

NEWSIN brief

Obama defends Syria move

Says troops deployment doesn't break no 'boots on ground' pledge

President Barack Obama has said the planned deployment of dozens of US special forces to Syria to advise opposition forces fighting Islamic State did not break his promise not to put "boots on the ground" in the Syrian conflict.

"Keep in mind that we have run special ops already and really this is just an extension of what we are continuing to do," Obama said in an interview on "NBC Nightly News" in his first public comments on the deployment since it was announced on Friday.

"We are not putting US troops on the front lines fighting firefights with ISIL," Obama said, using another acronym for the Islamic State militant group. "I have been consistent throughout that we are not going to be fighting like we did in Iraq with battalions and occupations. That doesn't solve the problem."

In announcing the measure, the White House said the troops would be on a mission to "train, advise and assist" and would number fewer than 50.

The introduction of US forces on the ground marks a shift after more than a year of limiting the Syria mission to air strikes against Islamic State. Before last year, Obama, who

has been averse to committing troops to Middle East wars, had ruled out an American presence on the ground in Syria.

Meanwhile, a senior Russian official yesterday said Syrian government officials and members of the country's splintered opposition could meet in Moscow next week.

After initially dismissing Syrian opposition groups fighting its regional ally President Bashar al-Assad, Moscow has shown increasing flexibility as it steps up diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict that has killed some 250,000 and displaced millions.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will meet UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura in Moscow today to discuss attempts to start a dialogue between Damascus and the Syrian opposition, Moscow's foreign ministry said.

In another development, Russian news agencies reported that the Russian and US air forces held a joint training exercise in Syria yesterday.

Interfax news agency also reported, citing General Andrei Kartapolov, that Russia and Israel were informing each other continually on the situation in Syrian airspace.

Russia's air force has flown 1,631 sorties and struck 2,084 militant targets since the start of its air strikes campaign in Syria, Russian news agencies cited the defence ministry as saying yesterday.



Chalabi, key lobbyist for US invasion of Iraq, dies

AFP, Baghdad

Ahmed Chalabi, a key lobbyist for the US invasion of Iraq who was blamed for providing false intelligence on weapons of mass destruction to justify it, died of a heart attack yesterday.

Chalabi, a 71-year-old lawmaker who headed the finance committee, "died this morning... of a heart attack," parliament said in a statement offering condolences for his death.

Living in exile as head of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), which opposed Saddam Hussein, Chalabi became a White House favourite for information he provided which supported the US justification for attacking Iraq in 2003.

But because of its long years abroad, his group was little known and little liked inside Iraq and American plans for a smooth and easy political transition fell apart.

Disastrous US moves such as disbanding the Iraqi army, an insufficient number of coalition troops to secure the country against insurgency and rising sectarian

tensions instead led to years of bloodshed that continue to this day.

The darling of lost favour after the invasion when information he provided regarding Saddam's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction and links to al-Qaeda turned out to be false.

He was also accused of providing information to US foe Iran.

Iraqi police and US forces raided his home in 2004 and seized documents and computers. The only formal charge was putting forged banknotes into circulation after the raid turned up a small number in his home.

Chalabi has also long been dogged by allegations of corruption and was convicted by a Jordanian court of embezzling funds from the collapsed Petra bank in 1992, a case he claims was politically motivated.

He organised a Kurdish uprising in northern Iraq in the mid-1990s but hundreds of people were killed and he later fled, returning only when US-led invading forces took control.



30 killed in Nepal after bus plunges over cliff

AFP, Kathmandu

A packed passenger bus plunged over a cliff and killed 30 people in central Nepal yesterday, a senior local official said. Rescuers struggled to recover bodies and help the injured to safety after the bus fell 200 metres (656 feet) off the mountainous road in Rasuwa district, home to the popular Langtang trekking route.

Indian court jails Uber driver for life for rape

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian court yesterday sentenced an Uber driver to life in prison for raping a young woman passenger in New Delhi, a case that inflamed fears over sexual violence in the capital. The Delhi court last month convicted Shiv Kumar Yadav of abducting and raping the 25-year-old passenger as she returned home from dinner with friends in December last year.

Qaeda calls for lone wolf attacks on West

AFP, Washington

Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has called for lone wolf attacks against Western countries, in particular America. Zawahiri spoke in a video released on Twitter and published and translated Monday by US-based SITE, which monitors violent extremist websites.

Pakistan bans coverage of terror groups

IANS, Islamabad

Pakistan's Interior Ministry on Monday imposed a ban on the media coverage of Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), Falah-e-Insaniyat (FIF) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) under the National Action Plan (NAP), the media reported. Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) has issued the notification in this regard, ARY News reported.

