

Iraqi army heads towards Fallujah

700 militants hiding in Ramadi: US-led coalition

AGENCIES
The Iraqi army, emboldened by the recent recapturing of the city of Ramadi from the Islamic State, is now eyeing another IS stronghold: Fallujah.

The defence ministry said yesterday that Iraqi security forces, supported by US-led air strikes, had started advancing towards Fallujah from different sides. It added that Iraqi forces were trying to cleanse areas adjacent to the Euphrates River and around Fallujah in order to cut IS supply line to the city.

But military experts told Al Jazeera that the presence of large numbers of improvised explosive devices and mines planted by IS at the entrances of the city, in addition to the violent resistance the group is putting up, will not make taking over Fallujah an easy mission.

Moreover, the Iraqi forces will need to consolidate power over the areas they have already taken over, experts said.

The US-led coalition yesterday said about 700 IS militants are suspected to be hiding in the centre and eastern outskirts of Ramadi days after Iraqi forces claimed victory over the militants in the western city, reports Reuters.

Much of the centre of the Anbar provincial capital still needs to be cleared of explosives laid by the militants who seized the city in May, delaying the return of tens of thousands of civilians who fled to Baghdad and other parts of the country, the coalition said.

The Pentagon said Tuesday that an IS leader with "direct" ties to the alleged mastermind of the Paris attacks was among 10 of the group's higher-ups killed in Syria and Iraq this month.

The US military says such strikes are helping to weaken the jihadist group, which captured large parts of Iraq and Syria last year but has recently seen significant setbacks including this week's loss of Ramadi in Iraq, reports AFP.

WAR ON IS



Students hold portraits of deceased former "comfort women" protesting against South Korea's agreement with Japan on wartime sex slavery during a weekly anti-Japan rally in front of Japanese embassy in Seoul, South Korea, yesterday. They waved banners and chanted slogans, dismissing the deal as "humiliating."

PHOTO: REUTERS



Modi wants to revamp cabinet

BJP leaders say changes could come early next yr
REUTERS, New Delhi

After a drubbing in a state poll in November, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi wants to overhaul his cabinet to weed out underperformers and improve his government's image. Problem is, several sources said, he can't find the right replacements.

As New Delhi buzzes with speculation about changes in several ministries, senior members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and a close aide to Modi said some changes could come early next year but the talent pool was too shallow to engineer a major revamp.

Pressure is mounting on Modi to revive his party's fortunes. Nearly two years after he swept to power on a promise of jobs and growth, the shine is coming off - reforms to revive investment have withered and the economy is stuttering. Rural distress has grown after two successive droughts.

"The challenge is to identify the right candidates who can deliver fast-paced reforms and policies in their work sphere," the prime minister's aide said.

Articulate and suave, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley has been considered for the defence portfolio, another high-profile role that is crucial to Modi's geopolitical ambitions and plans to boost Indian industry. But there was no one to take Jaitley's place in finance, the sources said.

A spokesman for Modi declined to comment. An official in Jaitley's office said they didn't have any knowledge of a possible reshuffle.

'More troops may be needed'

US general seeks more US force on the ground in Afghanistan

AFP, Washington

The top US and Nato military commander in Afghanistan may seek additional American troops to help local forces as they struggle to contain the Taliban insurgency, USA Today reported Tuesday.

General John Campbell's interview with the newspaper comes as the security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated in the second half of 2015, with an increase in insurgent attacks and higher casualties among both Taliban and national forces.

Already, President Barack Obama has backtracked on a pledge to pull out all but 1,000 troops, and in October he announced that 9,800 US troops would remain in Afghanistan until the end of 2016.

Campbell told USA today he would ask the Obama administration to keep that higher number of troops in country as long as possible and

suggested he might call for more US personnel.

"If I don't believe that we can accomplish the train, advise and assist (the counter-terrorism) missions, then I owe it to the senior leadership to come back and say, 'Here's what I need.'"



TALIBAN INSURGENCY
● Campbell would ask Obama administration to keep troops as long as possible
● Pakistan, Afghanistan set up military hotline to help defuse insurgency

If that's more people, it's more people," Campbell told the newspaper.

The 9,800 US troops are scheduled to be drawn down to 5,500 by January 1, 2017.

"My intent would be to keep as much as I could, for as long as I could,"

Campbell said.

Meanwhile, Pakistan and Afghanistan have established a hotline between their respective military commanders and made first contact yesterday, the Pakistani military said.

Pakistan army spokesman Lieutenant General Asim Bajwa said on Twitter that the direct line between the military commanders of the two countries was agreed during a visit to Kabul Sunday by the country's powerful army chief General Raheel Sharif.

Afghanistan sees Pakistan's support as vital to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table.

This month marks a year since the US and Nato-led mission in Afghanistan transitioned into an Afghan operation, with allied nations assisting in training and equipping local forces to tackle Taliban and other groups.

The Taliban have already dealt some stinging blows to Afghan forces, including a short-lived takeover of the

US still spying on Netanyahu

Reports The Wall Street Journal

AFP, Washington

The United States continues to spy on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's communications despite promising to curtail the hacking of its allies, The Wall Street Journal reported Tuesday.

Contacted by AFP, the White House did not deny the report, which cites several serving and former US officials, but stressed the importance of its ongoing close ties with Israel.

