



Assad 'part of the solution' in Syria

Says UN envoy

AFP, Vienna

Any resolution to the fighting in Syria must involve President Bashar al-Assad, the United Nations envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura said yesterday in the first such acknowledgement by the UN.

"President Assad is part of the solution," de Mistura told a joint press conference with Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz in Vienna.

"I will continue to have very important discussions with him," he added, noting that "the only solution is a political solution."

This was the first time a UN envoy on Syria explicitly named Assad as part of a peaceful solution after nearly four years of fighting between government troops and rebels seeking the leader's overthrow.

De Mistura, who was in Damascus this week meeting with Assad, is due to deliver a report on his mission to the UN Security Council on February 17.

If no solution to the conflict is found, "the only one who takes advantage of it is (the Islamic State group) ISIS Daesh," de Mistura said, referring to the jihadists who have taken over parts of Syria and Iraq.

The group is a "monster waiting for this conflict to take place in order to be able to take advantage," he said.

Kurz meanwhile agreed that "in the fight against IS it can be necessary to fight on the same side" but insisted that "Assad will never be a friend or even a partner."

Human rights groups have accused Syria's government of indiscriminate bombardment of civilians in rebel-held areas, including with crude "barrel bombs" -- allegations Assad denied in a BBC interview this week.



People visit the grave of shooting victims Yusor Abu-Salha and Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha after a burial in Wendell, North Carolina, on Thursday. More than 5,000 people gathered for the funerals who were killed by an anti-religion neighbor.

PHOTO: AFP

## 18 killed despite peace deal

Europe threatens Russia with sanctions over deal collapse

AFP, Donetsk

At least 18 people have been killed in eastern Ukraine in new artillery shelling just a day after a peace deal was signed to end the 10-month conflict.

Pro-Moscow rebels and government officials yesterday said that seven civilians were killed across the conflict zone during the past 24 hours while Ukraine's military said 11 soldiers lost their lives.

The unrest came as Europe warned Russia it risked fresh sanctions if the fighting did not stop.

The rebels and Kiev agreed to a wide-ranging peace plan Thursday after marathon talks in the Belarusian capital Minsk between the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany.

A ceasefire across the conflict zone was meant to start at midnight Ukraine time Sunday (2200 GMT Saturday) with both sides supposed to begin pulling back

heavy weaponry from along the frontline no later than two days after that.

The fragile agreement was seen as the best hope of ending the conflict, which has killed at least 5,480 people and ratcheted East-West tensions to highs not seen since the Cold War, but scepticism remains high after the collapse of a similar previous peace plan.

Kiev and the West accuse Russia of

### UKRAINE CRISIS

stoking the war in ex-Soviet Ukraine by pouring arms and troops to help the pro-Russian rebels fighting Kiev government troops in Ukraine's industrial east. Moscow denies the charges.

"I don't want anyone to have any illusions or to seem like I'm naive -- there is still an awful long way to go to peace," Ukraine President Petro

Poroshenko told troops near Kiev.

"Nobody is absolutely certain that the conditions for peace signed in Minsk will be fulfilled."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, warned Russia that the European Union, which has already slapped Moscow with sanctions over the crisis, was not ruling out further measures if the truce failed.

"If there are difficulties we wouldn't rule out other sanctions," she said in Brussels on Thursday, after the 17-hour Minsk talks with French President Francois Hollande, Russian leader Vladimir Putin and Poroshenko.

In the run-up to the truce, Ukraine's military said Friday that fighting remained fiercest around the strategic town of Debaltseve.

Ukraine said rebels had fired missiles at the beleaguered railway hub, mid-way between the main separatist bastions of Donetsk and Luhansk.

## US Senate confirms Carter as new defense secretary

AFP, Washington

Ashton Carter, a hard-charging intellectual known for blunt talk, was confirmed as US defense secretary Thursday, and he could soon find himself at odds with a White House that clashed with previous Pentagon chiefs.

The Senate -- by a vote of 93 to five -- overwhelmingly approved Carter, an accomplished defense technocrat with degrees in Medieval history and theoretical physics.

