

NEWS IN brief

EU extends sanctions against Russia

The EU extended damaging economic sanctions against Russia on Monday amid sharp differences over relations with Moscow which struck back with a furious tirade and its own import ban against Ukraine. Russia said the decision showed the EU did not really want improved relations so as battle common threats such as terrorism.

Next round of Syria talks in Geneva: UN

The next round of talks aimed at easing the violence in war-torn Syria will be held at the UN's European headquarters in Geneva early next year, a UN spokesman said yesterday. Last week, the UN Security Council gave its unanimous support to a plan to end Syria's brutal civil war. With crucial backing from the United States and Russia, the plan aims to install a ceasefire in Syria, possibly in January, when talks could also begin.

Brunei sultan bans X-mas celebrations

Anyone found illegally celebrating Christmas in Brunei could face up to five years in prison, according to a reported declaration by the Sultan of the tiny oil-rich state. Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, who has ruled the former British colony for nearly 50 years, introduced the ban on Christmas in 2014, the same year Brunei adopted a stricter sharia-based penal code. However, Christians and others can still celebrate Christmas, but must do so in private and have to first alert the authorities.

Lindsey Graham drops US presidential bid

Lindsey Graham, the hawkish Republican senator who wants thousands of US troops in the Middle East and warned Americans against nominating Donald Trump for president, announced Monday he is exiting the White House race. The 60-year-old senator from South Carolina never gained traction, often polling at just one percent nationally.

Panama to detain ex-leader over 'spying'

Panama's Supreme Court has ordered the detention of former president Ricardo Martinelli, prompting the absent millionaire super-market tycoon to furiously dismiss the ruling as a "political trial." Martinelli, who ruled the Central American country between 2009 and 2014, was ordered to be taken into custody for failing to show up for a trial on charges of spying on opponents.

Iraq launches final push for IS-held Ramadi

Forces advance into centre of town after months of preparation

Iraqi security forces yesterday advanced into the centre of Ramadi for a final push aimed at retaking the city they lost to the Islamic State group in May, officials said.

"We went into the centre of Ramadi from several fronts and we began purging residential areas," said Sabah al-Noman, spokesman of the elite Iraqi counter-terrorism service.

"The city will be cleared in the coming 72 hours. ... We did not face strong resistance, only snipers and suicide bombers and this is a tactic we expected," Noman told AFP.

The fresh push was launched overnight and is meant to result in the full recapture of Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's western province of Anbar.

The fighting in Ramadi is led by the elite counter-terrorism force, backed by US-led coalition air strikes and also supported by forces from the police, the army and Sunni tribes opposed to the jihadists.

Retaking the city, an insurgent bastion that saw some of the deadliest fighting against US troops a decade ago, would be the Iraqi federal forces' most significant victory so far.

The breakthrough came earlier this month when counter-terrorism forces broke down IS defences and retook the key southwestern neighbourhood of Al-Tameem.

After taking a few days to beef up their new positions, Iraqi military leaders had said in recent days a final push was imminent and leaflets urging the population to flee were dropped over the

weekend. On Monday, thinktank IHS Jane's said IS group lost around 14 percent of its territory in 2015, while Syria's Kurds almost tripled the land they control.

