

Russia rejects Idlib ceasefire

Says move will encourage 'terrorists'; talks uncertain

AFP, Geneva

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday rejected calls for a halt to a Russia-backed Syrian offensive in Idlib in northwest Syria.

"This is capitulating before terrorists and even a reward for their activities in violation of international treaties and numerous UN Security Council resolutions," Lavrov told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Lavrov accused some governments of "a desire to justify outrageous acts committed by radical and terrorist groupings."

"Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain admonishments about the possibility of concluding peace agreements with bandits," he said, referring to the situation in Idlib.

A months-long offensive by Russia-backed Syrian troops against rebels backed by Turkey in Idlib has seen hundreds of thousands of people flee the violence.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said he is planning to hold a summit on March 5 with the leaders of Russia, France and Germany over the escalating conflict. But yesterday he said he might instead hold face-to-face talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin on that date, either in Istanbul or in Ankara.

The Geneva-based International Committee of the Red Cross also yesterday said in a statement it was "deeply alarmed" by the situation for civilians fleeing the fighting.

The United Nations also warned on Monday against an imminent "bloodbath".



US President Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump attend a wreath laying ceremony at Mahatma Gandhi's memorial at Raj Ghat in New Delhi, India, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Mahathir gains in resignation

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Rival political factions competed to win favour with Mahathir Mohamad yesterday after he plunged Malaysia into political turmoil by resigning as prime minister, reinforcing the likelihood his shock move will strengthen his power.

Mahathir, who at 94 is the world's oldest government leader, stepped down on Monday but was immediately named as interim prime minister by Malaysia's king - a role that carries all the authority of a permanent leader.

The move effectively broke apart an increasingly fragile and unpopular coalition Mahathir had formed with old rival Anwar Ibrahim, 72, to win government on an anti-corruption platform in 2018. It also potentially freed Mahathir from a pre-election promise to hand over the reins to Anwar before his term ends in 2023.

"He has total freedom to decide as he pleases," said Ibrahim Suffian, director of pollster Merdeka.

In one of his first acts as interim leader, Mahathir disbanded his entire cabinet late on Monday, opening up political negotiations to form another government.

An official from Mahathir's Bersatu party, which is trying to put together one alliance, said a group of senior members met with Mahathir yesterday.



The Democratic Action Party (DAP), part of a rival pact, also said it wanted Mahathir to continue in office.

"He is the person most likely to be the next prime minister," said DAP parliamentary Ong Kian Ming.

Whatever the outcome of coalition talks, it will mark yet another realignment of politics just two years after Mahathir made a stunning political comeback to topple former leader Najib Razak and bring down the party that had ruled for six decades - and which he had once led.

Mahathir, a former doctor, is credited with transforming Malaysia into an industrial nation from a rural farming backwater when he previously served as prime minister from 1981 to his retirement 2003.

"Just another day in the office," Mahathir said in a post on his official Twitter account that was accompanied by a series of photos of him reading through paperwork at the prime ministerial desk.

Under Malaysia's constitution, any lawmaker who can command a majority in parliament can stake a claim to form a government, which must then be approved by the king.

The palace said the king would hold individual interviews with all 222 elected members of the lower house of parliament on Tuesday and Wednesday, to assess who was likely to succeed.

"For Malaysians, the trauma of uncertainty is hard to overstate," the pro-establishment New Straits Times newspaper wrote in an editorial.

VIOLENCE IN AND AROUND GAZA

Calm returns after two-day flare-up

AFP, Gaza City

Calm returned yesterday after a two-day flare-up in and around Gaza as a truce between Israel and Palestinian militant group Islamic Jihad appeared to take hold after initial jitters.

The Israeli military reported no rocket fire from the territory during the morning and AFP correspondents in Gaza reported no Israeli strikes.

The main border crossing between the Palestinian enclave and Israel was due to reopen at 9:00am (0700 GMT) to allow medical cases and foreign nationals to leave, Palestinian officials said.

Islamic Jihad is the second largest militant group in Gaza after dominant Islamist movement Hamas.

As with other Gaza truces, there was no official Israeli confirmation and the army ordered the parents of some 65,000 pupils in communities near the Gaza border to keep their children home yesterday for a second day.

Islamic Jihad fired more than 50 rockets and mortar rounds at Israel after the army killed one of its fighters on Sunday morning. Many were intercepted by Israeli air defences and there were no reports of casualties. One rocket hit a playground but it was empty at the time.

Israeli fighter jets and helicopters responded with strikes on Islamic Jihad targets across Gaza, as well as in neighbouring Syria.

Sunday's fighting was the most intense between Israel and Islamic Jihad since November, when Israeli air strikes killed senior commanders from the group.

That three-day flare-up saw 35 Palestinians killed and more than 100 wounded, according to official figures.

Bushfires burned a fifth of Australia's forest

Australia's wildfires have destroyed more than a fifth of the country's forests, making the blazes "globally unprecedented" following a years-long drought linked to climate change, researchers said Monday. In a special edition of the journal Nature Climate Change, Australian researchers examined several other aspects of the blazes, including investigations into their extent and possible causes. One study showed that between September 2019 and January 2020 around 5.8 million hectares of broadleaf forest were burned in New South Wales and Victoria. This accounts for roughly 21 percent of the nation's forested area, making this fire season proportionately the most devastating on record. The study's author said his work almost certainly underestimates the extent of forest loss as the island state of Tasmania was not covered in the data. Australia's annual average forest loss to wild fires is typically well below 2 percent.

