



### Anti-Russian ex-senator picked as US intel chief

Donald Trump has chosen for his director of national intelligence someone who could provide a counterweight to the president-elect's alleged soft spot for Moscow: a former senator banned by Russia. Dan Coats, 73, will be nominated by Trump to serve as the powerful coordinator of 16 intelligence and security agencies, according to multiple US media reports Thursday. Coats, who served as a Republican senator from Indiana from 1989 to 1999, and then from 2011 to the end of his term on Tuesday, was one of six US legislators and three White House aides blacklisted by Moscow in 2014 in reprisal for US sanctions placed on the country for its seizure of Ukraine's Crimea region. Coats, who had advocated tough sanctions against Russia, called the ban an honor. His nomination will have to pass Senate confirmation. He will replace James Clapper, director of national intelligence under outgoing President Barack Obama from 2010 to the present. The DNI oversees coordination between disparate agencies including the Department of Homeland Security, CIA, FBI, NSA and others, acting as the president's principal advisor on their work. According to reports, Trump wants to reshape and possibly slim down the US intelligence apparatus, a job which could fall to Coats. Trump spokesman Sean Spicer rejected earlier Thursday a Wall Street Journal report that Trump wants to scale back the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and restructure the CIA.

# Russia begins Syria pullout

## UN slams 'war crime' as 5.5m people in Damascus left without water

Russia's military yesterday said it has begun scaling down its deployment to Syria, as the regime intensified its bombardment of a rebel-held district home to the capital's main water source. Moscow's intervention in September 2015 helped turn the tide in favour of President Bashar al-Assad, whose forces scored a major victory last month with the recapture of opposition stronghold east Aleppo.

Carrier group during its military mission have been fulfilled," said Russia's main commander in Syria, Andrei Kartapolov, quoted by Russian news agencies. Aircraft on board the carrier conducted some 420 sorties and hit 1,252 "terrorist" targets during the two months that it was involved in

forces targeting Aleppo. The fall of the rebel-held east of the city was the regime's biggest victory in more than five years of fighting. Moscow had already announced a partial withdrawal of Russian forces in March 2016, but later ramped up its presence again as fighting increased.

sides trade blame over a cut to mains supplies to the capital. Damascus has been without water from Wadi Barada since December 22. The United Nations said on Thursday that 5.5 million people had been affected, warning that sabotaging water supplies was a war crime. Government aircraft yesterday dropped at least 10 barrel bombs, crude munitions notorious for the indiscriminate casualties they cause, on Wadi Barada, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. A child was killed as clashes resumed in the area between pro-government forces and rebel fighters led by the jihadist Fateh al-Sham Front, the British-based monitor said. East of the capital, clashes broke out in the Marj district. Three people were killed, one of them a child. In Damascus, there were a number of casualties from rebel rocket fire.



Aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov is the first ship to leave Syria.

Russia, along with fellow regime ally Iran and rebel backer Turkey, is pushing for peace talks to be held later this month in Kazakhstan. But escalating fighting near Damascus, including reported barrel bombings, has undermined a fragile week-old nationwide ceasefire and left the talks in doubt. The planned talks are the latest diplomatic initiative aimed at ending a nearly six-year conflict that has killed more than 310,000 people and forced millions to flee their homes. Russia's military said a naval group headed by aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov would be the first to leave the area under a drawdown ordered by President Vladimir Putin on December 29. "The tasks set for the aircraft

the Syria mission, Kartapolov said. He said that Russia still had sufficient air defence capabilities thanks to its S-300 and S-400 systems deployed in the war-torn country. The Kuznetsov arrived off Syria in November as Russia boosted its firepower on land and in the Mediterranean to support regime

Putin's latest announced drawdown coincided with the declaration of a ceasefire between government and rebel forces that has led to sharp drop in fighting. A major exception has been the rebel-held area of Wadi Barada near Damascus where the regime has stepped up air strikes as the rival

# Mexico to repay for wall: Trump

AFP, Washington

US President-elect Donald Trump yesterday criticised news reports that US taxpayers would pay for his planned border wall with Mexico, saying they were failing to report that US funds used to start the project would be repaid by Mexico.

"The dishonest media does not report that any money spent on building the Great Wall (for sake of speed), will be paid back by Mexico later!" Trump said on Twitter. The Mexico peso briefly weakened by about 0.22 percent following his comment. The Mexican currency has fallen to record lows against the dollar this week as Trump intensified his criticisms of businesses that produce goods there rather than in the United States.

It last traded at around 21.35 pesos to the dollar, little changed from Thursday.

CNN and other media organizations yesterday reported that Trump's transition team had signaled to congressional Republicans that he preferred to fund the border wall through the appropriations process as soon as April.

Trump said in his note on Twitter that initial US funding would be to get the wall started more quickly and Mexico would eventually repay the United States. Trump's top aide Kellyanne Conway said the president-elect was not going back on his campaign promise to have Mexico pay for the wall.

"Nothing has changed from our perspective. Congress is taking it on themselves to explore different options to pay for the wall," she told CBS News' "This Morning" program on Friday.

