

Revoke my security clearance too

Laden raid commander urges Trump

AFP, Washington

William McRaven, commander of the US Navy SEAL raid that killed Osama bin Laden, condemned President Donald Trump on Thursday for revoking the security clearance of former CIA chief John Brennan and asked that his be withdrawn as well.

The decorated retired Navy admiral, in an open letter published in The Washington Post, defended Brennan as "one of the finest public servants I have ever known" and accused Trump of using "McCarthy-era tactics."

"Few Americans have done more to protect this country than John," McRaven said.

"Therefore, I would consider it an honor if you would revoke my security clearance as well, so I can add my name to the list of men and women who have spoken up against your presidency," he said.

McRaven was the head of US Joint Special Operations Command from 2011 to 2014 and supervised the SEAL raid that killed bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011.

Trump revoked the security clearance of Brennan on Wednesday and warned several other prominent critics that they too risk being blacklisted.

Following the president's summit last month with Russia's Vladimir Putin, Brennan -- who headed the CIA under Obama -- described Trump's behavior as "nothing short of treasonous."



ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE 1924-2018



INDIA BIDS FAREWELL

(From top, clockwise) People crowd around the hearse carrying the body of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee as they move towards the cremation site in New Delhi; Vajpayee's adopted daughter Namita Bhattacharya (R) and granddaughter Niharika (C) watch his funeral; Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (L), president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Amit Shah (2nd L), former Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh (3rd R) and Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi (2nd R) attend the funeral; Hamid Karzai, the former Afghan president, pays his tribute to the three-time Indian PM.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



No place to hide

Exiled Chinese Uighurs feel state's long reach

AFP, Paris

Sitting on the terrace of a Paris cafe, a young Chinese woman glances nervously at her mobile phone as a message from a police officer in her native Xinjiang region pops up.

A member of China's Muslim Uighur minority, Mariem travelled halfway around the world to study in France, but has found herself pulled into a mass security crackdown under way back home.

"They want to know where I live, what I do, how I spend the weekend. They want me to give them information about Uighurs here. They threaten my family who beg me to do what they ask," she said, visibly stressed.

Mariem is one of several ethnic Uighurs in France who shared accounts of harassment by Chinese authorities and expressed concern for missing family members caught up in sweeping security operations back home.

All their names have been changed to protect their identity.



AFP saw messages several Uighurs received from the authorities on China's messaging application WeChat.

"Do you have your degree now?" one officer asks a student. "Send me your address and tell me who you work for and what your degree is," reads another message.

"Why don't you send photos?" another person returning from holidays is asked.

On Monday, Chinese officials were grilled by a UN human rights committee in Geneva over reports that it is holding up to one million Muslims, mostly Uighurs, in camps under cover of a massive anti-terrorism drive.

China has pointed to a series of attacks in Xinjiang by suspected Islamist radicals in recent years as justification for a draconian clampdown in a region with a long history of tensions with Beijing.

But it has called the reports of internment camps "completely untrue", saying that the "education and training centres" to which "minor criminals" are assigned serve merely "to assist in their rehabilitation and reintegration".

Several NGOs and China experts believe that what is under way is far more sinister, saying accounts from former detainees and official documents point to a massive programme of political and cultural indoctrination.

Last year, China banned "abnormally long" beards and Muslim veils in Xinjiang and ordered all car owners in the region to install GPS tracking devices.

In December, New York-based Human Rights Watch reported that Xinjiang authorities were planning to collect biometric data from all residents.

"An Orwellian society has been put in place in Xinjiang," Thierry Kellner, a politics professor at Belgium's Universite Libre de Bruxelles specialising in China and the Muslim world, told AFP.

A report published by US-based security analysis group Jamestown Foundation in May estimated that "at least several hundred thousand and possibly just over one million" people had been interned as part of a "pacification drive".

"This is unprecedented and exceeds anything that China has done in any other region including Tibet," the report's author, Adrian Zenz, told AFP.

Chinese military 'likely training' for US strikes

Pentagon report highlights Beijing's efforts to increase its global influence

REUTERS, Washington

China's military has expanded its bomber operations in recent years while "likely training for strikes" against the United States and its allies, a Pentagon report released on Thursday said.

