

NEWS IN brief

Air raids cut water to IS Syria bastion

Water to the Islamic State group's Syrian bastion of Raqa has been cut after suspected coalition raids on the city's main pipeline, a monitor and activists told AFP yesterday. Raqa, 90 kilometres south of the Turkish border, is IS's de facto capital in Syria and remains home to more than 300,000 people.

Woman tied to 'black site' to be CIA No 2

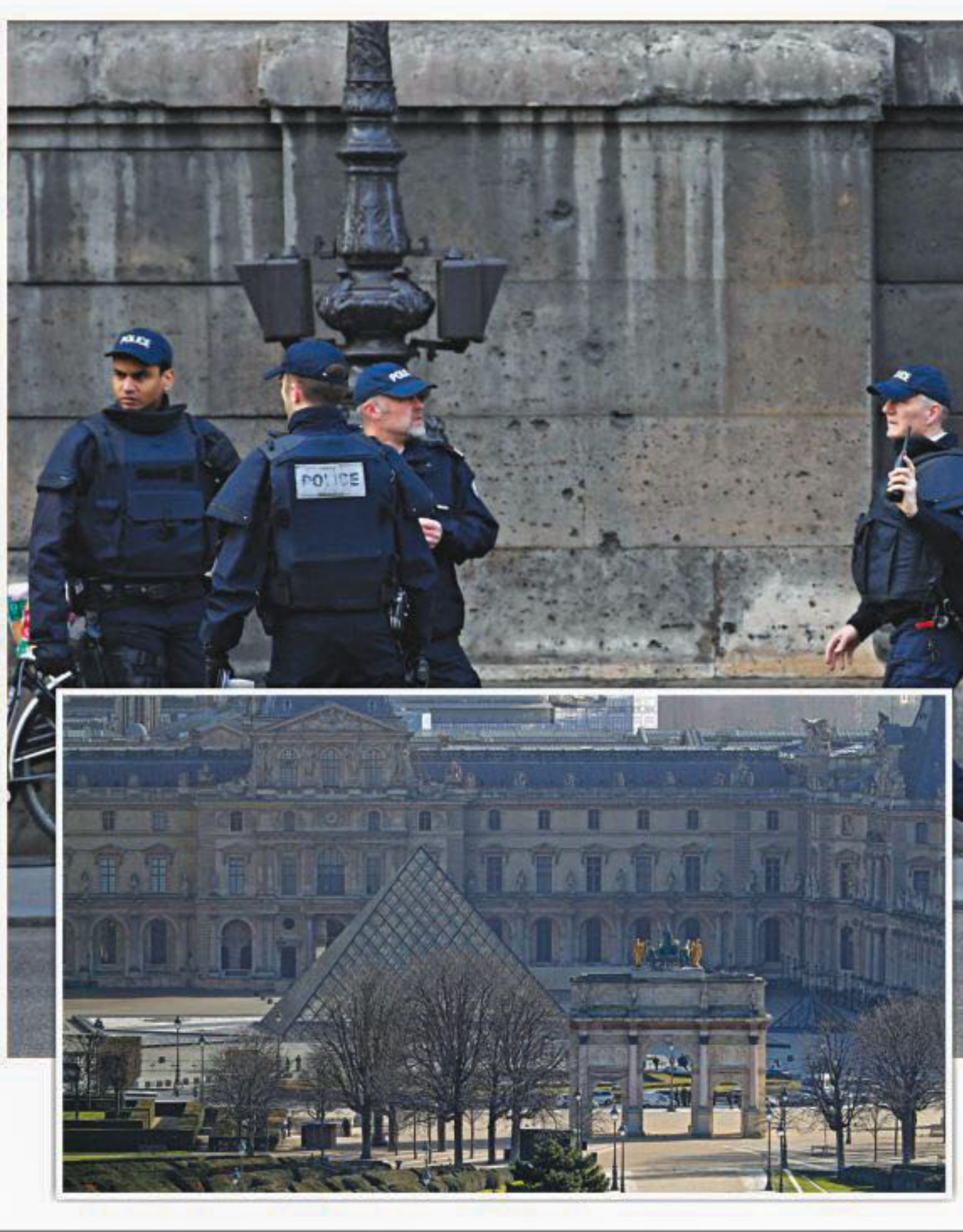
A longtime CIA clandestine operations official reportedly involved in its much-criticized "black site" interrogations after the 9/11 attacks was named number two at the US spy agency Thursday. Gina Haspel, the first female head of the Central Intelligence Agency's clandestine service, was named deputy director of the overall organization under its new director, Mike Pompeo.

Trump hit with \$6m fine in golf club lawsuit

A Florida judge has ordered President Donald Trump to pay nearly \$6 million in a breach of contract dispute at a country club he owns. Disgruntled members of Trump National Golf Club sued the real estate billionaire in May 2013. The dispute centered on the club's refusal to pay back refundable deposits to people who wanted to drop their memberships.