"Obviously, we respect federalism, and if Congress is trying to find different ways to fund this project that is a top priority of President(-elect) Trump, then they should do that," she said.



## Grow up, Donald VP tells US president-elect

AP, Washington

US Vice President Joe Biden told President-elect Donald Trump Thursday to "grow up." Biden dismissed a Trump complaint on Twitter about how the Obama administration has handled the transition. The vice president told "PBS NewsHour" in an interview: "Grow up, Donald. Grow up. It's time to be an adult."

Biden said of Trump: "You're president. You've got to do something. Show us what you have." The vice president also said that Trump as president will have to propose legislation that Congress and the public can then assess. He said that it'll be "much clearer what he's for and against" once he's in the position of governing.

Biden also said it's "dangerous" for Trump to have publicly criticised the US intelligence community over its conclusion that Russia interfered in the November election. Biden said it's "absolutely mindless" for a president not to have confidence in or listen to intelligence agencies.

The vice president said it would be legitimate to question intelligence and ask for more detail or disagree. But he said that's different than Trump claiming he knows more than the intelligence agencies.



## Spy chiefs stand firm on claim

### Intel report identifies Russians who gave emails to WikiLeaks

AFP, Washington

US spy chiefs were set to confront an openly dismissive President-elect Donald Trump yesterday with their evidence that Russia mounted an unprecedented bid to disrupt the US elections by hacking his Democratic rivals.

The meeting comes amid high tension between the leaders of the US intelligence community and their future boss, who has bridled at any suggestion that Moscow tipped the election in his favor.

After Trump first raised doubts early last month, President Barack Obama ordered the intelligence community to produce a comprehensive report on cyberattacks and Russian interference in the election.

Obama was briefed on the report Thursday, and the intelligence chiefs were scheduled to detail it to Trump yesterday.

James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, National Security Agency chief Mike Rogers,

Federal Bureau of Investigation director James Comey and Central Intelligence Agency Director John Brennan were expected to take part in the briefing. Clapper told the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday he had "very high" confidence in their findings.

### RUSSIAN MEDDLING IN US POLLS



"The Russians have a long history of interfering in elections, theirs and other people's," he said. "But we have never encountered such a direct campaign to interfere with the election process as we have seen in this case." "This was a multifaceted campaign. So the hacking was only one part of it,

and it also entailed classical propaganda, disinformation, fake news." Clapper, Rogers and Marcel Lettre, undersecretary of defense for intelligence, said in a joint statement that "only Russia's senior-most officials" could have authorized the operation, in which hackers stole Democratic Party files and emails.

Those files were then disseminated via WikiLeaks, embarrassing the party and harming losing candidate Hillary Clinton's White House effort. Trump, who has pledged a rapprochement with President Vladimir Putin's Russia after taking office on January 20, has repeatedly dismissed the findings.

US officials familiar with the report told CNN that the liaisons who delivered the stolen emails from Russia to WikiLeaks had been identified.

And US intelligence agencies intercepted communications from senior Russian officials indicating they had celebrated Trump's victory as a win for Moscow, according to a report in The Washington Post.

## NEWS IN brief

### Israeli PM quizzed again in graft probe

Police questioned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Thursday for a second time as part of a probe into whether he illegally accepted gifts from wealthy supporters, police said. According to a statement, investigators questioned Netanyahu for five hours at his Jerusalem residence as part of a corruption probe, the second such interrogation in four days.

### MH370 search to end in two weeks

The hunt for missing flight MH370 will end in two weeks, Malaysia's transport minister said yesterday, as relatives of passengers demanded authorities push on with the search. "We're at the final lap within these two weeks," the minister, Liow Tiong Lai told reporters. "We hope we can find the plane." Authorities had previously said the search will end early this year.

### Cuba signs first exports to US in half a century

Two firms signed a deal Thursday for the first commercial exports in half a century from Cuba to the United States, a new step in the countries' historic rapprochement. Cuban company CubaExport signed an agreement to sell charcoal to US firm Coabana Trading for \$420 a tonne, the communist island's state newspaper Granma said.

### Four freed from Gitmo arrive in Saudi Arabia

Four Yemenis released from the US prison at Guantanamo Bay arrived Thursday in Saudi Arabia to a tearful reunion with relatives, after the White House rejected Donald Trump's call for a freeze on transfers. The Pentagon confirmed the detainee transfers, and said there are now 55 inmates still being held in the military detention centre in Cuba.

### Six dead as floods spark chaos in Thai south

Thai authorities yesterday warned of flash floods across the south as torrential rains lashed the region leaving at least six people dead, delaying flights and disrupting holidays during peak tourist season. Nine provinces along Thailand's southern tail have been hit by unseasonal rains for nearly a week, with the resort islands of Samui and Phangan deluged, leaving thousands of tourists stranded or delayed.

## Saddam's death warrant signed 'on day one' after 9/11 attacks

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

George W Bush's administration saw Iraq as "unfinished business" and had their "minds made up from day one," a former CIA analyst has said.

