

No embassy move to Jerusalem this year

Says Trump denying Netanyahu's claim

REUTERS, Washington

President Donald Trump denied on Wednesday that the planned relocation of the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem would take place within a year, after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he expected the controversial move to happen by then.

Reversing decades of US policy, Trump in early December recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and set in motion the process of moving the embassy from Tel Aviv, imperiling Middle East peace efforts and upsetting the Arab world and Western allies alike.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said last month the embassy move was "probably no earlier than three years out, and that's pretty ambitious," a timeframe that administration officials have attributed to the logistics of finding and securing a site as well as arranging housing for diplomats.

Jerusalem is home to sites holy to the Muslim, Jewish and Christian religions. The Palestinians want East Jerusalem, which Israel captured in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and annexed in a move not recognized internationally, as the capital of their future state.

Netanyahu, according to Israeli reporters traveling with him on a trip to India, said on Wednesday: "My solid assessment is that it will go much faster than you think - within a year from now."

Asked about Netanyahu's comment, Trump told Reuters in an interview that was not the case. "By the end of the year? We're talking about different scenarios - I mean obviously that would be on a temporary basis. We're not really looking at that. That's no."



A wounded Palestinian is evacuated during clashes with Israeli troops in the West Bank city of Jenin yesterday. Israeli forces raided overnight to arrest suspects in the recent murder of an Israeli, leaving one of them dead and sparking clashes, officials said. PHOTO: REUTERS

Iraq, Syria see sharp drop in terror deaths

AFP, London

Iraq and Syria saw a sharp drop in the number of people killed in terror attacks last year, a report published yesterday by Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre has found.

Despite ongoing violence in both countries, there was a fall in the number of deaths in attacks by non-state actors such as the Islamic State group.

In Iraq 3,378 were killed in militant attacks last year, a fall of 60 percent compared to 8,437 fatalities in 2016, according to research by the London-based centre.

A similar trend was charted in Syria, where there was a drop of nearly 44 percent.

In total 3,641 people were killed in terrorism and insurgency in 2017, down from 6,477 the previous year.

The report does not include militants who died in attacks, nor the substantial number of people killed in government-led air strikes in countries such as Syria.

Despite losing significant territory in the two countries last year, the Islamic State group continued as the world's most active terror organisation by number of attacks.

"As it came under growing territorial pressure, the Islamic State transitioned back to insurgent operations, conducting a higher tempo of low intensity violence against security forces and non-state adversaries in areas newly recaptured from the group," said Matthew Henman, head of the research centre.

The Islamist group killed 6,499 people in attacks last year - a 40 percent decrease compared to 2016, despite upping the number of assaults by nine percent to 4,612 last year.

Although Iraq and Syria experienced a fall in the number of deaths in militant attacks, the scale of terrorism and insurgency in the two countries remained unparalleled globally.

US troops to remain in Syria

Says Tillerson as Damascus vows to free the country of foreign presence

REUTERS, Palo Alto

The United States on Wednesday signalled an open-ended military presence in Syria as part of a broader strategy to prevent Islamic State's resurgence, pave the way diplomatically for the eventual departure of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and curtail Iran's influence.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, in a speech at Stanford University, called for "patience" on Assad's departure - the clearest indication yet of an acknowledgment that Russia and Iran have bolstered Assad and that he is unlikely to leave power immediately.

Billed as the Trump administration's new strategy on Syria, the announcement will prolong the risks and redefine the mission for the US military, which has for years sought to define its operations in Syria along more narrow lines of battling Islamic State and has about 2,000 US ground forces in the country.

While much of the US strategy would focus on diplomatic efforts, Tillerson said: "But let us be clear: the United States will maintain a military

presence in Syria, focused on ensuring ISIS cannot re-emerge," while acknowledging many Americans' skepticism of military involvement in conflicts abroad, Tillerson said.

US forces in Syria have already faced direct threats from Syrian and Iranian-backed forces, leading to the shoot-down of Iranian drones and a Syrian jet last year, as well as to tensions with Russia.

US has deployed 2,000 ground troops to Syria for hunting remnants of IS
Mistrust of US over Syria continues: Turkey

Trump administration officials, including Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, had previously disclosed elements of the policy but Tillerson's speech was meant to formalize and clearly define it.

A US disengagement from Syria would provide Iran with an opportunity to reinforce its position in Syria, Tillerson said.

