



Jesse Turinainen (in gray shirt), a member of the Finnish neo-Nazi group Finnish Resistance Movement (FRM) is speaking during FRM demonstration in front of the railway station in Helsinki, Finland—REUTERS

Iran's Zarif hails Syria truce as 'major achievement'

TEHRAN, DEC 30 /-/- Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif today welcomed a nationwide truce in Syria as a "major achievement" that could lead to renewed peace talks. On the deal brokered by Russia and Turkey - potentially a significant breakthrough in the nearly six-year conflict - Zarif said: "Ceasefire in Syria is a major achievement."

"Let's build on it by tackling the roots of extremist terror," he posted on Twitter. Zarif spoke by telephone yesterday with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov on the latest developments in Syria, where Iran has offered considerable military, financial and diplomatic aid to defend President Bashar al-Assad. "Both sides welcomed the nationwide ceasefire and emphasised the fight against terrorism, Islamic State (IS) and Al-Nusra groups and their allies," the official IRNA news agency said. Zarif and Lavrov agreed to "continue consultation and coordination within the framework of the tripartite agreement among Turkey, Iran and Russia to hold talks between the Syrian government and rebels" in Kazakhstan, Turkey, Iran and Russia to hold talks between the Syrian government and rebels" in Kazakhstan it added.

Turkey and Russia are pushing for talks between the regime and rebels in Astana to begin next month. The ceasefire, announced yesterday by Russian President Vladimir Putin and confirmed by the Syrian army and opposition, does not include designated "terrorists" such as IS, (AFP)

Romania gets new PM, ending political turmoil

BUCHAREST, DEC 30 /-/- Romania's president today named social-democrat Sorin Grindeanu as the nation's new prime minister, bringing to a close weeks of uncertainty since the left won a parliamentary vote on December 11. The centre-right president Klaus Iohannis signed the official decree naming Grindeanu, a 43-year-old former communications minister, as the new premier. Grindeanu now faces a confidence vote in parliament on his programme and cabinet nominees. The nomination sought to put an end to a political crisis sparked when Iohannis rejected a previous candidate who would have been the country's first female and first Muslim prime minister.

The president offered no reasons for his rejection of Sorin Shahaideh, initially put forward by the Social Democrats (PSD), but there was speculation that it was due to her Syrian husband's background. Sources close to the president had indicated yesterday that Grindeanu was considered a "better solution". He is seen in Romania as a "disciplined soldier" within the PSD ranks and said himself in a recent interview that he had joined the party very young as an outlet for his leftist convictions. The PSD had proposed the previously little-known Shahaideh after his thumping poll victory on December 11 when it won 45 per cent of the vote, enough to form a majority coalition with its partners ALDE, Shahaideh, 52, who has only five months ministerial experience, is from Romania's small and long-established Turkish minority, but her Muslim faith is not thought to have been the problem.

Instead the focus was likely on her husband, 54, who worked in the Syrian agriculture ministry for 20 years before emigrating to Romania in 2011 and marrying Shahaideh the same year, according to the PSD. Website HotNews cited unnamed sources saying that the security services had "strongly cautioned" against Shahaideh's nomination because of the closeness of her husband and his two brothers to President Bashar al-Assad regime. This might have made giving Shahaideh the necessary security clearances to be the NATO member's prime minister problematic. PSD leader Liviu Dragnea had withdrawn his own bid to become prime minister because of a conviction that bars him from office. (AFP)

India, Egypt aim to boost ties in New Year after eventful 2016

CAIRO, DEC 30 /-/- India and Egypt had a fulfilling year in 2016 as the leadership of the two countries agreed to step up their defence and security cooperation to tackle the twin challenges of terrorism and radicalisation besides enhancing economic and people-to-people engagements. This year also witnessed some of the high-level meetings between the two countries including the visit of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to India at the invitation of his Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherjee in September to discuss ways to develop bilateral cooperation in different fields. A series of decisions to combat terrorism were taken in wide-ranging talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and al-Sisi as the two countries have been engaged in staving off the threat of extremism and radicalism. Identifying terrorism as one of the "grave

