

US-led strikes killed 2,079 in Syria

REUTERS, Beirut

Air strikes by the US-led coalition in Syria have killed 2,079 people, including 66 civilians, since the start of the aerial campaign against Islamic State militants last September, a group monitoring the war said yesterday.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said a majority of the deaths, some 1,922, were Islamic State fighters.

The hardline group has seized tracts of territory in Syria and neighboring Iraq, where it has also been targeted by US-led forces since last July.

Ten of the civilians killed were children and six were women, the Observatory said. It said 90 members of the al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front were also killed in the air strikes, which started on September 23.

Around 220,000 people have been killed in Syria's conflict, which is now in its fourth year, the United Nations has said.



A woman prays in memory of the victims of mass killings of Armenians by Ottoman Turks at Armenia's main cathedral in Echmiadzin, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

100TH ANNIVERSARY OF ARMENIA GENOCIDE Church canonises 1.5 million victims

AFP, Echmiadzin

The Armenian Church yesterday conferred sainthood on some 1.5 million Armenians massacred by Ottoman forces a century ago, in what is believed to be the biggest canonisation service in history.

The two-hour ceremony outside Armenia's main cathedral, Echmiadzin, close to the capital Yerevan, ended at 7:15pm local time, or 1915 according to the 24-hour clock (1515 GMT), to symbolise the year when the massacres started during World War I.

"Over a million Armenians were deported, killed, tortured but in the face of this they stayed faithful to Christ," Catholicos of All Armenians, Karekin II, said at the ceremony.

"They were persecuted for their faith in Christ."

After the ceremony, bells rang out across Armenia and a minute of silence was observed. Bells also tolled in cities around the world including Madrid, Venice, Berlin and the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, Armenian television said.

The service came ahead of commemorations expected to see millions of people including heads of state on Friday mark 100 years since the start of the killings.

Ex-Soviet Armenia and the huge Armenian diaspora worldwide have battled for decades to get the World War I massacres at the hands of the Ottoman forces between 1915 and 1917 recognised as a targeted genocide.

But modern Turkey -- the successor to the Ottoman Empire -- has rejected the term genocide and relations remain frozen to this day.

Ankara says 300,000 to 500,000 Armenians and at least as many Turks died in civil -- rather than religious -- strife when Armenians rose up against their Ottoman rulers and sided with invading Russian troops.

Air strikes pound rebels

Pak PM in Saudi for talks; UN to appoint new envoy

AFP, Sanaa

Saudi-led coalition warplanes launched new strikes in Yemen yesterday despite a demand by rebels for a complete halt to the raids as a condition for UN-sponsored peace talks.

Meanwhile, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon yesterday informed the Security Council that he plans to appoint Mauritanian diplomat Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed as his new envoy to Yemen.

Ban said in a letter that Cheikh Ahmed would "build on the achievements" of Jamal Benomar, who resigned last week after losing support from Gulf countries for his mediation efforts.

The regional alliance on Tuesday declared an end to the first phase of its operations against the Iran-backed Huthi rebels but vowed to keep hitting them with targeted bombing when necessary.

Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies launched the air war on March 26 in an attempt to restore the authority of President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi, who was forced to flee abroad last month as the rebels swept across the country.

After the end of Operation Decisive Storm, the coalition said the campaign would enter a second phase called Operation Renewal of Hope focusing on resuming political talks, aid deliveries and "fighting terrorism".

The alliance said it had destroyed the rebels' missile and air capabilities, but the Huthis and their allies still control the capital Sanaa and swathes of the country while Hadi remains in self-exile in Riyadh.

The Shia rebels on Wednesday called for a complete halt to the air raids so warring parties could return to the negotiating table.

YEMEN CRISIS

The World Health Organization says that at least 944 people have been killed in Yemen since March 19.

Meanwhile, the prime minister of Saudi Arabia's longstanding ally Pakistan arrived in the kingdom yesterday for talks after his parliament refused to send forces to help a Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

Nawaz Sharif is travelling with a powerful delegation including army chief General Raheel Sharif, Defence Minister Khawaja Asif and other senior officials.

Pakistan's parliament earlier this month unanimously voted against complying with Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia's request for troops, warplanes and ships.

