

# Germany won't join US in Syria strikes

REUTERS, Berlin

Germany will not join any military strikes against Syria in response to a suspected poison gas attack on an opposition enclave, but supports Western efforts to show the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable, Chancellor Angela Merkel said.

"Germany will not take part in possible - there have not been any decisions yet, I want to stress that - military action," Merkel said after meeting Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen in Berlin.

"But we support everything that is being done to show that the use of chemical weapons is not acceptable," she added.

In Dublin, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said Germany expects to be consulted before any Western allies conduct an attack on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces as the allies must be united on the matter.

Earlier, Merkel spoke with French President Emmanuel Macron about the suspected gas attack and expressed her concern that the international community's ability to ban chemical weapons was eroding, her spokesman said.

US President Donald Trump warned Russia on Wednesday that missiles "will be coming" in response to the April 7 gas attack, which aid groups said killed dozens of people, and lambasted Moscow for standing by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Norbert Roettgen, chairman of the German parliamentary foreign affairs committee and an ally of Merkel's, said: "Shamefully, there is still no policy from the EU - or even individual EU states - for the Middle (East) countries.

"If it came to military strikes with the participation of France and Britain, that is still not a policy."

Roettgen urged the European Union to develop a policy for the Middle East as a whole, adding: "Germany should work together with others for a Middle East peace conference. We have various diplomatic options to not let the topic rest."



Members of the opposition throw flour at Prime Minister Edi Rama during a parliamentary session in Tirana, Albania, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS



## Bipartisan US senators seek to protect Mueller

AFP, Washington

US senators has introduced a bipartisan measure that would protect the special prosecutor heading the Russia investigation, in a bid to check any attempt by President Donald Trump to fire him.

The bill faces long odds of making it into law, but it could serve as a serious warning to Trump not to sack the man investigating him.

The Special Counsel Independence and Integrity Act would ensure that Robert Mueller, who is also probing any Trump campaign contacts or coordination with Russia, and any future special counsels could only be fired for "good cause" by a senior Justice Department official.

Should the termination occur, the special counsel would have 10 days to challenge the firing in court.

The bill comes one day after the White House insisted that Trump has the power to fire Mueller.

Trump's attacks on Mueller have grown louder: on Wednesday he branded the Russia probe "fake" and "corrupt," blaming it for worsening ties between Washington and Moscow.

"We have faith in Mueller," said Republican Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Bob Corker.

"I've shared with the president that I think it would be a tremendous mistake on his part to fire him," Corker said, warning that "I think it would end his presidency as he knows it."

## WAR IN SYRIA

# Rebels give up Douma in major win for Assad

AFP, Wafideen Checkpoint

Rebels in Syria's Eastern Ghouta surrendered their heavy weapons and their leader left the enclave, a monitor said yesterday, signalling the end of one of the bloodiest assaults of Syria's seven-year war.

The Syrian flag was raised above the central mosque in Douma, the town where the regime is accused of carrying out a chemical attack that sparked outrage and threats of Western military action.

US President Donald Trump was mulling his options and British Prime Minister Theresa May called an emergency cabinet meeting Thursday, as the Syrian army braced for Western strikes, hiding assets and deserting key buildings.

Jaish al-Islam, which has controlled Eastern Ghouta's main town for years, had balked at a Russian-brokered deal like those that saw other factions bussed to northern Syria.

The group's political chief told AFP it was a chemical attack by the regime that forced

them to accept Russia's terms and evacuate their former bastion.

"Of course, the chemical attack is what pushed us to agree" to a withdrawal from Douma, said Yasser Dalwan.

Syrian regime forces had yet to take over Douma Thursday but, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the rebels handed over their heavy weapons.

"Jaish al-Islam fighters handed over their heavy weapons to Russian military police in the town of Douma on Wednesday," the Britain-based monitoring group said.

Their top leader Issam Buwaydani boarded a convoy out of Ghouta with thousands of other fighters and their relatives, it said.

Simultaneously carrying out air strikes, brokering talks and supervising humanitarian operations, Russia was the key player in an assault that left at least 1,700 civilians dead.

According to the Observatory, more than 350,000 people have been killed in seven years of conflict, including a proportion of children that has risen sharply over the past year.

# No more 'soft Russia policy'

## Says Trump's pick for top diplomat as he faces Senate grilling

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump's pick for top US diplomat was set to tell senators yesterday that if confirmed he will get tough on Russia, address flagging morale and fill vacancies at the State Department -- in addition to helping the agency revive its "swagger."

Mike Pompeo, currently the CIA director, faces a confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that could not come sooner, as tensions soar with Russia and Syria and a trade spat with China threatens to snowball.

"Russia continues to act aggressively, enabled by years of soft policy toward that aggression," Pompeo says in his prepared remarks. "That's now over."

He has been tapped to replace Rex Tillerson as secretary of state, in what could be one of the more consequential of many personnel shakeups since Trump took office 14 months ago.

Pompeo is a known entity for

Trump, someone who briefed the president almost daily and shares a gung-ho attitude towards Iran.

But in excerpts released Wednesday by the White House, Pompeo says that while Tehran has paid "too low a price" for its behavior, Pompeo and Trump



are prepared to revise the nuclear deal "to fix its most egregious flaws."

Mindful of Tillerson's reputation as a disengaged leader whose failure to fill critical positions at State alarmed lawmakers, Pompeo acknowledges he has heard firsthand from US diplomats about "how demoralizing it is to

have so many vacancies and, frankly, not to feel relevant."

"I'll do my part to end the vacancies," he says in the remarks.

As head of the Central Intelligence Agency, Pompeo has already been vetted by the US Senate, where 14 Democrats joined Republicans in confirming him to that post.

