

'25,000 foreign fighters' joined ISIS, Qaeda: UN

More than 25,000 foreign fighters from 100 nations have travelled to join militant groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS), a UN report says. It said the number of foreign fighters worldwide had soared by 71% between the middle of 2014 and March 2015. Syria and Iraq were by far the biggest destinations and had become a "finishing school for extremists". It also said if ISIS were defeated in Syria and Iraq, the foreign fighters could be scattered across the world. The UN Security Council had asked experts six months ago to investigate the threat from foreign fighters joining Islamic State and other militant groups. In the report filed to the council late last month, the experts say the flow of foreign fighters has risen from a few thousand a decade ago and is now "higher than it has ever been historically". They say: "For the thousands of [foreign fighters] who travelled to the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq... they live and work in a veritable 'international finishing school' for extremists, as was the case in Afghanistan during the 1990s."



(From L) British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond, US Secretary of State John Kerry, EU's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif arrive prior to the announcement of an agreement on Iran nuclear talks at the The Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology (EPFL) in Lausanne yesterday.

If Iran cheats, the world will know

Obama says nuke deal will make world safe

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama touted an "historic understanding" with Iran Thursday, telling critics it would prevent Tehran from building a nuclear weapon and ease one of the most pressing threats to national security. "I am convinced that if this framework leads to a final comprehensive deal, it will make our country, our allies and our world safer," Obama said in the White House Rose Garden. Obama sketched a regimen of "the most robust and intrusive inspections" ever negotiated, coupled with dramatic curbs on Iran's ability to enrich uranium. In return, he said, the United States would agree to end years of sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy. "This deal is not based on trust. It's based on unprecedented verification," Obama said. "If Iran cheats, the world will know it." Stating that sanctions had brought Iran to the negotiating table, Obama warned that "if Iran violates the deal, sanctions can be snapped back in place." The US president wasted no time in trying to sell the deal to skeptical allies around the world and a hostile Congress at home. Obama said he would call Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu later Thursday and invited key Arab allies to a summit at the presidential retreat at Camp David this spring. In an unusual coinciding of interests, Israel and Saudi Arabia have both expressed fears that the deal could provide cover for Iran to seek a bomb. Netanyahu went as far as making his case directly to the US Congress and the American people in March, infuriating Obama and the administration at large.

Rebels seize presidential palace

Shia militias push deep into Hadi's stronghold; Qaeda frees 300 inmates in jailbreak

AFP, Aden

Yemeni rebels seized President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi's palace in his former southern stronghold Aden yesterday, dealing a symbolic blow to the self-exiled leader despite a week of Saudi-led air strikes. As the war-torn country descended deeper into chaos, Al-Qaeda militants freed hundreds of inmates in a jailbreak. The advance by Iran-backed rebels deep into Aden, the last bastion of Hadi supporters, appeared to further douse prospects of his returning any time soon from neighbouring Saudi Arabia. "Dozens of Huthi militia and their allies arrived in armoured troop carriers and entered Al-Maashiq presidential palace," said a senior security official who witnessed their advance. Heavy clashes erupted afterwards between the rebels and their opponents inside the compound, a cluster of buildings perched on a hilltop accessible by a single winding road. A defence ministry official in Aden later confirmed the fall of the palace, saying it was now controlled by forces loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, which have allied with the Huthis.

But Brigadier General Ahmed Assiri, spokesman for the Saudi-led coalition, said the situation in Aden was "stable". "Huthi militias are not in control of any government buildings in Aden," he told reporters,



without commenting specifically on the palace. The rebels have seized swathes of the country including the capital Sanaa. At least 44 people -- including 18 civilians -- were reported dead yesterday in the southern port city. Hadi fled to Aden from the capital after the Huthi Shiite rebels seized power in February, and the palace came under fire from warplanes twice

