



Trump accuses CIA chief of leaking in tweet

CNN ONLINE

Donald Trump on Sunday night slammed outgoing CIA Director John Brennan for imploring the President-elect to put his confidence in the intelligence community and develop an "appreciation" for the effect his words could have on national security.

The CIA chief defended this agency and said in a Sunday interview with Fox News' Chris Wallace that the CIA was not trying to harm the incoming President or his team. "There is no interest in undermining the President-elect and the team coming in. It's our responsibility to make sure they understand exactly the dangers that are out there," Brennan said.

Trump has slammed the intelligence community repeatedly over the past few weeks in response to what he said was unfair coverage caused by leaked information from intelligence officials. On Sunday evening he even pointed fingers directly at the CIA director over Twitter.

@FoxNews 'Outgoing CIA Chief, John Brennan, blasts Pres-Elect Trump on 'Russia threat. Does not fully understand.' Oh really, couldn't do...much worse - just look at Syria (red line), Crimea, Ukraine and the build-up of Russian nukes. Not good! Was this the leaker of Fake News?" he wrote.

In response to the President-elect's tweets the CIA told CNN late Sunday evening it had no comment.

First on Twitter and then at his first news conference since July, Trump likened the leaks to "Nazi Germany." Brennan called the Nazi reference "outrageous."



Plane debris is seen at the crash site of a Turkish cargo jet near Kyrgyzstan's Manas airport outside Bishkek, yesterday. Inset, local residents react as they walk near the crash site. A cargo plane attempting to land in thick fog crashed into a village near the airport and killed at least 37 people, with authorities blaming "pilot error".



PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

HANDING TWO ISLANDS TO SAUDI ARABIA

Top Egypt court rejects transfer

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's top administrative court yesterday upheld a ruling voiding a government agreement to hand over two Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia in a deal that sparked rare protests.

The government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi had appealed against a lower court ruling in June that found the controversial border demarcation agreement was illegal.

In its ruling, the High Administrative Court said it was its "unanimous" decision that the two islands -- Tiran and Sanafir -- were sovereign Egyptian territories.

The courtroom erupted in cheers as the judge delivered the verdict, with lawyers and activists chanting: "These islands are Egyptian."

The decision came after the government referred the agreement to parliament for a vote.

It may further complicate ties between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, a main financial backer of Sisi since the former army chief toppled his Islamist predecessor in 2013.

Saudi Arabia has already signalled unease by stopping a promised flow of oil to Egypt, leaving Cairo scrambling to find a new supplier.

But relations have cooled over Egypt's stance on war-torn Syria, whose President Bashar al-Assad is seen as closer to Russia than Saudi Arabia which supports rebels fighting him.

Lawyers present in court told AFP the ruling was final, but a former senior judge said the government could still find a way to appeal it.

'Our fate in our own hands'

Says Merkel after Trump unleashes broadsides on Europe; Nato reiterates its confidence in US commitment

AGENCIES

Top European leaders hit back at US President-elect Donald Trump yesterday after he criticised Merkel, welcomed Britain's decision to leave EU, branded the Nato alliance "obsolete" and lashed out at a key nuclear deal with Iran.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel insisted yesterday that "we Europeans have our fate in our own hands".

"I think we Europeans have our fate in our own hands," Merkel told a joint news conference with New Zealand's prime minister in response to comments from US President-elect.

Asked about Trump's criticism of her migrant policy, Merkel said: "I am personally waiting for the inauguration of the US president. Then of course we will work with him on all levels."

German Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel said Europe should face Donald Trump with "confidence".

"I think we Europeans shouldn't somehow plunge into a deep, great depression," Gabriel told Bild daily following Trump's own interview with the German newspaper and Britain's The Times.

The EU's foreign policy supremo insisted the bloc would stand by the nuclear accord, described by Trump as "one of the dumbest deals I have ever seen".

Speaking ahead of a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brussels, Federica Mogherini said the deal was "proof that

diplomacy works and delivers".

"The European Union will continue to work for the respect and implementation of this extremely important deal, most of all for our security," she said.

Britain's foreign minister Boris Johnson also defended the deal, saying it had "great merit" and "we want to keep it going".

Germany's top diplomat Frank-Walter Steinmeier acknowledged Nato "concern" over Trump's remarks about the US-led alliance.

