

Don't harm Kurds after Syria pullout

Trump warns Turkey of economic 'devastation'; defiant Ankara vows to continue fight

AFP, Ankara

Turkey yesterday said it would not be intimidated by threats after US President Donald Trump warned of devastating economic consequences over any attack on Kurdish forces, but indicated Ankara was open to the idea of a security zone in Syria.

"We have said repeatedly we are not scared of and will not be intimidated by any threats," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said, adding: "Economic threats against Turkey will get nowhere."

Trump on Sunday warned via Twitter that the US would "devastate Turkey economically if they hit Kurds" in the wake of the US troop pullout from Syria.

Cavusoglu hit out at Trump's use of social media. "Strategic partners, allies do not hold discussions via Twitter, via social media," he told reporters.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's spokesman Ibrahim Kalin earlier vowed Ankara would continue to fight against the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia despite Trump's warnings.

Cavusoglu added that Turkey was "not against" a "security zone" in Syria, during a press conference in Ankara with his Luxembourg counterpart Jean Asselborn.

Trump had also pushed for the creation of a 30-kilometre (20-mile) "safe zone" in his tweet but offered no details on who would create, enforce or pay for it, or where it would be located.

"What is our concern? There is a terror corridor on the other side of our border, a terror organisation that wants to

Threats against Turkey will get nowhere: Turkey FM



Qatar rejects normalising ties with 'criminal' Assad

divide Syria and this terror organisation is a threat to us. We are targeting this terror organisation (YPG)," Cavusoglu added.

American military support to the YPG has been a major source of tension between Turkey and the United States because Ankara accuses Washington of working with a "terrorist offshoot" of Kurdish insurgents fighting against the Turkish state since 1984.

The YPG has spearheaded the fight against the Islamic State extremist group in Syria.

But for Turkey, the YPG is the Syrian extension of the outlawed Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK is blacklisted as a terror group by Ankara, the US and the European Union.

But when Trump announced he would pull out 2,000 American troops, the Nato allies' relations appeared to be back on track with Erdogan welcoming Trump's move.

Meanwhile, Qatar's foreign minister yesterday ruled out the possibility of re-opening an embassy in Damascus, in line with some other Gulf countries, calling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad a war criminal.

His comments come after Gulf neighbours the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain announced late last month they reopened their Damascus embassies.



Firefighters and security forces gather amidst the debris of a Boeing 707 cargo plane that crashed into a residential complex near the Iranian capital Tehran yesterday. *Inset*, people react at the site of the plane crash that left 15 people, out of the 16 on board, killed.

Saudis committed to accountability

Says Pompeo after meeting king, crown prince

REUTERS, Riyadh

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said yesterday that Saudi leaders assured him everyone responsible for the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi would be held accountable, as Riyadh tries to resolve its biggest political crisis in a generation.

Pompeo told reporters he had also raised a number of human rights issues with King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, including women's rights activists who have been detained for months and some allegedly tortured.

Khashoggi, a longtime royal insider who had become a critic of the crown prince, was killed in October in the kingdom's Istanbul consulate, prompting a global outcry including Treasury sanctions on 17 individuals and a US Senate resolution blaming

KHASHOGGI KILLING



Prince Mohammed.

A CIA assessment has blamed the crown prince for ordering the killing, which Saudi officials deny. At least 21 Saudis have been detained in the case, with five facing the death penalty. Five officials were also fired, including a senior royal advisor.

"They both acknowledged that accountability needed to take place. They talked about the process that is occurring inside their country, both the investigative process and the judicial process that is taking place," Pompeo said.

"They reiterated their commitment to achieve the objective, the expectations we set for them."

The outcry over Khashoggi's murder has strained ties with Western allies and focused attention on Saudi Arabia's domestic crackdown on dissent and the nearly four-year-old war in Yemen.

SNOOPING ON CITIZENS' COMPUTERS

India's apex court seeks govt response

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's apex court yesterday asked the federal government to give its reply to petitions challenging the sweeping powers given to ten investigating agencies to intercept and monitor data on computers, including emails, that critics allege is against the right to privacy.

Allowing the petitions against the government's order, the Supreme Court gave six weeks to the government to file its reply.

The petitions filed by lawyer M L Sharma, Trinamool Congress lawmaker Mahua Moitra and others alleged that the government's order is against the fundamental right to privacy and must be withdrawn in the interest of justice.

Ten federal probe agencies have been given the powers of "interception, monitoring and decryption of any information generated, transmitted, received or stored in any computer," according to a Home Ministry order signed by Home Secretary Rajiv Gauba in December last year.

