

ANTI-MADURO PROTEST

Venezuelan violence kills 3 amid crisis

AFP, Caracas/San Cristobal

Two Venezuelan students and a National Guard sergeant died on Wednesday after being shot during protests against unpopular leftist President Nicolas Maduro, increasing turmoil in the volatile nation amid a devastating economic crisis.

Opposition supporters protested in Caracas and other cities in what they called "the mother of all marches," denouncing Maduro for eroding democracy and plunging the oil-rich economy into chaos.

Crowds swelled to hundreds of thousands, including Maduro supporters who held a counter-demonstration in the capital at the urging of the president, and clashes were reported across the country during the most sustained protests since 2014.

Maduro says that beneath a peaceful facade, the protests are little more than opposition efforts to foment a coup to end socialism in Venezuela. The opposition says he has morphed into a dictator and accuses his government of using armed civilians to spread violence and fear.

The deaths mean eight people have now been killed during protests in Venezuela this month. The opposition blames the deaths on security forces and alleged paramilitary groups. Over 400 people were arrested during protests on Wednesday, rights group Penal Forum said.

The opposition called for another protest today, raising the specter of prolonged disruption in Venezuela.

The march followed a fortnight of violent protests triggered by a Supreme Court decision in March to assume the powers of the opposition-led Congress - which it quickly reversed under international pressure.



Demonstrators clash with police during a march against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, in Caracas, on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

ALLEGED RUSSIAN MEDDLING IN US POLLS

'Putin-linked think tank drew up plan'

REUTERS, Washington

A Russian government think tank controlled by Vladimir Putin developed a plan to swing the 2016 US presidential election to Donald Trump and undermine voters' faith in the American electoral system, three current and four former US officials told Reuters.

They described two confidential documents from the think tank as providing the framework and rationale for what US intelligence agencies have concluded was an intensive effort by Russia to interfere with the Nov. 8 election. US intelligence officials acquired the documents, which were prepared by the Moscow-based Russian Institute for Strategic Studies [https://en.riss.ru/], after the election.

The institute is run by retired senior Russian foreign intelligence officials appointed by Putin's office.

The first Russian institute document was a strategy paper written last June that circulated at the highest levels of the Russian government but was not addressed to any specific individuals.

It recommended the Kremlin launch a propaganda campaign on social media and Russian state-backed global news outlets to encourage US voters to elect a president who would take a softer line toward Russia than the administration of then-President Barack Obama, the seven officials said.

A second institute document, drafted in October and distributed in the same way, warned that Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was likely to win the election. For that reason, it argued, it was better for Russia to end its pro-Trump propaganda and instead intensify its messaging about voter fraud to undermine the US electoral system's legitimacy and damage Clinton's reputation in an effort to undermine her presidency, the seven officials said.

The current and former US officials spoke on the condition of anonymity due to the Russian documents' classified status. They declined to discuss how the United States obtained them. US intelligence agencies also declined to comment on them.

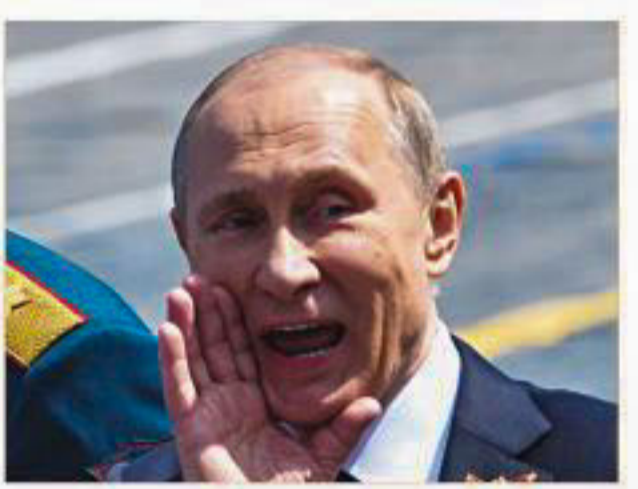
Putin has denied interfering in the US election. Putin's spokesman and the Russian institute did not respond to requests for comment.

The documents were central to the Obama administration's conclusion that Russia mounted a "fake news" campaign and launched cyber attacks against Democratic Party groups and Clinton's campaign, the current and former officials said.

"Putin had the objective in mind all along, and he asked the institute to draw him a road map," said one of the sources, a former senior US intelligence official.