Qaeda overruns 3 Yemeni towns

Al-Qaeda in Yemen overran three southern towns just days after a deadly US raid targeting its commanders, before withdrawing from two of them yesterday, officials said. The jihadists' entry into the two towns on Thursday evening was helped by a pullout by government forces angry over the late payment of their wages, a security official told AFP.



French police officers and soldiers patrol in front of the Louvre museum, inset, in Paris yesterday. A French soldier patrolling at the Louvre museum shot and seriously injured a machete-wielding attacker, thrusting security and the terror threat back into the limelight three months before elections.

Over 100,000 visas revoked

US lawyer tells Virginia court

More than 100,000 visas have been revoked since President Donald Trump's executive order on immigration and travel was signed January 27, a government lawyer revealed in a court session in Virginia yesterday.

The number came in response to a question from the judge about how many people have been affected by this order.

Erez Reuveni, from the Office of Immigration Litigation at the Civil Division of the Justice Department, also said no returning legal permanent residents have been denied entry.

The judge also extended a temporary restraining order against removing lawful permanent residents until next Friday.

Trump gives mixed signals

US settlement remarks challenge Israel, alarm Palestinians

Israel yesterday discovered that settlement construction may not be as simple as it thought under US President Donald Trump, implying it would tone down activity ahead of crucial Washington talks.

Palestinians, however, were worried by the Trump administration's first direct statements on the issue made since the January 20 inauguration.

The White House issued a statement seeming to tone down Trump's full-throated support of settlement construction after a series of Israeli announcements on thousands of new homes in settlements, as well as plans to build a new settlement for the first time since 1992.

But the remarks did not criticise the very existence of Jewish settlements in Palestinian territories as previous US administrations had consistently done.

"While we don't believe the existence of settlements is an impediment to peace, the construction of new settlements or the expansion of existing settlements beyond their current borders may not be helpful," White House spokesman Sean Spicer told reporters on Thursday.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had welcomed Trump's presidency as bearing "significant opportunities" after eight years of often strained relations with Barack Obama.

Netanyahu, who is due to meet with Trump in Washington on February 15, did not comment on the remarks, but lower ranking officials played

down their significance and noted their upside.

The remarks did not amount to "a U-turn", Israel's ambassador to the United Nations Danny Danon said.

"The statement is very clear and essentially means: wait for the meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu, who is arriving in Washington in less than two weeks to meet President Trump, and then we'll determine our policy," he told Israeli public radio.

Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely said the "White House itself holds that the settlements are not an obstacle to peace and they never have been".

Israel has now approved more than 6,000 homes for settlers since Trump took office, having signalled a softer stance on settlement construction than his predecessor Obama.

Earlier this week, Netanyahu pledged to build a new settlement for the first time in 25 years.

The Palestinians, meanwhile, were concerned by the US statement, with senior official Hanan Ashrawi telling AFP that its "unacceptable and unclear" wording implied building inside settlements was permitted.

Another Palestinian official told AFP on condition of anonymity that the statement was "worrying".

Settlements in both the West Bank and east Jerusalem are viewed as illegal under international law and major stumbling blocks to peace as they are built on land the Palestinians want for their own future state.



Trump moves to roll back financial regulation

President Donald Trump was scheduled yesterday to move to roll back key reforms enacted in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, in what the White House sees as an effort to cut damaging red tape.

Officials say Trump will sign two executive actions asking the Treasury and the Labor Department to look into ways of reforming rules that were designed to make markets safer and give consumers more protection.

One order will ask the Treasury Department to identify possible changes to a package of financial reforms -- known as Dodd-Frank -- enacted in 2010 by president Barack Obama.

Among other things, the legislation created the consumer financial protection bureau and required banks to keep more capital on hand to prevent over-leveraging.

The review will also target the so-called "Volcker Rule," which curbs some speculative investments.

"(We) believe that Dodd-Frank in many respects was a piece of massive government overreach," said a senior administration official, previewing the orders Trump will sign later Friday.

"It imposed hundreds of new regulations on financial institutions, it established an enormous amount of work and effort for financial firms," the official said. Republicans have made no secret of their dislike for the consumer financial protections bureau, which looks set to be targeted in the review. Any substantial repeal of Dodd-Frank would require congressional action, but the Trump White House is keen to send a signal that it is ready to slash red tape.



Now mentally ill people can buy guns in US

Lawmakers have struck down an Obama administration rule that attempts to keep guns out of the hands of people who suffer from mental illness.

The Republican-controlled House voted 235-180 in an apparent effort to improve gun ownership under President Trump. The rule affected nearly 75,000 Social Security recipients diagnosed with mental health conditions, such as extreme anxiety and schizophrenia, and are considered incapable of managing their own affairs.

The legislation will now head to the Senate.

In his final months in office, President Barack Obama issued the regulation that requires the Social Security Administration to relay names of individuals into a database of citizens who are ineligible to purchase a firearm.

Republicans and gun rights activists have argued that the rule stigmatises those with mental health issues and unfairly strips them of their Second Amendment rights.



Most Americans want Obama back as leader

Donald Trump has been President for 13 days and yet more than half of Americans are missing former President Barack Obama, according to a new poll.