Earlier, only the Home Ministry could scan calls and emails of people. The new order gave that power under the Information Technology Act, 2010, to the Intelligence Bureau, Narcotics Control Bureau, Enforcement Directorate, Central Board of Direct Taxes, Directorate of Revenue Intelligence, CBI, National Investigation Agency, Cabinet Secretariat (Research and Analysis Wing), Directorate of Signal Intelligence (in Jammu and Kashmir, North-East and Assam only) and the Delhi Police Commissioner.

BITS OF HISTORY (JANUARY 14)

1953: Marshal Josip Broz Tito was elected first president of the Republic of Yugoslavia.

2004: President Bush outlined a dramatic shift in US space policy targeting a return to the moon and eventual manned mission to Mars.

2004: Georgia restores national "five-cross flag" after 500 year hiatus.

2011: Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali flees after mass protests.



Pro and anti Brexit supporters hold placards and flags as they demonstrate outside the Houses of Parliament yesterday. Prime Minister Theresa May ramped up warnings to MPs poised to reject her EU divorce deal that failing to deliver Brexit would be "catastrophic" for British democracy. Story on page 16.

PHOTO: AFP

OPCW agrees to ban Novichok nerve agents

REUTERS, The Hague

The OPCW global chemical weapons watchdog will add Novichok, the Soviet-era nerve agent used in an attack last year in Salisbury, England, to its list of banned toxins after its members adopted a proposal yesterday.

The 41 members of the decision-making body within the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) adopted a joint proposal by the United States, the Netherlands and Canada, member states said.

They agreed "to add two families of highly toxic chemicals (incl. the agent used in Salisbury)," Canada's ambassador to the agency, Sabine Nolke, said on Twitter.

"Russia dissociated itself from consensus but did not break," she wrote.

Western allies ordered the biggest expulsion of Russian diplomats since the height of the Cold War in response to the attack on former Russian secret service agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury in March.

Britain says Russian GRU military intelligence agents poisoned the Skripals with Novichok. Moscow denies involvement.

Yesterday's OPCW decision was confidential and no other details were released.

It was the first such change to the organisation's so-called scheduled chemicals list, which includes deadly toxins VX, sarin and mustard gas, since it was established under the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention.

SEPTEMBER ATTACK ON US EMBASSY IN BAGHDAD

White House asked for options to strike Iran

REUTERS, Washington

The White House's national security team last fall asked the Pentagon to provide it with options for striking Iran after a group of militants aligned with Tehran fired mortars into an area in Baghdad that is home to the US Embassy, a source familiar with the matter said on Sunday.

The source said that the Pentagon drew up options in response to the request, which was first reported by the Wall Street Journal and which originated from the White House National Security Council led by John Bolton.

Citing current and former US officials, the newspaper reported that the request sparked deep concern among Pentagon and State Department officials.

The Wall Street Journal also reported that it was not clear whether the options were provided to the White House, whether President Donald Trump knew of the

request or whether serious plans for a US strike against Iran took shape at that time.

The decision was prompted by three mortars being fired into a diplomatic quarter in Baghdad in September, the newspaper said. The shells landed in an open lot and no one was hurt. Two days later, unidentified militants fired three rockets that hit close to the US consulate in the southern city of Basra but caused no serious damage.

The State Department did not comment on the report. The Pentagon said it provides the president options for a variety of threats.

NSC spokesman Garrett Marquis, said the NSC does the same and it will continue to consider "the full range of options" after the attacks.

The Journal, citing conversations with people familiar with the talks, also reported that the council requested options for launching strikes at both Iraq and Syria when they made the request for Iran.

4 killed, 44 injured in Kabul blast

AFP, Kabul

A car bomb exploded near a heavily fortified foreign compound in Kabul yesterday, killing at least four people and wounding 44, officials said, in the latest attack to rock the Afghan capital.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the huge blast, which shook the city, but it comes as diplomatic efforts to end the 17-year war with the Taliban gather pace.

Militants targeted Green Village, located near a busy road in the east of the city and where some foreign workers are based, said interior ministry spokesman Najib Danish.

At least 10 children were among the wounded, he added.

Until recently some United Nations' staff had lived and worked at the highly secure compound, but Danish said the area was now largely empty and "only a number of guards" were left.

"Residential houses nearby have sustained heavy damage," Danish said.

"Special police forces' units have been deployed to the site to check if there are more attackers."

The explosion happened in the early evening when traffic is normally heavy.

The last assault on a foreign compound was in late November when a Taliban-claimed vehicle bomb exploded outside the compound of British security firm G4S, killing at least 10 people.