Trump has said Russia's activities had no impact on the outcome of the race. Ongoing congressional and FBI investigations into Russian interference have so far produced no public evidence that Trump associates colluded with the Russian effort to change the outcome of the election.

Four of the officials said the approach outlined in the June strategy paper was a broadening of an effort the Putin administration launched in March 2016. That month the Kremlin instructed state-backed media outlets, including international platforms Russia Today and Sputnik news agency, to start producing positive reports on Trump's quest for the US presidency, the officials said.



We will wipe out US, allies

Says North Korea, warns of 'preemptive nuke strike' amid rising tensions

REUTERS, SEOUL

North Korean state media warned the United States of a "super-mighty preemptive strike" after US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the United States was looking at ways to bring pressure to bear on North Korea over its nuclear programme.

US President Donald Trump has taken a hard line with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, who has rebuffed admonitions from sole major ally China and proceeded with nuclear and missile programmes in defiance of UN Security Council sanctions.

The Rodong Sinmun, the official newspaper of the North's ruling Workers' Party, did not mince its words. "In the case of our super-mighty preemptive strike being launched, it will completely and immediately wipe out not only US 'imperialists' invasion forces in South Korea and its surrounding areas but the US mainland and reduce them to ashes," it said.

Reclusive North Korea regularly threatens to destroy Japan, South Korea and the United States and has shown no let-up in its belligerence after a failed missile test on Sunday, a day after putting on a huge display of missiles at a parade in Pyongyang.

"We're reviewing all the status of North Korea, both in terms of state sponsorship of terrorism as

well as the other ways in which we can bring pressure on the regime in Pyongyang to re-engage with us, but re-engage with us on a different footing than past talks have been held," Tillerson told reporters in Washington on Wednesday.

US Vice President Mike Pence, on a tour of Asian allies, has said repeatedly an "era of strategic patience" with North Korea is over.

US House of Representatives Speaker Paul Ryan

DEVELOPMENTS

Tillerson says looking at ways to pressure N Korea

Russia, United States clash at the United Nations

US tries to clear confusion over 'armada'

said during a visit to London the military option must be part of the pressure brought to bear.

North and South Korea are technically still at war because their 1950-53 conflict ended in a truce, not a peace treaty.

South Korea's acting president, Hwang Kyo-ahn, at a meeting with top officials yesterday, repeatedly called for the military and security ministries to maintain vigilance.

The defence ministry said US and South Korean air forces were conducting an annual training exercise, codenamed Max Thunder, until April 28. North Korea routinely labels such exercises preparations for invasion.

The North has said it has developed a missile that can strike the mainland United States, but officials and experts believe it is some time away from mastering the necessary technology, including miniaturising a nuclear warhead.

Meanwhile, the United States and Russia clashed at the United Nations on Wednesday over a US-drafted Security Council statement to condemn North Korea's latest failed ballistic missile test. Diplomats said China had agreed to the statement. Such statements by the 15-member council have to be agreed by consensus.

There has been some confusion over the whereabouts of a US aircraft carrier group after Trump said last week he had sent an "armada" as a warning to North Korea, even as the ships were still far from Korean waters.

The US military's Pacific Command explained that the USS Carl Vinson strike group first had to complete a shorter-than-planned period of training with Australia. It was now heading for the Western Pacific as ordered, it said.

'We want to be happy' Iraqi violinist plays in Mosul as troops battle IS militants

REUTERS, Mosul

Amid the bombed-out ruins of an ancient site revered by both Muslims and Christians in Mosul, Iraqi violinist Ameen Mukdad on Wednesday held a small concert in the city he was forced to flee by Islamic State militants.

As Mukdad played scores he had composed in secret while living under the militants' austere rule, explosions and gunfire could be heard from Mosul's western districts where US-backed forces are still battling Islamic State for control.

"This is a place for all, not just one sect. Daesh represents no religion but is an ideology that suppresses freedom," Mukdad told Reuters, using a derogatory name for the militants. "Everything about Daesh is wrong."

Mukdad, 28, fled Mosul after Islamic State fighters stormed his house and confiscated his instruments, deeming his music a violation of their hardline interpretation of Sunni Islam.

Wednesday's hour-long concert marked his first return to the city that was overrun by Islamic State in 2014.

Mukdad said he chose the Tomb of Jonas, or Mosque of the Prophet Yunis, as the site is known by Muslims, to symbolise unity.

