

Russia capable of more

Says Putin in its military operations in Syria; Hezbollah militant 'killed in Israeli raid' near Damascus

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Vladimir Putin has said Russia is using "far from everything we are capable of" in its military operations in Syria.

"We see how efficiently our pilots and intelligence agents coordinate their efforts with various kinds of forces - the army, navy and aviation, how they use the most modern weapons," Putin was quoted as saying in a speech.

"We also have other things as well and will use them if necessary," the Russian president said.

Putin was speaking a day after the UN Security Council endorsed a peace plan for the war-torn nation, including calls for a ceasefire, reports Reuters.

The Syrian army, backed by Russian air strikes, captured a rebel stronghold in the northern province of Aleppo yesterday, driving out the Islamists, a monitoring group said.

State news agency SANA also said that army units and other pro-regime forces had seized control of Khan Tuman and neighbouring farms.

Meanwhile, a Lebanese militant notorious for the murder of three Israelis, including a four-year-old girl, has been killed in an Israeli air raid near the Syrian capital, his

Hezbollah movement said.

Samir Kantar was freed by Israel as part of a prisoner swap in 2008, three decades after the killings, and he became a high-profile figure in Hezbollah.

In September, the United States placed Kantar on its terror blacklist, saying he had "played an operational role, with the assistance of Iran and Syria, in building up Hezbollah's terrorist infrastructure in the Golan Heights".

The 54-year-old was killed on Saturday night "when the Zionist enemy planes bombed the building where he lived in Jaramana," southeast of Damascus, the Lebanese Shia militant group said in a statement.

The Syrian state news agency SANA reported the "martyrdom" of Kantar in a "terrorist raid".

It released a picture showing Syrian pro-government forces standing guard next to a partially collapsed building where Kantar was said to have been killed.

Israeli Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked said that her country "has not claimed" the strike but "was happy to learn the news".

"He was an arch-terrorist who killed a young girl by fracturing her skull and had continued his terrorist activities after being freed," she told military radio.

WAR ON TERROR



Damaged buildings are seen as rescuers search for survivors in an industrial park in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, China yesterday. A massive landslide at the park buried 22 buildings and left 41 people missing.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEPAL CHARTER ROW Congress, Madhesis agree to resolve crisis

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Nepal's main opposition party Nepali Congress and the agitating group of Indian-origin Madhesis have agreed to quickly resolve the current political crisis due to the ongoing blockade of key border trade points with India.

The Nepali Congress (NC) and representatives of the United Madhese Democratic Front (UMDF) met at the residence of NC President Sushil Koirala's residence at Maharjunj here on Saturday.

During the meeting, they held discussions on contemporary issues and the ongoing unrest in the Terai region, and agreed to resolve the current political crisis as soon as possible. The NC urged the front to support resolving the crisis through the Constitution amendment process as the bill related to the same has been tabled in the Parliament. The party also asked the front to forge consensus on the bill as it could be revised by including the front's demands.

Meanwhile, Nepali police shot and killed a protester yesterday after fresh clashes erupted in the country's southern plains, deepening the crisis over a new constitution, an official said.

UN declares end of Yemen peace talks

AGENCIES

The United Nations says peace talks between warring sides in Yemen have ended amid severe new fighting in the country.

The UN office in Geneva says the special envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, will hold a press conference later yesterday. The peace talks between pro-government fighters and Shia rebels began Tuesday in the Swiss village of Macolin, reports AP.

Fierce fighting and airstrikes by a Saudi-led coalition pounded northern Yemen on Saturday, as the two main parties in the country's conflict continued to violate a cease-fire.

Clashes in Hajjah Province near the Saudi border between rebel-allied units and pro-government Yemeni forces have killed more than 75 people over the past three days, according to Yemeni security officials and witnesses said.

DELHI GANG RAPE Juvenile rapist freed amid protests

BBC ONLINE

The youngest convict in the notorious 2012 Delhi gang rape case has been released from a correctional centre, his lawyer has told the BBC.

Legal challenges and protests from the victim's parents failed to prevent the release. The rapist, who cannot be named as he was a minor at the time of the crime, was sentenced to a maximum three years in a reform facility in August 2013.

