

Friday Times

# International

FRIDAY, APRIL 14, 2017

**Divided nationalists hold key for Erdogan in Turkey vote**

11



**India's party Mecca Goa bans late night raves in crackdown**

16



**Japan PM: North Korea may be capable of sarin-loaded missiles**

18



WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump speaks during a news conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in the East Room of the White House, in Washington. — AP

## US-RUSSIA RELATIONS AT 'ALL-TIME LOW'

**WASHINGTON:** Laying bare deep and dangerous divisions on Syria and other issues, President Donald Trump declared that US relations with Russia "may be at an all-time low." His top diplomat offered a similarly grim assessment from the other side of the globe after meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow. "Right now we're not getting along with Russia at all," Trump said flatly during a White House news conference Wednesday.

It was stark evidence that the president is moving ever further from his campaign promises to establish better ties with Moscow. Only weeks ago, it appeared that Trump, who praised Putin throughout the US election campaign, was poised for a potentially historic rapprochement with Russia. But any such expectations have crashed into reality amid the nasty back-and-forth over Syria and ongoing US investigations into Russia's alleged interference in America's US presidential election.

Still, Trump quickly reverted to a conciliatory tone yesterday, hinting that he hasn't abandoned hope for warmer ties. "Things will work out fine between the USA and Russia," Trump tweeted. "At the right time everyone will come to their senses & there will be lasting peace!" On Wednesday, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson emerged from a nearly two-hour meeting with Putin saying the two countries had reached a "low point" in relations.

### 'Certainly possible'

Trump, who last week ordered airstrikes on a Syrian air

base in retaliation for a chemical weapons attack, was asked Wednesday if Syria could have launched the attack without Russia's knowledge. Trump said it was "certainly possible" though "probably unlikely." The newly hardened view of Moscow comes as the president has tried to shake suspicions about the motives behind his campaign calls for warmer relations.

As the FBI and multiple congressional committees investigate possible collusion between Russia and Trump's campaign, the president and his aides can now point to his hard-line stance on Syrian President Bashar Assad as evidence he's willing to stand up to Putin. More than 80 people were killed in what the US has described as a nerve gas attack that Assad's forces undoubtedly carried out. Russia says rebels were responsible for whatever chemical agent was used, which the Trump administration calls a disinformation campaign.

Not long before Trump spoke, Russia vetoed a Western-backed UN resolution that would have condemned the chemical weapons attack and demanded a speedy investigation. The dim view of US-Russia ties from both Trump and Tillerson reflected the former Cold War foes' inability to forge better relations, as Trump until recently has advocated.

Allegations of collusion between Russian officials and Trump campaign associates also have weakened Trump's ability to make concessions to Russia on any issue, lest he be accused of rewarding bad behavior. Russia wants the US to eliminate sanctions on Moscow related to its 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region and support for pro-Russian sepa-

ratists in eastern Ukraine. Until the chemical attack, the Trump administration had sought to step back from the US position that Assad should leave power. But Tillerson repeated the administration's new belief that "the reign of the Assad family is coming to an end."

### 'Irrefutable evidence'

Beyond Syria, Russia's alleged meddling in the US presidential election also hovered over what was the first face-to-face encounter between Putin and any Trump administration Cabinet member. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov blasted US claims that it has "irrefutable evidence" of election interference. "We have not seen a single fact, or even a hint of facts," he said. "I do not know who saw them. No one showed us anything, no one said anything, although we repeatedly asked to produce the details on which these unfounded accusations lie."

He also rejected American claims of certain evidence that Assad ordered the chemical attack. Still, Tillerson sought to stress the positives from his meetings. He said working groups would be established to improve US-Russian ties and identify problems. He said the two sides would also discuss disagreements on Syria and how to end the country's six-year civil war. But such hopes appeared optimistic as the diplomats outlined their sharply diverging views on Syria. Tillerson said Syria's government had committed more than 50 attacks using chlorine or other chemical weapons over the duration of the conflict. — AP