during his stay. He went into hiding last week as the rebels bore down on what was his last stronghold, later surfacing in the Saudi capital as Riyadh launched an air war on the rebels. Saudi Arabia yesterday announced its first casualties since launching the offensive, with one soldier killed and 10 more wounded by gunfire from across the Yemeni border. In the coastal city of Mukalla in southeast Yemen, Al-Qaeda militants stormed a Hadramawt provincial prison and freed more than 300 inmates, including one of their leaders, a security official said. Khalid Batarfi, a top commander with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula known for his leading role in a 2011-2012 battle with government troops during which extremists seized large parts of the south and east, had been held for more than four years. Two guards and five inmates were killed, the official added. Yemen has descended further into chaos since a Saudi-led coalition launched Operation Decisive Storm a week ago against positions held by Shiite rebels and their allies across the deeply tribal country.



Obama warned that without a deal, the US would be faced with military action as the only way to curb Iran's activities. "If Congress kills this deal, not based on expert analysis and without offering any reasonable alternative, then it's the United States that will be blamed for failure of diplomacy. International unity will collapse and the path to conflict will widen," he said. "A diplomatic solution is the best way to get this done and offers a more comprehensive and lasting solution. It is our best option by far." Obama said he would soon reach out to Republican lawmakers. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon yesterday welcomed the framework Iran nuclear deal, saying it will pave the way to bolstering peace and stability in the Middle East. "A comprehensive, negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear issue will contribute to peace and stability in the region and enable all countries to cooperate urgently to deal with the many serious security challenges they face," Ban said in a statement from his spokesman.

Most-wanted Nazi dies a free man



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One of the most-wanted Nazis in the world has died aged 93 without having been punished for a murder conviction. Danish former volunteer officer Soren Kam died on 23 March, just a little more than a fortnight after his wife passed away -- according to the German newspaper Allgauer Zeitung as reported by Reuters. Kam was the fifth-most wanted war criminal by Jewish rights organisation Simon Wiesenthal Center, that seeks to bring former Nazis to justice and educate about the Holocaust. The Dane had been a volunteer officer in the Schalburg Corps, a SS-Viking division, and was one of three men who killed Danish anti-Nazi newspaper editor Carl Henrik Clemmensen in 1943. A Danish court convicted him in absentia of the murder after the war. Another man was executed for the same crime. Kam had fled to Germany where he obtained citizenship in 1956 and his new home country had refused to extradite him to Denmark several times, according to Danish media.

FRENCH ALPS PLANE CRASH Second black box found after 9 days

AFP, Marseille

The second black box from the Germanwings plane that crashed in the French Alps last week has been found after a nine-day search, prosecutors said yesterday. Authorities are hoping to unearth more clues about the disaster from the black box after the first voice recorder suggested that co-pilot Andreas Lubitz deliberately flew the plane into a mountain. The second black box records technical flight data that could provide vital insights into the final moments of Flight 4U9525 before it crashed last Tuesday, killing all 150 people on board. The plane smashed into the mountains at a speed of 700 kilometres an hour, instantly killing everyone on board -- half of them German and more than 50 from Spain. Meanwhile, German prosecutors yesterday said the Lubitz had searched online for information about suicide and cockpit doors in the week before the disaster. A tablet computer which prosecutors said was used by him was found in a search of a flat he used in Duesseldorf, the prosecutor's office in the western city said in a statement. It indicated the user had been researching "medical methods of treatment", "ways to commit suicide" as well as "cockpit doors and their security provisions", it added.



Relatives of victims of the Sewol ferry accident have their heads shaved during a protest ahead of the anniversary of the disaster, in Seoul yesterday. A group of 52 relatives had their hair shaved, demanding the salvage of the wreckage and an independent inquiry into the mishap.

NEWS IN brief

54 feared dead in Russia trawler sinking

AFP, Moscow

Rescuers were yesterday searching freezing waters off Russia's Far East after a fishing boat sank in the Sea of Okhotsk with the loss of at least 54 lives. Some 132 people were on board the trawler Dalny Vostok when it went down at around 6:30am yesterday, off the coast of Kamchatka. Sixty-three people were rescued alive. Fifteen people were still missing.

