



US STRIKE AFTER CHEMICAL ATTACK

A red line already crossed in Syria

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump's decision to strike the Syrian regime in retaliation for a chemical attack comes four years after his predecessor Barack Obama faced a similar challenge from Damascus -- and chose to back down.

There was no doubt among the international community on August 21, 2013: Obama's "red line" had just been crossed in Syria with a chemical weapons attack outside Damascus that was almost certainly the work of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Two years earlier, Obama had vowed that the use of such weapons would "change my calculus" to justify military intervention in Syria. Britain and France agreed, embracing the president's rhetoric.

So when the massacre took place in Ghouta, an eastern suburb of the Syrian capital where US intelligence said some 1,400 were killed by a sarin gas attack, all eyes turned toward Washington.

Two days later, Obama said he was ready to strike.

But to surprise in the United States and around the world, he said he would put any decision over military action in Syria to a vote in Congress, essentially ruling out any immediate attack.

In the end, Obama's White House would never directly intervene militarily against the Assad regime, anxious to maintain the region's crumbling geopolitical and military balance.

Washington instead agreed to a last-minute deal with Damascus brokered by Moscow to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons arsenal and ship it to Russia starting in October 2013.

Under the aegis of the United Nations Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) -- awarded the Nobel Peace Prize that year -- the operation theoretically ended the Syrian government's ability to use chemical weapons against its own citizens or anyone else.

Obama's controversial decision precipitated an avalanche of criticism in the United States and abroad for his paralysis over Syria.



In this image released by the US Navy, the guided-missile destroyer USS Porter conducts strike operations in Syria while in the Mediterranean Sea, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Russia detains 8 over metro bombing

AFP, Saint Petersburg

Russian investigators on Thursday detained eight people suspected of involvement in the Saint Petersburg metro bombing, as the country held commemorative rallies to honour the 13 victims. No one has yet claimed responsibility for the blast that tore through a subway carriage in Russia's second city on Monday. During their searches investigators discovered an explosive device, firearms and ammunition.

'Terror attack' kills 1 in Australia

AFP, Sydney

A Pakistani petrol station attendant was stabbed to death during an "absolutely horrific" crime spree in Australia, authorities said, fearing that the attack was terror-linked. The 29-year-old man was found with multiple stab wounds late Thursday after allegedly being attacked by two teenage boys. Sydney's Daily Telegraph reported that "IS" appeared to be scrawled in blood on a window at the petrol station, referring to the Islamic State group.

Avalanches kill Indian troops in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Three soldiers have died after avalanches struck a high-altitude army post in Indian-administered Kashmir. Multiple avalanches hit a post in Batalik near the Line of Control -- the de-facto border that divides Kashmir -- on Thursday, burying five soldiers, an army spokesman said. Two were rescued alive.

Samsung heir accused of embezzlement, perjury

AFP, Seoul

The heir to the huge Samsung business empire yesterday appeared in court at the start of his trial for embezzlement and perjury, part of a corruption scandal that brought down South Korea's president.

Lee Jae-Yong, the vice-chairman of Samsung Electronics, was brought into the Seoul Central District Court bound and handcuffed.

Lee, who was arrested in February, has been charged with offering nearly \$40 million to the now-impeached president and her close friend Choi Soon-Sil, allegedly as bribes to secure policy favours.

Four other Samsung executives have also been charged.

Special Prosecutor Park Young-Soo said in his opening statement that Lee's case is "one of the most deep-rooted and typical cases involving unhealthy relations between politicians and businessmen".

"In the course of providing bribes, Lee Jae-

COLOMBIA MUDSLIDE

Some 100 children among 311 killed

AFP, Bogota

Some 100 children were among the 311 people killed in the giant mudslide that slammed into the southern Colombian town of Mocoa last week, the government said Thursday.

The mudslide hit late Friday after heavy rains caused three rivers to flood, sending a sea of mud, boulders and debris crashing into the town.

The latest death toll was given by the country's Disasters Risk Management office.

More than 300 people remain missing, according to President Juan Manuel Santos.

Mocoa, the capital of the department of Putumayo, was home to 70,000 people, about 45,000 of whom were affected by the disaster, according to the Red Cross.

In an effort to speed up reconstruction, the government formally declared a 30-day state of economic, social and ecological emergency in Mocoa, which will allow direct contracting of services without the need for formal, more time-consuming procedures.

Authorities are investigating whether local and regional officials correctly enforced building codes and planned adequately for natural disasters.

The mayor, the governor and their predecessors are also being probed to see whether they bear any responsibility, according to Colombian media reports.

The mudslide turned Mocoa into a wasteland of earth, boulders and debris.

India inks arms deal worth nearly \$2b with Israel

AFP, New Delhi

India will buy nearly \$2 billion worth of weapons technology from Israel in what's being described as the "largest defence contract" ever signed by the military exporting giant.

The deal will see state-owned Israel Aerospace Industries provide India with an advanced defence system of medium-range surface-to-air missiles, launchers and communications technology, the company said in a statement Thursday.

The "mega" missile agreement is "considered to be the largest defense contract in Israel's defense industries' history", the company said.

The Israeli firm will also supply a naval defence system including long-range surface-to-air missiles for India's first aircraft carrier, which is still under construction.

Comment was not immediately available from India's defence ministry.

Israel Aerospace Industries said some components will be assembled in India, in line with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's push to reduce reliance on costly imports.

Modi's government has raised the limit on foreign investment in the defence sector and encouraged tie-ups between foreign and local companies under a 'Make in India' campaign.

India -- the world's largest defence importer -- has been investing tens of billions in updating its Soviet-era military hardware to counter long-standing tensions with regional rivals China and Pakistan.

