

Rebels swapped in UN deal

Rare evacuation of three towns as deadly blasts kill 32 in Homs

AGENCIES

A rare UN-backed deal between Syria's warring sides saw hundreds of fighters and civilians evacuate three towns yesterday, as bomb blasts in the regime-held city of Homs killed at least 14 people.

President Bashar al-Assad's regime has agreed to several ceasefires with rebel groups in the past but yesterday's evacuation plan was one of the most elaborate in the nearly five-year war.

controlled villages in northwestern Syria to other government areas, also via the neighbouring countries, he said.

Residents of the mainly Shia villages of Fuua and Kafraya were to cross into Turkey, then fly into Beirut and travel overland into Damascus. It is the first time the neighbouring countries are involved in such an evacuation deal.

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Meanwhile, at least 32 people were killed and 90 wounded in two bomb explosions in the Syrian city of Homs yesterday, monitoring group the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The blasts, one from a car bomb and another from a suicide attack, struck the Zahra district in the middle of the city, the Britain-based Observatory said.

It was the second major attack in the city since a ceasefire deal between warring sides took effect earlier this month, paving the way for the government to take over the last rebel-controlled area of Homs.

SYRIA WAR



Members of Iraq's elite counter-terrorism service place their national flag on the roof of a building at the government complex yesterday after they recaptured the city of Ramadi from Islamic States group jihadists.

PHOTO: AFP

CHARTER AMENDMENT BILL Nepal parties decide to reach consensus

PTI, Kathmandu

Nepal's three major political parties yesterday decided to reach a consensus on a bill to amend the new constitution to resolve the current political crisis amid the ongoing protests by Madhesis demanding greater representation and review of provincial boundary demarcation.

The three parties held a meeting at Baluwatar which was attended by Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli, UCPN—Maoist chairman Prachanda, Nepali Congress president Sushil Koirala and general secretary of the party Prakash Man Singh.

"A meeting of three major parties and the agitating United Democratic Madhesi Front will be convened soon to make a common opinion among the political parties regarding the constitution amendment bill tabled in the Parliament and the ongoing Madhes movement," according to Prime Minister's press adviser Pramod Dahal.

Madhesis, largely of Indian-origin, are agitating over the new constitution demanding more representation. They are also protesting division of their ancestral homeland under the seven-province structure and have led an ongoing blockade of key border trade points with India.

On Sunday, Maoist chief Prachanda told Prime Minister Oli that the three major parties need to forge consensus on the demands of the agitating Madhesi parties.

'War spoils' of IS

REUTERS, Washington

Islamic State has set up departments to handle "war spoils," including slaves, and the exploitation of natural resources such as oil, creating the trappings of government that enable it to manage large swaths of Syria and Iraq and other areas.

The hierarchical bureaucracy, including petty rivalries between officials, and legal codes in the form of religious fatwas are detailed in a cache of documents seized by US Special Operations Forces in a May raid in Syria that killed top IS financial official Abu Sayyaf.

Reuters has reviewed some of the documents.

US officials say the documents have helped deepen their understanding of a militant group whose skill in controlling the territory it has seized has surprised many. They provide insight into how a once small insurgent group has developed a complex bureaucracy to manage revenue streams - from pillaged oil to stolen antiquities - and oversee subjugated populations.

"This really kind of brings it out. The level

of bureaucratization, organization, the diwans, the committees," Brett McGurk, President Barack Obama's special envoy for the anti-IS coalition, told Reuters.

For example, one diwan, roughly equivalent to a government ministry, handles natural resources, including the exploitation of antiquities from ancient empires. Another processes "war spoils," including slaves.

The documents also show how "meticulous and data-oriented" IS is in managing the oil and gas sector, although it is not a sophisticated operation, said Amos Hochstein, the State Department's top official for energy affairs.

US officials said the documents have helped the anti-IS coalition to pinpoint vulnerabilities. The United States and its allies have been using air strikes to degrade the group's oil infrastructure and target key officials.

The documents show the Islamic State is not immune to the rivalries and personality clashes that typify bureaucracies everywhere. A Nov. 21, 2014 letter from the Diwan of Natural Resources emphasizes that Abu Sayyaf is in charge of handling antiquities.

Seized documents reveal Islamic State has a department to handle slaves, exploit natural resources

Who runs Russia with Putin?

BBC ONLINE

When Vladimir Putin first came to power, he was asked in an interview which of his colleagues he trusted most. He named five people: Nikolai Patrushev, Sergei Ivanov, Dmitry Medvedev, Alexei Kudrin and Igor Sechin.