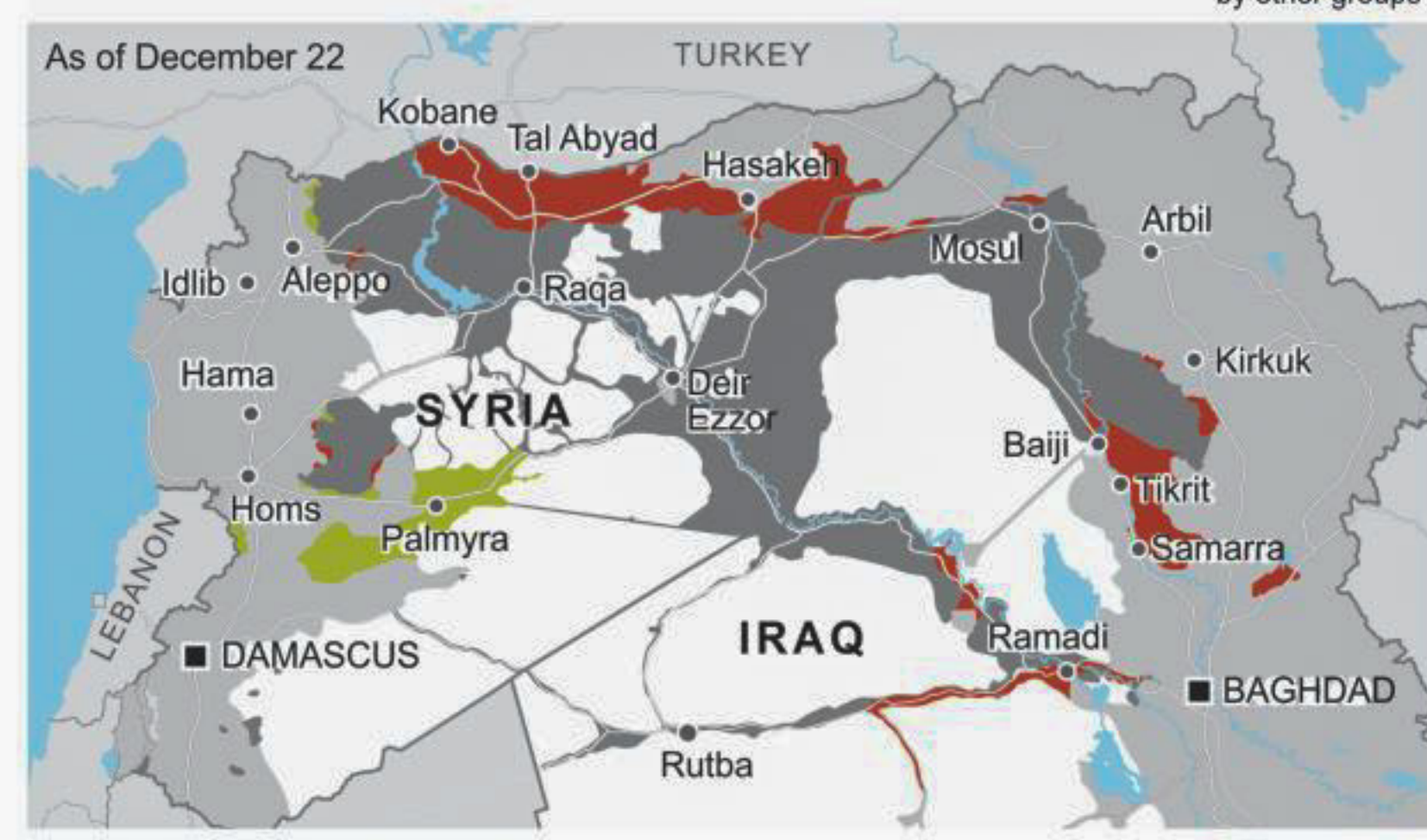
The development is a blow to the group given that its aim is to capture and

presence in Indonesia with dreams of creating a "distant caliphate" in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country.

While Australian authorities believed there was little chance IS could create a caliphate within Indonesia, they were

IS TERRITORIES IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

The Islamic State (IS) group lost around 14 percent of its territory in 2015, according to new analysis by thinktank IHS Jane's



hold territory to expand its so-called "caliphate", where it imposes a severe and bloody form of what it calls Islamic law.

The US-based thinktank said the group's territory had shrunk 12,800 square kilometres to 78,000 square km between the start of the year and December 14.

Meanwhile, Australia yesterday warned that IS is working to boost its

deeply worried the terror group may establish a permanent foothold in the archipelago. This could allow it to conduct attacks against Western or Australian interests within Indonesia and beyond.

In another development, Russia and France have agreed to bolster efforts to share intelligence relating to the Islamic State jihadist group after the two countries vowed to cooperate militarily on the issue.

HELMAND SIEGE Afghan forces battle to flush out Taliban

Military planes have dropped food and ammunition to besieged Afghan forces battling to push Taliban insurgents out of Sangin, officials said yesterday, two days after the emboldened militants stormed the opium-growing district.

But there are conflicting reports as to who controls the whole district.

The Helmand governor and police dismissed Taliban reports that it now controlled it as "totally false".

Sangin district has fallen to Taliban control several times and the fighting has caused significant casualties among Afghan and international forces.

Three rockets were also fired into Kabul overnight on Monday.

Some 12,000 foreign soldiers are deployed in the country as part of the Nato-led Resolute Support international coalition, which is meant to underpin Afghan security forces.

Britain has announced that a small number of UK personnel have been deployed to Camp Shorabak in Helmand province in an advisory role. The BBC understands there are 10 such personnel.



UN: 1m entered Europe in 2015

More than one million migrants and refugees reached Europe this year, including over 970,000 who made the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean, the UN refugee agency said yesterday.