Clinton, Rubio lead in poll

Clinton charities will refile tax returns after controversy

AGENCIES

Hillary Clinton and Marco Rubio are early frontrunners to become the next president of the United States, according to a well-regarded poll released yesterday.

Clinton -- a celebrity former secretary of state, first lady and New York senator -- who is bidding to become America's first female president, is head-and-shoulders above her 2016 Democratic party rivals according to a Quinnipiac University poll.

She has the backing of 60 percent of Democrats, according to the survey, with her nearest potential rival, Vice President Joe Biden trailing on 10 percent.

At first blush, that would appear to be superb news for Clinton supporters, who were shocked to lose the party nomination to Barack Obama in 2008.

But Clinton's seemingly unassailable lead has the party faithful worried that a meek primary campaign will leave her far from battle hardened by the time the general election campaign against the Republican nominee begins.

Perhaps more concerning for

Clintonites will be Quinnipiac's finding that more than half of all voters polled say the 67-year-old is not trustworthy.

US ELECTION 2016



Republican party operatives have already launched a massive campaign to undercut Clinton's appeal by painting her as out of touch, manipulative and not to be trusted.

The scandals and pseudo-scandals of her husband Bill Clinton's tenure in the White House have been restated, along with allegations about her use of a private email server, her handling of the murder of a US diplomat in Libya and foreign donations to the Clinton

family foundation.

Clinton's family's charities are refiling at least five annual tax returns after a Reuters review found errors in how they reported donations from governments, and said they may audit other Clinton Foundation returns in case of other errors.

The foundation and its list of donors have been under intense scrutiny in recent weeks. Republican critics say the foundation makes Clinton vulnerable to undue influence. Her campaign team calls these claims "absurd conspiracy theories."

The fight for the Republican nomination is a much more closely-fought affair. Several candidates from across the party's conservative and religious spectra are vying for the lead.

Florida Senator Marco Rubio, the son of Cuban immigrants, garners 15 percent of support from those polled, ahead of Jeb Bush, who is within the margin of error at 13 percent.

The youthful but relatively inexperienced Rubio launched his campaign earlier this month, calling for a new era of American leadership that is not "stuck in the 20th century."

China warns on rising N Korea nuke capability

REUTERS, Seoul

Chinese nuclear experts have warned that North Korea may already have 20 nuclear warheads and the capability to produce enough weapons-grade uranium to double its arsenal by next year, The Wall Street Journal reported.

The Chinese estimates of Pyongyang's nuclear production, relayed to US nuclear specialists, exceed most previous US forecasts, which range from 10 to 16 bombs currently, said the report, which cited people briefed on the matter.

Experts at the US-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies earlier this year presented three scenarios for North Korea's nuclear capability, predicting its stockpile of weapons could grow to 20, 50 or 100 within five years.

UK GENERAL ELECTION Leaders' last chance?

AFP, London

The knives are already being sharpened for the leaders of Britain's political parties, several of whom could see their careers brought to a brutal end if they fail to deliver at the May 7 election.

Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, his Liberal Democrat deputy Nick Clegg, leader of the main opposition Labour party Ed Miliband, Nigel Farage of the anti-EU UK Independence Party -- all run the risk of being kicked out.

"All four are fighting for their political life," said Steven Fielding, professor of political history at Nottingham University.

David Cameron: He arguably has the most to lose. He became prime minister in 2010 after 13 years of Labour government but the Conservatives failed to win enough House of Commons seats to govern alone.

The result: a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats which was deeply unpopular with his party.

"If Cameron is not prime minister, he will go," said Simon Hix of the London School of Economics (LSE).

He could even be pushed out if he has a chance of remaining prime minister but would have to form a new coalition or minority government to do so.

Ed Miliband: He became Labour leader in 2010 under circumstances which could

be straight out of a Greek tragedy. Miliband unexpectedly beat older brother David to the job -- or "stabbed his own brother in the back", in the words of Defence Secretary Michael Fallon this month.

But he has struggled to persuade the country and some in his own party that he is prime minister material.

"If he doesn't win a majority and Labour is still not the largest party, many backbenchers will want to get rid of Ed Miliband. They will say he should have won this election after five years of austerity," Hix said.