Kashmir to expel 11,000 Afghans

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Pakistani Kashmir is set to expel some 11,000 illegal Afghan refugees under a national anti-terrorism plan announced in the wake of the country's worst ever militant attack, police said yesterday. There are an estimated three million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, either officially or unofficially.

Egypt jihadists kill 15 soldiers in Sinai

AFP, Cairo

Jihadists in Egypt's Sinai killed 15 soldiers and two civilians in attacks on checkpoints yesterday, security officials said, the deadliest in months despite a massive army campaign against the insurgents. The gunmen, believed to be members of the Islamic State group's Egypt branch, simultaneously opened fire with assault rifles and grenade launchers at five checkpoints in the restive north of the peninsula, the security officials said.

Putin threatens nuke war

Says he would go any length to drive Nato from baltics

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Russia has threatened to use "nuclear force" to defend its annexation of Crimea and warned that the "same conditions" that prompted it to take military action in Ukraine exist in the three Baltic states, all members of Nato. According to notes made by an American at a meeting between Russian generals and US officials -- and seen by The Times newspaper -- Moscow threatened a "spectrum of responses from nuclear to non-military" if Nato moved more forces into Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The Russians told the meeting, which took place in Germany last month, that an attempt to return Crimea to Ukraine would be met "forcefully including through the use of nuclear force". And they said if Nato sent arms to Ukraine this would be seen as "further encroachment by Nato to the Russian border" and "the Russian people would demand a forceful response". They added that "the same conditions that existed in Ukraine and caused Russia to take action there" existed in the three Baltic states, which like Ukraine have significant numbers of people who regard themselves

as ethnically Russian.

Russia was considering taking steps in the Baltics, according to the notes, but this would most likely be "destabilising actions that would be even harder to trace back to Russia than those of eastern Ukraine".



The notes suggest Moscow would avoid "injections of troops and heavy weapons in favour of other tools". "Russia would hope slowly to entice those Russian populations towards Russia without giving Nato a pretext to deploy troops," the document adds. If Nato then responded, that would make it "a potential co-aggressor against Russian-speaking minorities in Baltic states", a situation described as "potentially more dangerous than that in Ukraine to the United States".

ISIS pushed back from Yarmuk camp

AFP, Damascus

Palestinian fighters and Syrian rebels yesterday retook control of large parts of a refugee camp in Damascus that had been seized by Islamic State group jihadists, a monitoring group said. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said a number of armed groups in the Yarmuk camp in south Damascus "were able to regain control over all of the areas that IS had taken over." The jihadists had overrun the camp on Wednesday, raising fears for thousands of civilians inside and giving ISIS a potential beachhead inside Syria's capital. Anwar Abdel Hadi, director of political affairs for the Palestine Liberation Organisation in Damascus, said ISIS had been pushed "to the periphery" of the camp.

Kim Jong-un reinstates 'pleasure troupe' harem

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North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un has ordered a new "pleasure troupe" of young women to entertain him. Kim, 32, whose country is notorious for its allegedly widespread and horrific human rights abuses, is reportedly drawing up lists of a new generation of female companions, The Daily Telegraph reports. Despite being married to a former singer with whom he has a baby daughter, the dictator is drawing on a tradition established by his father -- Kim Jong-il -- that saw government officials scour the countryside and select girls for the leader. The previous "pleasure troupe" was disbanded on the death of the old dictator in December 2011, but with the official three-year mourning period now over, Kim is free to start his own. The "pleasure troupes" were a practise introduced by Kim's grandfather, North Korea's founding father, the 'Eternal President' Kim Il-sung. Government officials would conduct searches of the countryside for the most attractive young women, typically taking 30 to 40 every year, who would become maids, singers, or dancers following an interview with the leader. The prettiest would be expected to become the leader's concubines, eventually passed on -- or "retired" -- to high ranking military or government officials after they reached their mid-20s.

