



Students wearing face masks walk across the street in a line in Jinan, in east China's Shandong province amongst heavy air pollution, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

AIR POLLUTION

Ten China cities on red alert

AFP, Beijing

More than 100 million people in China have been warned to stay indoors after at least 10 Chinese cities issued red alerts for smog, state media reported yesterday.

Pollution covered large parts of the country's east and centre as measures to curb the toxic haze were ordered to be implemented. Factories are ordered to close and half of all private cars are told pulled off the streets to battle the pollution.

In addition, the eastern province of Shandong, home to almost 96 million and some of the 10 cities under red alert, issued its first ever top-level warning Wednesday, the provincial environmental bureau said.

It is believed to be the first time an entire province has issued a red alert. The ten cities include the sprawling industrial hub of Tianjin in the northeast.

Counts of PM2.5 -- harmful microscopic particles that penetrate deep into the lungs -- in one of the cities under red alert, central Henan Province's Xinxiang, were as high as 727 micrograms per cubic metre earlier yesterday, according to provincial authorities. The reading is nearly 30 times the World Health Organisation's recommended maximum exposure of 25 over a 24-hour period.

Beijing cancelled its red alert for pollution at midnight on Tuesday as a cold front blew away the foul air, state-run Xinhua news service said yesterday.

Syria agrees to attend Geneva talks: UN

AFP, Beirut

Syria's regime yesterday said it was ready to take part in new talks in Geneva aimed at ending the war but appeared to make its participation conditional on which opposition groups will attend.

It came as the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group pushed further into a key city in eastern Syria in fighting that reportedly left more than two dozen regime loyalists dead.

During an official visit to China yesterday, Foreign Minister Walid Muallem said Damascus "is ready to participate in the Syrian-Syrian dialogue in Geneva without any foreign interference."

Last week, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution endorsing a peace plan to bring the regime and opposition together for talks in January.

The plan is the result of nearly two months of strenuous efforts between top diplomats from 17 countries, including regime backers Russia and Iran. But it does not address the sharpest difference between opposition groups and the regime: the fate of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Muallem's comments yesterday seemed

to indicate government approval of the plan -- but with apparent preconditions.

Speaking after meeting his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, Muallem said Syria was waiting to receive a list of "terrorist organisations" that would not be allowed to participate in the talks.

The UN tasked Jordan with creating the banned list, which was submitted Friday and apparently included IS and the al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front.

But Syria's government has systematically referred to all its opponents, including non-Islamist groups, as "terrorists".

A landmark summit in Saudi Arabia earlier this month saw armed and political branches of the opposition agree to talks with Assad's government.

The UN resolution calls for talks in early January that would lead to the "establishment of an inclusive transitional governing body with full executive powers" within six months.

Previous efforts to negotiate a political solution to Syria's nearly five-year conflict have faltered, including the 2014 Geneva talks between the regime and opposition forces.

UNSC backs Libya peace deal

REUTERS, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Wednesday endorsed a UN-brokered agreement among Libya's warring factions to form a national unity government, a deal Western powers hope will bring stability and help to combat a growing Islamic State presence.

Libya's UN ambassador, Ibrahim Dabbashi, said Libyan authorities have no plans to request Western air strikes against Islamic State militants anytime soon, if at all. He dismissed media reports citing him as saying the resolution would lead to a swift Libyan appeal for Western military intervention.

The unanimously adopted resolution, drafted by Britain, made clear that Libya's future unity government should be the sole representative for the North African country, where competing governments have long vied for power.

Four years after Muammar Gaddafi's fall, Libya is deeply fractured, with a self-declared government in Tripoli and an internationally recognized one in the east, each backed by coalitions of former rebels and militias. Hardliners in both Libyan factions reject the peace deal.

The resolution said the council welcomed the formation of the so-called Presidency Council in Libya and urged it to form a unity government within 30 days as called for in last week's agreement. It also urged the Presidency Council to finalize interim security arrangements necessary for bringing stability to Libya and called on UN member states to "respond urgently to requests for assistance" from Libya's unity government.

