



People look at a statue of a girl facing the Wall St Bull, as part of a campaign by US fund manager State Street to push companies to put women on their boards, in the financial district in New York on Tuesday. Women and activists around the world yesterday marked the Working Women's Day with rallies and demonstrations and vowed to keep their struggle for women's rights.

PHOTO: AFP

Obama 'irked' at wiretapping claims by Trump

CNN, Washington

Barack Obama was irked and exasperated in response to his successor's uncorroborated wiretapping accusation, sources close to the former US president told CNN yesterday.

Obama and his aides responded with disbelief when they learned of US President Donald Trump's Saturday morning tweets laying out the charges.

Later in the day, an Obama spokesman said, "Neither President Obama nor any White House official ever ordered surveillance on any US citizen. Any suggestion otherwise is simply false."

The sources provided CNN with slightly different insight into Obama's demeanor than others who told The Wall Street Journal that Obama was "livid."

Obama's loyal army of supporters have been far more active in voicing their dissatisfaction with Trump. On social media and television, former aides have been aggressively pushing back on Trump in the first weeks of his presidency.

Presidents Trump and Obama have not spoken since Inauguration Day, when Obama welcomed Trump for coffee in the White House and accompanied him to the US Capitol for the swearing-in ceremony.

The two men had developed what Trump termed a "warm" relationship in the run-up to Trump's inauguration, fostered by an in-person meeting in the Oval Office and several phone conversations.

But people close to both men acknowledge that the bitterness of the presidential campaign, paired with Trump's longstanding antagonism toward Obama regarding his birth certificate, would make a close relationship improbable.

BREXIT BATTLE

UK PM receives Lords blow for a second time

AFP, London

Prime Minister Theresa May suffered her second defeat in a week over Brexit Tuesday when the House of Lords voted to give parliament the final say on how Britain leaves the European Union.

Peers voted by 366 to 268 to amend the bill empowering May to trigger Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty -- the formal notification of Brexit, which she has promised to issue by the end of March.

She remains confident she will meet that deadline, but the defeat is a setback -- as well as a taster of the domestic opposition she could face in the coming months of complex EU negotiations.

The amendment would give parliament the power to reject the final Brexit deal agreed with the EU -- a move critics said was akin to a "veto" which would bind the government's hand in negotiations.

Lawmakers would still be constrained by the strict Article 50 timetable, which means Britain will leave the EU after two years whether it

Which child to feed?

Somali families face agonising choice in the face of famine



REUTERS, Mogadishu/Baidoa

Somali mothers are facing an agonising choice over how to divide their shrinking food supply among hungry children as a devastating drought kills off livestock and leaves the Horn of Africa nation facing the possibility of famine.

"If there's a very small amount of food, we give it to those who need it the most - the youngest," said Fatuma Abdille, who arrived in the capital of Mogadishu two weeks ago with her seven children after the family's herd of goats perished from hunger.

The drought has shrivelled grass and dried up water holes. In Bay, a key agricultural region, the United Nations says the harvest has dropped by more than 40 percent.

Now the United Nations is warning that the country risks a repeat of the 2011 famine that killed around 260,000 people. Aid workers are asking for \$825 million to provide aid to 6.2 million Somalis, about half the country's population.

The appeal comes after US President Donald Trump signed a revised executive order suspending travel to the United States from six mainly Muslim nations, including Somalia. Trump has justified that measure on national security grounds. He has also said he will slash budgets for US aid and diplomacy.

That could reduce the support for the new UN-backed government, which is fighting to overcome an Islamist insurgency. Somalia had been plagued by civil war for more than a quarter of a century.

Insecurity prevents aid workers from accessing parts of the country, so in many parts of Somalia, families from rural areas are flooding into cities in search of food.

As water sources evaporate, many families are forced to drink water infected with deadly cholera bacteria. The outbreak has affected nearly 8,000 people has killed more than 180 so far.

Mohamed Ali, 50, came to the central city of Baidoa with his seven children. He said he and his wife were getting weaker as they gave the children their share of food.

"We let the children eat first and then we follow but most of the time there's nothing left because the food is not enough," he told Reuters in a makeshift camp where families had stretched material over sticks and wire.

Abdille, the mother in the capital, said she watched her 9-year-old son give his younger siblings his portion of food with mixed feelings of sadness and pride.