But at his confirmation hearing last week, Carter signaled an independent streak, venturing beyond the White House's stated policy on Ukraine and promising a fresh look at troop withdrawal plans in Afghanistan.

His comments provoked a quick response from a White House Spokesman Josh Earnest said any decision on arming Ukraine's army or other issues would be up to the "commander-in-chief" and not Carter.

Carter has gained a reputation as a bona-



fide expert on hi-tech weapons and defense budgets, portraying himself as a reformer determined to shake up the Pentagon's vast bureaucracy.

But much of his time will be taken up with a new war against extremists in the Middle East, with the United States leading an open-ended bombing campaign against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria. He also will have to contend with upheaval in Yemen, Iran's nuclear ambitions, a resurgent Russia that has rattled Eastern European allies, and an expanding Chinese military that could jeopardize the US Navy's dominance in the Pacific.

Carter will not be prepared to simply rubber stamp White House decisions, said Stephen Biddle, a professor at George Washington University who befriended Carter while at Harvard.

"I'm sure he'll want to be an architect and not just a carpenter," Biddle said.

## Yemen 'collapsing before our eyes'

UN chief tells Security Council; Saudi joins West in pulling out staff

AFP, Sanaa

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon appealed to the Security Council for action to halt Yemen's slide toward anarchy, warning the country was "collapsing before our eyes", as more countries evacuated their staff from the crisis-hit country.

Saudi Arabia, Germany and Italy became the latest countries to withdraw embassy staff from Yemen yesterday as an exodus of foreign diplomats gathered pace due to growing insecurity.

Long on the front line of the war against al-Qaeda, Yemen has descended into chaos since Shi'ite militiamen, known as Huthis, seized Sanaa in September and ousted the government last week.

Riyadh, Berlin and Rome said they had temporarily closed their missions in the capital Sanaa.

"Due to the deteriorating security and political situation in the Yemeni capital, Saudi Arabia has suspended all embassy operations in Sanaa and evacuated all its staff," said the Saudi foreign ministry.

The United States, Britain and France have rushed to close their embassies over security fears, with US staff destroying top-secret documents and sensitive equipment before pulling out Wednesday.

The Netherlands followed suit the next day.

The Huthis said Western powers had no reason to shut their embassies, insisting security was solid in the capital.

The latest embassy closures came a day after remarks by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who warned Yemen was falling apart.

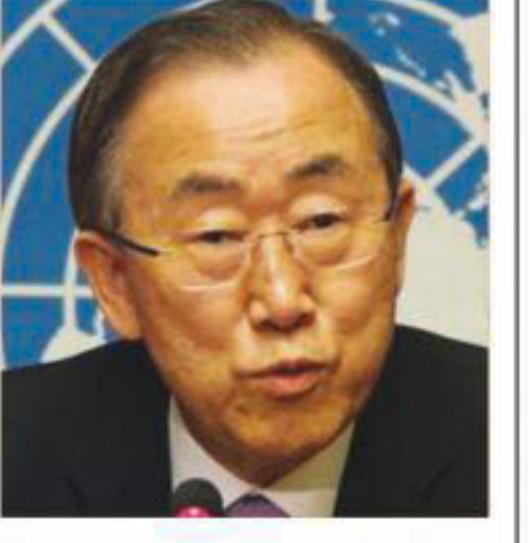
"Let me be clear: Yemen is collapsing before our eyes. We cannot stand by and watch," Ban told the UN Security Council in New York.

The instability has been seized upon by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which is expanding its foothold across the country.

AQAP fighters overran an army camp in southern Shabwa province on Thursday, that left 12 troops and 15 militants dead, military officials said revising an earlier toll of seven killed.

The militants also seized a large quantity of armour and heavy weaponry, including dozens of tanks and army vehicles as well as artillery pieces, an military official said.

They later handed back control of the camp following tribal mediation but kept the weapons, local government officials said.



Members of the Economic Freedom Fighters, wearing red uniforms, clash with security forces during South African President's State of the Nation address in Cape Town on Thursday. The members of the Economic Freedom fighters led by populist firebrand Julius Malema had caused uproar as they demanded that Zuma repay millions of taxpayers money spent on his private residence.

