

SYRIA MISSILE STRIKES WORLD REACTIONS

UNITED STATES "A perfectly executed strike last night. Thank you to France and the United Kingdom for their wisdom and the power of their fine Military," US President Donald Trump tweeted. "Could not have had a better result. Mission Accomplished!"

SYRIA Syrian President Bashar al-Assad told a group of Russian lawmakers yesterday that Western missile strikes on his country were an act of aggression. "Yesterday we saw American aggression. And we were able to repel it with Soviet missiles from the 70s," Russian lawmaker Dmitry Sabinin quoted Assad as saying, TASS reported.

IRAN Iran's Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, branded US President Trump, France's Emmanuel Macron and Britain's Theresa May "criminals".

RUSSIA "Russia severely condemns the attack on Syria where Russian military are helping the lawful government in the fight with terrorism," the Kremlin said in a statement.

ISRAEL "A year ago I gave Israel's total support for (US) President Donald Trump's decision to mobilise against the use of chemical weapons," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, referring to American strikes against the Syrian regime in April 2017. "Israel's support remains unchanged," he added.

NATO Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in a statement backed the strikes, saying they "will reduce the regime's ability to further attack the people of Syria with chemical weapons".

UNITED NATIONS "I urge all member states to show restraint in these dangerous circumstances and to avoid any acts that could escalate the situation and worsen the suffering of the Syrian people," said UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in a statement.

CHINA China said it was "opposed to the use of force" in international relations. It called for a political solution and a "return to the framework of international law".

EUROPE European Council President Donald Tusk said on Twitter that the European Union supported the strikes and "will stand with our allies on the side of justice". German chancellor Angela Merkel called the strikes a "necessary and appropriate military intervention".

SAUDI ARABIA "Saudi Arabia fully supports the strikes launched by the United States, France and Britain against Syria because they represent a response to the regime's crimes," a foreign ministry statement said.



A Syrian soldier inspects the wreckage of a building described as part of the Scientific Studies and Research Centre compound in the Barzeh district, north of Damascus, on Saturday. The images (bottom) released by the US Department of Defense show the damage at the Barzah research and development center before (L) and after (R) the missile strikes.



PHOTO: AFP

US DECISION TO TRANSFER EMBASSY TO JERUSALEM

Saudi rejects Trump plan

AFP, Dhahran

Saudi Arabia's King Salman yesterday criticised the US decision to transfer its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem as Arab leaders met in the kingdom for an annual gathering. Opening the 29th Arab League summit, the king also slammed Iran's "blatant interference" in regional affairs and described "terrorism" as the biggest challenge facing Arab leaders.

Seventeen leaders from across the Arab world -- minus Syrian President Bashar al-Assad -- gathered in the eastern Saudi city of Dhahran for the summit, which this year comes as world powers face off over Syria and tensions rise between Riyadh and Tehran. The meeting opened only 24 hours after a barrage of strikes launched by the United States, Britain and France hit targets they said were linked to chemical weapons development in Syria, which was suspended from the league seven years ago.

But King Salman avoided any mention of Syria in his address, as a seat marked "Syrian Arab Republic" sat empty in the hall. Instead the king focused on rivalries with long-time foe Iran -- only 160 kilometres (100 miles) across the Gulf from Dhahran. "We renew our strong condemnation of Iran's terrorist

acts in the Arab region and reject its blatant interference in the affairs of Arab countries," the king said.

And despite being a stalwart ally of US, the ruler also criticised US President Donald Trump controversial decision to transfer America's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

"We reiterate our rejection of the US decision on Jerusalem," Salman said. "East Jerusalem is an integral part of the Palestinian territories."

Arab ministers at a preliminary meeting in Riyadh on Thursday focused heavily on blocking the move, unanimously condemning Trump's decision.

King Salman yesterday announced a \$150 million donation for the maintenance of Islamic heritage in East Jerusalem.

Saudi Arabia is pushing for a tough, unified stance against its regional arch-rival Iran at the annual gathering of the 22-member Arab League.

The two regional titans back opposing sides in a range of hotspots across the Middle East, including Lebanon and Syria and in Saudi Arabia's southern neighbour Yemen.

Iran is backing Shia Huthi rebels that Riyadh opposes in Yemen and yesterday Salman praised "the UN Security Council's statement denouncing the Iranian-made ballistic missile fire on Saudi cities."

King Salman slams Iran's interference in regional affairs at Arab summit

Announces donation for maintenance of Islamic heritage in East Jerusalem



Air China flight diverted by pen threat

AFP, Beijing

An Air China flight was diverted yesterday after a male passenger brandishing a fountain pen held a crew member hostage, aviation authorities said.

