

Defense Minister:

France Has No Evidence on Syria Chemical Attack

PARIS (Dispatches) – The French defense minister has cast doubt on the veracity of accusations that the Syrian government has used the chemical agent chlorine in the country.

“We have some indications of possible chlorine use [in Syria], but we have no absolute confirmation,” Florence Parly told France Inter radio.

“So we, alongside the others, are working on trying to confirm this, as we clearly have to get the facts straight,” she added, without elaborating on who else was engaged in the confirmation effort.

Parly pointed to French President Emmanuel Macron’s position that any use of chemical weapons in Syria is a “red line” for Paris and noted that due “to the lack of certainty on what happened in Syria,” France is currently not able to say whether that red line has been crossed.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian accused the Syrian

government of using chlorine, saying “all indications show... that chlorine is used by the regime right now in Syria.”

He also called for caution, however, admitting that the evidence “wasn’t completely documented.”

In January, pro-terrorist sources in Syria, the White Helmets and the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, claimed that the Syrian government had used chlorine gas against terrorists in northwestern Syria.

On Monday, the U.S. and UK raised the issue at the UN Security Council, but the Syrian envoy rejected the allegations as “false and cheap.”

The Syrian diplomat said the U.S. resorts to such “fabricated accusations” whenever it realizes that terrorist groups are in trouble in the face of any progress by the Syrian army.

The Russian ambassador also rejected the claims as a



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“propagandistic campaign” by the Western media outlets and accused the U.S. and Britain of using the issue to sabotage Moscow’s efforts to find a political solution to the crisis in Syria.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria in early 2011, the Western

governments have on several occasions accused Syria of using chemical weapons against terrorists. Damascus has denied the allegation, saying it is meant to pile more pressure on the government forces and delay their success in the fight against terrorists.

Erdogan Aide Meets U.S. National Security Adviser in Turkey

ISTANBUL (Reuters) – U.S. National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster held talks on Sunday in Istanbul with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan’s spokesman, a presidential source said, amid persistent tensions between the NATO allies over Syria and other issues.

Turkey is targeting the Syrian Kurdish militia YPG in a weeks-long air and ground operation in Syria’s Afrin region. Turkey considers the YPG a terrorist

group, but it is a key component of U.S.-backed forces battling Daesh in Syria.

Erdogan has promised to sweep the militia from Turkey’s southern border, a move that could put Turkish troops in confrontation with U.S. forces on the ground in Syria.

McMaster’s talks with Erdogan’s spokesman Ibrahim Kalin in Istanbul come days ahead of an expected visit to Turkey by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

“In the meeting (of McMaster and Kalin) the long-term strategic partnerships between Turkey and the U.S. were confirmed and the sensitivities and priorities of the two countries were handled,” the presidential source said.

The two men evaluated regional developments, factors that have damaged relations between the allies and developing ways of combating terrorism, the source said, but provided no further details. Last week Turkish Foreign

Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said he would tell Tillerson during his visit that the two countries must repair damaged mutual trust. No dates have yet been confirmed for the Tillerson visit.

Relations have also been strained by Washington’s failure to extradite a U.S.-based Muslim cleric blamed by Turkey for a failed coup attempt against Erdogan in 2016. Washington says Ankara has not provided enough evidence for the extradition.

Indian PM Vows Commitment to Palestine’s Interests

WEST BANK (Dispatches) – Prime Minister Narendra Modi has pledged India’s commitment to the Palestinian people’s interests during a visit to the West Bank, the first by an Indian premier.

“I have once again assured President Abbas that India is bound by a promise to take care of the Palestinian people’s interests,” Modi said following a meeting with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah on Saturday.

Modi also hailed India and Palestine’s “historic relations” and expressed hope that Palestine will soon “become a free country in a peaceful manner.”

“Palestinian interests have always got our support and remained at the top in our foreign policy,” he added during a joint press conference with Abbas.

The Indian prime minister visited Palestine as part of a four-nation regional tour that has already taken him to Jordan, with the UAE and

Oman his next destinations.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Modi stressed that New Delhi “hopes for peace and stability in this region,” noting, “We believe a permanent solution to Palestine is possible through dialogue.”

Abbas, for his part, said he had exchanged views with Modi on “bringing the political process out of the deadlock due to the continued Israeli occupation of our land and the political impasse following [U.S. President Donald]

Trump’s decision on al-Quds and the refugees.”

Last December, Trump declared that Washington was recognizing al-Quds as the “capital” of Zionist regime and planning to relocate the American embassy from Tel Aviv to the holy city.

Modi’s visit follows his trip to the Israeli-occupied territories last July and comes less than a month after Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s six-day visit to India.

Over Gulen Links

Former Istanbul Governor, Ex-Police Chief Get Jail Terms

ANKARA (Hurriyet) – A former governor of Istanbul and a former police commissioner in the province have been given jail terms for their links to Fethullahist Terror Organization (FETO), state-run Anadolu Agency reported, citing an unnamed judicial source.

The 30th Heavy Criminal Court in Istanbul sentenced former Governor Huseyin Avni Mutlu to three years, one month and 15 days in prison

in a trial against FETO’s structure in civil service, said the official, who asked not to be named due to restrictions on talking to the media. Mutlu was later released by the court, considering the duration he served in the jail.

The former Police Commissioner Huseyin Capkin was also sentenced to two years and one month in prison, the official said.

Mutlu is accused of “being

a member of armed terror organization” and Capkin is accused of “willfully helping the organization, despite not being involved in the organization’s hierarchical structure.”

Mutlu was arrested on Aug. 5, 2016 along with nine other suspects, shortly after Turkey’s July 2016 military coup attempt, believed to have been orchestrated by the followers of U.S.-based preacher

Fethullah Gülen.