Switzerland still top tax haven: report

TNN, New Delhi

Switzerland has retained its top spot in the financial secrecy index (FSI) 2015, unveiled by the Tax Justice Network (TJN) on Monday. Switzerland is followed by Hong Kong, the US, Singapore and the Cayman Islands. The biggest surprise is the US, which has climbed to third place from sixth place in FSI-2013.

Bomb found in Maldives capital

AFP, Male

A remote-controlled bomb was discovered near the presidential palace in the Maldivian capital on Monday, but the improvised explosive device was safely defused, the military said. No one has claimed responsibility for planting the bomb.



This Russia's Emergency Ministry photo released yesterday shows the wreckage of the crashed A321 Russian airliner in Wadi al-Zolomat, a mountainous area of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. Inset, One of the two black boxes of the airliner that crashed in Sinai Peninsula killing all 224 people on board.



Sonia Gandhi slams 'silent' Modi

Shah Rukh Khan says not being secular in India 'is the worst kind of crime'

AGENCIES

After leading a short protest march of party lawmakers to Rashtrapati Bhawan, Congress president Sonia Gandhi attacked Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday, accusing him of "silence" amid "an atmosphere of fear, intolerance and threat" that she alleged was being scripted by organisations associated with the government.

In a memorandum to President Pranab Mukherjee, Gandhi said, her party has expressed serious concern over "unfortunate incidents that are happening as a part of a well-planned strategy to divide our society on purpose."

"Some organisations and people associated with the government or a part of Modi Ji's government are trying to attack the plurality of the country and promoting intolerance," she said, adding "The President had expressed his opinion, but

PM is silent which clearly shows that he approves of such incidents."

Meanwhile, Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan has become the latest high profile figure to speak out against "extreme intolerance" in India, reports

PROTESTS AGAINST INTOLERANCE



BBC. Khan, who turned 50 on Monday said, "there is intolerance, there is extreme intolerance... there is, I think... there is growing intolerance." He said he "respected" people returning awards to protest against intolerance.

"We have made a huge thing about our meat-eating habits. How can the food habits of people be an issue?" Khan told the NDTV news channel.

"It is stupid... It is stupid to be intolerant and this is our biggest issue, not just an issue... Religious intolerance and not being secular in this country is the worst kind of crime that you can do as a patriot."

Sonia Gandhi's son and deputy Rahul Gandhi, who also marched yesterday from Parliament House to the Rashtrapati Bhawan, said, "a serving minister in the government calls two children who were burnt to death, dogs. This is not the type of minister who should be in the cabinet. People are being lynched and being killed, and the prime minister is silent."

As it began its march, the Congress had complained that the government was "muzzling dissent" by restricting the delegation to only 125 people.

Kerry offers support to C Asia nations

REUTERS, Dushanbe

US Secretary of State John Kerry sought yesterday to reassure the rulers of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan that Washington remained committed to Central Asia's security, even though it is withdrawing troops from neighbouring Afghanistan.

Both countries fear the spread of Islamist militancy, and US officials worry that government crackdowns will backfire and bring greater instability.

Kerry met Tajik President Imomali Rakhmon in Dushanbe and was due to meet Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov in Ashgabat later yesterday.

"I emphasized the United States' commitment to work with Tajikistan and other countries... to strengthen border security," Kerry told reporters after the talks with Rakhmon.

The two visits come on the last day of Kerry's tour of Central Asia. He made stops in all five of the region's former Soviet republics, in an effort to show that Washington intends to stay engaged as Russia, fresh from forays into Ukraine and Syria, reasserts itself.

US officials hope Central Asian leaders will see President Barack Obama's recent decision to slow the pace of US withdrawal from Afghanistan as proof that Washington is not abandoning them.

Afghan woman stoned to death for 'adultery'

AFP, Kabul

A young Afghan woman was stoned to death after being accused of adultery, officials said yesterday, a medieval punishment apparently recorded in a video that harks back to the dark days of Taliban rule.

The 30-second clip run in Afghan media shows a woman in a hole in the ground as turbaned men gather around and hurl stones at her with chilling nonchalance.

The woman, named by officials as Rokhsahana and aged between 19 and 21, is heard repeating the shahada, or Muslim profession of faith, her voice growing increasingly high-pitched as stones strike her with sickening thuds.

The killing took place about a week ago in a Taliban-controlled area just outside Firozkoh, the capital of central Ghor province, officials said, confirming the video which went viral on social media.

Rokhsahana was stoned by a gathering of "Taliban, local religious leaders and armed warlords", officials said.