The flight left Changsha, capital of the central province of Hunan, at 8:40am en route to Beijing. It landed in Zhengzhou, the capital of neighbouring Henan province, just over an hour later after the man threatened the crew member.

"The incident was successfully dealt with by 1:17pm, and passengers and crew members are safe," according to a statement from the Civil Aviation Administration of China, which said a man used a pen as a threatening device.

Authorities have not yet released further information about the man's motives or what happened to him.

Why should Kim give up nuke?

CNN ONLINE

As the US prepares to try and convince North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to give up his nuclear weapons, it may have made his counter argument for him.

On Friday, US President Donald Trump announced he had given the order for US forces to strike the Syrian regime in response to an alleged chemical weapons attack on a rebel-held city in the southwest of the country, which he blames on Russia and Syria.

But the attack against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad -- a longtime ally of North Korea -- could complicate Trump's planned summit with Kim, expected to take place in May or June.

"This is sort of the whole reason why North Korea has pursued nuclear weapons," Rodger Baker, VP of strategic analysis for the global intelligence firm Stratfor, told CNN. "The perception is (having nuclear weapons) reduces the likelihood of these types of punitive strikes."

In the past, Pyongyang has repeatedly pointed to US military interventions around the world as a justification for its nuclear program, viewing it as a vital deterrent to any attempts at regime change instigated or led by Washington.

According to Dan Coats, Trump's director of national intelligence, Kim views nukes as key to the "survival (of) his regime."

"He has watched ... what has happened around the world relative to nations that possess nuclear capabilities and the leverage they have, and seen that having the nuclear card in your pocket results in a lot of deterrence capability," he said at an event last year.

In December 2003, after months of negotiations with the US, Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi agreed to dismantle his nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs.

US President George W Bush welcomed Libya back into the "community of nations," and British Prime Minister Tony Blair visited Tripoli the following year as Gaddafi was embraced as a partner in the growing War on Terror.

By March 2011, however, London and Washington had soured on Gaddafi, and Nato intervened to support his overthrow. Within months, Gadhafi was dead, comered by rebels who beat and abused him before summarily shooting him in the head.

Some Ukrainian politicians have also claimed that had the country not given up its post-Soviet nuclear arsenal, Russia would not have annexed Crimea in 2014.

"The lessons that we learned out of Libya ... and Ukraine giving up its nukes is, unfortunately, if you had nukes, never give them up," Coats said. "(And) if you don't have them, get them."

A North Korean foreign ministry official said in 2011 that Nato's bombing campaign against Libya taught "a grave lesson," that "one should have power to defend peace."

While analysts said North Korea's massive conventional military and vast amounts of artillery aimed at Seoul gave it a deterrent Libya and Syria both lacked, even without nuclear weapons, all indications are Pyongyang has no intentions of reducing its capabilities.

"(Syria) is one of those case studies the North Koreans will use in their discourse with the US," Baker said. "What exactly is a security guarantee?"

Friday's strike in Syria may make denuclearisation more difficult than it ever was.

Trump's strike on Syria is exactly why North Korea wants nuclear weapons



DENIAL OF CONSULAR ACCESS TO PILGRIMS

India lodges strong protest with Pak

TOI, New Delhi

India has lodged a strong protest with Pakistan over blocking Sikh pilgrims' access to Indian diplomats and consular teams, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said in a press release yesterday.

"A standard practice has been that the Indian High Commission's consular/protocol team is attached with visiting pilgrims, to perform consular and protocol duties, like helping out in medical or family emergencies. However, this year, the consular team has been denied access to Indian Sikh pilgrims," the MEA said.

Around 1,800 Sikh pilgrims from India had travelled to Pakistan last Thursday to celebrate Baisakhi festival at Gurdwara Panja Sahib in Rawalpindi district. However, Pakistani authorities have repeatedly blocked the Indian High Commission from performing basic consular and protocol duties for Indian citizens.

"The team could not meet the pilgrims on their arrival at Wagah Railway Station on April 12. Similarly, it was denied entry into Gurdwara Panja Sahib on April 14, for a scheduled meeting with pilgrims there," the MEA said.

The statement also detailed a snub to the Indian High Commissioner Ajay Bisaria, who was turned away while on his way to meet the pilgrims at the shrine.



An Indian demonstrator holds a placard during a protest in support of rape victims following high profile cases in Jammu and Kashmir and Uttar Pradesh states, in Mumbai, yesterday. Indian police have made another arrest after the alleged rape of a teenager by a ruling party politician sparked protests across the country, federal investigators said.

NEWS IN brief

Israel destroys Hamas tunnel from Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's army yesterday said it had destroyed a Hamas tunnel crossing from the Gaza Strip into its territory. Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman said it was the longest and deepest Gazan tunnel discovered by Israel. It was the fifth Gazan tunnel destroyed by Israel in recent months.