Mutlu, who served four years as Istanbul governor until 2014, a period that included a police crackdown on the Gezi protests under his watch. In 2014 he was reassigned to Ankara to become an Interior Ministry civil servant but was suspended from his position on July 17, 2016.

He denies having any ties to FETO and rejects all charges.

Taliban Kill 6 Policemen in Afghanistan’s Helmand

KABUL (Press TV) – At least six local policemen have been killed and several others wounded in a militant attack on their checkpoints in Afghanistan’s southern province of Helmand.

District police chief Amanullah, who goes by only one name, said Saturday that the assault was carried out the previous night in Nawa district.

Qari Yusouf Ahmadi, a Taliban spokesman, in a statement sent to media claimed responsibility for the attack. He said 15 members of local security forces were killed after Taliban fighters overran three checkpoints.

In a separate attack, heavily-armed gunmen killed a district judge in the western province of Herat.

Iqbal Nezami, a spokesman for the

provincial police in Ghor province, said Mawlawi Baz Mohammad was on his way from Ghor to Herat when gunmen forced him out of his vehicle and killed him in Shandand district. No individual or group has claimed responsibility for the killing.

The rise in attacks by the Taliban over the past months has also raised doubts about the effectiveness of

Washington’s strategy in Afghanistan some 17 years after the United States and its allies invaded the country under the pretext of war on terror.

A new study has found that the Taliban militants are openly active in 70 percent of Afghanistan’s soil, fully controlling four percent of the country and having presence in another 66 percent.

Enemies ...

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People from all walks of life rally in different cities and towns across Iran to celebrate the nation’s victory that put an end to the monarchical rule of the U.S.-backed Pahlavi regime.

Some of Iran’s latest defense achievements were put on display in Azadi Square, including an anti-tank missile called Toofan M-2 which has a maximum range of 3,750 meters as well as two long-range Qadr ballistic missiles.

A total of 250 foreign reporters were covering the event, according to Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance officials.

Syria ...

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Zionist officials said missile remnants were found near the crash site after the occupying regime initially refused to admit the downing only saying a warplane had crashed. “We don’t know yet if it’s an SA-5 or SA-17, but it’s a Syrian anti-aircraft missile,” a Zionist military official said.

David Ivry, a former Zionist air force chief, told Reuters he believed it was the first time an Israeli F-16 was brought down since the occupying regime began using the jets in the 1980s.

Hezbollah said in a statement: “Today’s developments mean the old equations have categorically ended.”

Iran’s military chief warned the occupying regime of Israel last October against breaching Syrian airspace and territory.

Netanyahu, visiting the Golan on Tuesday, peered across the border into Syria and in public remarks issued new threats against Syria and its allies in the fight on foreign-backed terrorists.

A Syrian official said after the downing of the F-16 that a “message” had been sent to Israel. But he added: “I do not believe matters will develop to a regional war.”

Tensions also have spiked across the frontier between Israel and Lebanon over Zionist plans for a wall on the Lebanese border, and Beirut’s plans to exploit an offshore energy block which the occupying regime wants to dominate.

Thousands ...

(Continued From Page One)

The problem, Harrison says, is that the budgets have been stretched by rising personnel costs, more expensive technology investments and other factors, compounded by the cumulative effects of more than a decade of combat in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. And throughout this period, the military has been required to keep up or even increase its pace of operations at home and abroad - and there is no letup in sight.

“We are stretched too thin,” Harrison said Friday. “We are trying to do too much with the size force that we have all around the world. Money doesn’t necessarily fix that.”

The U.S. has far fewer troops in Iraq than it did 10 years ago, and the roughly 15,000 in Afghanistan today compare with a peak of 100,000 in 2010-11, but the trend is leaning in the opposite direction under President Donald Trump, including stepped up military operations in Somalia and Yemen. Trump has added several thousand troops in Afghanistan. Also, the prospect of war against North Korea looms large as Trump insists on a hostile rhetoric.

In a move seen as largely signaling to China, the Trump administration could soon boost its military presence in East Asia, the Wall Street Journal reported Friday.

The Pentagon, it said, is considering increasing its Marine Corps Expeditionary Units in East Asia as it draws down its deployments in the Middle East, citing unnamed military officials.

Many are critical of the plan and believe it could add to tensions with China and North Korea and essentially play on the fear card.

The enormous increases in military spending agreed to by lawmakers Friday go beyond what Trump ask for. Of the \$700 billion in spending for the 2018 budget year that started last Oct. 1, about \$629 billion is for core Pentagon operations and nearly \$71 billion is for the wars in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Trump had requested a 2018 military budget of \$603 billion for basic functions and \$65 billion for war missions.

The deal Congress approved early Friday also sets the Pentagon’s 2019 budget at \$716 billion, giving Mattis the financial means he’s been demanding.

The biggest winners in the military buildup are the country’s largest military contractors, such as Lockheed Martin, Boeing and General Dynamics, that spend millions of dollars each year lobbying Congress.

The legislation that Trump signed Friday is expected to translate to billions more for one of the Pentagon’s highest priorities: missile system. The appropriations committees still need to finalize exactly what will be in the 2018 military budget. But they’re likely to follow closely the military policy bill approved by Congress late last year. That included \$12.3 billion for the Pentagon’s Missile Defense Agency and ordered a more rapid buildup of the nation’s missile systems.

IRGC ...

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Since losing the territory it had overrun, Daesh has been attempting to relocate to Afghanistan, where it has already gained a foothold.

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei said recently that the United States was relocating Daesh to Afghanistan.

In so doing, the U.S. is attempting to rationalize its military presence in the region, the Leader added.

Since emergence in Afghanistan, Daesh has carried out a number of deadly terrorist attacks in the Asian country. Ramezan stressed that the group should not be allowed to take root there.