

Ukraine truce hangs in balance

AFP, Donetsk

The latest push for peace in Ukraine appeared moribund yesterday after initial talks failed to agree when the warring sides should meet again to try ending the eight-month pro-Russian revolt.

Negotiations mediated by European and Russian envoys in the Belarusian capital Minsk broke up after more than five hours on Wednesday with the separatists reporting progress on only one of the four points that is to release some prisoners of its current civil war.

Adding to the tensions was the Ukrainian parliament's decision this week to officially drop the neutrality the country adopted under Russian pressure in 2010. The ceremonial shift in Kiev's diplomatic allegiance was in line with Poroshenko's vow to put Ukraine under Western military protection in the face of Russian threats.



Pope Francis kisses the unveiled baby Jesus during a Christmas Eve mass at St Peter's Basilica to mark the nativity of Jesus Christ at the Vatican on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Warplane 'not shot down by ISIS'

Claims US; Jordan vows to save pilot

AFP, Amman

Jordan yesterday vowed to make every effort to save a pilot captured by the Islamic State group in Syria as Washington denied claims the jihadists shot his warplane out of the sky.

Maaz al-Kassasbeh, a 26-year-old first lieutenant in the Jordanian air force, was captured by ISIS on Wednesday after his F-16 jet crashed while on a mission against the jihadists over northern Syria.

It was the first warplane lost and the first capture of a serviceman since the coalition launched strikes against ISIS in Syria in September.

It was also a major propaganda victory for the Sunni extremist group, which released several photographs parading the captured pilot.

"The Jordanian government... is making all efforts with several crisis cells to free (the pilot)," government daily Al-Rai said in an editorial yesterday.

Kassasbeh's plane went down near the Syrian city of Raqa, which ISIS has used as its de facto capital and where coalition warplanes have carried out regular strikes.

The jihadists and the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claimed the plane was brought down by an anti-aircraft missile, raising concerns for other coalition planes flying in the area.

But the US military dismissed the claim, saying "evidence clearly suggests that ISIL did not down the aircraft", using another name for IS.

"We strongly condemn the actions of ISIL, which has taken captive the downed pilot," US Central Command chief General Lloyd Austin said in a statement.

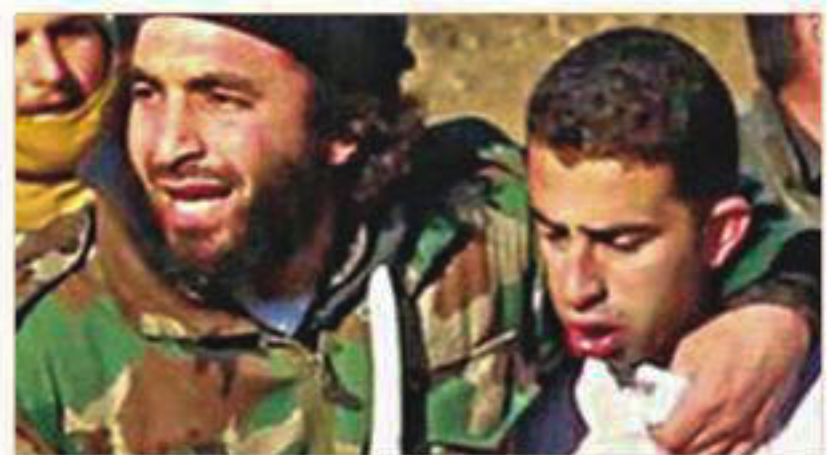
UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon appealed for the pilot's captors to treat him humanely.

An activist in Raqa said ISIS militants were divided over the fate of the pilot, with more extremist foreign fighters wanting him executed and others wanting him kept alive.

Despite the loss of the plane, the coalition was reported to have launched further air strikes. The Observatory, which monitors Syria's conflict with a wide range of local sources, said four strikes had been carried out late yesterday against ISIS positions in Kobane, where Syrian Kurdish fighters have been holding off an IS offensive. Several other coalition strikes took place at Bukamal near the Iraqi border, it said.

Elsewhere in Syria at least 30 ISIS fighters were killed in clashes with Kurdish militia in the northeastern Hasakeh province, it said.

ISIS has committed widespread atrocities in areas under its control, including mass executions of captured soldiers and public beheadings of hostages including Western journalists and aid workers.



The legend of Santa Claus

The legend of Santa Claus can be traced back hundreds of years to a monk named St Nicholas. It is believed that Nicholas was born sometime around 280 AD in Patara, near Myra in modern-day Turkey. Much admired for his piety and kindness, St Nicholas became the subject of many legends. It is said that he gave away all of his inherited wealth and traveled the countryside helping the poor and sick. Over the course of many years, Nicholas's popularity spread and he became known as the protector of children and sailors. By the Renaissance, St Nicholas was the most popular saint in Europe.

The name Santa Claus evolved from Nick's Dutch nickname, Sinter Klaas, a shortened form of Sint Nikolaas (Dutch for Saint Nicholas).

St Nicholas made his first inroads into American popular culture towards the end of the 18th century. Stores began to advertise Christmas shopping in 1820, and by the 1840s, newspapers were creating separate sections for holiday advertisements, which often featured images of the newly-popular Santa Claus. In 1841, thousands of children visited a Philadelphia shop to see a life-size Santa Claus model. It was only a matter of time before stores began to attract children, and their parents, with the lure of a peek at a "live" Santa Claus.