Fifteen years later, these men still form President Putin's core group and dominate the strategic heights of Russian government and big business. Patrushev was director of the FSB internal security service from 1999 until his appointment as Secretary of the Russian security council in 2008.

Ivanov has been Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. Since 2011, he has been head of the presidential administration. Medvedev was President from 2008-12, forming part of the ruling "tandem" with Putin, and is now Prime Minister.

Kudrin, finance minister until 2011, no longer holds a formal position but still appears to offer advice to the president on financial and economic matters. Sechin, who has held senior positions in the presidential administration and government, is chief executive of Rosneft, the state oil company.

This core group illustrates two important points about who runs Russia. First, there has been continuity in terms of the personnel closest to Putin. Real reshuffles are rare, and very few have been evicted from this core group.

Second, the heart of the leadership team is made up of allies who served with Putin in the KGB, in 1990s St Petersburg, or both.

This core group also includes others whom the president trusts to implement major infrastructure projects, such as Arkady Rotenberg, one of those responsible for the Sochi Winter Olympics, as well as several regional figures and senior bureaucrats.

Many of these figures held senior positions even before Putin's rise to power. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, formerly Minister of Emergency Situations, was a prominent party political figure in the second half of the 1990s and leader of the United Russia party from 2001-05.

Such figures convene in the security council, one of the most important organisations for co-ordinating high-level decision-making and resources. At the same time, the Russian administrative system - the so-called vertical of power - does not function well: policy instructions are often implemented tardily and sometimes not at all, so others have important roles helping develop and implement projects.



The inner circle (clockwise from top left): Nikolai Patrushev and Dmitry Medvedev, Sergei Ivanov, Alexei Kudrin, Igor Sechin.

NEWSIN brief

Rome, Milan ban car after smog levels rise

BBC ONLINE

Two of Italy's largest cities, Milan and Rome, are restricting car use as smog levels build up. Milan is banning cars, motorcycles and scooters for six hours a day over the next three days. In Rome, cars with odd-numbered plates have been banned for nine hours yesterday. Cars with even-numbered plates will be restricted today.

Bin Laden's former bodyguard dies

BBC ONLINE

Nasser al-Bahri - Osama Bin Laden's former bodyguard has died after a long illness, medical sources in Yemen have told the BBC. They said Bahri, a Yemeni national, passed away on Saturday in a hospital in the southern city of Mukalla. He is believed to have been in his 40s. Bahri, also known as Abu Jandal, was also a driver for the late al-Qaeda leader, when he was in Afghanistan. He was freed from the Guantanamo Bay jail and returned to Yemen in 2008.

Families mark AirAsia crash anniversary

AFP, Surabaya

Families of those killed in an AirAsia plane crash in Indonesia demanded yesterday the airline apologise for negligence after a probe showed faulty equipment contributed to the accident. A year on from the tragedy that left 162 dead. Flight QZ8501 plunged into the Java Sea in stormy weather on December 28 last year during what was supposed to be a routine flight from the Indonesian city of Surabaya to Singapore.

Congress left red-faced on foundation day

Party mouthpiece blames Nehru over his foreign policy moves

AGENCIES

A periodical published by India's main opposition Congress has criticised India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru over his foreign policy moves.

The unsigned piece in Congress Darshan said Nehru faltered in his initiatives in Kashmir, China and Tibet. Nehru was a leader of the Congress party and its current vice-president Rahul Gandhi is his great grandson, reports BBC.

Articles in the December issue left the party squirming over the controversy on its foundation day yesterday.

The editor of the period-



Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron (C) greets British soldiers working on flood relief after the river Ouse burst its banks, in York city centre, northern England, yesterday. Cameron visited the flood-hit historic city of York as cities, towns and villages across northern England battled to get back on their feet following devastating storms.

PHOTO: AFP

France opens WW2 Vichy regime files

Documents reveal how Nazi Germany deported 76,000 Jews

BBC ONLINE

France is opening up police and ministerial archives from the Vichy regime which collaborated with Nazi occupation forces in World War Two.