The new figures, jointly released by the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), listed migrant arrivals in six European countries since January 1, with the vast majority of people -- 821,008 -- landing in Greece, reports AFP. A total of 3,692 migrants died or disappeared crossing the sea, IOM said.

The UN refugee chief on Monday said that people who reject Syrian refugees are the "best allies" of Islamic State militants and other extremists, after US Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump proposed an entry ban on foreign Muslims.

More than 4.3 million Syrians have fled a nearly five-year civil war. UN High Commissioner for refugees Antonio Guterres told the Security Council they cannot be blamed for the terror they are risking their lives to escape, reports Reuters.

Meanwhile, 11 migrants bound for EU member Greece, including three children, drowned off the Turkish coast yesterday when their boat sank in the latest tragedy in the Aegean Sea, the state-run Anatolia news agency said.

Seven people were rescued in the incident off Turkey's Aegean Sea resort of Kusadasi but coastguards found the bodies of 11 people, including three children, it added.

"The number of people displaced by war and conflict is the highest seen in Western and Central Europe since the 1990s," the UNHCR said, referring to the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia that decade.

Greek parliament backs Palestine statehood

Greece's parliament approved a resolution yesterday calling on the government to recognise the state of Palestine, but Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras said Athens will judge when the time is right to make the formal move.

At a special session attended by visiting Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, all parliamentary parties voted in favour of the move, speaker Nikos Voutsis said.

It urges the Greek government to "promote appropriate procedures for the recognition of a Palestinian state and every diplomatic effort for the resumption of discussions for peace" in the region, Voutsis added.

Abbas said he was proud to be in the Greek parliament, calling it "the sanctuary of

democracy", and thanked the deputies for a vote he said would "contribute to the creation of a Palestinian state".

Tsipras announced Monday after talks with Abbas that Greece would no longer refer on official documents to the Palestinian Authority, but rather to Palestine.

The Palestinian Authority considers over 130 countries to have recognised Palestine as a state, although the number is disputed and several recognitions by what are now European Union member states date back to the Soviet era.

Nine EU members -- the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Malta, Cyprus and Sweden -- have so far recognised Palestine. But no EU heavyweight has yet made the move.

Juvenile crimes: India toughens law

New bill allows authorities to try 16-18-year-olds as adults

The Indian parliament has passed a bill which allows juveniles between 16 and 18 years of age to be tried as adults for serious crimes like rape or murder. At present, those under 18 can be sentenced to a maximum of three years in a reform facility.

The move to change the law gathered momentum after the youngest convict in the notorious 2012 Delhi gang rape was recently released from detention. The parents of the victim were among those campaigning to change the law.

The Juvenile Justice Bill was passed yesterday by the Rajya Sabha - the upper house of the parliament. The bill was approved by the Lok Sabha - the



lower house - in May.

It will now have to be signed by the president to become law - which, correspondents say, is a mere formality. The new law will not apply to the youngest 2012 rapist, but it will be used in future cases involving juvenile offenders above 16 years.

Jyoti Singh, a 23-year-old physiotherapy student, died after being brutally raped by five men and one minor on a moving bus in 2012. The attack sparked a huge public outcry in India and forced the authorities to introduce tough new laws to deal with crimes against women.

Four adult convicts in the case are appealing against death sentences. A fifth died in prison. But the youngest of her attackers, who was 17 at the time of the crime, was sentenced to three years and released recently. During his trial in a juvenile court, there were calls to try him as an adult and protests were held over the weekend against his release. Since his release, the rapist has been housed with a charity because of fears over his safety.



Rescue workers look for survivors after a landslide hit an industrial park in Shenzhen, south China's Guangdong province yesterday. Hopes for those still missing in the mud were fading fast yesterday, almost three days after the landslide, even as heavy machinery raked through thousands of tonnes of soil and rubble that buried factories and residential buildings.

PHOTO: AFP

Boko Haram forces 1m out of school

The Boko Haram insurgency has kept more than one million children out of school, the UN children's agency reported yesterday, highlighting fears that a lack of education will fuel further radicalism in and around Nigeria.

Over 2,000 schools are closed across Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger, while hundreds of others have been attacked, looted, or set on fire by Boko Haram jihadists in their quest to create an independent Islamic state, said Unicef.