The assessment, which comes at a time of heightened U.S.-China tensions over trade, was contained in an annual report that highlighted China's efforts to increase its global influence, with defense spending that the Pentagon estimates exceeded \$190 billion in 2017.

"Over the last three years, the PLA has rapidly expanded its overwater bomber operating areas, gaining experience in critical maritime regions and likely training for strikes against US and allied targets," the report said, using an acronym for China's People's Liberation Army.

The report comes as China and the United States plan to hold trade talks, offering hope they might resolve an escalating tariff conflict that threatens to degenerate into an all-out trade war.

The report said that while the PLA had continued to extend operations, it was not clear what message Beijing was seeking to send by carrying out the flights "beyond a demonstration of improved capabilities."

The Chinese embassy in Washington could not

immediately be reached for comment.

This year China's air force landed bombers on islands and reefs in the South China Sea as part of a training exercise in the disputed region.

In January the Pentagon put countering Beijing, along with Russia, at the center of a new national defense strategy.

While Washington and Beijing maintain a military-to-military relationship aimed at containing tensions, this has been tested in recent months, notably in May when the Pentagon withdrew an invitation to China to join a multinational naval exercise.

In June, US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis became the first Pentagon chief to visit China since 2014.

The Pentagon report said that despite a projected slowdown in economic growth, China's official defense budget would be more than \$240 billion by 2028.

The Pentagon report also said China's space program was progressing rapidly.

"The PLA continues to strengthen its military space capabilities despite its public stance against the militarization of space," it said.

This month, President Donald Trump's administration announced an ambitious plan to usher in a new "Space Force" as the sixth branch of the military by 2020.



Tear gas canisters are fired by Israeli troops towards Palestinian demonstrators as they run during a protest demanding the right to return to their homeland at the Israel-Gaza border, in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday. Dozens were wounded in the clashes. In another incident, a Palestinian man who was suspected of trying to stab a Jerusalem policeman was shot to death in Jerusalem's Muslim Quarter yesterday afternoon, Israeli police said.

PHOTO: AFP

MAXIMUM 'PRESSURE' STRATEGY

US creates 'Iran Action Group'

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced a new high-level team to focus US and international efforts to increase diplomatic and economic pressure on Iran.

The Iran Action Group will drive Washington's "maximum pressure" strategy to change Tehran's behavior, including potentially sanctioning other countries which trade with the country.

The group will be headed by Brian Hook as the State Department's Special Representative for Iran.

Hook, currently director of policy planning at the State Department, was in charge of the failed effort to get support from US allies for Washington's decision in May to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal.

"For nearly 40 years the regime in Tehran has been responsible for a torrent of violence and destabilizing behavior against the United States, our allies, our partners and indeed the Iranian people themselves," said Pompeo.

"Our hope is that one day soon we can reach a new agreement with Iran. But we must see major changes in the regime's behavior both inside and outside its borders."

The US has laid out a long list of activities it demands Tehran changes, including halting support for the Syrian government and the Lebanese Hezbollah movement, shutting down its nuclear development program, and freeing detained Americans.

Hook, who met with officials from Britain, France and Germany on Iran policy in London on Wednesday, held out the possibility of the US engaging directly with Iranian leaders if they demonstrate a "commitment" to changing their behavior.



Saudis pledge \$100m to help stabilise Syria

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia yesterday pledged \$100 million to reconstruct areas of northeastern Syria formerly held by the Islamic State group, in a move sharply criticised by President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

The kingdom said the 88-million-euro contribution would go towards a US-backed campaign to "stabilise" the one-time IS bastion and to help ensure the jihadists cannot re-emerge as a threat.

The government in Damascus slammed the contribution as "morally unacceptable", in a statement carried by the official SANA news agency.

A longtime foe of Riyadh, it accused Saudi Arabia's royal family of supporting "terrorism and those who contributed to the killing of the people of Syria and the destruction of its infrastructure."

IS declared a "caliphate" after seizing swathes of Iraq and Syria in 2014, but has since been ousted from most of that territory including its former de facto Syrian capital Raqqa and a pocket of Damascus.