

Hackers Attempted Clinton's Server

WASHINGTON (AP) — Russia-linked hackers tried at least five times to pry into Hillary Rodham Clinton's private email account while she was secretary of state, emails released Wednesday show.

Clinton received the infected emails, disguised as speeding tickets, over four hours early on the morning of Aug. 3, 2011.

Security researchers who analyzed the malicious software in September 2011 said that infected computers would transmit information from victims to at least three server computers overseas, including one in Russia.

But the phishing attempts highlight the risk of Clinton's unsecured email being pried open by foreign intelligence agencies, even if others also received the virus concealed as a speeding ticket from Chatham, New York.

Agents Sought To Discredit US Lawmaker

WASHINGTON (AP) — Scores of U.S. Secret Service employees improperly accessed the decade-old, unsuccessful job application of a congressman who was investigating scandals inside the agency, a new government report said Wednesday.

The actions by the employees could represent criminal violations under the U.S. Privacy Act, said the report by the Homeland Security Department's inspector general, John Roth.

Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson personally apologized to Chaffetz again Wednesday, the congressman told The Associated Press in an interview on Capitol Hill.

Johnson said in a statement Wednesday that "those responsible should be held accountable" but did not provide further details.

"I am confident that U.S. Secret Service Director Joe Clancy will take appropriate action to hold accountable those who violated any laws or the policies of this department," Johnson said.

Palestinians Ask For Global Protection

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas told world leaders Wednesday that he is no longer bound by agreements that have defined relations with Israel for the past two decades and are meant to form the basis for a two-state solution to the Middle East conflict.

But what sounded like a potentially explosive declaration was blunted by the lack of any detail on how he plans to move forward.

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly, Abbas said Israel had repeatedly violated its commitments, most notably by expanding settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, on lands the Palestinians seek for a future state.

Abbas' speech reflected growing Palestinian frustration and appeared aimed at focusing the attention of the international community — busy with the Syrian civil war and the migrants' crisis in Europe — on the long-festering Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However, the Palestinian leader stopped short of specific threats that would irrevocably put him on a collision course with Israel, such as suspending security cooperation.

US Launches Airstrikes To Back Troops

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Afghan troops backed by U.S. airstrikes massed Tuesday on the outskirts of a key northern city seized by the Taliban in the buildup for what is likely to be a long and difficult campaign to drive out the insurgents.

Despite the overnight U.S. bombing of Taliban positions, the militants extended their grip on Kunduz, forcing government forces to retreat from a strategic fortress hilltop and giving the insurgents a vantage point overlooking the city.

At least three U.S. airstrikes had targeted Taliban fighters near the city by early Wednesday, U.S. Army spokesman, Col. Brian Tribus, said that U.S. and NATO coalition advisers, including special forces, were also at the scene "in the Kunduz area, advising Afghan security forces."

He denied reports that they were fighting on the ground, stressing the forces were there in a non-combat, train-and-assist role. "But these are dangerous situations and if they need to defend themselves, they will," Tribus added.

Residents reported increasing distress as insurgents put the city under virtual lockdown, blocking roads and setting up checkpoints to prevent people from leaving.

Pope Meets With Kentucky Clerk

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — The private meeting Pope Francis held with defiant Kentucky clerk Kim Davis is a strong papal endorsement of religious resistance to gay marriage, but it doesn't necessarily mean he approves of how she's waged her fight, experts said Wednesday.

The Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, said their encounter in Washington last Thursday was private. Out of deference to the Vatican, Davis' attorney, Mat Staver, would not say how it was arranged.

Davis said she grasped the pope's outstretched hand, and he told her to "stay strong."

Davis refused to issue any marriage licenses in Rowan County, Kentucky, rather than comply with the Supreme Court ruling that effectively legalized gay marriage nationwide.

"Just knowing that the pope is on track with what we're doing and agreeing, you know, it kind of validates everything," Davis told ABC News.

Russia Begins Airstrikes In Syria, But West Disputes Targets

BY NATALIYA VASILYEVA Associated Press



Map locating Homs Province Syria where Russia carried out first airstrikes.

