



An image grab taken from an APTV video released yesterday shows people gathering amidst the debris at the site of a car bomb attack in the rebel-held town of Azaz in northern Syria.

RESIGNATION CALL TO 'OBAMA AMBASSADORS'

# In a first, envoy to Canada quits

AFP, Montreal

The US ambassador to Canada announced his resignation Friday, becoming the first to yield to a demand by Donald Trump that politically appointed ambassadors quit by Inauguration Day.

"As requested I have resigned as US Ambassador to Canada effective 1/20," Bruce Heyman wrote on Twitter. Heyman is close to outgoing President Barack Obama.

The New York Times reported Thursday that the Trump transition team has issued a blanket order requiring politically appointed ambassadors -- as opposed to career diplomats holding such posts -- to leave their overseas positions by Inauguration Day on January 20. The paper quoted ambassadors familiar with the plan.

Ambassadors are said to be thinking about appealing the decision with Rex Tillerson, the billionaire property developer's nominee for Secretary of State.

Political appointees are often close to the president who gave them the job. In the past, they were often allowed to stay in their posts for weeks or months after the president's term ends, the Times said. Trump's move breaks with this precedent.

Heyman, on the job in Ottawa since April 2014, was a major contributor to Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns.

Trump's decision means the United States could be left without ambassadors in important countries for months. The posts require Senate confirmation. So far, Trump has only publicly named bankruptcy lawyer David Friedman as ambassador to Israel and Iowa Gov Terry Branstad as his ambassador to China. It is unlikely Trump will have appointed all of his overseas envoys before he is inaugurated.

## NEWS IN brief

### US Congress certifies Trump polls win

AFP, Washington

The US Congress certified Friday that Donald Trump won the November presidential election.

Lawmakers held a ceremonial final count in the House of Representatives chamber that affirmed the Electoral College voting. Trump 304 won votes while his Hillary received 227 votes. Seven electors defied their states' results and voted for other figures, but it did not affect the outcome.

### Israel cuts \$6 million in UN funding

AFP, United Nations

Israel on Friday suspended about \$6 million in funding to the United Nations to protest a Security Council resolution demanding an end to settlements in the Palestinian territories. The cut to Israel's \$40 million annual contribution to the United Nations represented the portion of the UN budget allocated to four committees on Palestinian issues, the Israeli mission said.

### Two migrants freeze to death in Bulgaria

AFP, Sofia

Two Iraqi men were found frozen to death Friday in a mountain forest in south-eastern Bulgaria, which has been pounded by blizzards, police said. Villagers made the grim discovery in the Strandzha, a massif that straddles the Bulgarian-Turkish border, police in the regional capital of Burgas said. The men were aged 28 and 35. On Monday, a Somali woman was found dead from the cold in the same region.

### Turkey to naturalise Syrian, Iraqi migrants

AFP, Istanbul

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday announced that some of the millions of Syrian and Iraqis who have fled to Turkey would be given Turkish nationality. According to Turkish government figures, the country is hosting more than three million Syrians and Iraqis who have fled war.

### US Marines to return to Helmand: report

AFP, Washington

Some 300 US Marines will head to Helmand province in Afghanistan this spring to help a NATO-led mission to train Afghan forces, the Marines said Friday. The move puts Marines back in Helmand, who left in 2014 as Nato withdrew its forces and let Afghan troops lead the fight against the Taliban.

# Fuel truck blast kills 43

AGENCIES

A fuel truck exploded in the busy centre of a rebel-held town near Syria's border with Turkey yesterday, killing dozens of people and wounding dozens more, several sources said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 43 people, mostly civilians, were killed when the tanker blew up in front of a courthouse in the northern Syrian town of Azaz.

Dozens more had severe injuries, said the Observatory, which monitors the violence in the country.

In unsourced comments, Turkey's privately owned Dogan news agency said a car bomb planted by Islamic State was responsible. There was no immediate claim of responsibility from the militant group.

Turkey's state-run Anadolu news agency cited a doctor in Azaz as saying at least 60 people had been killed and more than 50 wounded.

Video from the scene showed huge clouds of smoke rising from a street filled with debris and twisted metal, which bulldozers were working to clear.

