

UN ready to release list of accused

AFP, Geneva

UN investigators yesterday said they were prepared to publish secret lists of alleged war criminals in Syria to help stem an "exponential rise" in atrocities from nearly four years of war.

Releasing the lists would put "alleged perpetrators on notice" and could "serve to maximize the potential deterrent effect" and "help to protect people at risk of abuse," a commission of inquiry said in a new report.

The commission has drawn up four lists of individuals and groups it believes are guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and has kept them locked up in a safe in Geneva, out of concern for due process.

But the investigators said they were ready to shift their approach after nearly four years of efforts.

"We are trying to convince, to mobilize the international community to consider all options on the table for accountability and not to ignore the horrific, the abominable situation of the victims of this war," Brazilian Paulo Pinheiro, who heads the panel, told reporters at UN headquarters in New York.

The investigators are set to hand over a fifth list of suspected war criminals to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva next month, and Pinheiro said he expects a decision during the March 17 meeting on the release of the names.

More than 210,000 people have been killed in Syria and half of the population has been forced to flee their homes since the conflict erupted in March 2011.

The lists include a number of unit commanders and armed group leaders who were identified as perpetrators on the basis of their command responsibility.

US signals delay in troop pullout from Afghanistan

Says new Pentagon chief in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

President Barack Obama's new Pentagon chief yesterday said the United States was seriously considering slowing the pace of a troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, as the country faces a growing Taliban insurgency.

US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter's comments in Kabul offered the clearest sign yet that Washington was ready to delay the closure of some bases and retain more troops after appeals by Afghanistan's new President Ashraf Ghani and advice from commanders.

To safeguard "hard-won" progress, Obama "is considering a number of options to reinforce our support for President Ghani's security strategy, including possible changes to the timeline for our drawdown of US troops," Carter said after talks with Afghan leaders.

"That could mean taking another look at the timing and sequencing of base closures to ensure we have the right array of coalition capabilities," he said at a joint news conference with Ghani.

Apart from troop numbers, the United States and its allies would need to make "long-term commitments in resources, equipment and other support" to ensure the success of the Afghan forces, he said.

Carter's visit comes amid a sharp rise in Afghan casualties from the 13-year conflict,

with the UN recording a 22 percent increase in the number of civilians killed and injured in 2014 due to an intensification in ground fighting between government and insurgent forces.

It also comes as Obama faces a decision about the timetable for a troop drawdown in Afghanistan. Under the current plan, the 10,000-strong US force is due to drop to roughly 5,000 by the end of 2015 and then pull out altogether by the time Obama leaves office in two years.

But the Obama administration already has delayed the pace of the withdrawal, allowing 1,000 additional American forces to remain this year.

And the US commander on the ground, General John Campbell, has suggested he favours slowing the drawdown further, though the details of the possible options before Obama remain unclear.

Afghan leaders and some lawmakers have urged Obama to reconsider the withdrawal timetable, warning that an early US exit could jeopardise security and international aid.

His trip coincides with a concerted effort by Ghani to promote peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban, with Pakistan voicing strong support for the initiative.

Ghani declined to confirm whether Taliban leaders were now ready to enter into direct negotiations with his government, but he said the conditions were ripe for a potential breakthrough.

Lost Sherlock Holmes story found

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A lost Sherlock Holmes story written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, has been unearthed.

Walter Elliot, an 80-year-old historian, stumbled upon the "great little story" in a collection written to raise funds for the flood-hit Scottish town of Selkirk at the turn of the 20th century.

"Sherlock Holmes: Discovering the Border Burghs and, By Deduction, the Brig Bazaar" was sold in a collection of short stories called The Book o' the Brig.

The story dates back over a century and Elliot, a retired woodcutter, was

given the 48-page book 50 years ago. He recently found it in his attic, and it will go on display at the Cross Keys Selkirk Pop-Up Community Museum.

It was put together to raise funds for a wooden bridge that crossed the Ettrick after its predecessor was destroyed by flooding in 1902. Conan Doyle was a visitor to Selkirk and agreed to contribute to the book. It was sold at a bazaar to raise funds.

The story follows Holmes' deducing the fact that Watson was going to the Border country. Watson also says he is "going to Selkirk in aid of a bridge".

"I have no idea if it has ever been published – I've never seen it," Elliot said.