18 more die after boat sinks off Turkey coast

AFP, Ankara

At least 18 migrants drowned yesterday when their overcrowded boat sank in the Aegean Sea on the way to the Greek island of Lesbos in the latest tragedy involving refugees seeking to enter Europe.

The wooden boat capsized in high waves two miles off the Bademli coast in the Aegean, the private Dogan news agency reported.

The Turkish coastguard recovered the bodies including several children from the sea, and were hunting for another two who were missing. A one-year old baby was among those rescued.

Divers from the nearby Turkish coastal city of Izmir were rushed to the scene after a tip-off that more refugees could be stuck in the hold, Dogan said.

The UN refugee agency and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said this week more than one million migrants and refugees reached Europe this year, most of them by sea.

Turkey, which is currently hosting at least 2.2 million Syrian refugees, is a major

launch-pad for migrants who are seeking better lives in European Union nations.

The EU is grappling for solutions to the mass arrival of migrants, most of them Syrian refugees from Turkey.

Ankara reached an agreement with the EU in November to stem the flow of refugees heading to Europe, in return for financial assistance.

Brussels vowed to provide three billion euros (\$3.2 billion) in cash as well as political concessions to Ankara in return for its cooperation in tackling

Europe's worst migrant crisis since World War II.

After the landmark deal, Turkish coastguard and police have stepped up their presence along the coasts where smugglers operate the refugee business.

Meanwhile, because of the winter conditions, there has been a decrease in the numbers of people seeking to reach Europe in risky sea journeys.

Turkish media reported this week that human smugglers have decreased the trip per migrant to \$500 from around \$1,200 because of reduced demand.

MIGRANT CRISIS



Trump soars in opinion poll despite gaffes

AFP, Washington

American billionaire Donald Trump, the dominant Republican no one can stop talking about heading into the 2016 presidential election, is leaving his rivals far behind in the polls.

The provocative real estate magnate and political neophyte remains at the center of campaign firestorms, roiling the Republican establishment and leading the GOP pack as it gears up for the post-New-Year gallop to Iowa and the first voting in the nominations process on February 1.

Trump's campaign trail bombast -- including extraordinary comments, among them a vulgar attack on Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton that stunned many observers -- appears to have done him little if any harm in the polls as he solidifies the frontrunner status he has maintained since late July.

A new poll released Wednesday showed him with double the support of his nearest competitor.

The national CNN/ORC poll of Republican and Republican-leaning registered voters has Trump leading with 39 percent support -- more than twice that of Senator Ted Cruz on 18 percent, a two-point gain since the companies' last poll in November.

Senator Marco Rubio and retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson have both slipped slightly and sit at 10 percent, while New Jersey Governor Chris Christie came in fifth at five percent. None of the other eight Republican candidates is above four percent.

Iran calls China to join the fight

AFP, Dubai

China should play a more active role in fighting Islamic State, a senior figure in a body that advises Iran's Supreme Leader said yesterday, according to the country's Fars news agency.

China relies on the Middle East for oil supplies, but tends to leave diplomacy there to other permanent members of the UN Security Council -- the United States, Britain, France and Russia.

"China can significantly help the regional peace and stability by becoming more active in the fight against the Islamic State," said Mohsen Rezaei, who has the title of Secretary of the Expediency Council, after meeting members of a Chinese delegation in Tehran.

China has called for greater coordination after attacks in Mali and Paris and the downing of a Russian warplane by Turkey, but has long said there is no military solution in Syria, with state media criticizing the West and Russia for air strikes.

But this month a Chinese-language song purportedly released by Islamic State put Chinese officials on alert that they need closer global cooperation against Islamist militancy.

Beijing warns that some members of the Muslim Uighur ethnic group, from the western region of Xinjiang, have joined Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

Rezaei said if China plays a more significant role in the fight against the Islamic State, "Iran can fight against Islamic extremism in Central Asia through cultural activities and interaction with Chinese Muslim community."

Shia power Iran has ramped up its military presence in Iraq and Syria, where Islamic State controls large areas. The Sunni Islamist group views Shias as heretics.