German cops seek motive in car ramming incident

German authorities yesterday scrambled to determine the motives of a man who ploughed his car into a carnival procession, injuring dozens and further unsettling a country rocked by a fatal mass shooting last week. Investigators said the 29-year-old German driver had not been drunk at the time of ramming on Monday, but could not yet rule out that he was under the influence of drugs, national news agency DPA said. The ramming, which injured 52 people, including 18 children, comes just days after a gunman with suspected racist motives killed nine people with migrant backgrounds in Hanau, also in western Hesse state. The driver was also injured himself and couldn't be questioned.



World's oldest man dies

A Japanese man recently named the world's oldest living male has died aged 112, a local official said yesterday. Chitetsu Watanabe, who was born on March 5, 1907 in Niigata, north of Tokyo, died on Sunday at his nursing home in the same prefecture, the official said. The news came less than two weeks after he was officially recognised by Guinness World Records. Watanabe, who had five children, said the secret to longevity was to "not get angry and keep a smile on your face". He admitted a penchant for sweets such as custard pudding and ice cream. The oldest man in Japan is now Issaku Tomoe, who is 110 years old, according to Jiji Press, although it was not clear if Tomoe holds the title globally.

SOURCE: AFP

Makkah governor orders arrest of female rapper

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Saudi officials have ordered the arrest of a female rapper who appeared in a music video for her song Bint Makkah, or Girl from Makkah, stating that it is offensive to the customs and traditions of the holy city.

In the video, a Saudi woman identified as Ayasel Slay raps about her pride in being from Mecca, home to the holiest site in Islam, the Kaaba.

The video was uploaded to Ayasel's YouTube channel - which has since been removed - last week and featured her rapping in a cafe with a group of smiling children as her backup dancers.

"A Makkah girl is all you need/Don't upset her, she will hurt you," sang Ayasel, describing how a woman from Makkah exceeded all other Saudi women in beauty and strength.

On Thursday, Makkah regional authorities said in a Tweet that the governor had issued orders that Ayasel and the video production team be prosecuted.



The song has attracted strong reactions from social media, with racial undertones used in the hashtag #You_Are_Not_Mecca's_Girls directed at Ayasel's African origins.

"Immediate deportation is the answer, in addition to holding every foreigner who claims to be from Makkah accountable," one user said. "Including all Somalis living here," another replied in agreement.

Others spoke out against these comments.

"If anything needs to be deported, it is your racism, your arrogance, and your deep reverence for yourselves," one Twitter user retorted.



Performers from various samba schools perform during the last night of Rio's Carnival parade at the Sambadrome Marques de Sapucaí in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Monday.



PHOTO: AFP

'Just the beginning'

Activists vow to continue movement after Weinstein guilty verdict

REUTERS, New York

The guilty verdict in the sexual assault case against Harvey Weinstein energized Hollywood celebrities and activists who said it was just the start of their movement to hold abusers accountable.

After Weinstein was taken to jail in handcuffs, advocates promised a renewed push for changes in the law that would allow more victims of sex crimes to have their day in court.

Members of the Silence Breakers, a group of Weinstein accusers, said they would redouble efforts to persuade lawmakers to revise statutes of limitations in several states that limit prosecutors from bringing sexual assault and rape cases after a certain period of time.

"The era of impunity for powerful men who rape people is over," actress Mira Sorvino, one of the more than 80 women who accused Weinstein of sexual misconduct, said on a

conference call with more than a dozen of the Silence Breakers.

Weinstein has said any sexual encounters he had were consensual.

Time's Up, the organization founded in 2018 by Hollywood celebrities after the Weinstein allegations became



public, said the trial marked a "new era of justice" and urged people on social media to join the cause.

"Legally Blonde" star Reese Witherspoon, a founding member of Time's Up, tweeted: "This is just the beginning."

Actress Rosanna Arquette said

Monday's verdict brought hope to victims that their voices would be heard.

Advocates still face several challenges. One hurdle has been the reluctance of women to go public with accusations, and the Weinstein trial showed that they will continue to face tough grilling in a court of law. Some advocates noted that it would take sustained efforts to ensure that women in workplaces outside the movie business received support.

A statement released by the Me Too organization, led by activist Tarana Burke, noted that it had taken "years, and millions of voices raised, for (Weinstein) to be held accountable by the justice system." The implications "reverberate far beyond Hollywood," the group said.

"Though today a man has been found guilty, we have to wonder whether anyone will care about the rest of us tomorrow. This is why we say MeToo," the statement added.

Netanyahu pledges 3,500 new settler homes in West Bank

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday pledged to build 3,500 new settler homes in a super-sensitive area of the occupied West Bank, just a week before a tight general election.

Netanyahu's controversial statement is the latest in a string of election promises on settlement construction as the premier faces not only a general election but the beginning of a corruption trial.

"I gave immediate instructions for a permit to deposit (plans) for the construction of 3,500 units in E1," Netanyahu said.

The international community has warned repeatedly that Jewish settlement construction in the E1 corridor, which passes from Jerusalem to Jericho, would slice the West Bank in two and compromise the contiguity of a future Palestinian state.

In 2013, Netanyahu vetoed construction in the E1 corridor in the face of pressure from the UN, the EU and the US.

Angela Godfrey-Goldstein, co-director of Jahalin Solidarity, an NGO working to prevent the displacement of Palestinian Bedouin living in the E1 area, said the construction could mean their forced expulsion and constitute a "war crime".

"If allowed to go ahead, this move will end the potential for a viable, sustainable Palestinian state, and is yet another example of how desperate Bibi (Netanyahu) is to buy votes so as to stay out of prison at the expense of our future," she said.

On Thursday, Netanyahu announced plans for thousands of new homes for Israelis in annexed east Jerusalem, with critics calling the move a last-minute incentive to nationalist voters ahead of next week's election.

Israel seized east Jerusalem in the Six-Day War of 1967 and later annexed it in a move never recognised by the international community. Jewish settlements in east Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank are considered illegal by the United Nations and most foreign governments.