Joyenda, one of only two female governors in Afghanistan, said in Afghanistan, said Rokhsahana's family had married her off against her will and that she was caught while eloping with another man her age -- seen as tantamount to adultery.

The man was let off with a lashing, Joyenda's spokesman said.

Shariah law decrees stoning as the punishment for men and women convicted of having sex outside marriage.

West Antarctic ice melt could raise seas by 3 meters: report

AFP, Miami

Melting ice in West Antarctica is a major concern for global sea levels, and a key area may already be unstable enough to unleash three meters of ocean rise, scientists said Monday.

The study follows research out last year, led by NASA glaciologist Eric Rignot, warning that ice in the Antarctic had gone into a state of irreversible retreat, that the melting was considered "unstoppable" and could raise sea level by 1.2 meters (four feet).

This time, researchers at Germany's Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research pointed to the long-term impacts of the crucial Amundsen Sea sector of West Antarctica, which they said "has most likely been destabilized."

While previous studies "examined the short-term future evolution of this region, here we take the next step and simulate the long-term evolution of the whole West Antarctic Ice

Sheet," the authors said in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

They used computer models to project the effects of 60 more years of melting at the current rate.

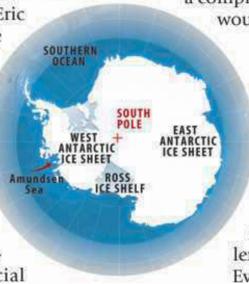
This "would drive the West Antarctic Ice sheet past a critical threshold beyond which a complete, long-term disintegration would occur."

In other words, "the entire marine ice sheet will discharge into the ocean, causing a global sea-level rise of about three meters," the authors wrote.

"If the destabilization has begun, a three-meter increase in sea level over the next several centuries to millennia may be unavoidable."

Even just a few decades of ocean warming can unleash a melting spree that lasts for hundreds to thousands of years.

The authors noted that Antarctica's situation presents the largest uncertainty in sea level projections for the coming centuries, and that studying the vast region poses many challenges.



Israel toughens law against stone throwers

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's lawmakers have voted to impose a minimum three-year jail sentence on stone throwers, the Knesset website said, weeks after the premier vowed "war" on those who pelt security forces with rocks.

The law was approved late Monday by 57 votes against 17 and comes as a surge of unrest in Israel and the occupied West Bank has entered its second month.

Meanwhile, the Israeli army yesterday raided and shut down a Palestinian radio station, confiscating equipment and causing significant damage, after the military accused it of celebrating attacks on Israelis.

Nine Israelis, 68 Palestinians -- around half of them alleged attackers -- and an Arab Israeli have been killed in a wave of violence since the start of October.

A stateless child is born every 10 minutes: UN

AFP, Geneva

A stateless child is born every 10 minutes, the United Nations said yesterday, warning that the problem has intensified as the conflict in Syria has sparked a global migrant and refugee crisis.

A new report by the UN refugee agency highlights the long-term consequences of statelessness for children such as being deprived of medical care, education and future access to employment.

The problem is particularly severe among migrants and refugees affected by conflict, said the report, which is to be launched by UNHCR chief Antonio Guterres at UN headquarters in New York today.

In Syria, children can acquire nationality only through their fathers, but the four-year civil war has forced more than four million people to flee the country and left 25 per cent of refugee families fatherless.

Women who fled Syria while pregnant told UN interviewers that their hopes of one day returning home with their families could be crushed without a birth certificate to prove that their children are Syrian.

Syria's war has also forced hundreds of thousands of people to seek refuge in Europe, including women who have given birth while trying to move across borders.

The agency said that in the 20 countries hosting the largest stateless populations, "at least 70,000 stateless children are born each year" -- or one about every 10 minutes.

"In the short time that children get to be children, statelessness can set in stone grave problems that will haunt them throughout their childhoods and sentence them to a life of discrimination, frustration and despair," Guterres said.

"Several million children are watching their childhoods slip away without the sense of belonging and protection that comes with a nationality," the report said.



'US to operate in South China Sea'

AFP, Beijing

The US military will continue to operate wherever international law allows, a top US admiral said in Beijing yesterday, a week after America infuriated China by sailing close to artificial islands it is building in the South China Sea.

"International seas and airspace belong to everyone and are not the dominion of any single nation," Admiral Harry Harris said at the Stanford Center at Peking University.

"Our military will continue to fly, sail, and operate wherever and wherever international law allows," he added, according to a transcript.

Harris is the head of the US Pacific Command and his public declaration in the Chinese capital is a mark of US resolve over the waterway