Nick Clegg: He is at serious risk of losing his own House of Commons seat in Sheffield, northern England, which would effectively put him out of a job.

Nigel Farage: The beer and tobacco-loving eurosceptic has been clearer than any of the other leaders about his future.

If he fails to win the seat he is fighting in southeast England, Farage has promised to step down.

"Was I supposed to brief UKIP policy from the Westminster Arms (a pub near Parliament)? No -- if I fail to win South Thanet, it is curtains for me," he wrote in a book this year.



These pictures taken yesterday from Puerto Varas, southern Chile, show high column of ash and lava spewing from the Calbuco volcano. Chile's Calbuco volcano erupted on Wednesday, spewing a giant funnel of ash high into the sky near the southern port city of Puerto Montt and triggering a red alert. Authorities ordered an evacuation for a 10-kilometer radius around the volcano.

PHOTO: AFP

The day mankind started to play God

Scientists modify genes of human embryos for first time in 'secret' experiments

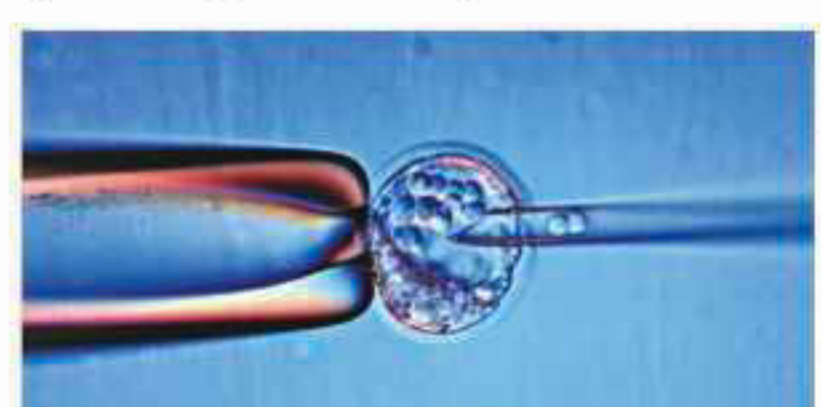
INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Chinese scientists have successfully edited the genes of human embryos for the first time, confirming rumours that secret genetic experiments had been happening in the country and prompting fears that the discovery could lead to a new kind of eugenics.

The researchers were able to successfully modify a specific gene responsible for a potentially fatal blood disorder. But they say that problems encountered during the testing mean that it is unlikely to be used more widely in the immediate future.

The technique could one day be used to edit out fatal and destructive genetic diseases. But others worry that it is unethical and could wreak unknown havoc on the human gene pool.

Using non-viable embryos obtained from fertility clinics, a group of scientists led by Junjiu Huang managed to inject embryos with an enzyme that can be programmed to target a specific gene. Along with another



molecule that is also added to the embryo, that injection can repair or replace genes that are considered to be a problem.

The technique has been used in tests on human cells and animal embryos.

But it is the first time that it is known to have been successfully tried on an embryo, and could make way for scientists to use the procedure to edit the genes of embryos used in IVF, before they are implanted.

The team tested the procedure on 86 embryos, and gave them 48 hours to react. After that it tested 54 of the 71 surviving embryos and found that 28 had been successfully spliced.

Scientists are worried that using the technique to snip out bits of DNA that are viewed as problematic could have terrible consequences for subjects' descendants, as well as the concerns about a scientifically-enabled form of eugenics. Because the alterations will be coded into the "heritable line", they will be passed down to future generations -- and nobody is really sure what effect that would have over time.

Drive for first female UN chief launched

REUTERS, New York

Since its founding 70 years ago, the United Nations has been led by men, a tradition that some women's rights advocates are determined to break when the global body elects a new secretary-general next year.

Equality Now, an international organization that campaigns for the rights of women and girls, launched an online campaign across social media on Wednesday to promote female candidates to lead the UN after current Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon steps down at the end of 2016.

"The selection process for the next UN Secretary-General is a great opportunity to bring us a step closer to gender equality globally," Antonia Kirkland, legal advisor at Equality Now, said in a statement. "We are hopeful that there is more momentum now to make this a realistic possibility."

The UN Charter offers virtually no guidance on how a secretary-general should be selected, including no actual description of the job or list of qualifications for candidates.