

Two cops shot amid chaos

AFP, Washington

Two police officers in the US flashpoint town of Ferguson were shot early yesterday during the latest protest over the treatment of blacks by the mainly white police force.

One officer was shot in the face and the other in the shoulder as a protest rally outside the police station in the Missouri town was dispersing, St Louis County police chief Jon Belmar told reporters.

He said the officers, aged 32 and 41, were conscious but that their injuries were serious.

Ferguson in recent months has been one of the hot spots for the long-standing US problem of harsh treatment of young black men by mainly white police.

Earlier in the day, the Ferguson police chief resigned over a scathing US Justice Department report into the fatal shooting of an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, by one of his officers back in August.

Brown was killed by white police officer Darren Wilson, igniting angry protests and a national debate about race and law enforcement in America.

Wilson was not charged in that death.

UNSC 'failing Syrian people'

UN, rights groups accuse world powers of protecting own interests as war enters fifth year

BBC ONLINE

The United Nations and a global coalition of aid agencies have accused international powers of failing the victims of the Syrian conflict.

Stephane Dujarric, a spokesman for the UN chief, told the BBC powerful nations had put their own interests ahead of the need to end the war.

He was responding to a joint report from humanitarian agencies, which criticised the UN Security Council.

It said civilians had experienced their "worst year" since the conflict began.

Dujarric told the BBC the UN still believed in bringing about a political solution to the conflict and called on the international community to unite.

He said there had been real success in eliminating President Bashar al-Assad's chemical weapons and getting some humanitarian aid through, but the supply of weapons to the warring parties was just making things worse.

"We have found a lack of political will to move forward in a united fashion to stop the fighting," Mr Dujarric said.

The Failing Syria report by agencies, including Save the Children and Oxfam, said the 15 member Security Council had not fulfilled pledges to increase aid access and alleviate suffering.

"The bitter reality is that the Security Council has failed to implement its resolutions," said Jan Egeland, secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, another of the groups involved in the report.

"Parties to the conflict have acted with impunity and ignored the Security Council's demands, civilians are not protected and their access to relief has not improved," he added.

Three Security Council resolutions passed last year called for an end to attacks on civilians, an increase in aid, and allowed the UN to operate in Syria without permission from Damascus, among other things.

Separate analysis by another group of charities says 83% of Syria's lights visible from space have gone out.

With Syria, a coalition of more than 100 humanitarian and human rights organisations, released satellite imagery showing that the number of lights had fallen dramatically since March 2011.

83% OF LIGHTS HAVE GONE OUT



INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Satellite images highlight the devastation caused by four years of conflict in Syria, with most of the country now plunged into darkness.

Eighty-three per cent of the lights have gone out in Syria as a humanitarian crisis continues to grip the country, according to scientists at the Wuhan University in China.

In Aleppo, one of the cities hardest hit by civil war and Isis's insurgency, a staggering 93 per cent of the city is now in the dark.

The research was conducted by academics in co-operation with the WithSyria coalition of 130 non-governmental organizations.

Former Labour foreign secretary David Miliband, president of the International Rescue Committee, said: "Four years since this crisis began,

Syria's people have been plunged into the dark: destitute, fearful, and grieving for the friends they have lost and the country they once knew."

The images come as international powers were accused of failing victims in Syria in the year after the UN Security Council Resolution 2139 was adopted.

The resolution called for "an urgent increase in access to humanitarian aid in Syria" and demanded that "all parties immediately cease attacks against civilians, end arbitrary detention, kidnapping and torture, and lift sieges of populated areas".

However, a report by humanitarian agencies found the resolutions and the hope created by them "have rung hollow" for citizens in Syria.

It concluded: "In the 12 months since Resolution 2139 was passed, civilians in Syria have witnessed ever-increasing destruction suffering and death."

The organisations said they believed such a dramatic drop was because of a number of factors, including infrastructural damage.

Separately, a UN-backed report by the Syrian Centre for Policy Research said four years of armed conflict, economic disintegration and social fragmentation in Syria have forced some 10 million people to flee their homes and reduced life expectancy by two decades.

Also on Wednesday, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) said a massive increase in medical assistance was urgently required.

