

JERUSALEM ROW

IS threatens US attacks

REUTERS, Cairo

Islamic State threatened attacks on US soil in retaliation for the Trump administration's decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, one of the group's social media accounts reported yesterday without giving any details.

In a message on one of its accounts on the Telegram instant messaging service titled "Wait for us" and "ISIS in Manhattan", the group said it would carry out operations and showed images of New York's Times Square and what appeared to be an explosive bomb belt and detonator.

"We will do more ops in your land, until the final hour and we will burn you with the flames of war which you started in Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Syria and Afghan. Just you wait," it said.

"The recognition of your dog 'Trump' (sic) Jerusalem as the capital of Israel will make us recognize explosives as the capital of your country."

Washington triggered widespread anger and protests across the Arab world with its decision on Jerusalem. The disputed city is revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, and is home to Islam's third holiest site. It has been at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for decades.

Islamic State was driven out of its Iraqi and Syrian capitals this year and squeezed into a shrinking pocket of desert straddling the border between the two countries.

The forces fighting Islamic State in Iraq and Syria now expect a new phase of guerrilla warfare there. Militants including people claiming allegiance to Islamic State have carried out scores of deadly attacks in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia and the United States over the past two years.



Hamas supporters take part in a rally marking the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Islamic movement, in Gaza City, yesterday. Inset, Palestinian protesters confront Israeli security forces near the West Bank city of Tulkaem yesterday, as protests continue in the region amid anger over US President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as its capital.

PHOTO: AFP

Iraq hangs 38 Sunni militants

AFP, Nasiriyah

Iraq hanged 38 jihadists belonging to the Islamic State group or al-Qaeda for terrorism offences yesterday in the southern city of Nasiriyah, provincial authorities said.

It was the largest number of executions in a single day since September 25 when 42 people were put to death in the same prison.

"The prison administration executed on Thursday in the presence of Justice Minister Haidar al-Zameli, in Nasiriyah prison, 38 death row prisoners belonging to al-Qaeda or Daesh (IS) accused of terrorist activities," said Dakhel Kazem, a senior official in the provincial council.

They were all Iraqis but one also had Swedish citizenship, a prison source said.

Amnesty International has voiced repeated concerns about the use of the death penalty in Iraq, which it ranks as one of the world's top executioners behind China, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

US gripped by false 'spymania'

Says Russian president, blames Trump's opponents for spreading lies

REUTERS, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday said the US was in the grip of a fabricated spymania whipped up by President Donald Trump's opponents but he thought US-Russia ties would recover one day.

Putin, who said he was on first name terms with Trump, also praised the US president for what he said were his achievements.

"I'm not the one to evaluate the president's work. That needs to be done by the voters, the American people," Putin told his annual news conference in Moscow, in answer to a question.

"(But) we are objectively seeing that there have been some major accomplishments, even in the short time he has been working. Look at how the markets have grown. This speaks to investors' trust in the American economy."

Trump took office in January, saying he was keen to mend ties which

had fallen to a post-Cold War low. But since then, ties have soured further after US intelligence officials said Russia meddled in the presidential election, something Moscow denies.

Putin dismissed those allegations and the idea of a Russia connection as

candidates in an election.

"What did someone see that was egregious about this? Why does it all have to take on some tint of spymania?," said Putin.

"This is all invented by people who oppose Trump to give his work

citing the Middle East, North Korea, international terrorism, environmental problems and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

In one of the most dramatic moments of the news conference, Ksenia Sobchak, a TV personality, asked him about what she said was the lack of political competition.

In particular, Sobchak asked about the case of opposition leader Alexei Navalny who looks unlikely to be allowed to run in the March election.

Putin, who polls suggest will be comfortably re-elected, warned that candidates like Navalny would destabilise Russia and usher in chaos if elected.

