



US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (L), Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (R) and others wait for the start of a meeting at the World Conference Center in Bonn, western Germany yesterday. Tillerson, who made his diplomatic debut at the G20 gathering, told Lavrov that Washington would cooperate with Moscow but only if it was in America's and its allies' interest to do so.

PHOTO: AFP

Two-state solution remains 'only way'

Insists UN on ME peace process

AFP, United Nations

The two-state solution remains "the only way" to meet the aspirations of the Palestinians and Israelis, the UN envoy for the Middle East peace process told the Security Council yesterday.

The council met to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a day after President Donald Trump stepped back from the US commitment to a two-state solution as part of a final peace deal.

"The two-state solution remains the only way to achieve the legitimate national aspirations of both peoples," Nickolay Mladenov told the council.

"Some may hold the illusion that the conflict can be 'managed' indefinitely," Mladenov said. "That the absence of a clear strategy to advance peace is a strategy in itself."

The envoy urged Israeli and Palestinian leaders to "carefully contemplate the future," which he warned could be one "built on perpetual conflict, rising extremism and occupation."

Trump announced Wednesday that the United States would not insist on a two-state solution to the conflict, in a break from Washington's decades-old policy and from the international consensus on the peace process.

Trump's comments were welcomed by Israel's rightwing government but the Palestinians reacted with alarm.

Britain, France and Sweden reaffirmed their support for a two-state solution.

TIES WITH RUSSIA

Mattis sees no military collaboration

REUTERS, Brussels

US President Donald Trump's defense secretary yesterday said he did not see possible military collaboration with Russia now, in a blow to Moscow's hopes to mend ties with Washington after Trump's election.

The remarks are perhaps the strongest indication yet from the Trump administration that prospects for any significant cooperation between the US and Russian militaries against Islamic State in Syria is unlikely anytime soon.

They came despite repeated suggestions by Trump during his election campaign of the possibility of joint action against Islamic State militants. "We are not in a position right now to collaborate on a military level. But our political leaders will engage and try to find

Assad hails US travel ban

Says it targeted 'terrorists' not Syrians, vows to retake 'every inch' of country

AFP, Paris

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad defended President Donald Trump's ban on Syrians entering the US, saying it targeted "terrorists" and not the Syrian people, in an interview broadcasted yesterday.

Trump last month summarily denied entry to all refugees for 120 days and barred Syrian refugees indefinitely. The highly controversial decree, which was suspended by a federal judge, also barred travellers from seven predominantly Muslim countries, including Syria, for 90 days.

In an interview with French media Assad expressed understanding for the ban.

"It's not against the Syrian people... it's against the terrorists that could infiltrate some of the immigrants to the West and that happened. It happened in Europe, mainly in Germany and could happen in the United States," he told Europe 1 radio and TF1 television channels in the interview in Damascus.

"For me, as president, I would not worry about that," he said, accusing Trump's critics of seizing on the ban "as the fuel for the conflict with Trump."

The interview came as Syrian gov-

ernment representatives and rebel groups began new peace talks in the Kazakh capital Astana, brokered by Russia, Turkey and Iran.

The talks in Astana are viewed as a warm-up for UN-led negotiations that are due to begin in Geneva on February 23.

Assad revealed that retaking the Islamic State's Syrian bastion of Raqa -- a key objective of the US-led coalition battling the jihadists -- was not a prior-

ity for his forces. "Raqa is a symbol," he said, "You have ISIS close to Damascus, you have them everywhere," Assad said, using another acronym for IS.

"For us it is all the same, Raqa, Palmyra, Idlib, it's all the same," vowing to win back "every inch" of Syrian territory. Across the border, Iraqi forces are four months into a massive operation

to drive IS out of the city of Mosul. In Syria, an Arab-Kurd rebel alliance has begun advancing on Raqa with the aim of liberating the city.

In the interview, Assad again denied recent allegations by Amnesty International of executions and atrocities perpetrated at a prison near Damascus.

