave no figures. The Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper however quoted a consulate source as saying that five Saudis including two women had died and 11 other people were injured. Al-Arabiya television also spoke of five dead and nine wounded while Turkish press reports said seven Saudis were killed.

A foreign ministry spokeswoman in Amman said two Jordanians were killed and six injured.

The spokesman had on Sunday reported a toll of three dead and four injured, but revised the figures after Turkish authorities said one of the three

was a Canadian resident in Jordan.

A spokesman for Iraq's foreign ministry said three Iraqis died.

The Lebanese foreign ministry announced the death of three Lebanese and said another four were wounded. Turkish media said Lebanon has sent a special delegation to repatriate its dead and wounded.

naming them as Abis Rizvi, the son of a former MP, and a woman, Khushi Shah.

The foreign ministry said that two Moroccans were killed and four hospitalised.

At least one German -- a man who has dual German-Turkish nationality - was killed in the attack, the foreign ministry said. A Turkish resident of Germany was



This handout video grab released yesterday shows a gunman carrying out the attack on the Reina nightclub, in Istanbul on Sunday. PHOTO: AFP

The Tunisian foreign ministry said on its Facebook page that one Tunisian and one Franco-Tunisian had died. Tunisia's ambassador to France named the victims as husband and wife Mohamed Azzabi and Senda Nakaa who leave behind a five-month-old daughter.

India's external affairs minister said two nationals were among the dead,

also killed, but it was unclear whether he also held German citizenship.

Local authorities in Bavaria had said earlier that two residents - a 28-year-old and another in his mid-20s -- were killed.

The Israeli foreign ministry said an Arab Israeli woman, 18-year-old Lian Nasser, had died.

PROBE OVER ACCEPTING GIFTS FROM SUPPORTERS

Israeli cop to question PM

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli police were expected to question Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday over whether he illegally accepted gifts from wealthy supporters, media reports said, in a probe shaking the country's political scene.

The long-running inquiry has looked into whether Israeli and foreign businessmen have offered gifts worth tens of thousands of dollars as well as another unspecified issue, according to the reports.

Attorney general Avichai Mandelblit has reportedly decided to upgrade the inquiry to a criminal probe, though he has yet to confirm this.

Police declined to comment yesterday. However, Netanyahu yesterday denied any wrongdoing ahead of his expected questioning by police.

"We hear all the media reports. We see and hear the festive spirit and atmosphere in television studios and in the corridors of the opposition," Netanyahu told lawmakers from his Likud party, according to a video posted to his Facebook page.

"I want to tell them to wait for the celebrations. Do not rush. I told you and I repeat: There will be nothing because there is nothing. You will continue to inflate hot air balloons and we will continue to lead the state of Israel."

Public radio said Netanyahu has agreed to be questioned at his residence. It was not clear when it would occur.

Screens were mounted at the entrance to the compound in central Jerusalem in an apparent bid to shield the investigators' arrival.

In a Facebook post at the weekend, Netanyahu rejected all allegations against him and said his political opponents and some news outlets wanted to bring down his government.

Police have carried out the inquiry in secret over the course of some eight months and recently reported at an important breakthrough, reports said. Some 50 witnesses are said to have been questioned.

In July, Mandelblit said he had ordered a preliminary examination into an unspecified affair involving Netanyahu, with no details given.



An overcrowded raft carrying African migrants is seen in front of an Italian Navy vessel, as lifeguards from the Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms rescue all 112 on board, including two pregnant women and five children, while it drifts out of control in the central Mediterranean Sea, some 36 nautical miles off the Libyan coast yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS IN brief

Obama plans farewell speech on Jan 10

REUTERS, Honolulu

US President Barack Obama will deliver a farewell address on Jan 10 to reflect on his time in office and say thank you to his supporters, he said in an email statement released yesterday. Obama, noting that the first president of the United States, George Washington, had penned a farewell address in 1796, said he would deliver his speech in his hometown of Chicago.

Horrific Thai road smash kills 25

AFP, Bangkok

A minivan and a pickup truck both packed with passengers collided in eastern Thailand yesterday, killing 25 people in a harrowing reminder of the country's notoriously dangerous roads. Police said the minivan driver lost control and ploughed through a central reservation into oncoming traffic in the eastern province of Chonburi. Both vehicles burst into flames.