"He is making a sacrifice," she said, gesturing to the solemn boy beside her. "I feel proud."

Stop nuke, missile tests

China asks N Korea, urges US to seek talks to avert 'head-on collision'

REUTERS, Beijing

China, fearing a rapid escalation of tension on the Korean peninsula, yesterday called on North Korea to stop its nuclear and missile tests and for South Korea and the United States to stop joint military drills and seek talks instead.

North Korea launched four ballistic missiles on Monday in response to the joint US-South Korea military exercises, which it regards as preparation for war.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said the tests by the North and the joint drills across the border in South Korea were causing tension to increase like two "accelerating trains coming toward each other".

"China's suggestion is, as a first step, for North Korea to suspend nuclear and missile activities, and for the US and South Korea to also suspend large-scale military drills," Wang said at his annual news conference on the sidelines of the meeting of China's

parliament in Beijing. Such a "dual suspension" would allow all sides to return to the negotiating table, Wang said.

North Korea fired the four missiles into the sea off Japan's northwest coast on Monday, angering South Korea and Japan with the latest in a series of

DEVELOPMENTS

Beijing sees US anti-missile system in South Korea as a provocation

Japan lawmakers argue for first strike options amid missile fears

ballistic missile and nuclear tests in defiance of UN resolutions in recent months.

His comments came a day after the US military started to deploy the first elements of its advanced Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system to South Korea.

That deployment added to the complexity of the tensions between South Korea and China, which opposes the THAAD deployment that it says destroys the regional security balance.

Wang reiterated those concerns on Wednesday, describing its deployment as a mistake.

Meanwhile, rattled by North Korean military advances, influential Japanese lawmakers are pushing harder for Japan to develop the ability to strike preemptively at the missile facilities of its nuclear-armed neighbour.

Japan has so far avoided taking the controversial and costly step of acquiring bombers or weapons such as cruise missiles with enough range to strike other countries, relying instead on its US ally to take the fight to its enemies.

But the growing threat posed by Pyongyang, including Monday's simultaneous launch of four rockets, is adding weight to an argument that aiming for the archer rather than his



IS leader flees Mosul

REUTERS, Mosul/Washington

US and Iraqi officials believe the leader of Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has left operational commanders behind with diehard followers to fight the battle of Mosul, and is now hiding out in the desert, focusing mainly on his own survival.

It is impossible to confirm the whereabouts of the Islamic State "caliph", who declared himself the ruler of all Muslims from Mosul's Great Mosque after his forces swept through northern Iraq in 2014.

But US and Iraqi intelligence sources say an absence of official communication from the group's leadership and the loss of territory in Mosul suggest he has abandoned the city, by far the largest population centre his group has ever held.

He has proved to be an elusive target, rarely using communication that can be monitored, and moving constantly, often multiple times in one 24-hour cycle, the sources say.

From their efforts to track him, they believe he hides mostly among sympathetic civilians in familiar desert villages, rather than with fighters in their barracks in urban

BBC World stops broadcasting from Thailand

AFP, Bangkok

The BBC World Service has stopped broadcasting from one of its major global transmission stations situated in Thailand, AFP has learned, after talks broke down with a junta riled by its uncensored coverage.

Sources with knowledge of the negotiations said the BBC's Thai-language output was an obstacle in discussions about renewing the 20-year lease on the complex, one of the network's main shortwave broadcast stations for Asia.

The centre beamed local language news into tightly-controlled countries such as China and North Korea, and into places where many still rely on radio like Pakistan and Afghanistan.

But it went off air on January 1 following the expiry of the lease.



A displaced Iraqi with his son prepares to get on a truck to be carried to a safe place, as Iraqi forces battle with Islamic State militants, in western Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. Iraq will continue to hit Islamic State targets in Syria, as well as in neighboring countries if they give their approval, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said yesterday.

NEWS IN brief

India police kill 'IS-linked gunman'

AFP, Lucknow

Indian police yesterday shot dead a self-radicalised Islamic State sympathiser who they said was involved in a train explosion that injured 10 people. Police said they ended a nearly 12-hour stand-off in the early hours by storming the house where the suspect, identified as Saifullah, was holed up in northern Uttar Pradesh state. Police recovered eight pistols and more than 600 rounds of ammunition, explosives, gold and passports from the house, on the outskirts of state capital Lucknow.

