

Trump gets new anti-IS plan

AFP, Washington
The Pentagon presented the White House with possible new battle plans Monday to defeat the Islamic State group, after President Donald Trump demanded top brass find additional ways to destroy the jihadists.

A pillar of Trump's campaign was to quicken the fight against IS, which despite losing thousands of fighters still controls parts of northern Syria and Iraq, and he berated Barack Obama's administration for taking too long to do so.

Trump had claimed to have a secret plan to defeat the brutal extremists, but never disclosed what this might be.

He repeatedly pledged to "bomb the hell" out of them and even threatened to kill family members of suspected IS fighters.

Shortly after taking office, the new president gave the Pentagon 30 days to review progress to date and develop a comprehensive plan to "totally obliterate" IS.

The initial draft of the review is now complete, and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis presented the findings to Trump's top national security advisors.

The options outlined in the classified document are preliminary and need to be further refined, said Pentagon spokesman Navy Captain Jeff Davis. "It is about the rapid defeat of ISIS," Davis said.

Meanwhile, more than 120 retired admirals and generals urged President Donald Trump not to slash spending on diplomacy and development aid, CNN reported Monday.

Trump has proposed increasing defense spending by some 54 billion dollars. Officials say he would like to cut a similar amount from the Environmental Protection Agency and State Department.



MOSUL BATTLE

People who are trying to escape fighting between Iraqi forces and Islamic State fighters cry on a street in Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. Inset, Displaced Iraqis wait to register at the special forces base. A batch of displaced Iraqis walks through the desert. Hundreds of civilians fled through the desert yesterday to escape fighting and privation in Mosul, joining thousands of others who left their homes as conditions worsen in the city's west. PHOTO: REUTERS

Obama behind leaks, protests: Trump

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Donald Trump has claimed he believes former President Barack Obama is behind the protests being carried out at Republican town halls across America, and the leaks coming from inside his own administration.

The president made the remarks in an interview on Fox News' 'Fox & Friends'. The broadcaster released a snippet of the interview, showing the president making the claims ahead of it airing yesterday.

In the interview, Trump is asked about his predecessor and his role in the protests being staged at Republican town halls. He is asked: "It turns out his organisation seems to be doing a lot of the organising at some of the protests a lot of these Republicans are seeing around the country and against you. Do you believe Obama's behind it, and if he is, is that a violation of the so-called unsaid President's code?"

The president responds by saying he thinks Obama "is behind it," adding: "I also think that's politics, that's the way it is."

Trump goes on to blame Obama for some of the leaks that have come out of his own administration.

"No I think that president Obama's behind it because his people [are] certainly behind it," he said.

"And some of the leaks possibly come from that group, and some of the leaks, which are really very serious leaks because they're very bad in terms of national security, but I also understand that's politics and in terms of him being behind things, that's politics. And it will probably continue."

The president has previously blamed the protests against him across the country, including in Utah, Kentucky and Tennessee, on liberal activists.

White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer has said some of the protests had appeared "manufactured".



Israeli PM under fire

AFP, Jerusalem

An Israeli state inquiry accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and top army brass yesterday of being unprepared for the strategic threat of tunnels used by Hamas militants during the 2014 Gaza war.

The findings of the two-year inquiry sparked a frenzy among Israel's political establishment prior to their official release yesterday, with critics of Netanyahu using the opportunity to slam the premier's allegedly flawed decision-making process.

"The political establishment, the military establishment and the intelligence bodies were aware of the tunnel threat and even defined it as strategic. And yet the actions taken to deal with the threat did not match this definition," state comptroller Yossef Shapira wrote in the report.

The report said Netanyahu and then-defence minister Moshe Yaalon did not fully share information they had on the tunnels with other members of the security cabinet, speaking instead in "sparse and general" terms.

The two men also failed to provide the ministers with "significant and essential information," necessary to make "well-informed decisions" on the situation in Gaza ahead of the war, the report said.

Netanyahu has frequently denied such claims, saying he regularly briefed colleagues on the situation.

"No cabinet in the country's history was updated more" than his wartime cabinet, he told members of his Likud faction on Monday.

Destroying the tunnels and stopping Gaza-based Palestinian militants, particularly Hamas, from launching rockets into Israel were the key declared goals of Israel's third offensive in the coastal territory in six years.

2014 GAZA WAR

A state inquiry accuses Netanyahu, top army brass of being unprepared for Hamas tunnel threat



Netanyahu accused his political opponents of bringing "petty politics and personal interests" into the realm of security.

Yaalon, who during the war was a close ally of the premier only to resign last year from Netanyahu's Likud party and political life in acrimony after a dispute, also defended his record.

"Those who played politics in the security cabinet in an unprecedented way during the war will continue to do so this week," Yaalon wrote on his Facebook page.

NEWSIN brief

160 killed in clashes on Myanmar-China border

AFP, Naypyitaw
At least 160 people have died in around three months of clashes between the military and ethnic armed groups in Myanmar's northern state of Shan, a senior army official said yesterday, threatening peace talks set for next month. More than 20,000 people have been displaced since fighting between the army and several armed ethnic groups erupted near the border with China in late November.