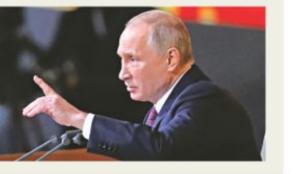
Putin disclosed he planned to run as an independent candidate and garner support from more than one party, in a sign the former KGB officer may be keen to strengthen his image as a "father of the nation" rather than as a party political figure.

an illegitimate character. The people who do this are dealing a blow to the state of (US) domestic politics," he added, saying the accusations were disrespectful to US voters.

Washington and Moscow had many common interests, he said,

PUTIN'S ANNUAL NEWS CONFERENCE

- Dismisses US allegations of Russian meddling
- Praises Trump's 'accomplishments', hopes for better ties
- Warns about dangers of Russian political opposition



Landmine deaths soar in 2016

Record number of children among victims

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION

A record number of children were reported killed or hurt by landmines and other explosives last year, with a handful of conflicts contributing to a "horrific" toll for the second year running, experts said yesterday.

The annual Landmine Monitor report recorded 8,605 casualties in 2016, the second highest figure since 1999 when it began gathering data.

The spike was fuelled by violence in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Yemen and Libya.

About three-quarters of known casualties were civilians, including more than 1,000 children who were injured and nearly 500 who were killed, the report said.

Co-editor of the report Loren Persi described the spike as "alarming", adding that the true number of victims would be significantly higher due to gaps in data from several countries, particularly Syria and Iraq.

The report said armed groups had also used mines in at least seven other countries in the last year: Afghanistan, India, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Ukraine and Yemen.

Myanmar and Syria are the only countries where government forces continue to use mines, it said.

Experts told a teleconference briefing there was evidence earlier this year that Myanmar had laid mines along border areas where Rohingya refugees were crossing into Bangladesh, and that there had been reports of women and children killed.

No renegotiation of deal

Warns EU after British MPs vote to have final decision

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A European Union leader has warned that the UK will be unable to renegotiate a new Brexit deal if Parliament votes to reject the one struck by Theresa May next year.

The suggestion that the UK could crash out without a deal if MPs refused to back what May returns with comes after the Government lost a key vote in the House of Commons that saw Tory rebels team up with Labour to ensure MPs getting a vote.

Arriving at a European Council summit in Brussels on Thursday just hours after May's defeat, Xavier Bettel, the prime minister of Luxembourg, said the UK would not be given the opportunity to renegotiate.

"No," he told reporters when asked. "To think Theresa May will negotiate something, we will negotiate something, and then again [Ms May] will go back to Westminster is not good for the position of the negotiations."

"Westminster should trust that Theresa May will do the best for the UK. Westminster shouldn't, even

before we start negotiations to have in their heads that they don't trust the prime minister."

National leaders were arriving in Brussels yesterday for the two-day meeting, where they will start by discussing the EU's response to the migration crisis

BREXIT



and a new bloc-wide defence pact.

Today, after May has returned to the UK, leaders of the EU27 will discuss the progress made in Brexit negotiations and are expected to formally agree to move to the next phase of talks - following the recommendation of

the European Commission and European Parliament.

Leaders will also discuss plans for tighter integration of the European Union economies, with attention likely to be focused on a plan to create a fully fledged European Monetary Fund to replace the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). The ESM gives Eurozone members instant access to financial assistance when they have budget problems.

Though the Brexit element of the summit was initially expected to be straightforward, May's defeat last night has added an extra element to proceedings - raising concerns in European capitals that the PM might not be able to enforce whatever deal she negotiates.

The Prime Minister is expected to speak to leaders at a working dinner on Thursday evening before flying back to the UK.

Following May's triggering of Article 50 in March this year the UK has until March 2019 before it automatically leaves the bloc. This period can only be extended by a unanimous vote of the European Council - a meeting of all the EU's national leaders.



A woman holds a 'Save the Net' protest sign during a demonstration against the proposed repeal of net neutrality outside the Federal Communications Commission headquarters in Washington, DC, Wednesday. The acrimonious battle over "net neutrality" in America comes to a head yesterday with the agency set to vote to roll back rules enacted two years earlier aimed at preventing a "two-speed" internet.

