



KANSAS CITY: Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton poses for a photo after speaking during the 136th Annual Session of the National Baptist Convention at the Kansas City Convention Center. — AFP

CLINTON SLAMS 'DANGEROUS' TRUMP AFTER PUTIN PRAISE CALLS RIVAL UNPATRIOTIC AND UNFIT TO LEAD

CHARLOTTE: Hillary Clinton portrayed herself Thursday as a steely stateswoman ready to fend off the dangers facing the United States, as she denounced Republican rival Donald Trump as "unpatriotic" and unfit to lead. With just 61 days before America chooses a new commander in chief, the Democrat went on the offensive highlighting the risk of electing a political novice who praises Russia's leader while dismissing the US president, and who has no real plan to combat IS jihadists.

Trump pushed back just as hard, accusing Clinton of being a failed and "trigger-happy" secretary of state whose policies triggered mayhem across the world. Clinton, 68, and Trump, 70, have clashed repeatedly over foreign policy, but their battle rose to a new level Wednesday night when the two were separately grilled over their national security credentials at a New York forum.

"One thing you didn't hear from Donald Trump last night is any plan to take on ISIS, one of the biggest threats facing our country," Clinton said, using an acronym for the Islamic State group. "He says his plan is still a secret, but the truth is he simply doesn't have one. And that's not only dangerous, it should be disqualifying." Instead of laying out a Middle East strategy at the forum, she said, Trump praised Putin and suggested the strongman is "far more" of a leader than US President Barack Obama. "Even I was shocked by this," Clinton said later at a rally in Charlotte, in the battleground state of North Carolina. "That is not just unpatriotic, it's not just insulting to the office and to the man who holds the office. It is scary, it is dangerous."

Hunt down IS chief

Clinton invoked one of the nation's most popular Republican presidents in driving home her point. "What would Ronald Reagan say?" Clinton asked, "about a Republican nominee who attacks America's generals and heaps praise on Russia's president? I think we know the answer." The senior most elected US Republican, House Speaker Paul Ryan, distanced himself from Trump's praise of Putin just one day after returning to Congress after a seven-week break. "Vladimir Putin is an aggressor that does not share our interests," Ryan said, citing US authorities who believe Moscow is conducting cyber-attacks on the US political system.

Seeking to strike a commanding tone, Clinton called for the United States to track down and kill Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as it did Osama bin Laden. "Getting Al-Baghdadi will require efforts at the top levels, but it will send a resounding message that nobody directs or inspires attacks against the United States and gets away with it," she said. With the campaign now in the final two-month stretch, Clinton was wasting no opportunity to harangue Trump over his missteps, accusing him of having "trash-talked" US generals. "We've never seen anything like this," she said, highlighting Trump's call to bring back interrogation techniques deemed to be torture, and to kill relatives of terrorists.

'Trigger-happy'

Clinton pointed to the US military code of honor, saying "that, Donald Trump, is what we're going to stand up and defend in the face of your outrageous, disgraceful attacks on the men and women of our armed forces." The

bitter back-and-forth was likely to be on display for the campaign's duration. Trump joined the fray Thursday with attacks on Clinton, whom he accused of having "raced to invade, intervene and topple regimes."

"Hillary Clinton is trigger-happy," with policies that "produced ruin" in Libya, Iraq and Syria, Trump said in Cleveland, Ohio in a 10-minute anti-Hillary riff before delivering planned remarks on education. "Her policies unleashed ISIS, spread terrorism and put Iran on a path to nuclear weapons." Trump has gained on Clinton over the past 10 days, but the former secretary of state still maintains an advantage of 2.8 percentage points, according to the RealClearPolitics poll average.