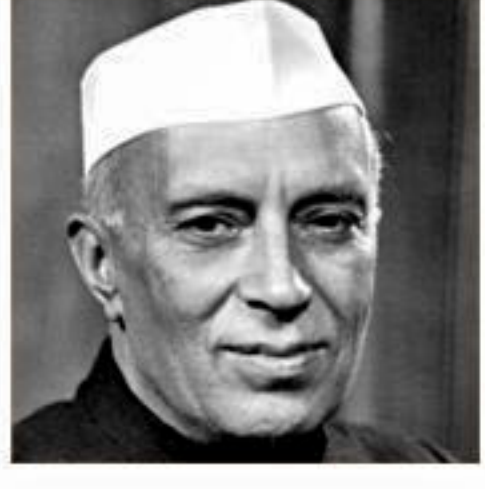
More than 200,000 declassified documents were made public yesterday. They date from the 1940-1944 regime of Marshal Philippe Petain.

During the war the Vichy regime helped Nazi Germany to deport 76,000 Jews from France, including many children. France is also opening files from its post-liberation provisional government.

The Vichy documents come from the wartime ministries of the interior, foreign affairs and justice, as well as the police. Some of the archives relate to war crimes investigations conducted by the French liberation authorities after the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Speaking to French TFI television news, historian Gilles Morin said the archives would probably shed new light on the arrest of Jean Moulin, a French Resistance leader who died after his capture and torture by the Nazis in 1943.

Police records and notes seized from French Resistance comrades will now add to the witness statements that researchers have relied on until now, Morin said.



ical, Sanjay Nirupam, apologised for the article and said he would investigate the matter. Nirupam, a senior party leader, told the Indian Express that he was "not involved in the day-to-day functioning of the magazine and was unaware of the article".

"I do not agree with the article. It seems to have been sourced, but I don't know who the writer is," he said. Nirupam said "action will be taken against people in the editorial team who are responsible for the mistake".

Editorial board member and party leader Bhushan Patil later informed that the journal's editor Sudhir Joshi had been sacked.

Nirupam, a former journalist himself, also said that he had plans to revamp the editorial board and would personally monitor the editorial content published in Congress Darshan.

WORST NATURAL DISASTERS OF 2015

About 150 major natural disasters affected millions of people worldwide in 2015. Asia again bore the brunt of these disasters reported globally. Floods continue to be the most frequently occurring natural disasters and also affect the most people worldwide. Here are six of the worst natural disasters of 2015:

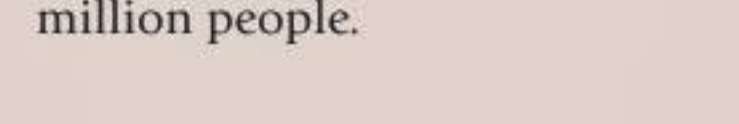


FLOODING SOAKS CHENNAI

At least 379 people have died and 100,000 acres of crops were destroyed as incessant rains continued to batter the southern Indian city of Chennai on early November. The rains have also affected at least 80,000 people in northern parts of neighbouring Sri Lanka. A depression formed in the Bay of Bengal has triggered rains in coastal areas of India's Tamil Nadu state and Sri Lanka.

BEIJING CHOKES ON SMOG

Schools and outdoor construction work shut down completely in Beijing as China issued its first ever serious warning over the smog build-up in the capital city on Dec 7, 2015. A "red alert" was declared by the authorities even as the government took measures to reduce air pollution by introducing the odd-even car-number restrictions and closing some expressways.



AFGHANISTAN AVALANCHE

Heavy winter snow caused avalanches in Afghanistan, killing at least 200 people and displacing hundreds. The Panjshir province, located around 100 km from Kabul, was the worst hit with numerous homes buried under the snow.

TROPICAL CYCLONE KOMEN

In July 2015, the monsoon depression over the north-east Bay of Bengal and Bangladeshi coast worsened and caused heavy downpours in regions which were already hugely affected by flash

FAMILIES MARK AIRASIA CRASH ANNIVERSARY

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MALAWI FLOODS

Above-normal rainfall in January led to catastrophic flooding throughout Malawi and Mozambique, forcing hundreds of thousands of people out of their homes and killing at least 200 in early 2015. Many more families lost crops and livestock. Roads, bridges, and water systems were damaged or destroyed.

STRONG QUAKE HITS NEPAL

A magnitude-7.8 earthquake struck Nepal on April 25, killing more than 8,800 people. It damaged or destroyed nearly 900,000 buildings, created avalanches in the Himalayas, and left almost 1 million children out of school. Major aftershocks, including a magnitude-7.3 tremor three weeks later, slowed recovery efforts and added to the devastation. This was the deadliest disaster on record for the nation of 26 million people.

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SOURCE: AGENCIES