Ice floes are seen along the Hudson River in New York. Inset, Two women take a selfie before a frozen fountain in New York. Millions of people awoke to painfully cold weather in the eastern US on Friday, with temperatures frigid enough in New York City and Washington to break decades-old record lows for February 20. At least 20 people across the country have died as a result of the blast from the arctic.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Russia won't bow to pressure

Says Putin as Kerry threatens 'extra sanctions'; rebels, govt exchange prisoners

AGENCIES

President Vladimir Putin said that Russia will never yield to any external pressure as US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday said that new "serious sanctions" against Russia were being considered over the conflict in Ukraine.

In a reception to mark the upcoming Defender of the Fatherland Day, Putin shared his confidence in Russia's military to protect the country from outside threats, Xinhua reported yesterday.

The Defender of the Fatherland Day is a national holiday celebrated on February 23 in honour of Russian servicemen.

"No one should have any illusions that it could achieve military supremacy over Russia or to put pressure on us in any form," Putin said on Friday.

Adding that his forces would always have an 'adequate response', he vowed to step up an ambitious military modernisation, with hundreds of new combat jets, missiles and other weapons.

His remarks came as Russia's relationship with the West has seemed to hit its lowest point due to the ongoing

crisis in eastern Ukraine.

The West has been criticising Russia for its intervention in Ukraine, allegations Moscow has continued to deny. The US and the European Union have imposed several sanctions against Moscow, which has cost the Russian economy heavily.

In London, Kerry said the US and Britain are considering deepening sanctions against Russia due to its "craven behaviour" in Ukraine.

"In the next few days I anticipate

UKRAINE CRISIS

that President Obama will evaluate the choices that are in front of him and will make his decision," he told a press conference in London.

"I am confident that some additional steps will be taken in response to the breach of this ceasefire."

Kerry said that a truce brokered by Germany and France had been honoured by pro-Russian separatists in only "a few areas".

"If this failure continues, make no

mistake, there will be further consequences including consequences that will place added strains on Russia's already troubled economy," he added.

On Saturday, members of Ukraine's military and pro-Moscow rebels swapped scores of prisoners in a rare act of compliance with the truce, brokered in Minsk earlier this month.

Meanwhile, General Sir Adrian Bradshaw, Nato's deputy supreme allied commander in Europe, said tensions with Russia could become an all-out conflict. Putin could invade and seize Nato territory and change Europe's borders, he added in a speech at the Royal United Services Institute in London.

The general said: 'The threat from Russia and the risk it brings of miscalculation resulting in a strategic conflict, represents an existential threat to our whole being.'

Nato has agreed to set up a rapid reaction force of about 5,000 soldiers ready to move within 48 hours in case of Russian aggression in Eastern Europe. Adrian said this would show Russia that an attack on any Nato member would 'lead them to a conflict with the whole alliance'.

Battle has been won, but not the war

Greek PM warns of 'difficulties' over debt deal

BBC ONLINE

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has warned of "real difficulties" ahead, as his government faces a Monday deadline to submit a list of reforms to lenders.

Under a deal agreed on Friday, the list must be approved by the international creditors in order for Greece to secure a four-month extension of its bailout.

"We won a battle, not the war," Tsipras said yesterday. The deal is widely regarded as a major climb down for the PM, who won power vowing to reverse budget cuts.

He hailed the agreement as a "decisive step" that "achieved much" towards ending austerity, but added: "We have a long and difficult road ahead."

The BBC's Mark Lowen in Athens says the government is engaged in a hard sell to the Greek people over the deal with eurozone ministers and the IMF in Brussels.

The Greek cabinet is discussing the potential list of reforms, which must be approved before eurozone members ratify the bailout extension on Tuesday.

Analysts say a collapse of the deal would revive fears of an exit from the euro, a so-called "grexit" - something both the EU and Greece say they want to avoid.

German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schauble stressed on Friday that there would be no payment of new funds to Greece until the conditions of the deal had been met.



A fire blazes at "The Torch", a residential high-rise tower, in Dubai, yesterday. Hundreds of people were evacuated from one of the world's tallest residential buildings yesterday when fire swept through the more than 330-metre (1,082-foot) tall skyscraper. Dubai police said there were no fatalities but seven people were treated at the scene for smoke inhalation. Authorities had no immediate word on the cause of the fire.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Terror drive stains Pak-Saudi ties

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have long enjoyed close relations, but Islamabad's new-found resolve for fighting the root causes of extremism has seen the Gulf state come in for rare criticism.