A new Quinnipiac Poll of battleground states shows Clinton ahead 48 percent to 43 percent in Pennsylvania and ahead 47-43 in North Carolina. But Trump leads in Ohio, 46-45, while the two are tied in Florida, 47-47, according to the poll. A Suffolk University poll shows a different story in North Carolina, with Trump ahead by three points. Clinton's tarmac address to reporters marked the first podium press conference in nine months for the candidate, who broke a long media drought by speaking to journalists at length on her campaign plane this week. She also rebuked an "undisciplined" Trump for discussing elements of a recent classified intelligence briefing during Wednesday's commander-in-chief forum, in which he said he learned that Obama and other US leaders "did not follow" the advice of US national security experts. "I would never comment on any aspect of an intelligence briefing that I received," Clinton said. — AFP

15 YEARS AFTER 9/11 ATTACK, TERROR NOW 'HOME-GROWN'

WASHINGTON: Fifteen years after the September 11 attacks, US anti-terror officials say the country is hardened against such well-developed plots but remains as vulnerable as ever to small and especially home-grown attacks. Counter-terror operations are under huge pressure to ferret out and disrupt plots by sympathizers of the Islamic State group and Al-Qaeda hidden by less centralized networks and new communications technologies, they say. "Our job is getting harder," said Nick Rasmussen, the powerful director of the National Counterterrorism Center, at a stock-taking this week in Washington.

The explosion of ways extremists can communicate with each other, many of them via popular smartphone apps and easy access to powerful encryption, "gives them the edge" against the US intelligence community, he said. The 9/11 attacks gave birth to the US War On Terror, which initially focused on Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. But 15 years later, the target is a different group, the Islamic State, which has seized territory in Syria and Iraq and shown the ability to plan and inspire home-grown attacks in Europe and the United States, smaller-scale than 9/11 but nevertheless deadly and demoralizing.

Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda still exists without former leader Osama bin Laden, with affiliates, spinoffs and rivals of both groups operating from the Philippines to West Africa, posing a more complex threat. "The reality is that it has metastasized" from the Iraq-Syria region, said Frank Cilluffo, director of the Center for Cyber and Homeland Security at George Washington University. "The threat persists and is in some cases more complex." A series of surprise attacks have placed "HVEs"—homegrown violent extremist—as much in the focus of intelligence agencies as threats from abroad. Among them, a 29-year-old American of Afghan descent believed to hold radical Islamic sympathies shot dead 49 people in an Orlando gay nightclub in June.

And in December, a US-born man and his wife, both with Pakistani roots, killed 14 at a Christmas party in San Bernardino, California. The George Washington University Program on Extremism counts 102 people who have been charged in the United States with offenses related to the Islamic State group, many of them lured online. US intelligence is strained by the more than 1,000 cases of possible extremists it is following, Rasmussen said. Moreover, plots are now developed and carried out much more rapidly, and in smaller networks, making it much harder for counter-terror operations to discover them. — AFP

MARINES FACE ACTION IN MUSLIM RECRUIT'S DEATH

WASHINGTON: The US Marine Corps is weighing criminal or administrative charges against as many as 20 personnel at a recruit training depot following the death of a Muslim trainee, officials said Thursday. Investigators opened a probe into the March death of Raheel Siddiqui, 20, who reportedly fell three stories to his death at the recruitment depot in Parris Island, California.

The Marines have classed the death as a suicide but, according to the Wall Street Journal, investigations suggest Siddiqui leaped from a third-story balcony after a drill instructor slapped him in the face. Citing anonymous Marine officials, the Journal said the drill instructor had referred to the Pakistani-American as a "terrorist." According to a Marine Corps statement, investigations revealed "departures" from the policies and procedures established for Marine Corps recruit training.

"Commanders and senior enlisted advisers at the series, company, battalion and regimental level were relieved in the wake of Recruit Siddiqui's death, and a number of drill instructors have been suspended," the statement reads. "Currently, 20 Recruit Training Regiment personnel have been identified for possible military justice or administrative action." Investigators uncovered a slew of allegations of physical and verbal abuse of recruits by drill instructors.

Commanders have implemented changes including the mandatory suspension of personnel who are being investigated for recruit abuse. "I fully support and endorse these initial actions," Marine Corps Commandant General Robert Neller said in a statement. "When America's men and women commit to becoming Marines, we make a promise to them. We pledge to train them with firmness, fairness, dignity and compassion." — AFP