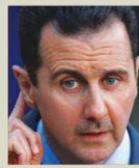
Assad said Amnesty's "biased" report contained "not a single fact (or) evidence" to support allegations that some 13,000 people were hanged at the Saydnaya prison between 2011 and 2015.

In the interview, Assad was also scathing of the West's fruitless attempts to mediate in the six-year conflict that has claimed more than 300,000 lives.

The West, he said, "did not want to achieve peace in Syria."

On the ground, Turkish bombardment on an Islamic State group-held town in Syria has killed 24 civilians, a monitor said yesterday, but Turkey's army said only "terrorists" died in the operation.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the dead in air strikes and shelling on the town of Al-Bab in the last 24 hours included 11 children.



Regime, rebels attend fresh Russian-backed talks
24 civilians killed in bombing on Al-Bab

Trump presses showdown with intelligence agencies

Vows to catch 'low-life leakers' after Flynn resignation

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump pressed his attacks on US intelligence agencies yesterday, vowing to catch "low-life leakers" amid a battle over contacts with Russia that led to the ouster of his national security adviser.

The latest flurry of presidential salvos came amid reports that Trump plans to name a New York billionaire, Stephen Feinberg, to lead a sweeping review of the US intelligence agencies, raising fears of a bid to curtail their independence.

Since firing his top security aide on Monday night, Trump has lashed out repeatedly at the community, portraying the leaks that prompted Michael Flynn's departure as a bid to undermine his legitimacy.

"The spotlight has finally been put on the low-life leakers! They will be caught!" Trump declared in an early morning tweet yesterday.

"Leaking, and even illegal classified leaking, has been a big problem in Washington for years. Failing @nytimes (and others) must apologize!"

Trump decried Flynn's treatment at a news conference on Wednesday despite having fired the retired general two days earlier for deceiving Vice President Mike Pence about his contacts with Russia's ambassador to Washington.

Earlier, he pointed the finger at the National Security Agency, which conducts electronic surveillance, and the FBI, which handles counter-intelligence probes, as possible sources of the leaks.

The New York Times reported Wednesday that intercepted calls and phone records show Trump aides were in repeated contact with Russian intelligence officials at least a year before the US elections.

The Wall Street Journal yesterday reported that US intelligence officials have withheld from Trump sensitive information on sources and methods because of concerns it could be leaked or compromised.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has moved gingerly on Russia, sending top officials to Europe to reassure Nato allies while making its opening official contacts with the Russians.



common ground," Jim Mattis told reporters after talks at Nato headquarters in Brussels, also mentioning US concerns about Russian interference in democratic elections.

Just hours before Mattis spoke, Russian President Vladimir Putin said it was in the interests of both nations to restore communications between their intelligence agencies.

"It's absolutely clear that in the area of counter-terrorism all relevant governments and international groups should work together," he told Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB).

Air raid on Yemen funeral kills eight

AFP, Sanaa

An air strike killed eight women and a child at a funeral reception near the Yemeni capital, witnesses said yesterday, adding to the conflict's mounting civilian death toll.

At least 10 other women were wounded in the overnight raid on the district of Arhab, 40 kilometres north of Sanaa, medics sent to the site told AFP.

The Iran-backed Huthi Shia rebels, who seized large parts of the country including the capital in 2014, accused the Saudi-backed Arab coalition supporting the Yemeni government of carrying out the strike.

A coalition statement sent to AFP said the group was "investigating the reports" that civilians were killed in the raid near Sanaa.

It was not immediately clear if the house was deliberately targeted. The home had been built on a plot of land with no other buildings visible in the immediate vicinity.

Yemen's war pits the internationally recognised government of President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi against Huthi insurgents allied with forces loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The Saudi-led Arab coalition that intervened in Yemen in March 2015 on the side of Hadi says that it does not target civilians. But it has faced repeated allegations of deliberately striking weddings, funerals, schools and hospitals.



Yemeni men check the site of an air raid that hit a funeral reception in the Arhab district yesterday. An AFP photographer said the stone building had been totally demolished except for three remaining arches. PHOTO: AFP

Oceans lost 2pc of oxygen

AFP, Paris

The world's oceans have lost more than two percent of their oxygen since 1960, with potentially devastating consequences for sea plants and animals, marine scientists said Wednesday.