In 1822, Clement Clarke Moore, an Episcopal minister, wrote a long Christmas poem for his three daughters entitled "An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas." Moore's poem is largely responsible for our modern image of Santa Claus as a "right jolly old elf". The poem created a new and immediately popular American icon. In 1881, political cartoonist Thomas Nast drew on Moore's poem to create the first likeness that matches our modern image of Santa Claus. It is Nast who gave Santa his bright red suit trimmed with white fur, North Pole workshop, elves, and his wife, Mrs Claus.

SOURCE: HISTORY.COM



'So many tears this Christmas'

Pope Francis addresses world woes in Christmas message

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis issued a strident call in his Christmas day message to safeguard children who are victims "under our very eyes" of violence and trafficking, while also demanding an end to "brutal persecution" worldwide.

Killings and hostage-takings from the Middle East to Nigeria and elsewhere must stop, he said in his annual Christmas "urbi et orbi" (to the city and the world) message.

Denouncing conflicts in Ukraine and Libya, and noting last week's deadly attack against a school in Pakistan, the pontiff also lamented the thousands of victims of the Ebola epidemic in West Africa.

"Truly there are so many tears this

Christmas," he said.

Delivering his second Christmas blessing, the popular Argentine pontiff, visibly moved and departing from his text, noted "the children massacred by bombardments, including where the son of God was born" and their "powerless silence that cries under the sword."

Denouncing "indifference", he explicitly condemned abortion, deploring the children "killed before seeing the light".

"May Jesus save the vast numbers of children who are victims of violence, made objects of trade and trafficking, or forced to become soldiers."

"May he give comfort to the families of the children killed in Pakistan last week" referring to the 149 people,

including 133 school-children, killed in Peshawar by the Taliban.

Speaking to a large crowd massed outside Saint Peter's Basilica, the pope urged Ukrainians to "overcome tensions, conquer hatred and violence and set out on a new journey of fraternity and reconciliation".

He turned too to the violence wrought by Islamic State fundamentalists this year in Syria and Iraq.

"I ask him, the saviour of the world, to look upon our brothers and sisters in Iraq and Syria, who for too long now have suffered the effects of ongoing conflict, and who, together with those belonging to other ethnic and religious groups, are suffering a brutal persecution."

Birth control is against growth, says Turkey PM

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan has described birth control as a form of "treason," saying it threatens the country's bloodline as he believes a couple should have more than three children.

Erdoğan urged couples in Turkey to have preferably four children to help boost population figures in Turkey where the birth rate has been slowing down over the past few years.

The religious roots of the government led by Erdoğan, who has been described by critics as an "Islamist", has long been accused of seeking to diminish the country's secular principles and limiting the civil liberties of women.

This is not Ferguson

Black mayor defends white officer

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Police in St Louis have defended themselves in the aftermath of the shooting of a black teenager who they said had pointed a handgun at an officer and made "bad choices". The local mayor said it was "not like Ferguson".

Still reeling from the protests that erupted following the August shooting of unarmed teenager Michael Brown in nearby Ferguson and the more recent decision not to charge the officer involved in the incident, police released video footage they said supported their claim that the white officer involved in the latest shooting in the St Louis suburb of Berkeley was acting in self-defence.

The footage taken late on Tuesday night, which appeared to show someone raising what appeared to be a gun, stops before the actual shooting of 18-year-old Antonio Martin.

The Mayor of Berkeley, Theodore Hoskins, said the incident was not the same as that which had played out in Ferguson in August. He said while Ferguson was a predominantly black town with a white mayor and white police chief, Berkeley had a Black mayor and a Black police chief. "We're different than Ferguson," said Hoskins.

At his own press conference on Wednesday morning, Col Jon Belmar, the chief of St Louis County Police, said Martin, the young man who was shot dead, was "known" to the force and had been arrested three times since he was 17. He said the incidents involved armed robbery, assault and the illegal use of a weapon.

Sierra Leone declares 5-day Ebola lockdown in north

AFP, Freetown

Sierra Leone's government has declared a five-day lockdown in the country's north to step up efforts to contain the Ebola epidemic, while making an exception for Christmas.

"Muslims and Christians are not allowed to hold services in mosques and churches throughout the lockdown except for Christians on Christmas Day," Alie Kamara, resident minister for the Northern Region, told AFP.

The lockdown announced Wednesday is designed "to intensify the containment of the Ebola virus," he said, adding: "We are working to break the chain of transmission."

Deputy communication minister Theo Nicol said "the lockdown for five days... is meant for us to get an accurate picture of the situation," adding: "Other districts will carry on with their own individual lockdown after this if they deemed it necessary."

Ebola has killed more than 7,500 people, almost all of them in west Africa.

Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea are the three nations worst-hit by the epidemic, and Sierra Leone recently overtook Liberia as the country with the highest number of

Ebola infections.

Kamara said shops and markets would be closed throughout the period, and "no unauthorised vehicles or motorcycle taxis" would be allowed to circulate.

Among "key objectives" is to allow health workers to identify patients, Kamara said.

As of Wednesday six of the country's 14



departments have these restrictions in place.

The lockdown came after it was announced that a fourth member of the UN mission in neighbouring Liberia had been hospitalised after testing positive for the virus.

Liberia tops the number of Ebola deaths in the world with 3,376 fatalities but has seen a clear decrease of new transmissions in the past month.

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