Hajj talks: Iran denies receiving Saudi invite

AFP, Tehran

Iran has denied receiving any invitation from Saudi Arabia for talks on the hajj, after a row between the arch-foes saw its pilgrims stay at home last year. The Al-Hayat daily reported on Friday that Saudi pilgrims minister Mohammed Bentin had opened discussions with more than 80 countries, including Iran, to work out the details of the 2017 hajj.

Syria fighting rages despite truce

AFP, Beirut

Syria's army advanced yesterday as it battles to capture a rebel region that is key to the capital's water supply, launching strikes and artillery fire threatening a fragile nationwide truce.

The ceasefire brokered by regime ally Russia and Turkey, which backs the opposition, is now in its fourth day, despite sporadic violence and continued fighting in the Wadi Barada area near Damascus.

"Regime forces and fighters from Lebanon's Hezbollah group are advancing in the region and are now on the outskirts of Ain al-Fijeh, the primary water source in the area," said Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor.

He said government troops and allied fighters were engaged in fierce clashes with rebels, including from the former al-Qaeda affiliate now known as Fateh al-Sham Front.

The monitor said government forces were carrying out air strikes and artillery fire on the area, northwest of the capital, but reported no casualties.



A rebel fighter carries his weapon inside a damaged building on al-Rayhan village front in Damascus, Syria, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

since mid-2015, but the siege was tightened in late December as the army piled on pressure seeking to secure a "reconciliation" deal.

It has won several of these deals in opposition areas around the capital, offering safe passage to surrendering rebels in return for retaking territory.

The opposition criticises them as a "stave or surrender" tactic.

As the fighting stepped up in the area, Syria's government says rebels targeted key water infrastructure, causing leaking fuel to poison the water supply and then cutting it off altogether.

The United Nations says at least four million people in Damascus have been without water since December 22.

The Observatory said around 1,000 civilians -- all of them women and children -- fled the fighting in Wadi Barada over the weekend, moving to other parts of the province.

The violence threatens the delicate truce that came into force last week and is intended to pave the way to new peace talks in Kazakhstan later this month.

Four civilians and nine rebels have been killed since the truce began, but officially it is still holding.

Around 60 killed in Brazil

REUTERS, Brasilia

Around 60 people have been killed in a bloody prison riot sparked by a war between rival drug gangs in the Amazon jungle city of Manaus, officials said yesterday, in some of the worst violence in years in Brazil's overcrowded penitentiary system.

The head of security for Amazonas state, Sergio Fontes, told a news conference that the death toll could rise as authorities get a clearer idea of the scale of the rebellion sparked by a fight between rival drug gangs.

Manaus' Em Tempo newspaper reported that several of the dead had their decapitated bodies thrown over the prison wall.

The riot began late Sunday and was brought under control by around 7:00 am yesterday, Fontes said. Authorities were still counting the prisoners to determine how many had escaped, he added.

International watchdog groups sharply criticize Brazil for its prison system, where overcrowding is the norm and deadly riots routinely breakout.

The massacre was the latest clash between inmates aligned with the Sao

Paulo-based First Capital Command (PCC) drug gang, Brazil's most powerful, and a local Manaus criminal group known as the North Family.

The Manaus-based gang is widely believed to be attacking PCC inmates at the behest of the Rio de Janeiro-based Red Command (CV) drug gang, Brazil's second largest.

Security analysts have said that a truce that held for years between the PCC and CV was broken last year, resulting in months of deadly prison battles between the gangs and sparking fears that chaos will spread to other prisons.

In the latest riot, a group of inmates exchanged gunfire with police and held 12 prison guards hostage late on Sunday in the largest prison in Manaus, an industrial city on the banks of the Amazon River, Globo TV reported.

Fontes said that 74 prisoners were taken hostage during the riot, with some executed and some released.

A video posted on the website of the Manaus-based newspaper Em Tempo showed dozens of bloodied and mutilated bodies piled atop each other on the prison floor as other inmates milled about.

PRISON RIOT