Nato yesterday reiterated its full confidence in the US security commitment to Europe, despite Trump sparking fresh uproar by saying the alliance was obsolete.

In a statement, Nato spokeswoman Oana Lungescu said alliance chief Jens Stoltenberg was looking forward to working with Trump and his team.

"He is absolutely confident that the incoming US administration will remain committed to Nato," Lungescu said.

She said the two men had already discussed defence and increased spending, a key issue for many years in Washington which has pushed the allies to share more of the burden.

In his interview, Trump went on to threaten punitive 35 percent tariffs on German carmakers like BMW if they build cars in Mexico and not the United States.



Turkish MPs back Erdogan

bid for more power

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey was a key step closer yesterday to dramatically expanding the powers of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan after parliament approved, on first reading, a bill critics fear will lead to one-man rule.

The parliament backed the two final sections of the 18-article new constitution late Sunday after a marathon week of debating that began on January 9 and included sessions that often lasted late into the night.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) mustered the necessary 330 or more votes -- a three-fifths majority -- needed to adopt the constitutional change and send it to a referendum for final approval.

The constitution plan will now go to a second reading in the Ankara parliament expected to start on Wednesday where the 18 articles will again be debated one by one.

Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus wrote on Twitter that with the changes "God willing, Turkey will reach a more efficient governance model."

He later told A-Haber television in an interview that it was possible the referen-

dum would take place as soon as the start of April.

The debates have been fractious and last week saw some of the worst fighting in years in the parliament with punches thrown, deputies bloodied and one lawmaker even claiming to have been bitten in the leg.

The proposed changes, which would create an executive presidency for the first time in modern Turkey, are controversial and far-reaching.

The president would have the power to appoint and fire ministers, while the post of prime minister will be abolished for the first time in Turkey's history.

Instead, there would be a vice president, or possibly several.

With Turkey already under a state of emergency for almost six months following the July 15 failed coup, the proposed changes would also widen the scope of conditions in which the president can declare an emergency.

Parliamentary elections and presidential ballots would be held simultaneously, with the draft giving November 3, 2019 as the poll date.

CHARTER REFORM



Syrian rebel groups to attend Astana peace talks

AFP, Beirut

Syrian rebel groups said yesterday they will attend peace talks next week, in a boost to efforts by rivals Turkey and Russia to put an end to the nearly six-year-old conflict.

The talks, beginning on January 23 in the Kazakh capital Astana, are set to build on a nationwide truce that has largely held despite escalating violence across several battlefronts in recent days.

Organised by rebel backer Turkey and regime allies Russia and Iran, the meetings are the latest bid to put an end to the inter-

mediate war raging in Syria since March 2011.

The powers have backed opposing sides of Syria's conflict for years but have worked unprecedentedly closely in recent weeks to end the bloodshed.

If the Astana meetings are successful, they could augur well for fresh UN-hosted negotiations on the conflict next month in

Geneva.

"All the rebel groups are going (to Astana). Everyone has agreed," said Mohammad Alloush, a leading figure in the Jaish al-Islam (Army of Islam) rebel group.

"Astana is a process to end the bloodletting by the regime and its allies. We want to end this series of crimes," Alloush said.

Ahmad al-Othman from the Sultan Murad faction also told AFP that "the rebel groups have decided to go to the talks."

Sources from the opposition and the regime said the talks would "probably" be face-to-face.

Several rounds of peace talks held by the United Nations have failed to produce a political solution to the conflict.

The Astana talks will assume a different approach, focusing strictly on military developments ahead of political discussions in Switzerland in February, opposition figures told AFP.



UN special rapporteur on Myanmar Yanghee Lee (R) meets a Buddhist monk at a monastery in Sittwe yesterday. Lee, the UN's rights envoy for Myanmar, arrived in troubled Rakhine state on Friday for a trip north to probe allegations of horrific abuse of Rohingya Muslims by security forces.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWSIN brief

Three militants killed in Kashmir gun battle

AFP, Srinagar

Three militants were killed in an overnight gun battle with soldiers in a village in Indian Kashmir, an army spokesman said yesterday. Rajesh Kalia said troops cordoned off the village near the tourist resort of Pahalgam after receiving a tip that fighters were hiding out in a private home there. "Three terrorists have been killed. Their bodies and weapons have been retrieved," he said.