A volunteer dressed in a Father Christmas (Santa Claus) outfit distributes gifts to children of asylum-seekers, as they arrive at the Schoenefeld train station near Berlin yesterday, before being dispatched to various refugee centres in or near the German capital. Pilgrims celebrated Christmas in Bethlehem, the town where tradition says Jesus was born, yesterday but festivities were subdued against a backdrop of violence in the Holy Land and a growing jihadist threat across the Middle East.

PHOTO: AFP

Boko Haram 'technically defeated': Nigeria leader

BBC ONLINE

Nigeria has "technically won the war" against Islamist Boko Haram militants, President Muhammadu Buhari said yesterday.

He told the BBC that the militant group could no longer mount "conventional attacks" against security forces or population centres.

It had been reduced to fighting with improvised explosives devices (IEDs) and remained a force only in its heartland of Borno state, he said.

Boko Haram has been described as one of the world's deadliest terror groups.

Critics of the government argue that it has exaggerated the scale of its success against the militants, and that each time the army claims to have wiped out Boko Haram, the militants have quietly rebuilt.

The group's six-year insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria has led to the deaths of some 17,000 people, destroyed more than 1,000 schools and displaced more than 1.5

million people.

President Buhari has given the army until the end of this year to defeat the group - a deadline that is likely to be extended as Boko Haram is still bombing some areas despite losing towns under its control.

But he told the BBC that the jihadists had been all but driven out from Adamawa and Yobe states, and their way of operating curtailed.

"Boko Haram has reverted to using improvised explosive devices (IEDs)," he said. "Indoctrinating young guys... they have now been reduced to that."

"But articulated conventional attacks on centres of communication and populations... they are no longer capable of doing that effectively."

"So I think technically we have won the war because people are going back into their neighbourhoods. Boko Haram as an organised fighting force, I assure you, that we have dealt with them."



Refugee in Spain wins €400,000 in lottery

BBC ONLINE

A migrant from Senegal who travelled to Europe by boat has won a stake of some €400,000 (£294,000; \$436,000) in Spain's Christmas lottery.

The man, named Ngagne, travelled from Morocco to Spain in 2007.

Ticket-holders in his coastal town of Roquetas de Mar won first prize, and a share of €640m, in the "El Gordo" lottery.

Ngagne told one Spanish newspaper that he and his wife often did not have even €5 to last the day.

The winning number - 79140 - appeared on 1,600 tickets in Roquetas de Mar.

El Gordo is the world's biggest Christmas lottery, and the live televised draw grips the nation.

Israel kills 4 Palestinian assailants in West Bank

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli forces killed four Palestinian assailants in separate incidents in the occupied West Bank yesterday, the army said, as a 12-week surge in street violence showed no sign of abating.

In the latest in a wave of almost daily assaults, a knife-wielding Palestinian hurt two guards yesterday near a Jewish settlement in the West Bank and was shot dead, the army said.

In other locations in the West Bank, another Palestinian was shot dead while trying to stab a soldier with a screwdriver, and a third after injuring a soldier in a car-ramming, the army said.

Near Qalandia in the West Bank, Israeli troops carrying out an arrest raid shot two Palestinians who fired at them from within a crowd of rock- and petrol bomb-throwing protesters, the army said. Local medics said a Palestinian was killed and six wounded. The army said two soldiers were hurt in the incident.

A video footage of far-right Jews mocking

arson victims sparked outrage in Israel yesterday and debate over whether the leak aimed to sway public opinion in favour of tough interrogation of several suspects who are in state custody.

Aired on television late on Wednesday, the clip showed a Jerusalem wedding last week at which a dancing celebrant stabbed a picture of 18-month-old Ali Dawabsheh while others waved assault rifles, knives and what appeared to be a petrol bomb.

With Israel hinting indictments over the arson in the West Bank village of Duma may be imminent, some of the suspects' lawyers have accused the security agency - also known as the Shin Bet - of trying to exact false confessions with torture.

The Shin Bet, in a rare public response, denied yesterday it had tortured any of the suspects.

Palestinians have killed 20 Israelis and a U.S. citizen since October. Israeli forces or armed civilians have killed at least 124 Palestinians, 76 of whom authorities described as assailants, while others died in clashes with security forces.