Australian arrested over IS missile-design plot

AFP, Sydney
An Australian was charged yesterday with helping the Islamic State group develop high-tech weapons, including long-range guided missile capabilities. Haisem Zahab, a 42-year-old electrician, was working alone and there was no domestic-related terror threat, officials said. Zahab appeared in court on two foreign incursion charges punishable by life imprisonment.

Insider attack: 11 Afghan cops killed

AFP, Kandahar
An Afghan policeman linked to the Taliban shot dead 11 of his colleagues at a checkpoint in the southern province of Helmand, officials said yesterday, in the latest so-called "insider attack". The incident occurred late Monday while the policemen were sleeping in their barracks in the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, as the Taliban escalate a deadly winter campaign of violence.



Israeli youths supporters of settlements hug near Israeli border guards in the settlement of Ofra in the occupied West Bank, during an operation by Israeli police to evacuate settlers' houses, yesterday. Israeli police began removing residents and protesters from nine West Bank settler homes, built on private Palestinian land, set to be demolished under a Supreme Court ruling. PHOTO: AFP

Two women indicted, to be charged with murder

N Korea 'executes five senior officials with anti-aircraft guns'

AFP, Kuala Lumpur
Two women arrested over the nerve agent assassination of Kim Jong Nam are to be charged with his murder, Malaysia said yesterday, as North Korea sent a senior diplomat to retrieve the body from the morgue.

The spectacular killing of Kim Jong-Un's half-brother with VX, a fast-acting poison developed for warfare, sparked an international probe and lurid stories of Pyongyang's Cold War-style tradecraft.

South Korea says its isolated neighbour was behind the assassination, and claims the North's agents engaged two outsiders to carry out the murder.

The women will appear in court today. If convicted, they could face death by hanging. Kim died less than 20 minutes after he was set upon at Kuala Lumpur International

Airport on February 13. CCTV footage shows two women approaching him and seemingly pushing something in his face.

Indonesian Siti Aisyah, 25, and Doan Thi Huong, 28, from Vietnam, told officials that they were tricked into killing Kim and thought they were taking part in a prank for a comedy video.

The development came as Kim South Korea's spy agency reported the North Korean leader has ordered more executions.

According to the report, North Korea executed five senior officials using anti-aircraft guns because they made false reports that "enraged" leader Kim Jong-un, South Korea's spy agency said Monday.

It's not clear what false reports they allegedly made, and the South Korea didn't say how it got its information.

KIM JONG NAM KILLING



US, Russia set to clash over Syria sanctions

UNSC to vote; Turkey wants to be part of Raqqa ops

AFP, United Nations
Russia and the United States headed for a clash at the UN Security Council yesterday as Moscow prepared to veto a draft resolution that would impose sanctions on Syria.

The council will vote on the text drafted by the United States, Britain and France that would punish 11 Syrians and 10 entities linked to chemical attacks in 2014 and 2015.

Russia has vowed to use its veto to block the measure, which would be the seventh time that Moscow has resorted to its veto power to shield its Damascus ally. The vote would mark the first major council action by the new US administration of President Donald Trump, who is seeking warmer ties with Russia. It would see the Trump administration joining old allies France and Britain to confront Russia over its support for Syria.

"How much longer is Russia going to continue to babysit and make excuses for the Syrian regime?" US Ambassador Nikki Haley said on Friday following a closed-door council meeting to discuss chemical weapons use in Syria.

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday said Moscow opposed any new sanctions against the Syrian leadership as they would undermine peace efforts to end the country's protracted war.

Qaeda no 2 leader killed in Syria

CNN ONLINE

Abu al Khayr al-Masri, the No 2 man for al Qaeda behind leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, has been killed by a missile strike in Idlib, Syria, according to multiple sources.

Two US officials said al-Masri was killed in an attack directed by the US intelligence community.

The UK-based activist group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, or SOHR, told CNN al-Masri, an Egyptian national, was killed Sunday in a strike targeting his vehicle near al-Mastoume village in Idlib. Several Syrian opposition activists also reported al-Masri was killed by a missile strike.

Abdallah al-Muhaysini, a senior member of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, acknowledged the death in a eulogy posted on his official Telegram channel. He said, "May Allah accept Abu al-Khayr in His heaven. May Allah gather us together with him."

Al-Muhaysini is a prominent inner-leadership member of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, which used to be known as Al-Nusra Front -- an al-Qaeda affiliate. Al-Nusra Front in Syria split from al-Qaeda last summer with the blessing of al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri.

CONWAY SPARKS CONTROVERSY AGAIN

Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway (L) checks her phone after taking a photo as US President Donald Trump and leaders of historically black universities and colleges pose for a group photo in the Oval Office of the White House on Monday. Conway has come under fire after the picture was widely shared on social media. Several Twitter users berated her for what they described as a lack of respect in the Oval Office. This is not the first time Conway has found herself at the centre of a storm. She recently came under fire for plugging the fashion brand of the president's daughter. The head of the US Office of Government Ethics urged the White House to investigate Conway after the incident, saying she should face disciplinary action. She also famously coined the term "alternative facts" and referred to a "Bowling Green massacre" -- which never happened -- during an interview. PHOTO: AFP