US expels 35 Russian officials, slaps sanctions over hacking

WASHINGTON, DEC 30 /-/- In apparent retaliatory action against alleged Russian hacking during the US presidential election, President Barack Obama has slapped a series of sanctions against Russia and expelled 35 Russian officials. "All Americans should be alarmed by Russia's actions," Obama said in a statement yesterday as he ordered a number of actions in response to the Russian government's alleged aggressive harassment of US officials and cyber operations targeting the US election. "These actions follow repeated private and public warnings that we have issued to the Russian government: an immediate and appropriate response to ef-

orts to harm US interests in violation of established international norms of behaviour," he said. The US has also ordered shutting of two of Russian compounds in the country. The executive order issued by Obama provided additional authority for responding to certain cyber activity that seeks to interfere with or undermine US election processes and institutions, or those of its allies or partners. "Using this new authority, I have sanctioned nine entities and individuals: three GRU and the FSB, two Russian intelligence services; four individual officers of the GRU; and three companies that provided critical support to the GRU's cyber operations," he said.

"In addition, the Secretary of the Treasury is designating two Russian individuals for using cyber-enabled means to cause misappropriation of funds and personal identifying information."

The State Department is also shutting down two Russian compounds, in Maryland and New York, used by Russian personnel for intelligence-related purposes, and is declaring 'persona non grata' 35 Russian intelligence operatives," Obama said. "Finally, the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation are releasing declassified technical information on Russian military and military intelligence service cyber activity, to help

network defenders in the US and abroad identify, detect, and disrupt Russia's global campaign of malicious cyber activities," he said. Obama said these actions are part of the sum total of US response to Russia's aggressive activities.

"We will continue to take a variety of actions at a time and place of our own choosing which will not be published," he said. "In addition to holding Russia accountable for what it has done, the United States and friends and allies around the world must work together to oppose Russia's efforts to undermine established international norms of behaviour, and interfere with democratic governance," Obama said. (PTI)

Russia moves to expel 35 US diplomats in tit-for-tat response: Reports

MOSCOW, DEC 30 /-/- Russia on Friday moved to expel 35 US diplomats in a tit-for-tat response after President Barack Obama unleashed a barrage of punishment against Moscow over alleged election interference. Obama's broadside over cyberattacks sent ties between Russia and the United States already at their worst since the Cold War - to a fresh low less than a month after of President-elect Donald Trump taking charge. The outgoing US leader yesterday gave 35 alleged Russian intelligence operatives "based at the country's embassy in Washington and consulate in San Francisco 72 hours to leave the country, and hit Russia's military and domestic intelligence agencies with sanctions. "We of course cannot leave these stunts unanswered. Reciprocity is the law in diplomacy and international relations," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in a televised statement, dismissing the US allegations as "groundless".

Lavrov said this ministry had asked President Vladimir Putin to declare 31 employees at the US embassy in Moscow and four at the country's consulate in San Francisco as "persona non grata". Russia is also seeking to ban US diplomats

from using a holiday home and warehouse in Moscow, Lavrov said, after Obama ordered the closure two Russian compounds in New York and Maryland. Making good on a promise to punish the government for allegedly trying to tilt the 2016 election in Trump's favour, Obama on Thursday unveiled a broad range of steps against Moscow including the diplomat expulsions. US intelligence concluded that the hack-and-Party and Hillary Clinton staff emails was ordered by the Kremlin and was designed to put the Republican real estate mogul in the Oval Office.