A total of 52 per cent of Americans are yearning for Obama, found a survey from Public Policy Polling, while just 43 per cent are glad that Trump is in the White House.

Furthermore, 40 per cent want the new President to be impeached, up from 35 per cent one week ago.

More than 500,000 people have also signed up to a petition by campaign group Impeach Trump Now on the basis that he has not taken a far enough step away from his real estate empire whilst in government.

Trump, despite winning the electoral college, lost the popular vote by close to three million votes and is already suffering the lowest popularity ratings in contemporary American history.

The low numbers come down to opposition to his policies. Only a quarter of Americans (26 per cent) were in favour of the Muslim ban, the executive order which barred nearly all travellers from seven Muslim-majority countries for at least 90 days.

Almost half of Trump supporters were in favour of the order, however, and 48 per cent believed the protesters at airports around the country - as well as people at the women's marches - were paid by billionaire investor and Hillary Clinton supporter George Soros.

VISA BAN ON MUSLIM COUNTRIES US judge extends deportation stay

A US federal judge on Thursday extended until February 21 a stay on visa holders from seven Muslim majority countries and refugees being deported under President Donald Trump's travel ban.

Judge Carol Bagley Amon took the decision at a hearing in New York, saying that she did not want to leave the issue in limbo given that the stay -- ordered last Saturday -- was set to expire on February 11.

The travel restrictions ban all refugees from entering the United States for at least 120 days and visa holders from seven Muslim majority countries from arriving in the country for 90 days.

Lawyers for the US justice department told the federal court in Brooklyn Thursday that they planned to file a motion to dismiss the case and said no one was currently in detention.

Counsel representing rights groups said they were still waiting for final confirmation that no one was being detained, and said that some travelers had been deported despite the stay.

They called for a complete list of all those detained since the executive order came into effect last Friday so that they could ask everyone deported whether they wanted representation or to return.



People take part in a protest in front of the government headquarters in Bucharest against the controversial decree to pardon corrupt politicians and decriminalise other offenses on Thursday. Demonstrators in Romania geared up for more protests yesterday over what they see as a worrying backsliding in the fight against corruption, as the political crisis showed no sign of easing.

EU inks Libya migrant deal

Leaders slam Trump over 'unacceptable' pressure on EU

European Union leaders yesterday agreed a plan to curb mass migration from Libya at a special summit in Malta that was overshadowed by the challenges of Donald Trump and Brexit.

Faced with a surge in migrants this spring, the 28 leaders backed steps including helping the Libyan coastguard to stop boats to Italy and setting up temporary camps in the north African state.

But they will also, without Prime Minister Theresa May, discuss the future of the bloc at a turning point with Britain set to leave, and an increasingly difficult geopolitical situation with the new US administration.

French President Francois Hollande lashed out at Trump, who has predicted that other countries will follow Britain out of the EU and branded the transatlantic Nato military alliance obsolete.

"It is unacceptable that there should be, through a certain number of statements by the president of the United States, pressure on what Europe should or should not be," Hollande said as he arrived at the summit.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel meanwhile said Europe "has its destiny in its own hands" as it deals with a US administration that seems ambivalent to Europe and Nato.

The migrant plan involves funding and training the Libyan coastguard to make it better able to intercept migrant boats before they reach international waters, and helping neighbouring countries to close routes into Libya.

On the eve of the Malta meeting, Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni and his Libyan counterpart signed a deal in Rome on tackling people smugglers.

That deal provides for the establishment of EU-funded but Libyan-run camps to house migrants pending their "voluntary return or repatriation" to their home countries. Italy committed to funding medical services for the camps.

Rights groups warned that sending boats back to Libya could result in children being sent back to squalid detention centres.

May, Merkel and Hollande were all briefing their colleagues on their contacts with Trump, as Europe seeks to understand an unpredictable new president.

HC rejects Brexit EEA challenge

England's High Court yesterday blocked a legal challenge to force the government to seek parliamentary approval before pulling out of the European Economic Area as a part of Brexit.

The case had been brought by campaigners who wanted a "soft Brexit" that would keep Britain in the European single market.

In a landmark decision last month, the Supreme Court ruled that parliament must give its approval before the government invokes Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty.

The EEA area contains the EU's 28 member states plus Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein.

Apple set to make iPhones in India

Apple is to start making iPhones in India this year, a local government official said yesterday, as the company seeks to tap into a booming middle class while sales in China slow.

Karnataka's IT minister said Apple had agreed to assemble its hugely popular phones in the southern state, whose capital Bangalore is India's technology hub.

Apple, which has not commented on the minister's statement, remains a relatively small player in India, where sales of its smartphones lag those of rival Samsung.

But chief executive Tim Cook said this week it would "invest significantly" in the country of 1.25 billion people.

"We have an understanding with Apple and we expect them to start manufacturing in Karnataka by the end of April," state minister of information technology and biotechnology Priyank Kharage told AFP.

He said the new operation would likely assemble iPhones for the domestic market. Apple has only a two percent share of the Indian market, well behind rival Samsung on 23 percent, according to research firm Canalis.