In its report, MSF said from the estimated 2,500 doctors who worked in Aleppo, Syria's second biggest city, before the conflict, fewer than 100 now remain.

The rest have fled, become internally displaced or have been kidnapped or killed.

It said this has left a "catastrophic gap in expertise and experience in medical care".

The unrest in Syria began in 2011 with nationwide protests against President Bashar al-Assad. His security forces attempted to use force to crush the dissent, with the opposition taking up arms to fight back.

It was the first agreement signed between Cuban and American companies since the announcement on December 17 that the two countries would renew diplomatic ties after more than 50 years of hostility.

The telephone link between the two countries has been interrupted and restored numerous times since Fidel Castro came to power in the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and began nationalizing American-owned companies in the 1960s.

But this is the first time the connection has been restored since February 25, 1999, according to Cuban authorities.



A demonstrator is detained and arrested during a protest outside the Ferguson Police Department in Ferguson, MO, early yesterday. Protests erupted after the announcement of the resignation of Ferguson Police Chief Tom Jackson earlier in the day. Inset, A protestor holds a sign during the protest.

PHOTO: AFP

Nemtsov killing exposes cracks in Kremlin unity

REUTERS, Moscow

The killing of Russian opposition figure Boris Nemtsov within sight of the Kremlin has exposed rarely seen tensions between different camps inside President Vladimir Putin's system of rule.

No outsiders can know with any certainty what is happening behind the red-brick walls of the Kremlin, but some of Nemtsov's associates say his shooting is being used by one faction to send Putin a message that they are unhappy and need to be reckoned with.

That would represent a challenge to the foundations of Putin's 15-year-old rule, built on a rigid pyramid of power and the assumption of unshakeable loyalty.

"I think that perhaps Putin, even completely sincerely, was bewildered and even afraid," Vadim Prokhorov, Nemtsov's lawyer, said of the hours after the Feb 27 shooting.

"Because if you can do that next to the Kremlin, then is it not possible to do it along the route of the (presidential) motorcade?" he told Reuters.

Feeding a mood of frenzied speculation in Moscow, Putin this week canceled a planned trip to Kazakhstan without explanation. A Kazakh official said Putin was ill, while the Kremlin said he was fine and working as usual.

Yet analysts point to signs of tensions between, on one side, the powerful head of Russia's Chechnya region, Ramzan Kadyrov, and on the other, the Russian state security agencies which are Putin's closest associates.

Many of Nemtsov's supporters said the president stood to gain by removing a relentless critic. Russian officials denied involvement and Putin called the killing a shameful tragedy.

Sergei Sharov-Delaunay, an aide to Nemtsov in the opposition movement, said he had a number of theories about the motive for the killing, but one is that it was part of an internal power struggle.

"It might have been some group within the authorities trying to put pressure on Putin, to boost their position, to force even more radical scenarios," he told Reuters.

Kadyrov, the Chechen leader, professes loyalty to Putin but also represents a risk for him. Kadyrov put down an anti-Moscow insurgency in Chechnya, helping Putin cement his rule. In exchange, Putin gave him a large degree of autonomy to run his region as he chooses. The arrangement has so far been successful for both men, but some observers say Kadyrov is overstepping the mark.

There are signs too that Putin's nationalist allies, who include some senior people inside the government, are getting fractious.

The best-known Russian commander among the separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine, a former special forces officer called Igor Girkin, has accused Putin's entourage of betrayal.

"The team that the president is now working with is absolutely pro-Western," he said in January on Neuromir TV, a Russian Internet TV channel. "It is the same people that the West is counting on as the fifth column."

Turkey detains spy who helped UK girls join ISIS

AFP, Ankara

Turkey yesterday said it had detained an intelligence agent working for one of the states in the US-led coalition fighting Islamic State (ISIS) for helping three British teenage girls cross into Syria to join the jihadists.

The surprise revelation by Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu appeared aimed at deflecting sustained criticism from Western countries that Turkey is failing to halt the flow of jihadists across its borders.

"Do you know who helped those girls? He was captured. He was someone working for the intelligence (service) of a country in the coalition," Cavusoglu told the A-Haber channel in an interview published by the official Anatolia news agency.