India has signed several big-ticket defence deals since Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party stormed to power in 2014.

Israel is a top weapons exporter, with sales last year surging to \$6.5 billion.

India is a top market for its arms, as New Delhi has turned increasingly away from traditional ally Russia for its military hardware.

Last year India signed a contract to buy 36 Rafale twin-engine fighter jets from France for 7.9 billion euros (\$8.8 billion) after major delays and obstacles over the cost and assembly of the planes in India.

FLOODS IN KASHMIR

Six people were killed and two were reported missing in India's northern region of Kashmir yesterday, after heavy rain and snowfall swept the region, setting off avalanches and turning mountain rivers into raging torrents.

Helicopters were deployed to rescue people cut off by flash floods that revived memories of 2014, when the Jhelum River flowing through the region's main city, Srinagar, burst its banks, swamping homes and killing 200 people.



Venezuelan opposition activists clash with the police during a protest against the government of President Nicolas Maduro on April 6, 2017 in Caracas. Violence erupted for a third straight day, leaving one demonstrator dead amid escalating tension over moves to keep the leftist leader in power.

Bomb, arson attacks rock Thailand's south

AFP, Bangkok

Nearly two dozen bomb and arson attacks erupted across Thailand's insurgency-torn south shortly after midnight, the army said yesterday, causing widespread blackouts but no casualties in the Muslim-majority region.

The violence, which saw more than 50 electricity poles toppled by explosives and tires set alight, struck only hours after Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn signed a new military-backed charter into law.

"There are 23 simultaneous incidents in three southern provinces and four districts of Songkhla," said Colonel Promote Prom-in, an army spokesman for the south.

The border provinces have sizzled with violence for over a decade as ethnic Malay rebels battle Thai troops for more autonomy from the Buddhist-majority state.

The fighting has claimed more than 6,800 lives -- mostly civilians -- since 2004.

The region was one of few areas to reject the ruling junta's constitution in a referendum that saw the document approved last year.

The new charter curbs the power of elected lawmakers and will bolster the army's role in government even after the junta steps down following elections expected in late 2018.



Misogyny 'played role' in election loss: Clinton

AFP, New York

Hillary Clinton said Thursday that misogyny "certainly" played a role in her bruising defeat to Donald Trump in last year's US presidential election, giving her first public interview since that shock loss.

"I don't know that there is one answer," she told the Women in the World Summit in New York when asked why a majority of white women voted for a Republican who had boasted of groping women.

"Certainly misogyny played a role, I mean that just has to be admitted," she added.

"I think in this election there was a very real struggle between what is viewed as change that is welcomed and exciting to so many Americans and change which is worrisome and threatening to so many others."

"And layer on the first woman president over that and I think some people, women included, had real problems," she said.

The former Democratic presidential nominee spoke at length, covering a range of issues that included calling on the United States to take out Syrian air fields in the wake of a suspected chemical weapons attack.

"I really believe that we should have and still should take out his air fields and prevent him from being able to use them to bomb innocent people," she said of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad.

Record amount of renewable energy added in 2016: UN

AFP, Paris

The world added a record 138.5 gigawatts of renewable power capacity in 2016 despite a 23 percent drop in investment, reflecting the falling cost of clean energy, the UN announced Thursday.

The new energy -- mainly from wind and solar installations, but not including large hydro projects -- was up eight percent from the previous year, on global investment of \$242 billion (227 billion euros).

Investment in fossil fuel-based energy was approximately half that amount in 2016, according to a report jointly published by UN Environment and Bloomberg New Energy Finance (BNEF).

"Ever-cheaper clean tech provides a real opportunity for investors to get more for less," said Erik Solheim, Executive



Director of UN Environment.

The renewables capacity brought online in 2016 is equivalent to that of the world's 10 largest power producing facilities combined.

The new figures come a day after Europe's energy utilities dealt a body blow to the coal industry by pledging that no new coal-fired power plants would be built after 2020.

National energy companies from 26 or the European Union's 28-nations -- with the exception of Poland and Greece -- joined the initiative, announced in Brussels.

In a statement, the consortium of 3,500 electricity generating companies renewed its commitment to the Paris Agreement, the 196-nation climate pact that vows to cap global warming at under two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit).

Samsung heir accused of embezzlement, perjury

AFP, Seoul

Yong embezzled company money, illegally diverted domestic assets abroad, hid illegally-earned incomes and committed perjury at parliament," the prosecutors said.

"The Choi case has left a deep scar in history but it has also provided momentum to re-establish the rule of law by dint of people's power," the prosecutors said.

Ousted president Park Geun-Hye was thrown into jail last week after a court ordered her arrest in connection with the sweeping corruption scandal that brought millions of people onto the streets and saw her impeached.

Her close confidante Choi is also on trial for leading Park to force top South Korean firms, including the tech giant, to "donate" nearly \$70 million to non-profit foundations, which Choi allegedly used for personal gain.

Lee's defence lawyers however said the payments to the Choi were charitable contributions for sports and culture development that Samsung was obliged to make under pressure from officials, and not bribes.

"In the course of providing bribes, Lee Jae-

IS executes 33 people

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Isis has carried out its largest mass killing this year, executing 33 people, according to a monitoring group.

The terror group carried out mass execution in the al-Madinah desert, near the strategic city of Deir Ezzor, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported.

It said its activists were "able to monitor the execution and see the bodies".

The report said 33 people aged 18 to 25 were "slaughtered by sharp tools" near a hole dug by the militants, which was "filled with blood".

The Observatory said it was unknown whether those executed were Syrian government forces, allied militia or rebel fighters.

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