In those five and a half decades, parts of the oceans devoid of oxygen, called anoxic waters, have quadrupled, said a study in the science journal Nature.

Oceans cover nearly three quarters of the Earth's surface, provide about half of the oxygen we breathe.

Most oxygen was lost in the Equatorial and North Pacific Ocean, the Southern Ocean, and the South Atlantic Ocean. The study also reiterated an older warning that the loss of oxygen would accelerate -- with predictions of a 1-7 percent decline by 2100.

CRACKDOWN ON IMMIGRANTS IN US

DC restaurants to close in show of solidarity

AFP, Washington

Some of the US capital's finest restaurants are putting their money where their mouths are: shutting down for a day to protest President Donald Trump's anti-immigrant policies.

A number of dining establishments are closing up shop Thursday as a boycott is calling for immigrants not to go to work for "A Day without Immigrants" -- in a country that until now has had a long history of welcoming newcomers.

"For one single day on a weekday, we must come together and unite in absolute resistance in order to reject the system dictating the launch from dehumanization and blatant oppression of those that are not straight, white,



natural-born citizens," reads the social media call to action.

The shutdown aims to show the world "how crucial we are to the basic fundamentals of the United States' economy," the Facebook post said.

Eateries in New York and Philadelphia have also said they will participate in the one-day protests.

The call to boycott comes after last week's series of immigration raids that rounded up some 680 people -- three-quarters of them with a criminal record -- for expulsion.

At least 11 million people are living in the US illegally. Undocumented immigrants make up about nine percent of employees in the hotel and restaurant industry in 2014, according to the Pew Research Center.

Israel 'biggest threat' to world peace

Says Iran after Trump warning

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday said that Israel's atomic arsenal is the biggest danger to world peace, a day after US President Donald Trump vowed to prevent Iran developing a nuclear weapon.

Israel is the "biggest threat to the peace and security in the region and the world," Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi said, quoted by state news agency IRNA. Trump had warned Wednesday after meeting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Washington that the "threat of Iran's nuclear ambitions" was one of the major security challenges facing Israel.

The US president told reporters that he would do "more to prevent Iran from ever developing -- I mean ever -- a nuclear weapon".

But Ghasemi dismissed the comments by Trump and Netanyahu comments as "nonsense". "The bitter truth is that these unjust claims are being repeated by the Zionist regime that doesn't abide by any international laws and has hundreds of warheads in its atomic arsenal," Ghasemi said, referring to Israel.

Israel is believed to be the Middle East's sole nuclear power but it has long refused to confirm or deny that it has such weapons.

A war of words has been escalating between Tehran and Washington since even before Trump took office in January.

Big fat Indian weddings in crosshairs of thrifty MP

AFP, New Delhi

Extravagant Indian weddings in palaces featuring elephants, foreign dance troupes and seven-course meals could become a thing of the past if one politician fed up with the excess gets her way.

Rankled by the obscene sums splashed out on festivities, Ranjeet Ranjan from the opposition Congress Party has proposed a bill that would cap the entertainment budget and redirect any extras to India's poor.

Life savings are poured into weddings in India, with price tags up to \$75,000 not uncommon for affluent urban families hosting sometimes thousands of guests for sumptuous celebrations lasting for days.

The new proposal might force some families to rethink the fireworks and chandeliers, with a requirement that weddings exceeding

500,000 rupees (\$7,500) contribute 10 percent of the overall cost to poorer Indians for their own nuptials.

Ranjan -- who made headlines herself last year for riding a Harley Davidson to parliament -- said growing up with six sisters she was troubled by the pressure on her parents to spend big.

"I have seen people spend two million rupees (\$30,000) just on dinner for wedding guests. People boast that we will serve 15 types of sweets brought from four states," she told AFP Thursday.

"These days marriages are more about showing off your wealth. Why should poor families be put under pressure to spend so much?"

Her private members bill has been listed for discussion when parliament convenes on March 9, but such proposals must clear many hurdles to become law.