The two countries, both with majority Sunni Muslim populations, are bound together by shared Islamic religious ties, financial aid from oil-rich Saudi and Pakistani military assistance to the kingdom.

But a Taliban massacre at a school that killed more than 150 people in December, mostly children, has led the government to crack down on militants and talk of bringing religious seminaries under tighter control.

Now the country's media and even government ministers have begun to question whether support from Saudi Arabia for seminaries, known as madrasas, is fuelling violent extremism -- bringing tension to the relationship for the first time.

Last week the Saudi embassy issued a statement saying that all its

donations to seminaries had government clearance, after a minister accused the Riyadh government of creating instability across the Muslim world.

The Pakistani foreign ministry responded by saying that funding by private individuals through "informal channels" would also be scrutinised closely to try to choke off funding for terror groups.

While the statement avoided mentioning Saudi Arabia specifically, it was widely interpreted as a rebuke.

Badar Alam, editor of Herald magazine, a respected Pakistani current affairs monthly, said the recent wave of criticism was unprecedented.

"Saudi has vast commercial and economic interests in Pakistan. There are open questions being asked on this relationship," he said.

"Before, nobody would ask any questions in any manner. Now even the Urdu press is asking questions."

Donors in Saudi Arabia have long been accused of quietly funding terror groups sympathetic to the kingdom's hardline version of Sunni Islam.

Leaked diplomatic cables by then-US secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2009 said Saudi Arabian donors were "the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide". The cable cited the Taliban, al-Qaeda and Pakistan's Sunni Muslim sectarian militants Lashkar-e-Jhangvi as examples of where funds were being channelled.

Linked to the funding is Saudi Arabia's long geostrategic struggle with Iran, the key Shia Muslim power in the region.

But, Najmuddin Sheikh, a former foreign secretary and ambassador, said any efforts to cut back on foreign funding for extremist seminaries must go hand in hand with similar efforts at home.

A senior government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, agreed.

"We didn't need the Saudis to radicalise us, we have geared ourselves to that," he said.

And while the current mood may be critical of Riyadh, the official said in the long run the relationship was too important and too beneficial to jeopardise.

NEWSINbrief

130 killed in Myanmar fighting: army

AFP, Naypyidaw

Myanmar's army yesterday said more than 130 people had died in a deepening battle with rebels in the northeast, declaring it would not rest until stability was restored to the border area which tens of thousands have fled. Fighting is being raged in the remote Kokang region of Shan state since February 9.

Australia braces for floods after cyclones

AFP, Rockhampton

Australia was clearing up yesterday after two severe cyclones, Tropical Cyclone Marcia and Tropical Cyclone Lam, left a trail of destruction, wrecking hundreds of homes and cutting electricity to tens of thousands, even as authorities warned of more flooding and gusty winds to come. Both cyclones have since ceased, but the Bureau of Meteorology warned of further flooding, heavy rains, damaging winds in southeast Queensland and northern New South Wales state.

Caracas mayor held over 'coup plot'

AFP, Caracas

Caracas mayor and opposition politician Antonio Ledezma remained in custody yesterday following his arrest over what Venezuela president Nicolas Maduro alleges is a coup plot financed by the United States. The US dismissed the claims as "baseless and false".

Liberia lifts Ebola curfew, opens borders

AFP, Monrovia

Liberia said Friday it was lifting nationwide curfews and re-opening borders shut last year at the height of the Ebola crisis which has killed more than 9,500 people. The move comes with Liberia and its neighbours Guinea and Sierra Leone seeing new infections drop to a tenth of the numbers being reported at the peak of the outbreak.

QUOTE of the day



"No one should have any illusions that it could achieve military supremacy over Russia or to put pressure on us in any form."

Says President Vladimir Putin as West ramps up pressure on Russia over Ukraine crisis.

Nigeria army recaptures town from Boko Haram

AFP, Lagos

Nigeria's military yesterday claimed to have recaptured the town of Baga from Boko Haram, more than a month after it was overrun in what is feared to be the worst massacre of its six-year insurgency.

Defence spokesman Chris Olukolade claimed that "a large number of terrorists" drowned in Lake Chad as they tried to flee bombardment from airforce jets.

There was no independent corroboration of the claim, as thousands of Baga residents had fled the town after Boko Haram attacked on January 3 and hundreds, if not more, were killed in the following days. Much of the town and 12 surrounding settlements were burnt to the ground.