

# FBI, Putin cost her election: Clinton

AFP, New York

Hillary Clinton on Tuesday laid the blame for her defeat in last year's White House race squarely at the feet of FBI director James Comey and Russia's Vladimir Putin, saying they had "scared off" voters.

The Democrat, speaking at a charity luncheon in New York, said she took "absolute personal responsibility" for a series of campaign blunders that contributed to her loss to Donald Trump.

But she pointed a finger at Russian hacking and interference and at the Federal Bureau of Investigation director, who revealed just before the November 8 election he was reopening a probe into Clinton's use of a personal email server while serving as secretary of state.

"I was on the way to winning until a combination of Jim Comey's letter on October 28th and Russian WikiLeaks raised doubts in the minds of people who were inclined to vote for me, but got scared off," Clinton said. "If the election had been on October 27, I'd be your president."

Trump responded hours later with a pair of snarky tweets, attacking Clinton and saying the Russia affair was a Democratic ploy to justify her loss to him.

In January the US intelligence community announced it had concluded Russia interfered in the election -- and that Putin himself ordered a campaign to undermine the US democratic process and harm Clinton's electability in order to help Trump win.

Clinton described the Russian president as someone who was "not a member of my fan club."

"He certainly interfered in our election and it was clear he hurt me and helped my opponent," she said.



Fire billows from a burning vehicle following a reported car bomb explosion in the rebel-held town of Azaz in northern Syria yesterday. Five people, including four civilians, were reportedly killed in the explosion. Syrian rebels said yesterday they were suspending participation in a latest round of peace talks aimed at pushing a Russian plan for "de-escalation zones" in the war-torn country

PHOTO: AFP

# IS developing own social media platform

Says Europol director

REUTERS, London

Islamic State militants are developing their own social media platform to avoid security crackdowns on their communications and propaganda, the head of the European Union's police agency said yesterday.

Europol Director Rob Wainwright said the new online platform had been uncovered during a 48-hour operation against Internet extremism last week.

"Within that operation it was revealed IS was now developing its very own social media platform, its own part of the Internet to run its agenda," Wainwright told a security conference in London. "It does show that some members of Daesh (IS), at least, continue to innovate in this space."

During a Europol-coordinated crackdown on IS and al Qaeda material, which involved officials from the United States, Belgium, Greece, Poland, and Portugal, more than 2,000 extremist items were identified, hosted on 52 social media platforms.

Jihadists have often relied on mainstream social media platforms for online communications and to spread propaganda, with private channels on messaging app Telegram being especially popular over the past year.

Technology firms, such as Facebook and Google, have come under increasing political pressure to do more to tackle extremist material online and to make it harder for groups such as Islamic State to communicate through encrypted services to avoid detection by security services.

However, Wainwright said that IS, by creating its own service, was responding to concerted pressure from intelligence agencies, police forces and the tech sector, and were trying to find a way around it.

# China urges all sides to 'lower temperatures'

REUTERS, Beijing

China yesterday called on all parties in the Korean standoff to stay calm and "stop irritating each other" a day after North Korea said the United States was pushing the region to the brink of nuclear war.

The United States has urged China, reclusive North Korea's lone major ally, to do more to rein in its neighbour's nuclear and missile programmes which have prompted an assertive response from the Trump administration, warning that the "era of strategic patience" is over.

The United States has sent a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to Korean waters and a pair of strategic US bombers flew training drills with the South Korean and Japanese air forces in another show of strength this week.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang, asked about the bomber flights, the drills and North Korea's

response, stressed that the situation was "highly complex" and sensitive.

"The urgent task is to lower temperatures and resume talks," he told reporters.

"We again urge all relevant parties to remain calm and exercise restraint, stop irritating each other, work hard to create an atmosphere for contact and dialogue between all sides, and seek a return to the correct path of dialogue and negotiation as soon as possible."

## N KOREA STANDOFF

The flight of the two bombers came as US President Donald Trump raised eyebrows when he said he would be "honoured" to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in the right circumstances, and as his CIA director landed in South Korea for talks.

North Korea said the bombers conducted "a nuclear bomb dropping drill against major objects" in its territory at a time when Trump and "other US warmongers are crying out for making a preemptive nuclear strike" on the North.