The rape and the subsequent death of the woman caused global outrage. Although the convict is now an adult, he was tried as a juvenile and has served the full sentence allowed.

He has now been handed over to a charity, where he will remain because of fears over his safety. Four adult convicts in the case are appealing against death sentences. A fifth died in prison.

The BBC's Sanjoy Majumder in Delhi says the release has been opposed by many people, including the parents of the victim, who were prevented by police from carrying out a protest rally in central Delhi earlier yesterday.

The convict's identity is being changed and no record of his crime will remain in the public domain, a move that has caused more outrage among many in India, our correspondent says.

A legal challenge by politician Subramanian Swamy to stop the release failed. A court ruled on the case on Friday, saying: "We agree it is a serious issue. But after 20 December, the juvenile cannot be kept at a special home per law."

US presidential hopefuls hit Trump Clash over jihadist fight in Democratic debate

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Hillary Clinton and other Democratic presidential hopefuls used Donald Trump as a political bogeyman Saturday to highlight their own calls to defeat jihadist extremists without the bigotry and bluster brandished by their top Republican rival.

Former secretary of state Clinton, Senator Bernie Sanders and Maryland ex-governor Martin O'Malley each hit on the need to boost national security, raise the minimum wage and protect rights of women, minorities and the disadvantaged as they faced off in New Hampshire.

But they had heated exchanges on the economy, guns, tackling the terrorist threat, and the role of the United States



- Hillary Clinton backs Obama's IS strategy
- Senator Sanders hits on the need to boost national security

NEWS IN brief

Air France flight in bomb scare
AFP, Mombasa

An Air France flight from Mauritius to Paris was forced to make an emergency landing in Kenya early yesterday after a suspected bomb was found on board, police said. Navy and police bomb experts were called in to determine if there were any explosives on board the plane, which had 459 passengers and 14 crew members aboard.

Indonesian police foil 'jihad' attacks
REUTERS, Jakarta

Indonesian counter-terrorism police said yesterday they had arrested suspected Islamist militants in locations across the island of Java, foiling separate plots to bomb minority Shia communities and target Christmas and New Year celebrations. Bomb-making materials and 'jihad manuals' were seized after the arrest of six men in central and west Java.

Burundi rejects AU peacekeepers
AFP, Nairobi

Burundi's government said yesterday it would not agree to the deployment of African Union (AU) peacekeepers, warning that they would be seen as "an invasion force". The announcement came a day after the 54-member bloc said it would send a 5,000-strong force to halt spiralling violence in the tiny central African country as fears grow that it is rapidly sliding towards civil war.

Protesters trash Geneva down-town: police
AFP, Geneva

An unauthorised demonstration over Geneva budget cuts for alternative culture spun out of control late Saturday, with protesters vandalising much of the centre of the Swiss city, police said. Many luxury shops and banks had their windows smashed or covered in graffiti with messages like: "Rich people are ugly" and "Fuck this



Rescue workers and residents help to unload the body of a ferry-sinking victim in Kolaka of Indonesia. Hopes faded yesterday for 78 people missing from the ferry that sank off Indonesia's eastern island, officials said. At least 37 passengers had been pulled alive from rough seas by rescuers in helicopters, fishing vessels and dinghies.

PHOTO: REUTERS

abroad. Clinton also backed elements of President Barack Obama's strategy to fight Islamic State militants, reports Reuters.

It was their party's third debate of the primary election season -- the last of 2015 and their first since the attacks in San Bernardino, California, where a radicalized married couple killed 14 people.

But the candidates also took turns hitting the Trump punching bag, as they hurled outrage about the Republican's fear-mongering and recent controversial comments about immigrants -- in particular, his call for a ban on Muslims entering the United States.

Americans, Clinton said, "need to make sure that the really discriminatory messages that Trump is sending around the world don't fall on receptive ears."

"He is becoming ISIS's best recruiter," Clinton said of the self-declared Islamic State extremist group, claiming that jihadists are "showing videos of Donald Trump insulting Islam and Muslims in order to recruit more radical jihadists."

Trump fired back on that point, tweeting overnight that Clinton had "lied."

O'Malley also offered a harsh rebuke to the "political danger" wielded by Trump and other "unscrupulous leaders (who) try to turn us upon each other."