The spy, whose nationality has not been revealed, was arrested 10 days ago, he said.

Close friends Kadiza Sultana, 16, and 15-year-olds Shamima Begum and Amira Abase, crossed into Syria after boarding a flight from London to Istanbul

Tikrit victory 'matter of time'

Says Iraq as forces tighten noose on ISIS militants around the city

AFP, Albu Ajil

Thousands of Iraqi troops and militiamen laid siege to jihadist fighters holed up in Tikrit yesterday, wary of rushing into streets littered with bombs and infested with snipers.

After making major gains in and around the city on Wednesday, commanders were confident that Baghdad's biggest victory yet against the Islamic State group was only a matter of time.

"Now we are moving to the second phase of our plan," Defence Minister Khaled al-Obeidi told reporters in Salaheddin province, of which Tikrit is the capital.

"We are very keen for our losses to be as low as possible. Time is on our side, we have the initiative," he said on

the 11th day of the offensive. "Tikrit is sealed off from all sides," he said.

None of the fighting forces involved have provided casualty figures since the start of the operation to wrest back Tikrit, the largest since ISIS captured the city nine months ago.

Dozens of bodies are being driven south to Baghdad and the Shia holy city of Najaf almost every day, however, and, while government forces have had the upper hand, ISIS has done damage with suicide car bombs, booby traps and snipers.

Troops and police as well as volunteers from the Popular Mobilisation units moved deep into the northern half of Tikrit on Wednesday and finished securing outlying areas.

Tikrit was the hometown of executed dictator Saddam Hussein, whose Baath party collaborated with the jihadists when they took over almost a third of the country last June.

With crucial military backing from neighbouring Iran and a 60-nation US-led coalition, Baghdad has rolled back some of the losses.

It started with operations to secure the Shia holy cities of Karbala and Najaf and bolster Baghdad's defences, then worked its way north, retaking Diyala province earlier this year.

Commanders see the recapture of overwhelmingly Sunni Arab Tikrit as a stepping stone for the reconquest of Mosul further north, Iraq's second city, which once had a population of two million.

China says ISIS spreading into Xinjiang

TNN, Beijing

A Chinese official has revealed an "inside story", which indicates the Islamic State (ISIS)'s influence has spread to China's disturbed Xinjiang province bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"I can give you an inside story. Recently, we have busted a terrorist cell in Xinjiang run by those who have returned from fighting with the organization (ISIS)," the province's Communist Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian said on the sidelines of China's annual parliament session.

"We broke up a few cases involving those who had returned directly after fighting in war."

This is the first time a senior Xinjiang official has confirmed Chinese nationals have returned after joining the ISIS.

Chinese police recently nabbed some Uighurs trying to leave an airport using fake Turkish passports, and others trying to illegally crossover to Myanmar.

China has witnessed repeated instances of violence, including attacks on policemen, knifing sprees and bombing, which it blames on Uighurs.

Google launches virtual tour of Everest region



AFP, Kathmandu

Google launched a virtual tour of Nepal's Everest region yesterday, allowing armchair tourists a rare glimpse of life in one of the toughest and most inaccessible places on earth.

The Street View project takes viewers into the heart of the Sagarmatha national park, home to the world's highest mountain, where icy blue rivers run below snow-capped peaks, monks play traditional music and yak-herders navigate precipitous stone-strewn trails.

Armed with two single-lens tripod cameras and a 15-lens custom-built "Trekker" unit designed for backpacks, teams travelled on foot to capture more than 45,000 panoramic images of the remote villages inhabited by the ethnic Sherpa community in the eastern Himalayas.

Google worked on the project with Kathmandu-based start-up Story Cycle and Nepalese mountaineer Apa Sherpa, who scaled Mount Everest a record 21 times before he retired from climbing.

Nepal's Sherpa community, who have long laboured as guides and porters on mountaineering expeditions, hope the project will promote the region and raise funds to improve access to education, offering future generations a way out of the high-risk climbing industry.



Members of the popular mobilisation unit attend a combat training session at a military camp in the Iraqi Shia shrine city of Karbala in central Iraq yesterday, ahead of joining the military operation in the city of Tikrit.

PHOTO: AFP