# BLACK MAN KILLING 'No charges' for two white cops in US shooting

AGENCIES

The US Department of Justice reportedly decided not to charge two white officers who shot and killed a black man in Louisiana last summer.

Video footage appearing to show the officers holding down Alton Sterling as they fired their weapons sparked days of protests in Baton Rouge. News of the decision leaked to US media on Tuesday before the city mayor or the Sterling family had been told.

The decision may not be the final legal chapter in a case that reverberated far beyond Louisiana's capital.

# Brexit threats timed to affect vote: British PM

AFP, London

Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday accused Brussels of deliberately making "threats against Britain" over the Brexit talks in order to affect the outcome of next month's general election.

In a tough statement outside Downing Street, just hours after the European Union's negotiator set out his plans for the negotiations, May said some people in the EU did not want the negotiations to succeed.

"In the last few days, we have seen just how tough these talks are likely to be," the Conservative Party leader said, charging that Britain's negotiating position had been "misrepresented" in the European press.

"The European Commission's negotiating stance has hardened. Threats against Britain have been issued by European politicians and officials," she said.

"All of these acts have been deliberately timed to affect the result of the general election that will take place on June 8."

May added: "The events of the last few days have shown that -- whatever our wishes, and however reasonable the positions of Europe's other leaders -- there are some in Brussels who do not want these talks to succeed. Who do not want Britain to prosper."

May called the snap election last month, saying she wanted a stronger mandate from the public ahead of the Brexit talks, which are due to start in June.

"Whoever wins on 8 June will face one overriding task: to get the best possible deal for this United Kingdom from Brexit," she said.

"If we don't get the negotiation right, if we let the bureaucrats of Brussels run over us, we will lose the chance to build a fairer society," she added.



## NEWS IN brief

### Saudi offers Indians 90-day exit amnesty

TNN, Chennai

Thousands of Indian workers stranded in Saudi Arabia after travelling there illegally and those who overstayed their visas, including a large number from Tamil Nadu, are ready to return to India under a 90 day amnesty period that the kingdom's government has offered them. Anil Nautiyal, counsellor at the Indian embassy, said 20,321 had applied till Monday evening to return home under the scheme.

### 70 miners trapped after Iran blast

AFP, Tehran

At least 70 coal miners were trapped after an explosion in northern Iran yesterday, Iranian media said. The mine in Golestan province collapsed when trapped methane gas exploded as workers tried to jump-start a locomotive engine. An official told state news agency IRNA that several workers probably died in the blast, but there was no official casualty toll.

### Lankan MP with dual citizenship loses seat

AFP, Colombo

A Sri Lankan court yesterday stripped an actress-turned-politician of her seat in parliament after it was revealed she had Swiss nationality in addition to being a local citizen. Sri Lanka-born Geetha Kumarsinghe, who built a following on the silver screen before winning a seat for President Maithripala Sirisena's party, violated a new law by holding dual citizenship, the Court of Appeal held.



Philippine Environment Secretary Regina Lopez sings "I believe I can fly" during a news conference shortly after lawmakers rejected her appointment as Environment Secretary, 10 months into her term in office, at the Senate in Manila, Philippines, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Le Pen, Macron face off in final TV debate

AFP, Paris

French presidential candidates Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen were set to face off in a final televised debate yesterday which was expected to be bitter, personal and potentially decisive ahead of the run-off vote this weekend.

The stakes are high ahead of the contest between the pro-European Macron, a 39-year-old former investment banker, and far-right leader Le Pen, the 48-year-old scion of the National Front party.

Their starkly different views on Europe, immigration, the economy and French identity will be explored for the first time face-to-face, after a week marked by bruising clashes between them.

Polls show Macron holding a hefty but narrowing lead in the polls of 59 percent versus 41 percent, but previous debates during the rollercoaster French campaign

have quickly shifted public opinion.

"Our goal is to avoid being dragged into mud-slinging," an aide to Macron told AFP on condition of anonymity ahead of the two hours and 20 minutes of exchanges between the candidates.

Whatever the outcome, the event marks a new step into the mainstream for Le Pen, whose party was once considered by France's political establishment to be an extremist fringe of racists to be boycotted.

When her father Jean-Marie made it into the final round of the presidential election in 2002, his conservative opponent Jacques Chirac refused to debate him out of fear of "normalising hate and intolerance".