Raging fires were burning in several vehicles, and the fire brigade was battling to put them out with a giant water

tanker and hoses.

Syria's nearly six-year war has created a patchwork of areas of control across the country, and Azaz is a major stronghold of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA).

The FSA is an alliance of moderate rebel groups whose fighters have, with Turkish military support, pushed Islamic State militants out of the border area.

The blast comes during a fragile

ceasefire brokered by government ally Russia and rebel backer Turkey.

The truce came into effect on December 30, and is intended to pave the way for new peace talks in Kazakh capital Astana, which regime ally Iran is also helping organise.

But the ceasefire and the planned talks have been threatened by ongoing violence in the rebel-held Wadi

Barada region outside Damascus, which is the main water source for the capital.

Overnight, the Observatory said seven Syrian soldiers and two civilians were killed in clashes, though the fighting appeared to have calmed by yesterday morning.

The government says Fateh al-Sham is present in Wadi Barada, and blames rebels there for cutting water to Damascus since December 22. Rebels deny the jihadist group is in the region and say the mains supply was severed after government strikes hit pumping facilities in the area.

The damage has left 5.5 million people in Damascus and its suburbs without water, according to the UN.

Yesterday, state media said maintenance teams had arrived in the area and were "prepared to enter" to begin repair work. A source close to the regime said a temporary ceasefire had been agreed to allow the repair crews to enter, though it could take days before the mains supply is restored.

More than 310,000 people have been killed in Syria since the conflict began in March 2011 with anti-government protests.

## WAR IN SYRIA REPAIR TEAMS POISED TO BEGIN WORK RESTORING DAMASCUS WATER LINE

# Search on for motives as airport reopens

REUTERS, Fort Lauderdale

Federal investigators yesterday pursued all angles in determining the motives behind a mass shooting in which an attacker opened fire in a crowded baggage claim area at Fort Lauderdale's airport, killing five people.

Authorities said they had taken decorated Iraq war veteran Esteban Santiago, 26, into custody following the shooting and questioned him at length. He was expected to face federal charges, said George Piro, special agent in charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's office in Miami.

Piro said FBI investigators had not ruled out terrorism as a reason for the attack and were reviewing the suspect's recent movements.

Authorities said the attacker retrieved a 9mm semiautomatic handgun from his checked luggage and began firing indiscriminately.

In addition to the five killed, eight people were wounded by gunfire and some three

dozen were taken to hospital with bruises or broken bones.

The airport resumed cargo flights and general aviation for private small planes at midnight local time. Commercial flights were to resume yesterday, the airport said on Twitter.

Authorities said Santiago, 26, arrived in Fort Lauderdale shortly before 1 p.m. local time (1800 GMT) on Friday on a connecting flight from Alaska.

Piro said Santiago had turned up at an FBI office in Anchorage in November of last year behaving erratically and was turned over to local police, who took him to a medical facility for a mental health evaluation.

Santiago served from 2007 to 2016 in the Puerto Rico National

Guard and Alaska National Guard including a deployment to Iraq from 2010 to 2011 according to the Pentagon.

A private first class and combat engineer, he received half a dozen medals before being transferred to the inactive ready reserve in August last year.

## FLORIDA SHOOTING



(From left, clockwise) People take cover outside the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International airport after a shooting took place near the baggage claim on Friday in Fort Lauderdale, Florida; An injured man is being helped after the shooting; law enforcement officers move in to verify the identity of people in nearby field outside the airport.



# 'Frexit', if EU refuses to cede powers

Warns Marine Le Pen

AFP, Paris

French far-right leader Marine Le Pen pledged Friday she would campaign for France to leave the EU unless Brussels agreed to return full powers to control immigration and economic policy to member states.

The presidential candidate has promised if elected in May to dump the euro and organise a Brexit-style referendum on France's membership in the European Union.

But recently she has appeared to soften her stance, saying a "common currency" could coexist with the national unit.

Addressing a gathering of foreign correspondents, the National Front (FN) leader insisted she had "not changed my mind."