He ordered a number of actions in response to the Russian government's aggressive harassment of US officials and cyber operations aimed at the US election, Obama said in a statement. In response to the hacks, dubbed "Grizzly Steppe" by US officials, Obama announced sanctions against Russia's military intelligence agency, known as GRU, and the FSB - the KGB's successor. Obama also repeatedly rejected the US accusations of cyber-interference and spokesman Dmitry Peskov accused the Obama administration of "definitely destroy US-Russia relations which have al-

ready reached a low." Relations between Washington and Moscow have slumped to their lowest point since the end of the Cold War, and Obama has previously imposed sanctions over Russia's actions in Syria and Ukraine.

Peskov said ahead of Lavrov's announcement that Putin would take into account the fact Obama only has some three weeks left in office when responding, insisting Moscow would try to act like "bull in china shop" in the hope of normalising ties once Trump takes charge. The moves by Obama could also raise further tensions with his successor Trump, who has expressed his admiration for Putin and desire to improve ties with Russia. Trump has questioned whether Russia really tipped the electoral scale, painting Obama's accusations as a thinly veiled effort by a Democratic administration to delegitimise a Republican victory.

Trump said that while he believes the US should "not" be "over-reacting" to the hacks, he would meet with intelligence leaders next week for a briefing on the situation. Obama has pointedly stated that "all Americans should be alarmed by Russia's actions."

Man wrongly arrested for Berlin attack fears for family: Report

LONDON, DEC 30 /-/- The Pakistani man wrongly arrested for the Berlin truck attack today said he had told German police he could not even drive, and was now afraid for the safety of his family back home. Naveed Baloch, an asylum seeker from the troubled province of Balochistan, told the Guardian newspaper he had just left a friend's house and was crossing a street when he saw a police car approaching fast and picked up his pace. He said he was arrested and taken to a police station, where he was undressed and photographed.

"When I resisted, they started slapping me," the 24-year-old, who has been living in a secret location provided by a friend since his arrival, because he says he is afraid for his life, told the British daily. Baloch, who sought refuge in Germany as a member of a secular separatist movement in Balochistan, struggled to communicate because no translator could be found who could speak his native Balochi. "I calmly told them I cannot drive at all. Neither can I even start a vehicle," he said.

Baloch was arrested on December 19 in the hours after the attack on a Christmas market in the heart of Berlin in which 12 people were

killed. Police released Baloch 24 hours later, after failing to find evidence of his involvement. They instead identified rejected Tunisian asylum seeker Anis Amri as the prime suspect. Amri was shot dead by Italian police on December 23 after fleeing a manhunt in Germany. Baloch, a shepherd by profession, told members of his family in the village of Mand in Balochistan in southwest Pakistan had received threatening phone calls following his arrest.

"Now they all know I fled to Germany, fearful of my life, and that I am claiming asylum here. It leaves my family very vulnerable and there's nothing I can do to protect them," he told the Guardian. Baloch said he left Pakistan around a year ago, arriving in Germany via Iran, Turkey and Greece, because of death threats he had received for his activism for the Baloch National Movement. "Most of the people I worked with have been arrested and killed. I knew it was a matter of time before they came for me."

"That's the reason I came to Germany," he said. Mineral-rich Balochistan province has been plagued for decades by a separatist insurgency and sectarian killings. (AFP)

It's time for US to move on to bigger and better things: Trump

WASHINGTON, DEC 30 /-/- Amid series of punitive actions against Russia by the Obama administration, President-elect Donald Trump has said that it's time for the US to "move on" to "bigger and better things" as he decided to meet top intelligence officials next week in order to be updated on the facts on alleged Russian hacking during the presidential election. "It's time for our country to move on to bigger and better things. Nevertheless, in the interest of our country and its great people, I will meet with leaders of the intelligence community next week in order to be updated on the facts of this situation," Trump said.

Trump's vaguely worded statement, which did not mention Russia directly, came soon after the Obama administration yesterday announced a series of punitive measures against alleged Russian hacking during the presidential election. A top Trump advisor said that it is time to move on. "He'll receive an intelligence briefing this coming week. And in the meantime, he believes it's time to move on," Kellyanne Conway, Counselor to the president-elect, told CNN. "I've been reading all the news reports about these retaliations, these sanctions put forward by President Obama and his administration. Some of them seem largely symbolic."