It appears at least one Democrat will be needed to get Pompeo successfully through the foreign relations committee with a positive recommendation.

The panel has 11 Republicans and 10 Democrats, and Republican Rand Paul has already expressed his opposition to Pompeo, for the latter's support of the Iraq war and his aggressive posture against Iran.

But Senator Lindsey Graham, a Republican hawk on foreign policy, said Pompeo is "the right guy at the right time" to lead State through a "dangerous" global period.

Trump has gone without a top US diplomat for nearly a month.



Palestinian relatives of Hamas gunman Mohammed Hejelah, who was killed in an Israeli air strike, mourn during his funeral in Gaza City, yesterday. Israel said the strike was launched in response to a bomb attack on a military vehicle on the Gaza frontier on Wednesday, in which there were no casualties. When gunmen shot at the aircraft, they were fired upon, the Israeli military said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Zuckerberg unscathed by congressional grilling

## Pledges reform, defends FB business model

AFP, Washington

Mark Zuckerberg defended Facebook's business model on Wednesday against fierce criticism of how it feeds user data to advertisers, even as he admitted his own personal information had been leaked to outside companies.

Facing tough questioning in a second day of high-stakes hearings in Congress, the 33-year-old CEO conceded that regulation of social media companies -- under mounting scrutiny over the misuse of user data -- is "inevitable."

But he stiffly defended Facebook's use of the data and postings of the 2.2 billion users of its free platform -- in order to attract the ad revenue that the \$480 billion company depends on.

Speaking in the wake of a scandal over the massive leak of data to a British political consultant, Zuckerberg reiterated that the company had shut down the pipeline that



allowed such data, including his own, to slip into the hands of third parties.

Yet in his testimony, he was also steadfast in arguing that Facebook's users themselves are choosing to make their data available.

"Every time that a person chooses to share something on Facebook, they're proactively going to the service and choosing that they want to share a photo, write a message to someone."

Zuckerberg faced tougher questions from House lawmakers over Facebook's stance than during Tuesday's five-hour session in the Senate, where his defense of data sharing was weakly challenged.

Zuckerberg said he accepted that legal restrictions of some sort were in the cards -- while adding a word of caution.

"The internet is growing in importance around the world in people's lives, and I think that it is inevitable that there will need to be some regulation," he said.

# One Lula jailed, 60 'Lula' in congress

AFP, Brasilia

If Brazil's right-wing politicians thought they'd seen the last of Lula with his imprisonment, they couldn't have reckoned on running into more than 60 new "Lulas" popping up in Congress on Wednesday.

Like an army of clones, members of Lula's Workers' Party in the legislature have changed their names to that of their fiery leader.

The tribute to the disgraced two-term former president -- and gleeful dig at his opponents -- was led by the Workers' Party head, Senator Gleisi Hoffmann.

From now on, she will be referred to in the legislature as Gleisi Lula Hoffmann, she wrote in a letter to the Senate speaker published Wednesday. The party's leader in the lower house, hitherto known as Paulo Pimenta, sent a similar letter: he is now Paulo Lula Pimenta.

The 60 Workers' Party deputies in the lower house have followed suit.

The backlash, however, has already started.

Sostenes Cavalcante, from the small right-wing DEM party, has informed that he will now make Moro his middle name, paying tribute to Judge Sergio Moro, who convicted Lula.

## EX-RUSSIAN SPY'S POISONING IN UK

# OPCW confirms UK findings

## Daughter declines Russian help but embassy doubts statement

AFP, London

The world's chemical arms watchdog yesterday said it had confirmed Britain's findings on a nerve agent used in an attack on a former spy last month, which London said came from Russia.

Samples tested by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) "confirm the findings of the United Kingdom relating to the identity of the toxic chemical," according to a summary of the Hague-based group's report.

It added that "the toxic chemical was of high purity."

In a declassified summary of its findings, the OPCW did not make any assessment on who carried out the March 4 attack on former double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the English city of Salisbury that also

injured a police officer.

Britain and allies including the United States have blamed Moscow, sparking furious denials and provoking an international row resulting in the expulsions of diplomats from all sides.

The OPCW did not name the chemical compounds reportedly developed by the Soviet government in the 1970s and 1980s.

Russia has strongly denied any involvement, and insists it has destroyed all of its chemical weapons.

Skripal moved to Britain in a spy swap in 2010 and settled in Salisbury, and his daughter Yulia was visiting from Russia when they were poisoned, possibly on his front door.

Meanwhile, the Russian embassy in London has requested consular access to the Skripal, and warned that any secret resettlement of the family "will be seen as an abduction or at least as their forced isolation."

In a statement issued through British police on Wednesday, Yulia Skripal said she did not currently want any help from the embassy, adding: "I am safe and feeling better as time goes by."

Britain named it as Novichok, a group of powerful and deadly chemi-



# Night owls risk dying younger

AFP, Paris

People who stay up late and have to drag themselves out of bed are likelier to die younger than those who rise and set with the Sun, researchers said yesterday.

A survey of more than 430,000 people in Britain found that night owls had a 10-percent higher risk of dying in the 6.5-year study period than "larks".

"This is a public health issue that can no longer be ignored," said study co-author Malcolm van Schantz of the University of Surrey -- and argued that "night types" should be allowed to start and finish work later in the day.

"Night owls trying to live in a morning-lark world may (suffer) health consequences," said fellow author Kristen Knutson of the Northwestern University in Chicago.

The duo gathered information on nearly half-a-million people aged 38-73 from a public database.

People in the late-night group were more likely to suffer from psychological disorders, diabetes, and stomach and breathing troubles, and slept fewer hours per night. They were also more likely to smoke, drink alcohol and coffee, and use illegal drugs.

The higher risk may be because "people who are up late have an internal biological clock that doesn't match their external environment," Knutson said.