If she won the vote on May 7, she would immediately begin negotiations with the EU on restoring "four

# 'I hope I've made you proud'

## Michelle Obama issues emotive parting message

AFP, Washington

Michelle Obama urged young Americans not to fear the future but fight for it, delivering an emotive farewell speech Friday in which she said being first lady was the greatest honor of her life.

After eight years in the White House, the 52-year-old will be leaving with her husband Barack Obama on January 20, when Donald Trump is sworn in as president.

"For all the young people in this room and those who are watching, know that this country belongs to you, to all of you, from every background and walk of life," she said in the East Room of the White House.

"Being the first lady has been the greatest honor of my life," she said at an event for School Counselor of the Year. "I hope I have made you proud."

As first lady, Obama focused her public role on encouraging healthy lifestyles, education

for girls and in supporting military families.

But it was as a role model for minorities that the first African-American first lady wielded the most influence -- most spectacularly by denouncing Donald Trump's attacks on immigrants and Muslims during the White House race.

"If you or your parents are immigrants, know that you are part of a proud American tradition," she told the audience. With a lot of hard work and a good education, anything is possible, including becoming president. That's what the American dream is all about," she said.

She made no direct reference to the president-elect Friday but the mogul's victory framed her remarks.

"You cannot take your freedom for granted," Obama said. "So don't be afraid... Don't be afraid, be focused, be determined, be empowered... lead by example, with hope, never fear."



# 12 killed in Thai south floods

AFP, Nakhon Si Thammarat

Heavy rains continued to hammer Thailand's flood-ravaged south yesterday, bringing the death toll up to 12 and leaving thousands of villages partially submerged, authorities said.

The flooding, which was roof-high in some areas, has affected more than 700,000 people since it started a week ago, the Interior Ministry said in a statement.

At least 12 people have died, according to the ministry and local officials, with the rain turning roads into rivers, inundating farmland and damaging more than 1,500 schools in the region.

# POST-COUP PURGES

## Turkey dismisses over 8,000 more

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey yesterday ordered the dismissal of almost 8,400 civil servants and the closure of over 80 associations, including sports clubs, in the latest round of purges after the July failed coup.

More than 100,000 people have already been suspended or sacked in a crackdown on those alleged to have links to coup-plotters in a relentless purge that shows no sign of slowing.

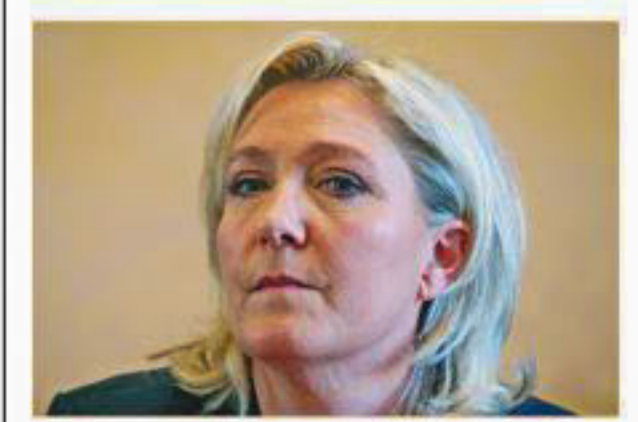
According to three new decrees published within the state of emergency imposed after the coup, 8,390 more civil servants are to lose their jobs from 63 different state institutions.

They include 2,687 police officers, 1,699 civil servants from the justice ministry, 838 health officials and hundreds of employees from other ministries.

Another 631 academics and eight members of the Council of State were also dismissed.

The dismissals are authorised by the cabinet and require no parliamentary approval under the state of emergency, which has twice been extended and is now due to last until April 19.

But its scope has been vehemently criticised by the European Union and human rights activists.



fundamental types of sovereignty: territorial, economic, monetary and legislative". The discussions, she said, would focus on her demands for the return of intra-EU borders, an end to the primacy of EU over national law, and the right for France to toss out the euro and adopt a policy of "economic patriotism". Six months later she would put the outcome to a "Frexit" in/out referendum. The anti-immigration Le Pen is one of the top contenders for the presidency. Most polls show her qualifying for -- but losing -- the run-off second round of the election in May against the conservative candidate Francois Fillon.