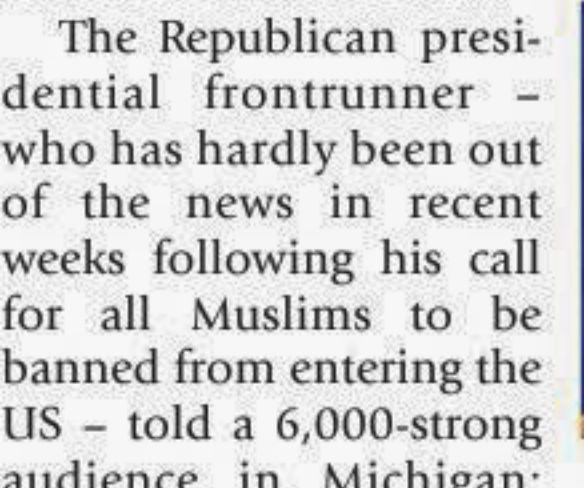
Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari has given his military commanders until the end of the month to end the Boko Haram insurgency, but even if victory is possible analysts say his government will have to contend with social turmoil stemming from a generation of children who have not gone to class.

"The longer they stay out of school, the greater the risks of being abused, abducted and recruited by armed groups," said Manuel Fontaine, Unicef regional director of West and Central Africa.

Boko Haram fighters stormed a school in the remote northeastern Nigerian town of Chibok on April 14, 2014, seizing 276 girls who were preparing for end-of-year exams in an abduction that shocked the world.

Trump under fire over vulgar Clinton remark

Donald Trump has attracted fresh controversy after telling a rally that Hillary Clinton was "schlonged" by Barack Obama when both ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008.



The Republican presidential frontrunner - who has hardly been out of the news in recent weeks following his call for all Muslims to be banned from entering the US - told a 6,000-strong audience in Michigan: "Even her race to Obama. She was going to beat Obama. I don't know who'd be worse. I don't know. How does it get worse?"

Trump told the rally: "I thought she quit, I thought she gave up."

He later added: "I know where she went. It's disgusting. I don't want to talk about it."

Trump also accused the Democratic frontrunner of lying during the debate when she said that IS had used videos of his comments relating to Muslims to recruit militants.

misogynistic comments he made in relation to an interview with Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly: "You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes. Blood coming out of wherever."

The 69-year-old used the rally to raise a number of criticisms he has of Clinton, who is running for the Democratic nomination for next year's US presidential election.

Mocking her for taking a brief toilet break during Saturday's Democratic debate,

Crisis-hit Nepal to amend charter

Madhesi reject Kathmandu package

In the first sign of a breakthrough in understanding between India and Nepal, Indian government welcomed steps by the Nepali cabinet to amend the new Constitution.

However, the amendment proposals are yet to be welcomed by protesting Madhesi groups, with the main UDMF calling them "a disappointment", raising questions whether the move would lead to the end of the three-month-old blockade at the India-Nepal border that has caused a humanitarian crisis.

In an emergency meeting of the Nepal Cabinet on Monday, Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli promised to address the contentious issues of demarcation of states, delimitation of constituencies, proportional representation for Madhesi, and strict citizenship rules.

Reacting to the proposals that include amending the Constitution, the India's external affairs ministry said India was a "well-wisher" of Nepal. "The government of India welcomes these developments as positive steps that help create the basis for a resolution of the current impasse in Nepal. We urge all Nepali political forces to now demonstrate the necessary maturity and flexibility to find a satisfactory solution to the constitutional issues through constructive dialogue in an agreed time-frame."

'New door' to space travel

SpaceX experiment shows rockets can be reused as airplanes

AFP, Miami

SpaceX successfully landed its powerful Falcon 9 rocket Monday for the first time, a major milestone in the drive to cut costs and waste by making rockets as reusable as airplanes.



Its engines burning bright orange against the dark night sky, the Falcon 9 made a graceful arc back to Earth and touched down upright at Cape Canaveral, Florida, minutes after launching a payload of satellites to orbit, video images showed.

"The Falcon has landed," a commentator said above the screams and cheers of people gathered at SpaceX headquarters in Hawthorne, California.

SpaceX, headed by Internet tycoon Elon Musk, is striving to revolutionize the rocket industry, which currently loses many millions of dollars in jettisoned machinery and sophisticated rocket components

after each launch. Previous attempts to land the Falcon 9's first stage on a floating ocean platform have failed -- with the rocket either colliding with the autonomous drone ship or tipping over.

But this time, video images on SpaceX's live webcast showed the tall, white portion of the rocket -- known as the first stage -- appearing to settle down firmly and stick the landing. The rocket reached a height of 125 miles (200 kilometers) before heading back to Earth and touching down at a former US Air Force rocket and missile testing range that was last used in 1978.

The US space agency NASA applauded the feat.

"Congratulations @SpaceX on your successful vertical landing of the first stage back on Earth!" NASA said in a tweet.