US secy of state to make first trip to Asia

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will make his first trip to Asia next week and meet with senior officials to discuss North Korea's recent missile tests and U.S. economic and security interests in the region. He will arrive in Japan on March 15, continue on to South Korea on March 17 and visit China from March 18-19.

SA asked to appear at ICC over Sudan's Bashir

AFP, Cape Town

South African authorities have been asked to appear at the International Criminal Court (ICC) on April 7 over the failure to arrest Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir during a visit two years ago, a senior official said yesterday. Pretoria announced its intention to leave the ICC in 2015 after the tribunal criticized it for disregarding an order to arrest Al-Bashir, who is accused of genocide and war crimes. South Africa's High Court last month blocked the attempt.

US needs better leadership

Says UN rights chief; House intel chief refutes back Trump's wiretap claim

AGENCIES

The UN human rights chief took aim at President Donald Trump yesterday, saying the United States needed better leadership to meet challenges like surging xenophobia and religious discrimination.

In a keynote speech to the United Nations rights council's main annual session, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said he was "concerned by the new administration's handling" of key issues.

"Greater and more consistent leadership is needed to address the recent surge in discrimination, anti-Semitism, and violence against ethnic and religious minorities," Zeid added.

Zeid warned that Washington's "vilification of entire groups such as Mexicans and Muslims" as well as "false claims" about higher crime rates among migrants "fuel xenophobic abuses."

And, taking direct aim at Trump personally, Zeid said he was "dismayed at attempts by the president to intimidate or

undermine journalists and judges."

Major media organisations as well as press freedom groups have accused Trump of demonising journalists in an unprecedented manner for a president, including by describing the media as "the enemy of the people."

The United States holds a seat on



the 47-member rights council and had been an active member through much of Barack Obama's eight-year term.

But, representing the Trump administration last week, assistant secretary of state Erin Barclay told the council its work was often at odds with core

American values, notably over its criticism of Israel.

Zeid had been the first top UN figure to speak out against Trump's initial travel ban and yesterday blasted a revised executive order that bars entry of people from six mainly Muslim countries.

Meanwhile, the chairman of the US House of Representatives intelligence committee said on Tuesday he had seen no evidence to support President Donald Trump's allegation he was wiretapped by then-President Barack Obama during the 2016 presidential campaign.

Republican Representative Devin Nunes said if Trump's assertion were true, the leaders of Congress and chairmen of its two intelligence committees, known collectively as the "Gang of Eight," should have been briefed.

"I have not seen that evidence," Nunes told a news conference.

Trump made the accusation in tweets on Saturday, providing no evidence. An

India to start river inter-linking project soon

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Work on the first project of India's ambitious inter-linking of rivers across the country will begin by the middle of this year, a federal minister said yesterday.

Chairing the 12th meeting of the Special Committee for inter-linking of river, Minister of State for Water Resources Vijay Goel said though deliberations on river linking project were going on in our country for many years, it is going to take real shape now.

He said his ministry has identified five priority links for taking up the work of inter-linking of rivers.

He said almost all clearances have been obtained for the first project of linking Ken and Betwa rivers flowing between central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh and adjacent state Uttar Pradesh.

All inter-linking projects should be completed in a time-bound manner, an official statement quoted Goel as saying.

The meeting also reviewed the follow-up action on the decisions taken during the last meeting held last year including the status

of various statutory clearances for Ken-Betwa Link Project Phase II, status detailed project report of Damanganga-Pinjal and Par-Tapi-Narmada Link Projects, status of simulation studies of Mahanadi-Godavari, surplus water in river basin for interlinking of rivers, status of intra-state link proposals and restructuring of National Water Development Agency.

"Vigorous efforts have been made for generating consensus with development of alternative plans and also setting out road maps for implementation of projects," said the statement.

Bangladesh, as lower riparian country, has from time to time voiced concerns over the effects of inter-linking of Indian rivers on the flow of some major common rivers between the two countries including the Brahmaputra and the Ganges.

However, India has repeatedly assured Bangladesh that it will not do anything that would jeopardize the interests of that country.

The interlinking of rivers is a pet project of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.