The Syrian government said yesterday that a US military presence in Syria represented an "aggression" against Syrian sovereignty, and vowed to free the country from any "illegitimate" foreign presence.

"The American military presence on Syrian land is illegitimate and represents a blatant breach of international law and an aggression against national sovereignty," Syrian foreign ministry statement said.

Syria would continue its "relentless war against terrorist movements with their different names until every inch of Syrian soil is cleansed" and would work with "the same determination" to free Syria of any "illegitimate foreign presence."

Turkey said yesterday it was not satisfied with Washington's attempts to allay its concern about the creation of a Syrian border force on its southern frontier, adding its "direct mistrust" of the United States continued.

Nato member Turkey has reacted angrily to a statement by the US-led coalition that it is helping set up a new 30,000-strong border force in Syria including members of the Syrian-Kurdish YPG militia.

Russia undermining N Korea sanctions

Says Trump as South Korea says it will continue peace talks with clear eyes amid global warnings

AGENCIES

US President Donald Trump complained on Wednesday that Russia was helping North Korea to evade international sanctions, signaling frustration with a country he had hoped to forge friendly relations with after his 2016 election win.

"Russia is not helping us at all with North Korea," Trump said during an Oval Office interview with Reuters. "What China is helping us with, Russia is deterring. In other words, Russia is making up for some of what China is doing."

China and Russia both signed onto the latest rounds of United Nations Security Council sanctions against North Korea imposed last year. There was no immediate comment from the Russian embassy in Washington on Trump's remarks.

During a 53-minute interview with a fresh Diet Coke near at hand on his desk, Trump also said he was considering a big "fine" as part of an investigation into China's alleged

theft of intellectual property; that he has lost all trust in the chief Democratic Party negotiator on immigration in the Senate; and declined to clear up conflicting reports about his use of the phrase "shithole countries" in a White House meeting, which caused an international outcry.

With North Korea persisting as the major global challenge facing Trump this year, the president cast doubt on whether talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un would be useful. In the past he has not ruled out direct talks with Kim.

Meanwhile, South Korea said it will continue high-level talks with North Korea with "clear eyes" amid global warnings that Pyongyang might be playing for time to continue its nuclear-arms programme.

"We have to make the most" of the opportunity, South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha told the BBC.

The two Koreas earlier agreed to march under a "unified Korea" flag at next month's Winter Olympics in the South.



Kang Kyung-wha

52 people die in Kazakhstan bus inferno

Short circuit blamed

AFP, Astana

Fifty-two people were killed yesterday when the Russia-bound bus they were travelling on caught fire in Kazakhstan, the central Asian nation's emergency services ministry said.

"On January 18 at 10:30 am, a bus caught fire ... 55 passengers and two drivers were on board. Five people who managed to escape are receiving medical assistance. The rest died on the spot," the ministry said, without elaborating on the cause of the blaze.

All those who died are believed to be Uzbek nationals, an interior ministry official told Interfax-Kazakhstan news agency. Kazakh media reported they were migrant workers travelling to Russia.

Uzbekistan's emergency services ministry said it had opened a hotline.

The vehicle was registered in Kazakhstan, emergency services ministry official Ruslan Imankulov told AFP. He said the fire spread very quickly.

Regional emergency service officials initially blamed the fire on a short circuit and said the bus was overloaded, Interfax-Kazakhstan news agency reported.

Ministry representative Imankulov did not confirm this however, telling AFP: "It's too early to talk about the reasons for the fire."

Panic broke out on board the bus, hindering evacuation, while survivors managed to climb through a door and window, Kazakh news site BNews reported.

Two of the survivors suffered burns to their hands, emergency services officials told AFP, while others suffered minor



People protest to call for a new DREAM Act to replace DACA in Los Angeles, California, US on Wednesday. President Donald Trump aligned himself solidly with conservative Republicans on immigration, criticizing a proposed bipartisan deal as "horrible" on US border security and "very, very weak" on reforms for the legal immigration system.

Trump opposes top aide on Mexico border wall

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump yesterday said his concept of a wall along the US border with Mexico "has never changed or evolved," contradicting comments made by his chief of staff.

White House chief of staff John Kelly told Hispanic lawmakers during a Wednesday meeting that some of Trump's immigration views during the campaign were "uninformed," according to reports in the Washington Post and New York Times.

Kelly elaborated in an interview later with Fox News, saying that the Republican president's views have evolved.