'Qaeda attack' kills 4 soldiers in Yemen

AFP, Aden

Four soldiers were killed and three wounded in a suspected Al-Qaeda attack on a checkpoint in southern Yemen, a security official said yesterday. "Terrorist elements on Sunday evening attacked... soldiers at a checkpoint" in the town of Loder in Abyan province, the official told AFP, requesting anonymity. AQAP is seen by Washington as the jihadist network's most dangerous franchise.

Snow traps 1,000 motorists in Tunisia

AFP, Tunis

Heavy snow has trapped around 1,000 motorists in northwestern Tunisia, the prime minister's office said yesterday. Drifts blocked roads including a major highway in the province of Jendouba on Sunday evening, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed's office said. The government opened 10 emergency shelters in schools and sports centres, warning the public not to travel unless absolutely necessary.

Lights go out at Piccadilly Circus

AFP, London

The iconic lights that illuminate London's Piccadilly Circus were turned off yesterday for renovations, the first time since World War II they have gone dark, except for power cuts and funerals.

The billboards at the central London hub have displayed illuminated advertisements for more than a century, but will not be switched on again until the autumn, when a new permanent single screen will be unveiled in place of the current six screens.

The lights went out at 08:30 am (0830 GMT), and a temporary advertising banner will replace the screens.

The new screen will flash advertisements to the 100 million people who are estimated to pass by each year as well as news, sport and weather updates.

The last time the lights went out for a lengthy spell was in 1939, when cities turned off their lights during the war. They were not switched back on until 1949. They have since been turned off during the funerals of Winston Churchill and Princess Diana and for environmental campaigns, while also suffering the occasional power cut.



Japan to supply new patrol boats to Vietnam: Abe

REUTERS, Hanoi

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday promised Vietnam six new patrol boats during a visit to the Southeast Asian country locked in a dispute with China over the busy South China Sea waterway.

Abe's stop in Vietnam completes a tour through an arc of a region where Japan stakes a leadership claim in the face of China's growing dominance and uncertainty over what policy change Donald Trump will bring as US president.

"We will strongly support Vietnam's enhancing its maritime law enforcement capability," Abe said, while emphasizing that the dispute over the South China Sea should be settled through talks and in accordance with international law.

China claims almost all the South China Sea, through which about \$5 trillion worth of sea-borne trade passes every year. Vietnam and four other countries also have claims in the sea, believed to have rich

deposits of oil and gas.

Tokyo has no territorial claims there, but worries about China's growing military reach into the sea lanes. Japan has a separate dispute with China over a cluster of tiny islets in the East China Sea.

In September, Japan had said it was ready to provide new patrol boats to Vietnam after earlier supplying six old vessels.

Maritime security and trade have been key themes during Abe's other stops - in Indonesia, the Philippines and Australia.

Given the readiness of the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte to move closer to the Chinese and further from its traditional US ally, Vietnam is one of fewer regional states showing potential readiness to confront China.

Uncertainty over US policy in Asia was amplified last week by comments from Secretary of State nominee Rex Tillerson that China must stop building islands in the South China Sea and that its access to those islands must not be allowed.

SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW

Iraqi forces battle IS near Tigris river

REUTERS, Mosul

Iraqi special forces battled Islamic State militants in districts near the Tigris river in Mosul yesterday as they sought to bring more of the east of the city back under government control.

The latest clashes occurred in the neighbouring Shurta and Andalus districts. At least three Islamic State suicide car bombs targeted Iraqi forces in Andalus. There was no immediate word on any casualties. In an online post, Islamic State said it had carried out a "martyrdom operation" in the area.

Iraq's elite Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) said the militants, who seized Mosul in 2014 as they swept across much of northern Iraq, only to since lose much of that terrain to government counter-offensives, were fighting back hard.

"We've begun breaching (Shurta) but there was an attack a few moments ago. By the end of the day we'll make some progress," CTS spokesman Sabah al-Numan said.

Shurta and Andalus are situated close to the eastern bank of the Tigris, separated only by some woodland, and within sight of the city's northernmost bridge across the river.

Iraqi forces, which have reached three of the five bridges, say they will soon fully control the eastern bank. They have already taken areas of the river bank further south.

Once the east bank is recaptured, they can begin attacks on western Mosul, which the Sunni Muslim extremist insurgents still hold.