"I want to take the opportunity to send a message to the



A Sri Lankan worker sorts garbage at a dump in Karadiyana, a suburb of Colombo yesterday, after the city's main landfill closed after a garbage mountain collapsed killing 32 people and destroying 145 homes. PHOTO: AFP

HARASSMENT CLAIMS

Fox dumps popular host Bill O'Reilly

AFP, New York

Fox News on Wednesday severed its relationship with Bill O'Reilly, sacking its biggest star and America's most-watched cable news anchor over a flood of sexual harassment allegations and crashing advertising sales.

It was a stunning fall from grace for one of the biggest US media names, a veteran broadcaster at Fox News for two decades, who counted President Donald Trump among his personal supporters and whose ratings had soared regardless of alleged abusive behavior towards women dating back years.

But the departure of



SYRIA CRISIS

UN, Russia set for meet without US

AFP, Geneva

The UN's Syria envoy yesterday said that he will hold talks with Russian officials next week but without the US present after previous plans for a trilateral meeting were "postponed".

UN peace mediator Staffan de Mistura said his meeting with Russia's deputy foreign minister Gennady Gatilov is set for Monday in Geneva.

"The trilateral meeting is not off the table, it is simply being postponed", de Mistura told reporters.

Asked why US President Donald Trump's representatives decided to skip the meeting, de Mistura said: "you should ask them, frankly."

He also restated his desire to convene a sixth round of UN-backed talks involving Syrian rivals next month. The previous rounds have failed to produce concrete results.

Meanwhile, hundreds of frightened Syrian evacuees from two besieged government-held towns were stuck at a rebel-held transit point yesterday where dozens of their fellow townspeople were killed in a weekend bombing.

The 3,000 evacuees, who had left their homes at dawn on Wednesday, spent the night in buses in a marshalling area in Rashidin, west of government-held second city Aleppo, awaiting onward transport to safety. Some 300 evacuees from rebel-held towns were similarly held up at a staging point at Ramussa in government-held territory.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the delay was the result of 11th-hour rebel demands for the release of prisoners held by the government.

FB out to read your mind

AFP, San Francisco

Facebook wants to read your mind. At least, when it comes to what you'd like to say or type. The social network giant, at its annual developers conference, unveiled Wednesday projects aimed at allowing users to use their minds to type messages or their skin to hear words.

"Speech is essentially a compression algorithm, and a lousy one at that," Facebook executive and former DARPA director Regina Dugan told a packed audience at the Silicon Valley event.

"That is why we love great writers and poets, because they are just a little bit better at compressing the fullness of a thought into words. What if we could type directly from our brain into a computer?"

The project grew from being an idea six months ago to being the focus of a team of more than 60 scientists, engineers, and system integrators, according to Dugan, who heads a Building 8 team devoted to coming up with innovative hardware for the social network's mission of connecting the world.

"We are just getting started," Dugan said.

"We have a goal of creating a system capable of typing 100 words-per-minute

straight from your brain." Video played during her presentation showed a woman with an advanced neurodegenerative disease using her mind to move a cursor on a computer screen, slowly typing words.

Such brain-computer interface technology currently involves implanting electrodes, but Facebook wants to use optical imaging to eliminate the need to surgically intrude on brains, according to Dugan.

Facebook is looking at creating "silent-speech interfaces" based on sensors that could be worn, and made in quantity.

Such technology could let people fire off text messages or emails by thinking, instead of needing to interrupt what they are doing to use smartphone touchscreens, for example.

It would also have the potential to capture concepts and semantics associated with words people are thinking, making language differences irrelevant by enabling sharing of what is in mind, Dugan said.

The Building 8 group is also working on sensors that let people "hear" through their skin, with what they feel being converted into words in a variation on how the ear turns vibrations into comprehensible sounds.



world and send a strike against terrorism and all ideologies which restrict freedom that music is a beautiful thing," he said. "Everyone who opposes music is ugly." Mukdad advertised the concert venue and time on social media, a bold move in eastern Mosul at a time the militants still control the Old City across the Tigris river. Soldiers guarding the venue, which lies near the ancient Nineveh ruins, at first refused access after the boom of a nearby rocket rang out, saying they could not guarantee the public's safety. They later relented, and troops joined the applauding crowd. "The performance was like a dream," said Tahany Saleh, who as a woman was forced by the militants to cease her university studies. "I wanted to come to give a message that war has not stopped life in Mosul," she said. "You can see all this damage but still we still want to be happy, we want to listen music." In a sign of how nervous Mosul residents remain six months into the military operation to flush out Islamic State, just 20 people, mostly young men, attended the concert. "This is what we young people need," said said another spectator.