In an apparent rebuke of Kelly, Trump wrote on Twitter yesterday: "The Wall is the Wall, it has never changed or evolved from the first day I conceived of it."

The border wall stands at the center of a congressional struggle to overhaul immigra-

tion before the March expiration of a program protecting so-called "Dreamers" - immigrants who were brought to the country illegally as children.

Trump wants any deal to include funding for the wall, which Democrats oppose and is expected to cost more than \$20 billion.

During the campaign, Trump supporters cheered when he loudly promised a barrier along the 2,000-mile (3,200 km) US-Mexico frontier to keep out drug smugglers and undocumented immigrants and have Mexico pay for it. Since taking office, he has acknowledged there were geographical barriers such as mountains and rivers along the border where a wall would not be necessary.

"The Wall will be paid for, directly or indirectly, or through longer term reimbursement, by Mexico, which has a ridiculous \$71 billion dollar trade surplus with the US," Trump said on Twitter yesterday.



Australia drone makes first rescue

AFP, Sydney

A pair of Australian swimmers yesterday became the first people to be rescued in the ocean by a drone when the aerial lifesaver dropped a safety device to distressed teens caught in rough seas.

Australia is leading the use of the technology in surf lifesaving, with dozens of drones being trialled on beaches around the country.

In what is believed to be a world-first drone surf rescue, two boys yesterday got caught in three-metre (10-foot) swells while swimming off Lennox Head in New South Wales, near the border with Queensland.

Beachgoers onshore raised the alarm to the lifeguards who then alerted the drone pilot, and the aerial lifesaver was deployed in moments.

"I was able to launch it, fly it to the location, and drop the pod all in about one to two minutes," lifeguard supervisor Jai Sheridan told the Gold Coast Bulletin.

"On a normal day that would have taken our lifeguards a few minutes longer to reach the members of the public."

Huge storms hit Europe

Three killed in the Netherlands; flights scrapped

AFP, The Hague

Violent gales battered northern Europe and beyond yesterday, snapping air and train links and leaving three people dead, all killed by falling trees.

The Netherlands bore the brunt of the severe winter storms -- the second this month -- as bitter winds barrelled off the North Sea to hit the low-lying country with full force.

Amsterdam's Schiphol airport, one of the continent's busiest travel hubs, was forced to briefly cancel all flights as winds gusted up to 140 kilometres (86 miles) an hour in some areas.

"Due to severe weather conditions: all air traffic has been suspended until further notice," Schiphol airport said in a tweet. Departures and arrivals gradually began resuming about two hours later.

But the airport also had to close the entrances to two of its three departure halls when some roof tiles were whipped off the terminal building.

"Fire department staff were there to help

and assist, because it was not safe," airport spokeswoman Gedi Schrijzer told AFP, adding there had not been any injuries.

As the national weather service raised its warning to the highest code red level, a 62-year-old man was killed in the central Dutch town of Olst by a falling branch.

A second Dutchman, also 62, was killed in



the eastern Enschede when a tree toppled onto his car, the Dutch news agency ANP said.

In neighbouring Belgium, a woman driver also reportedly died when her car was crushed by a tree as she was travelling through a wood in the Crez-Doiceau area.

China spots oil slicks from sunken tanker

AFP, Beijing

The spill from a sunken Iranian tanker off China's east coast has spawned four oil slicks as authorities prepared to send robots to the wreckage to assess the environmental damage.

The Sanchi, which was carrying 136,000 tonnes of light crude oil from Iran, sank in a ball of flames in the East China Sea on Sunday, a week after colliding with Hong Kong-registered bulk freighter the CF Crystal.

The bodies of only three out of 30 Iranian and two Bangladeshi crew members have been found.

The State Oceanic Administration of China said late Wednesday that it was monitoring four slicks with a total area of almost 101 square kilometres (39 square miles), roughly the same size as Paris.

The office is attempting to "control the spread of the oil spill and is carrying out work to estimate its impact on the marine ecological environment", it said on its website.

The type of condensate oil carried by the Sanchi does not form a traditional surface slick when spilt, but is nonetheless highly toxic to marine life and much harder to separate from water. The cargo amounted to nearly one million barrels (bbl) of oil.

Japan's coast guard said yesterday a patrol ship and plane examined the oil spill and found that it was spreading 30 kilometres east and eight kilometres northwest from the wreck, with a maximum width of 800 metres.