

Obama Aide Calls Netanyahu Visit 'Destructive'



Susan Rice speaks at the Brookings Institution on Feb. 6, 2015, in Washington.

WASHINGTON (AP) — A top adviser to President Barack Obama sharply criticized Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plans to address Congress next week, calling the move "destructive" to the ties between the U.S. and Israel.

National Security Adviser Susan Rice said Netanyahu's March 3 speech, which was arranged by Republican congressional leaders, has "injected a degree of partisanship" into a relationship that should be above politics.

"It's destructive to the fabric of the relationship," Rice told the Charlie Rose show Tuesday. "It's always been bipartisan. We need to keep it that way."

Rice's statements were among the Obama administration's toughest public criticism of Netanyahu's speech and the negative impact it could have on the close alliances between the U.S. and Israel. The Israeli leader's speech was arranged without the White House

or State Department's knowledge, a move the administration blasted as a breach of diplomatic protocol.

Rice's comments came as Netanyahu turned down an invitation to meet privately with Senate Democrats during his trip to Washington, saying such a session could "compound the misperception of partisanship" surrounding his visit.

"I regret that the invitation to address the special joint session of Congress has been perceived by some to be political or partisan," Netanyahu wrote in a letter to Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Diane Feinstein, D-Calif. "I can assure you that my sole intention in accepting it was to voice Israel's grave concerns about a potential nuclear agreement with Iran that could threaten the survival of my country."

U.S. officials believe Netanyahu's trip is aimed primarily at derailing a nuclear deal with Iran, Obama's signature foreign policy

objective. While Netanyahu has long been skeptical of the negotiations, his opposition has increased over what he sees as Obama's willingness to make concessions that would leave Iran on the brink of being able to build a nuclear weapon.

U.S. and Iranian officials reported progress in negotiations this week on a deal that would clamp down on Tehran's nuclear activities for at least 10 years but then slowly ease restrictions. Israeli officials warned this week that such a deal would allow Iran to become a nuclear threshold state.

The White House has been weighing ways to counter Netanyahu's address to Congress, as well as separate speech to the annual policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. The administration is still weighing whom to send to the conference, with some officials pushing for a lower level representative than normal.

UK Rapped Over Attacks on Civil Liberties



A view of the UK's Palace of Westminster, which includes the two houses of parliament (file photo)

LONDON (PRESS TV) — Amnesty International has slammed the UK over its assaults on civil liberties, saying the country is "leading the charge" in attacking European human rights legislation, amid increased surveillance and diminished access to justice.

The human rights group censured the UK in an annual report, titled The State of the World's Human Rights, which was released on Wednesday.

Amnesty said Prime Minister

David Cameron's government had quickly approved legislation on issues such as anti-terror measures and invasive spying powers without providing sufficient time for parliamentary debate.

The report also condemned Cameron for "leading the charge" in attacking the European Convention on Human Rights as well as passing legislation at the cost of civil rights.

"The UK is going in the wrong direction on rights, protections

and fairness. Public safety is paramount but not at the cost of basic civil liberties," said Kate Allen, the group's UK director.

"We should all be concerned about waking up in a surveillance state without having a proper public debate about it first," Allen added.

The right group highlighted two cases this year in which the UK's intelligence services - Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the Security Service (MI5) and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6) - were found guilty of operating unlawfully.

"Twice this year GCHQ spies have been rumbled breaking the law. Just last week, the Government was forced to concede its regime for intercepting lawyer-client communications was illegal," said Allen.

In addition, the report criticized the influence of "nationalist, thinly veiled xenophobic attitudes" in the British government that were particularly evident in its immigration policies and anti-EU sentiments.

More Drones Appear Over Paris



The Eiffel Tower in Paris

PARIS (PRESS TV) — French police say unidentified drones flew over Paris for a second night in a row in the latest mystery appearance of unmanned aircraft over major sites in France.

The French police said on Wednesday that the drones had flown over central Paris, the capital city, at least five times.

The drones had been spotted near the US embassy, Eiffel Tower, and several major roads leading in and out of Paris, the police further noted.

On Tuesday, a French security source, speaking on condition of anonymity, had reported another spate of drone flights, saying that police had spotted at least five drones buzzing over several places in the capital.

The security source added that

police failed to catch the operators of the drones flying over central Paris landmarks in the early hours of Tuesday.

The US embassy, the Eiffel Tower, The Place de la Concorde, a major public square in Paris, and the Invalides military museum were among the places that witnessed the drones flying over them on Tuesday, the source said.

Several mysterious pilotless aircraft have been spotted flying over French cities in the last few months.

On January 20, a drone was seen flying briefly over the French Presidential Palace in the central part of Paris.

A probe has been launched into the incident by the Paris prosecutor's office.

First Day With No Troops Killed Under Ukraine Truce

KIEV (Reuters) — A long-awaited truce took hold at last in east Ukraine on Wednesday, with the army reporting no combat fatalities for the first time in weeks, but the news did nothing to halt a currency collapse that forced the central bank to ban most trading.