The country will rise to the challenge of the IS extremists, but only if Americans never surrender their values "to the fascist pleas of billionaires with big mouths. We are a better country than this."

Trump's apparent popularity has only grown in recent weeks since his most contentious remarks. The political neophyte tops most Republican national polls and is

Spain's Mireia wins Miss World title

AFP, Sanya

Spanish model Mireia Laguna was crowned Miss World 2015 after beating out 113 contestants from across the globe on Saturday night at a coastal resort city in south China's Hainan Province.

The pharmacy student from Barcelona claimed the illustrious crown after winning over the contest's judges during the 65th edition of the world famous pageant in China's Sanya.

"Without the love I have received from all of the people I have met here, and from all of the people wishing me well and supporting me at home, I would never have gotten to this point," said the beauty queen, according to a statement released by the event's organisers.

"I want to show them and the world that I am deserving of the Miss World title and I hope to do everyone proud."

The pageant's second place was awarded to Russia's Sofia Nikitchuk, while third place went to Indonesia's Maria Harfanti. However, the ceremony was not without controversy. Officials in Hong Kong last month stopped Miss Canada, Anastasia Lin, from boarding a plane bound for Sanya, telling her she would not receive a visa.

The 25-year-old actress claimed the decision was due to her stance on China's human rights record, including its persecution of Falun Gong, a Chinese spiritual group of which she is a practitioner.



Third of Syrian rebels share IS aims

BBC ONLINE

About a third of rebel groups in Syria - some 100,000 fighters - share the ideology of so-called Islamic State (IS), new research suggests.

The Centre on Religion and Geopolitics, linked to former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, said defeating IS militarily "would not end global jihadism". That would require an "intellectual and theological defeat" of its ideology.

The Syrian conflict has killed more than 250,000 people. Millions more have been displaced. A Western coalition has been carrying out air strikes against IS in Syria and Iraq for more than a year.

In September, Russian forces began air strikes against rebels in Syria, targeting "all terrorists", including IS. However, Western-backed groups are also reported to have been hit.

The Centre on Religion and Geopolitics, an initiative of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, says that Syria now hosts the largest gathering of jihadi groups in modern times.

New parties seek power in Spanish landmark polls

AFP, Madrid

Spanish voters went to the polls yesterday in what is expected to be one of the most closely-fought contests in modern history as two dynamic new parties take on the country's long-established political giants.

The general election caps off a year of electoral change in southern Europe after far-left party Syriza was swept to power in Greece in January and a coalition of leftists parties in Portugal pooled their votes in parliament to unseat the conservative government in October after an inconclusive election.

Spain has been dominated for more than three decades by the conservative Popular Party and the main opposition Socialists, who have alternated running the government.

But this time around many voters are expected to cast their ballots for two upstart parties vying for change -- the centrist Ciudadanos and the anti-austerity Podemos, a close ally of Greece's Syriza.

"We are on the threshold of a new democratic transition, a new era," said Ciudadanos leader Albert

Rivera after he cast his ballot in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat in the northeastern region of Catalonia.

Polls predict Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's Popular Party will win the largest share of the vote but not enough to retain its absolute majority in parliament.

Such a result would force it to form an uneasy alliance with another political grouping or attempt to rule as a minority government.

And all bets are off regarding who will come second in the legislative elections, as the Socialists could end up neck-and-neck with Ciudadanos and Podemos, which would give these new parties unprecedented influence on the political scene.

"The fact that a tectonic shift is about to shake up the Spanish political system is testified by the expected 80 percent turnout... compared to 69 percent in the 2011 election," said analysts at UniCredit, calling yesterday's polls "historic."

Sky-high unemployment, inequality, corruption and an ever-rising separatist drive in the northeastern region of Catalonia are just some of the issues at



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AFP, Geneva

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Palestinian shot trying to stab Israelis
AFP, Hebron

A Palestinian woman attempted to stab Israeli soldiers in the flashpoint city of Hebron in the West Bank yesterday before she was shot and arrested, officials and medics said. The incident set off a clash between Palestinian residents and Israeli security forces who fired rubber bullets and stun grenades.

Three people were hurt by rubber-coated bullets, including a five-year-old who was in the area, according to the medics and Palestinian police.