PHOTO: AFP



'Abbott most incompetent Western leader'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

An expert at the internationally respected US think-tank has labelled Tony Abbott the most "incompetent leader in any industrialised democracy," as the Australian prime minister provoked criticism over his latest remarks.

Speaking during the Australian parliament's question time, Abbott accused the opposition Labour party of causing a "holocaust of job losses."

He immediately withdrew his comment in parliament, but the damage had already been done, and many opponents eagerly picked up on the latest gaffe.

Abbott's many gaffes are among the numerous issues a senior researcher at the Council on Foreign Relations lists against the current Australian leader in the post titled: 'Tony Abbott Has To Go'.

Encouraging Abbott's party to unseat him, Joshua Kurlantzick says: "Abbott has proven so incapable of clear policy thinking, so unwilling to consult with even his own ministers and advisers, and so poor at communicating that he has to go."

Abbott has the worst poll ratings for any Australian leader since 1994.

## ISIS seizes parts of Iraq town close to US base

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Isis militants seized control of parts of the western Iraqi town of al-Baghdadi, close to an air base where 320 US Marines are training Iraqi soldiers.

The town is northwest of Ramadi, in Anbar province, and has been under attack from the insurgents for months.

Much of the province was attacked by Isis during its bloody advance through Iraq and Syria, and now ninety per cent of the district has now been captured by fighters, a local official told Reuters.

Fox News reports that this is significant because of its proximity to the Al Asad air base holding hundreds of US Marines training members of the Iraqi 7th Division -- the

town is just a 13 minute drive away.

A Pentagon spokeswoman said heavy fighting in al-Baghdadi, but stressed there had been no direct attack on the air base. However, she said there was reports of "ineffective indirect fire in the vicinity of the base".

The death toll from fighting is not yet known. The heavily fortified air base has reportedly been attacked by mortar fire once previously since December.

Militants attacked al-Baghdadi from two directions earlier in the day and then advanced on the town, intelligence sources and officials in the Jazeera and Badiya operations commands told Reuters.

Five civilians were also killed in bomb attacks in two towns south of Baghdad.

## Five killed in first Boko Haram attack in Chad

AFP, N'djamena

Nigeria-based Boko Haram Islamists yesterday carried out their first attack inside Chad, killing five people in an early morning strike on a village and military camp on the shores of Lake Chad, a security source told AFP.

The pre-dawn attack left four civilians and one soldier dead and most of the village of Ngouboua torched before the jihadis were pushed back, the source said on condition of anonymity.

The attackers struck after crossing the lake from Baga, Nigeria to Ngouboua in Chad in large canoes.

Two-thirds of Ngouboua, where around 7,000 Nigerian refugees have sought refuge from the jihadis attacks, was torched in the

onslaught.

Boko Haram has carried out several cross-border attacks on neighbours of Nigeria who have launched a regional operation to combat the group.

Meanwhile, at least 21 people were killed in two separate Boko Haram attacks on villages near the key city of Maiduguri in northeast Nigeria, a community leader and a witness said yesterday. The two attacks came before a female suicide bomber blew herself up at a crowded market in the town of Biu, in the south of Borno state.

The death toll could increase further, as health officials were working to establish the identities of at least two other people who were blown apart by the strength of the blast.

GENEVA SUMMIT  
Climate pact blueprint ready for adoption

AFP, Geneva

Negotiators in Geneva are geared to adopt a climate blueprint Friday, a symbolic milestone in the fraught UN process that must culminate in a universal pact in Paris in December.

Assembled over the past six days, the 86-page draft plan for limiting manmade global warming is due to be adopted at a closing session that starts at 1400 GMT.

Ever since the 2009 Copenhagen conference failed to deliver a world agreement, the 195 nations gathered under the UN Framework Convention for Climate Change have been working on a new project for adoption by the end of this year.

Set to be inked at the November 30-December 11 UNFCCC Conference of Parties (COP) in Paris, the pact must enter into force by 2020 to further the UN goal of limiting warming to two degrees Celsius over pre-Industrial Revolution levels.

Scientists warn that at current greenhouse gas emission trends, Earth is on track for double that, or more -- a recipe for catastrophic droughts, storms, floods and rising seas.