PHOTO: AFP

US military to send cyber soldiers to the battlefield

AFP, Washington

The US Army will soon send teams of cyber warriors to the battlefield, officials said Wednesday, as the military increasingly looks to take the offensive against enemy computer networks.

While the Army's mission is generally to "attack and destroy," the cyber troops have a slightly different goal, said Colonel Robert Ryan, who commands a Hawaii-based combat team.

"Not everything is destroy. How can I influence by non-kinetic means? How can I reach up and create confusion and gain control?" he told reporters.

The cyber soldiers have been integrated for six months in infantry units, and will tailor operations according to commanders' needs, said Colonel William Hartman of the Army's Cyber Command.

The Army has for the past three years conducted training for such operations at a

huge center in southern California.

Hartman didn't give details on what the cyber troops can achieve, except to say that they would be scooping up information or intercepting planned attacks.

According to the New York Times, CYBERCOM has previously placed "implants" in Islamic State group networks that let experts monitor the group's behavior and ultimately imitate or alter commanders' messages so they unwittingly direct fighters to areas likely to be hit by drone or plane strikes.

Another technique likely being employed is a common type of cyber attack known as a denial of service.

Cyber Command had previously been a subordinate part of the US Strategic Command, but President Donald Trump in August ordered the Pentagon to elevate it to its own command, in a sign of its growing importance.



US-led raids kill 23 civilians in Syria

AFP, Beirut

Air strikes by a US-led coalition killed 23 civilians Wednesday in a village held by the Islamic State group in Syria's eastern Deir Ezzor province, a monitor said.

"At least 23 civilians, among them eight children and six women, were killed Wednesday before dawn by air strikes carried out by the US-led coalition, targeting a village controlled by IS on the eastern banks of the Euphrates river," the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The Observatory, which gathers eye-witness reports from the ground, said the civilians were hiding inside a house and were all members of the same extended family.

US-backed forces are currently battling to capture the last scraps of IS-controlled territory in the area and on Tuesday took a village adjacent to the one that was hit, the monitor said.

Earlier Wednesday a spokesman for the coalition said fighters with its support cleared six kilometres (four miles) of territory along the eastern bank of Euphrates river over the past day.

"ISIS is weak but still a threat -- terrorists lurking in Mid-Euphrates River Valley," spokesman Ryan Dillon wrote on Twitter, using another acronym for IS.

The jihadist group has lost the vast bulk of the territory it captured across Syria and Iraq in 2014 after a string of gruelling offensives.

RUSSIA MEDDLING INVESTIGATION IN US POLLS

Trump's eldest son testifies to US Senate committee

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump's eldest son met with the US Senate Intelligence Committee on Wednesday as part of the panel's investigation into Russia, the 2016 US election and whether his father's election campaign colluded with Moscow.

Donald Trump Jr. arrived at a Senate office building shortly after 10am Capitol police officers tried to keep journalists from witnessing his arrival, but he was spotted by reporters as he rushed to a room the committee uses for classified briefings.

He testified for nine hours, a person familiar with the matter said.

US intelligence agencies said after Trump's victory in the November 2016 presidential election that they had concluded Russia sought to influence the campaign to boost Trump's chances of defeating

former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, his Democratic challenger.

Moscow has denied any such activity, and Trump has dismissed talk of possible collusion as a "witch hunt" led by Democrats disappointed about his victory.

The Senate committee is conducting one of the main congressional investigations. Richard Burr, the panel's chairman, told reporters on Tuesday he expected its probe to last into 2018, but likely not for many months into the new year.

Department of Justice Special Counsel Robert Mueller is also investigating the matter.

Trump Jr testified to the House Intelligence Committee last week.

Lawmakers are interested in talking to him about a meeting with a Russian lawyer in June 2016 at Trump Tower in New York at which he said he hoped to get information about the "fitness, character and qualifications" of Clinton.