The GRU doesn't travel here, doesn't keep its assets here. No Russian allies will follow suit. We've yet to see all of the intelligence reports," she said. Trump, she noted, believes it's time to move on to bigger and better things for the country. President Barack Obama has sanctioned Russia, expelled 35 Russian officials and shut down two Russian-owned compounds in the US over alleged Russian hacking during the presidential election. Meanwhile, announcement of sanctions against Russia was welcomed by lawmakers from across the aisle. "Russia does not share America's interests. In this, I have consistently sought to undermine them, sowing discord and chaos in their world. While today's action by the administration is overdue, it is an appropriate way to end eight years of failed policy with Russia. It serves as a prime example of this administration's ineffective foreign policy that has left our country weak in the eyes of the world," House Speaker Paul Ryan said. The retaliatory measures announced by the Obama Administration are long overdue, said Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham.

"But ultimately, they are a small price for Russia to pay for its brazen attack on American democracy. We intend to lead the effort in the new Congress to impose stronger sanctions on Russia," the two Senators said in a joint statement. After years of weakness that have invited and encouraged Russian aggression, the actions by President Obama are long overdue, said Senator Marco Rubio. "Vladimir Putin has made it abundantly clear he is not an ally or partner of the United States, and that his interests are fundamentally not our interests," he said as he welcomed the sanctions against Russia. (PTI)

S Korea court says Park won't testify in impeachment trial

SEOUL, DEC 30 /-/- South Korea's Constitutional Court today said it cannot require President Park Geun-hye to testify in her impeachment trial that enters the argument phase next week, dismissing demands by lawmakers who voted to remove her over a corruption scandal. The nine-justice court also confirmed the dates when some witnesses will testify but delayed a decision on whether to make companies answer whether they were really forced into sponsoring foundations controlled by the president's allies in the Chong Ju-sil. Lawyers, who are the prosecutors in an impeachment trial, argued it could pressure companies. Park's lawyers, however, said the court needed to verify facts independent of the findings by state prosecutors, who accused Park of allowing Choi to interfere with government affairs and of colluding with Choi to export money and favors from the country's largest companies.

The court said there was no way to force Park to appear and the trial can proceed without her. South Korea's opposition-controlled parliament voted to impeach Park on Dec. 9 over the corruption scandal, and the court has up to six months to decide whether she should remain in step down or be reinstated. During the impeachment trial, the court will also review lawmakers' accusations that Park was responsible for media restrictions and government inaction during a 2014 anti-corruption probe that involved more than 300 people, mostly teenagers on a school trip. State prosecutors have passed the investigation to a special prosecution team, which on Friday summoned an arrested former presidential aide for the second time this week as they focus on bribery suspicions between Park and the Samsung Group.

Ahn Jong-boom, Park's former senior secretary for policy coordination, allegedly directed former Health Minister Moon Hyung-pyo to pressure the National Pension Service to support a merger between two Samsung affiliates last year. The deal reduced the pension fund's stake in one of the companies by an estimated hundreds of millions of dollars in value, but allowed Samsung CEO Lee Jae-yong to promote a generational transfer of leadership and increase corporate wealth at the group. Samsung is one of the main companies that gave a combined 7.4 billion won (USD 64 million) to two non-profits Choi allegedly controlled and abused to expand her personal wealth. Choi, Ahn and Jung Ho-sung, another arrested presidential aide accused of passing on confidential government information to Choi, will be called to testify on January 10. (Agencies)



Naveed Baloch, an asylum seeker from the troubled province of Balochistan, told the Guardian newspaper he had just left a friend's house and was crossing a street when he saw a police car approaching fast and picked up his pace. He said he was arrested and taken to a police station, where he was undressed and photographed.