The Ukrainian military said the past 24 hours were its first day without combat fatalities for several weeks, since long before the truce was meant to take effect on Feb 15. Only one soldier had been wounded.

In rebel-held eastern Ukraine, rebels were withdrawing heavy guns from the front. Kiev said it was too early to do likewise, but its acknowledgement that most of the front was quiet suggests it too could implement a truce that had appeared stillborn when the reb-

els launched a major offensive last week.

The cautious good news from the front has come amid dire economic consequences for a country teetering on bankruptcy.

With the hryvnia currency in free fall as investors flee, the central bank called a halt by banning banks from buying foreign currency on behalf of clients for the rest of this week.

Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk said the ban was bad for the economy. He had learned about it on the Internet and would demand an explanation from central bank chief Valeria Gontareva.

The central bank said the move was necessary to stabilize the currency amid "unfounded" demand for foreign exchange.

Bangladesh Court Issues Arrest Warrant for Former Premier

DHAKA (PRESS TV) — A court in Bangladesh has issued an arrest warrant for opposition leader and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia over her absence at hearings on graft charges that can jail Zia for the rest of her life.

Judge Abu Ahmed Jamadder, from a special anti-corruption court in the capital, Dhaka, issued the warrant against Zia despite the fact that she has been "confined" to her office since January over the political unrest in the country, Zia's lawyer Sanallah Miah said on Wednesday.

Zia, who is accused in two corruption cases of embezzling \$650,000 during her tenure as

premier in 2001-2006, could face a life sentence if found guilty.

The former premier says the embezzlement charges are politically motivated, aimed at destroying her Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Bangladeshi authorities have recently put more pressure on 69-year-old Zia, who has been confined in her office at the opposition headquarters in Dhaka since January 3.

On January 6, Zia called for a nationwide transport blockade as part of efforts to overthrow the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and pave the way for new elections.



WASHINGTON (Reuters) — Eddie Ray Routh was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole after a Texas jury found him guilty of murdering Chris Kyle, the former U.S. Navy SEAL whose autobiography was turned into the hit movie "American Sniper."

Routh, 27, a former U.S. Marine, was found guilty of fatally shooting Kyle and Kyle's friend, Chad Littlefield, multiple times at a gun range about 70 miles (110 km) southwest of Fort Worth in February 2013. Prosecutors said he ambushed the two from the rear, waiting for Kyle to completely unload his weapon at the range before he attacked with a barrage of gunshots.

Kyle, a former ranch hand turned SEAL credited with the most confirmed kills of any U.S. military sniper, has been lionized in his home state of Texas. He became entrenched in U.S. popular culture in large part due to his best-selling book and the Academy Award nominated movie directed by Clint Eastwood and starring Bradley Cooper.

After leaving military service, Kyle, who battled his own mental demons, helped counsel troubled veterans with trips for shooting and talks. He had driven Routh to the range with Kyle's neighbor, Littlefield.

ABU DHABI (PRESS TV) — Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has reportedly reached an agreement for the purchase of weapons from the Persian Gulf country of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which is itself one of the largest purchasers of US arms in the Middle East.

Speaking at the International Defense Exhibition and Conference in Abu Dhabi, Poroshenko did not, however, specify the volume or the type of weaponry Ukraine would purchase from the UAE but said they would help Kiev protect its territory from the pro-Russian forces.

The arms deal, according to press reports, was struck with the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and deputy supreme commander of the UAE Armed Forces, Mohammed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. However, UAE officials have not yet commented on the deal.

The Ukrainian president said following a meeting with top UAE officials that military technical-cooperation agreements were signed to bolster Ukraine's arms industry, which he said would secure several export orders.

He further described the deals as "extremely important so we have the money to modernize our armed forces."

ATHENS (AP) — Greece's prime minister was briefing his party's lawmakers Wednesday on pledges made to European creditors to win a four-month extension of the country's bailout, amid simmering discontent with what some see as a capitulation.

Greece cleared a major hurdle on Tuesday after the finance ministers of the other eurozone countries approved a list of Greek policy goals, including pledges to fight corruption, and granted the four-month extension.

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras was elected last month on campaign pledges to repeal some of the budget cuts and tax hikes made in return for 240 billion euros (currently \$272 billion) in rescue loans from other eurozone countries and the International Monetary Fund.

Without the extension, Greece faced the possibility of bankruptcy, limits on bank transactions and even a potential exit from euro, the joint currency used by 19 European nations.

While the government has sought to present the negotiated deal as a victory, it has faced criticism from party hardliners as well as opposition parties.

Energy and Environment Minister Panagiotis Lafazanis, a party hardliner, has insisted he will stick to election promises not to go ahead with privatizations.

Wednesday's edition of the daily Ethnos newspaper quoted him as saying that the privatization of the power grid nor that of the country's power utility would be halted, as final binding bids had not yet been submitted.