China, Japan FMs pave way for rare summits

AFP, Tokyo

The leaders of China and Japan are expected to pay reciprocal visits as relations between their countries warm, the Japanese foreign minister said yesterday. Taro Kono agreed that Japan would host a trilateral summit between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, without setting a date, after meeting his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi.

Egypt extends state of emergency

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi extended for three months from Saturday a state of emergency for the fourth time since it was first declared last year, the official gazette said. A nationwide state of emergency was first imposed in April last year after two church bombings claimed by the Islamic State group killed at least 45 people, and was renewed in July, in October and in January.

MILITANTS ATTACK ON UN BASES IN MALI

1 peacekeeper dead, dozens wounded

REUTERS, Bamako

Militants disguised as UN peacekeepers exploded two suicide car bombs and fired dozens of rockets at the French and United Nations bases in Mali's northern city of Timbuktu on Saturday, killing one and wounding dozens, Malian authorities said.

The UN mission confirmed that the complex attack had killed a UN peacekeeper. The Malian government said in addition that 10 French soldiers had been wounded, but the French mission did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"Terrorists wearing blue helmets aboard two cars laden with explosives, including one in the colours of the Malian army and another with a 'UN' written in it, attempted to infiltrate these camps," the Malian government statement said.

UN peacekeeping and French military forces stationed in northern Mali have been under near-constant attack over the past

year by determined and well-armed jihadist groups seen as the gravest threat to security across Africa's Sahel region.

But even by the standards of Mali's increasingly emboldened Islamist fighters, Saturday's attempted breach of two foreign bases at once was ambitious.

"MINUSMA confirms a significant complex attack on its camp in Timbuktu mortars, exchange of fire, vehicle suicide bomb attack," the mission tweeted. "One blue helmet was killed in the exchange of fire."

The United Nations last month said 162 people deployed in Mali have been killed since 2013, making it the world's deadliest peacekeeping operation to date.

A 2015 peace deal signed by Mali's government and separatist groups has failed to end violence in northern Mali by Islamists, who have also staged assaults on high-profile targets in the capital, Bamako, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast.

Afghan, Pak forces clash near border

Two Pak soldiers killed

REUTERS, Parachinar

Two Pakistani soldiers were killed in cross-border fire from Afghanistan while working on a fence intended to cover nearly all of the disputed 2,500km border separating the countries, the Pakistani military said yesterday.

"Pakistani troops are exercising maximum restraint so as to avoid any Afghan civilian casualties," the Pakistan Army's public relations department said, adding that five soldiers were wounded in the attack.

Afghan officials said that Pakistani troops crossed on to Afghan soil, prompting a response by border forces and the local tribal force.

Ghani invites Taliban to run in polls again

AGENCIES

Afghanistan's president has invited the Taliban to take part in the upcoming parliamentary election in October. The unusual offer comes as the militant group continues to seize swathes of land in the war-torn country.

The Afghan government made "a clear and comprehensive suggestion about peace" to the Taliban, President Ashraf Ghani declared on Saturday as he spoke at a voter registration launch ceremony. "The upcoming election is a great opportunity" for those "who think they have roots in this country," he said.

The Taliban now "can appear as a political party and participate in this process," Ghani says. He added that Afghans are "tired of the bloodshed," and urged the militant group "to be serious about elections."

President Ghani already offered recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate political group in late February.

However, Mohammed Akram Khpalwak, chairman of the Afghan High Peace Council -- an agency in charge of negotiating with the Taliban -- claimed on Saturday the group is considering the proposal.



'Clinton win' prompted email probe

Admits Comey

AFP, Washington

Former FBI chief James Comey said his belief that Hillary Clinton would be elected president in 2016 "was a factor" in his handling of the probe into her misuse of a private email server while she was secretary of state.

Comey, who was fired by Trump last year, told ABC that a desire to ensure Clinton's victory was seen as legitimate played a role in his decision to announce the bureau would reopen the investigation, made 11 days before the election.

"I don't remember consciously thinking about that, but it must have been because I was operating in a world where Hillary Clinton was going to beat Donald Trump, and so I'm sure that it was a factor," he said in the interview, to be aired today.

"I don't remember spelling it out, but it had to have been, that she's going to be elected president and if I hide this from the American people, she'll be illegitimate the moment she's elected, the moment this comes out," he added.

Clinton has previously noted she believes Comey's announcement played a part in her loss. "After the Comey letter, my momentum was stopped," she told NPR in late 2017. "My numbers dropped, and we were scrambling to try to put it back together, and we ran out of time."