MOSCOW — Russia launched airstrikes Wednesday in Syria, sharply escalating Moscow's role in the conflict but also raising questions about whether its intent is fighting Islamic State militants or protecting longtime ally, President Bashar Assad.

President Vladimir Putin called it a pre-emptive strike against the militants, and the Russian Defense Ministry said its warplanes targeted and destroyed eight positions belonging to extremists from the IS group, also known as ISIL or ISIS. It did not give specific locations.

But French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told lawmakers in Paris, "Curiously, they didn't hit Islamic State. I will let you draw a certain number of conclusions yourselves."

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter also said the Russians appeared to have targeted areas that did not include IS militants and complained Moscow did not use formal channels to give advance notice of its airstrikes to Washington, which is conducting its own airstrikes in Syria against the Islamic State group.

He said the Russians should not be supporting the Assad government and their military moves are "doomed to fail."

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov dismissed charges that Russian airstrikes in Syria targeted positions of the Syrian opposition. Speaking to journalists on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly, he said that the Russian Air Forces are cooperating with the Syrian pro-government military to target "exclusively" Islamic State targets.

"Rumors that the targets of these strikes were not IS positions were groundless," he stressed, adding that the Russian Defense Ministry has clearly stated on its website the targets and objectives of Russian airstrikes in Syria.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said Washington was prepared to welcome Russian military action in Syria as long as it is directed against IS and other al-Qaida affiliates, but would have "grave concerns" if it conducted strikes against other groups.

Kerry said Russian operations must not support Assad or interfere with those of the U.S.-led coalition that is already attacking Islamic State targets. He called for an urgent start to military-to-military talks to prevent any kind of conflict between Russia and the coalition.

"If Russia's recent actions and those now ongoing reflect a genuine commitment to defeat (the Islamic State) then we are prepared to welcome those efforts and to find a way to de-conflict our operations and thereby multiply military pressure on ISIL and affiliated groups," Kerry said.

He added that the U.S. "would have grave concerns should Russia strike areas where ISIL and al-Qaida affiliated targets are not operating," he said. "Strikes of that kind would question Russia's real intentions fighting ISIL or protecting the Assad regime."

Russia targeted positions, vehicles and warehouses believed to belong to IS militants, Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov told Russian news agencies.

A senior U.S. official, however, said the airstrikes don't appear to be targeting IS, because the militants aren't in the western part of Syria, beyond Homs, where the strikes were directed. It appears the strikes were directed against opposition groups fighting Assad, according to the official, who wasn't authorized to discuss the Russian airstrikes publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Syrian state TV quoted an unidentified military official as saying that Russian planes targeted IS positions in central Syria, including the areas of Rastan and Talbiseh, and areas near the town of Salamiyeh in Hama province.

IS controls parts of Homs province, including the ancient town of Palmyra. Homs also has positions run by al-Qaida's affiliate in Syria, known as the Nusra Front. Both groups have fighters from the former Soviet Union, including Chechens.

Genevieve Casagrande of the Institute of the Study of War, said the airstrike on Talbiseh, "did not hit ISIS militants and rather resulted in a large number of civilian casualties."

"If confirmed, the airstrike would signal Russian intent to assist in the Syrian regime's war effort at large, rather than securing the regime's coastal heartland of Latakia and Tartous," she said.

Khaled Khoja, head of the Syrian National Council opposition group, said that the U.N. that Russian airstrikes in four areas, including Talbiseh, killed 36 civilians, with five children among the dead. The claim could not be independently verified.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said claims of civilian casualties were part of an "information war ... which, it appears, someone prepared well."

U.S. State Department spokesman John Kirby said a Russian official in Baghdad had told U.S. Embassy personnel in the Iraqi capital that Russian military aircraft would shortly begin flying anti-IS missions in Syria. The Russian official also asked that U.S. aircraft avoid Syrian airspace during those missions Wednesday, Kirby didn't say whether the U.S. agreed to that request.

The U.S.-led coalition will continue missions over Iraq and Syria, Kirby added.

The U.S. official who spoke on condition of anonymity said there were no conflicts with the Russian strikes, and they had no impact on coalition missions, primarily in the north and east.