Fifteen years later, Le Pen scored 21.3 percent in the first round of the French election on April 23 after successfully softening the FN's image -- but without fully removing doubt about the party's core beliefs.

## FRENCH ELECTION

Polls show Macron holding a hefty but narrowing lead in the polls of 59 pc versus 41 pc

## JERUSALEM RESOLUTION

# Israel cuts \$1m from its UN funding

AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced yesterday that Israel would cut \$1 million from its United Nations funding over a Unesco resolution he says denies Jews' historical connection with Jerusalem.

The resolution, passed Tuesday at the UN organisation's Paris headquarters 22 votes to 10, with 23 abstentions, denounced actions taken by "Israel, the occupying power..." to alter the character and status of the holy city of Jerusalem.

It particularly criticised Israel's annexation of east Jerusalem after occupying it in 1967, a move never recognised by the international community.

"Unesco again accepted an absurd resolution yesterday about the status of Jerusalem -- the capital of the Jewish people for 3,000 years," Netanyahu said at the opening of a cabinet meeting.

"This systematic harassment has a price," said Netanyahu, telling ministers he had ordered the foreign ministry to "cut an additional \$1 million from the money Israel transfers to the UN."

Yesterday's cut was the third time in recent months Israel reduced its UN budget over what it perceived as anti-Israel votes, putting the 2017 payments at \$3.7 instead of the original \$11 million, an Israeli official said.

Netanyahu, however, noted the "silver lining" of Tuesday's vote, which he said saw more states supporting Israel's position than in previous similar resolutions.

# IS attack on Nato convoy in Kabul kills eight people

## Afghan president slams the blast as criminal act

AFP, Kabul

A powerful blast targeting an armoured Nato convoy in Kabul killed at least eight people and wounded 28 yesterday, including three coalition troops, officials said in an attack claimed by the Islamic State group.

The explosion, which came during morning rush hour on a busy road near the US embassy and Nato headquarters, killed "mostly" civilians, an interior ministry spokesman told AFP without giving a breakdown.

Three coalition service members received "non-life threatening wounds" but are in stable condition, a spokesman for US Forces-Afghanistan said, without confirming their nationalities.

The attack, claimed by IS via its Amaq propaganda agency, comes three weeks after the US dropped its largest non-nuclear bomb on the jihadist group's hideouts in eastern Afghanistan, triggering global shockwaves.

Monday's blast also comes days after the Taliban launched their "spring offensive", heralding a surge in fighting as the US seeks

to craft a new Afghan strategy and Nato mulls boosting troop levels to break the "stalemate" against the resurgent militants.

The attack, which IS said was a suicide car bomb and Nato said was an improvised explosive device (IED), damaged two of the convoy's heavily armoured vehicles and left a small crater in the road.

MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) vehicles, which are designed to withstand large explosions, are routinely used by international forces moving around Kabul.

At least three civilian cars were also damaged, with one ablaze, while windows were shattered up to several hundred metres away.

Firefighters and ambulances rushed stunned survivors to hospital as President Ashraf Ghani slammed the blast as a "criminal act".

Nato commander in Afghanistan General John Nicholson has said the US decision to drop the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast in Nangarhar province last month was a "very clear message" to IS: "If they come to Afghanistan they will be destroyed".



# Indian village bans cellphones for women

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian village has banned women from using mobile phones in public in an attempt to restrict their contacts with men and plans hefty fines for violators, police said yesterday.

Village elders ruled that women found using a mobile phone outside their homes would be fined 21,000 rupees (\$325) -- a sum it would take most rural Indians several months to earn.

The ruling was issued on Tuesday in Madora, a mainly Muslim village in the conservative northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

"We have received reports about the Khap ordering the ban on women using mobile phones," local police chief Arun Kumar Singh told AFP, referring to the informal village councils known as khap panchayats in India.

"Such orders are against the constitution and we will take action."

The council believes that mobile phones are helping unmarried women to elope and that a ban will limit their interaction with men.

The council also imposed fines on people caught slaughtering cows -- illegal in most Indian states -- or smuggling liquor.

"We do support their measures against illegal activities but won't allow them to curb the freedom of women," Singh said.

Khap panchayats are mostly run by male village elders. Although illegal, they have considerable influence in rural north India.