John Nixon, who questioned Saddam Hussein after he was found hiding in a cave in December 2003, said the Iraqi dictator's death warrant was signed after the 9/11 attacks.

Discussing the first days of the Bush administration on BBC Radio 4's Today Programme, Nixon said: "We had gotten word that they saw Iraq as 'unfinished business'.

"We never really understood at that point what unfinished business meant, but we knew that they wanted to do something." He added: "You know, they had their minds made up from day one. And then after 9/11, that's when the death warrant for Saddam Hussein was signed."



The CIA interrogator has previously said it quickly became clear Hussein had not developed weapons of mass destruction when he questioned him. He has also spoken out against the Iraq war numerous times, saying America was critically mistaken about the intervention in a number of ways. Nixon also said the execution of Hussein was "the final straw in terms of pulling out the justifications for the war in Iraq." He described it as "a mob justice". Hussein was executed in 2006, three years after he was captured close to his home town of Tikrit. Commenting on the infamous unauthorised video of the execution, he added: "I was blown away by the video. I was shocked by it and disgusted. "We went to Iraq to do all of these things, to find the weapons of mass destruction, to help build a new Iraq, to establish rule of law, give the Iraqi people democracy, and one by one, all of those things just crumbled."



People ransack a store while protesting against the rising prices of gasoline enforced by the Mexican government in Agua Dulce, Mexico, on Thursday. Gunfire erupted on as protesters clashed with police in Mexico during another day of looting and demonstrations against the price hike that has infuriated the population.

## 33 killed in new Brazil prison riot

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

At least 33 inmates were killed by their rivals at a prison in northern Brazil yesterday, days after a riot by warring gangs left dozens more dead at another prison, officials said.

The government of Roraima state said the situation at PAMC (Agricola de Monte Cristo prison) was now "under control". The latest violence did not appear to be an all-out riot but rather a rapid early morning attack by one group of inmates against another, lasting less than an hour, a local government spokeswoman told AFP.

Most of the killings were carried out with knives, she said. No firearms have been found inside the prison so far. In October, 10 inmates were killed at the same prison during clashes between rival drug gangs.

The prison holds inmates from the Red Command, a powerful drug gang based in Rio de Janeiro. It is allied with a local gang called the Family of the North.

That is the group authorities say was responsible for the grisly riot in Manaus, the capital of Amazonas state, where jailed gang members beheaded and mutilated 56 of their rivals in a 17-hour bloodbath Sunday and Monday. Most of those killed in Manaus were members of a rival gang, the Sao Paulo-based First Capital Command.

## WWII 'COMFORT WOMAN' ROW

### Japan recalls S Korea envoy

AFP, Tokyo

Japan recalled its ambassador to South Korea yesterday to protest the placing of a statue symbolising victims of Japanese wartime sex slavery outside its consulate in the city of Busan last month. In a move likely to reignite a feud over the so-called "comfort women", Japan's chief government spokesman Yoshihide Suga also announced that Japan is ordering home its consul-general in Busan and suspending discussions over a Japan-South Korea currency swap.

"Japan and South Korea are neighbours," Suga said. "It's a very important country. It's extremely regrettable we had to take this action."

"The Japanese government will continue to strongly urge the South Korean government as well as municipalities concerned to quickly remove the statue of the girl," he

added. Mainstream historians say up to 200,000 women, mostly from Korea but also other parts of Asia including China, were forced to work in Japanese military brothels during World War II. The plight of the women is a hugely emotional issue that has marred relations between the two Asian neighbours for decades and which, for many South Koreans, symbolises the abuses of Japan's 1910-45 colonial rule over the Korean peninsula.

The statue is a copy of one that sits across the road from the Japanese embassy in Seoul and that for more than five years has been a rallying point for supporters of the few surviving South Korean former sex slaves.

The statue in Busan was initially removed by local authorities after South Korean activists placed it in front of the Japanese consulate in the southern port city last week.



## Qaeda chief slams Islamic State 'liars'

### US puts Laden's son on terror blacklist

AFP, Washington

Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has denounced what he said was a dishonest propaganda campaign by rival jihadist group the Islamic State against his organization, in an audio message released Thursday.

In the message found and translated by US-based watchdog the SITE Intelligence Group, the Egyptian extremist accuses IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of slandering his group. Al-Qaeda, founded by the late Osama Bin Laden, is locked in a battle with the so-called Islamic State -- which sprang from its Iraqi faction -- for the leadership of a global jihad.

In his message, the 65-year-old Zawahiri complained that Al-Baghdadi had alleged that al-Qaeda opposes sectarian attacks on Shia and was prepared to work with Christian leaders. "The liars insist upon their falsehood, to the extent that they claimed we do not denounce Shia," Zawahiri said, according to the translation of the message.

Meanwhile, the US added Hamza bin Laden, son of Osama bin Laden, to its terrorist blacklist on Thursday. Hamza has become active as an al-Qaeda propagandist since his father's death at the hands of US special forces on May 2, 2011.