Earlier Wednesday, Russian lawmakers voted unanimously to allow Putin to order the airstrikes in Syria, where Russia has deployed fighter jets and other weapons in recent weeks. The Federation Council, the upper chamber of the parliament, discussed Putin's request for the authorization behind closed doors in a debate notable for its speed.

Under the constitution, Putin had to request parliamentary approval for any use of Russian troops abroad. The last time he did so was before Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in March 2014.

Putin insisted Russia will not send ground troops to Syria and that its role in Syrian army operations will be limited.

Congress OKs Bill To Keep Government Open

BY ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Just hours before a midnight deadline, a bitterly divided Congress approved a stopgap spending bill Wednesday to keep the federal government open — but with no assurance there won't be yet another shutdown showdown in December.

Democrats helped beleaguered House Republican leaders pass the measure by 277-151 — a lopsided vote shrouding deep disagreements within the GOP — after the Senate approved it by a 78-20 tally earlier in the day. President Barack Obama signed the bill Wednesday evening, but not without White House carping.

"The American people deserve far better than last-minute, short-term legislation," said spokesman Josh Earnest in pressing for a broader, longer-lasting budget deal.

Approval of such stopgap measures used to be routine, but debate this year exposed acrimonious divisions between pragmatic Republicans such as House Speaker John Boehner and more junior lawmakers in the party's tea party wing who are less inclined to compromise. The tea partiers had demanded that the must-pass measure be used to punish Planned Parenthood, stripping it of federal money because of its practice of supplying tissue from aborted fetuses for scientific research.

House Republicans opposed the measure by a clear margin, but Democratic support was unanimous.

The legislation finances the government through Dec. 11, providing 10 weeks to negotiate a more wide-ranging budget deal that would carry past the 2016 presidential election.

But the talks promise to be difficult, and success is not assured. Boehner is resigning from Congress at the end of October, a decision he announced last week after informing Republicans he would not risk a government shutdown over Planned Parenthood.

A similar fight over implementing Obama's health care law sparked a 16-day shutdown two years ago that Boehner, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and other top Republicans did not want to repeat in election season. McConnell is seeking to protect embattled incumbents in Democratic-leaning states such as Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, while some GOP conservatives are more apt to use the battle to appeal to the party's core voters on the right.

"Today was a win for the Washington cartel, and another setback for the American people," said Rep. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, who is using combat with Washington GOP leaders to help define his presidential campaign. "Republican leadership chose to abandon its constitutional power of the purse and to fund 100 percent of President Obama's failed agenda."

Support from Democrats also helped power the measure through the Senate, all of the opposition coming from conservative Republicans.

Longtime lawmakers bemoaned the chronic dysfunction on Capitol Hill and the collapse of the annual appropriations process that is supposed to be wrapped up by now. Democrats demanding a new budget deal have blocked work in the Senate, while a fight over the Confederate flag halted work in the House with only six of the 12 annual spending bills having passed.

"It is to my great dismay that we are at this point again, requiring a temporary Band-Aid to buy us time to do our duty,"

said Rep. Hal Rogers, R-Ky., chairman of the Appropriations Committee, during House debate.

Tea party anger directed at Boehner over the Planned Parenthood issue helped prod the Ohio Republican's announcement to step down. His decision — and other House leadership races — has highlighted divisions between more pragmatic Republicans and hardline conservative wing that is increasingly prominent in Congress, especially in the rough-and-tumble House.

McConnell said Tuesday that he and Boehner spoke with Obama recently and that he expects budget negotiations to get underway soon. The turmoil in the House, where many conservatives want to block spending increases, is certain to complicate the talks, which are likely to focus on swapping near-term budget increases for the Pentagon and domestic programs for longer-term saving elsewhere in the budget.

Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., the likely new House speaker, hasn't said whether he supports a deal.

The Pentagon and domestic agencies all are still operating under automatic curbs that would effectively freeze their spending at current levels. Republicans are leading the drive to boost defense while Obama is demanding equal relief for domestic programs.

The conversation among McConnell, Boehner and Obama took place in mid-September — before Boehner announced he was stepping down. Many of the conservative GOP lawmakers who helped bring Boehner down want to preserve stringent "caps" on the spending bills Congress passes every year. But Senate Republicans are generally more eager to rework the 2011 Budget Control Act that put them in place.

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