Netanyahu's office in Jerusalem as well as the spokesman of the Israeli foreign ministry declined to comment on the report.

Two years ago, after rogue intelligence contractor Edward Snowden revealed the vast extent of the National Security Agency's online surveillance, President Barack Obama promised to limit spying on US allies.

Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel had been embarrassed by the revelation that her cellphone had been monitored and other allies expressed private concerns about the breadth of NSA monitoring.

But, according to the Journal report, Obama decided there was a "compelling national security purpose" in continuing to monitor some leaders, including Netanyahu and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The US administration decided not to remove or disable the "cyber-implants" it had secreted on foreign communications systems, as they would be hard to replace.

Instead, the report says, Obama ordered that some of the hacked systems used by close allies would not be routinely monitored by the NSA.



Officials inspect damage at a beverages factory after Saudi-led air strikes destroyed it in Yemen's capital Sanaa yesterday. The Arab coalition is backing forces loyal to Yemeni President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi's internationally recognised government with air strikes, ground troops, and weaponry, in addition to training.

PHOTO: REUTERS

US PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN Trump to spend \$2m a week

AFP, Washington

Republican White House frontrunner Donald Trump said Tuesday he will start spending millions of dollars in hard-hitting campaign advertising in the run-up to the first votes in the 2016 presidential race.

Trump, a billionaire real estate tycoon who is self-funding his campaign, has spent virtually no money in political television ads. But that is changing.

"I'll be spending a minimum of \$2 million a week, and perhaps substantially more than that," he told reporters on his campaign plane.

Meanwhile, George Pataki, who was governor of New York during the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, announced Tuesday he is ending his presidential bid.

Trump has been leading nationally in all polls for months, and his bombastic and provocative style has allowed him to dominate the media spotlight, without spending any of the \$35 million he said he had expected to use on ads by January 1.

Caned in public for crime of 'affectionate contact'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A young unmarried woman and a man have been publicly caned in Indonesia's Aceh province for being "too intimate" with each other.

The two university students, 23-year-old Wahyudi Saputra and 20-year-old Nur Elita, were caned for "khalwat" - affectionate contact - in front of a crowd, according to the The Jakarta Post.

They were struck five times each and Elita was reportedly carried by officials to an ambulance after the punishment.

Four other men were caned for "indecent and gambling", prohibited under Islamic law.

All the victims were punished in the front yard of the Baiturrahim mosque in Banda

Aceh, and one onlooker was Deputy Mayor Zainal Arifin.

"Take these punishments as a lesson. What has been done by these convicts should not be taken as an example. And I hope their canings in Meuraxa district today will be the last ever," he said, according to Antara.

Aceh is the only region in Indonesia that implements this system of Shariah law and has done so since 2003 when it was granted special autonomy.

According to Reuters, the province only recently adopted a legal code based in a conservative interpretation of Islamic law, completing the transition from a secular legal code in October 2015 in accordance with legislation originally passed in 2014.

Shariah law is still implemented across



Worries grow over 'strongest El Nino'

BBC ONLINE

The strongest El Nino weather cycle on record is likely to increase the threat of hunger and disease for millions of people in 2016, aid agencies say.

The weather phenomenon is set to exacerbate droughts in some areas, while increasing flooding in others. Some of the worst impacts are likely in Africa with food shortages expected to peak in February.

Regions including the Caribbean, Central and South America will also be hit in the next six months. This periodic weather event, which tends to drive up global temperatures and disturb weather patterns, has helped push 2015 into the record books as the world's warmest year.

"By some measures this has already been the strongest El Nino on record. It depends on exactly how you measure it," said Dr Nick Klingaman from the University of Reading.

"In a lot of tropical countries we are seeing big reductions in rainfall of the order of 20-30%. Indonesia has experienced a bad drought; the Indian monsoon was about 15% below normal; and the forecasts for Brazil and Australia are for reduced monsoons."

As both droughts and floods continue, the scale of the potential impacts is worrying aid agencies. Around 31 million people are said to be facing food insecurity across Africa, a significant increase over the last year. Around a third of these people live in Ethiopia where 10.2 million are projected to require humanitarian assistance in 2016.

NEWS IN brief

Russian raids on Syria kill 2,300: monitor

AFP, Beirut

Three months of Russian air strikes in Syria have killed more than 2,300 people, a third of them civilians, a monitoring group said yesterday. Russia began conducting its air war in Syria on September 30 in support of embattled ally President Bashar al-Assad. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Moscow's strikes on Syria have killed 2,371 people so far.

India test-fires surface-to-air missile

REUTERS, New Delhi

India successfully test-fired yesterday a new long range surface-to-air missile capable of countering aerial threats at extended ranges, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi pushes to enhance the country's military capabilities. The test-firing of the missile system, jointly developed by India and Israel, was carried out by warship INS Kolkata.

Taiwan, China launch hotline after summit

AFP, Taipei

The first hotline between China and Taiwan was launched yesterday, in a move designed to build ties between the two sides following a historic summit between their leaders. Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed to set up the hotline during senior officials during a landmark meeting in Singapore in November.

UK flooding: Looters target victims' homes

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Looters are targeting homes which have been evacuated during the York floods. There have been multiple reports of dry goods left outside flooded homes being stolen and driven away in white vans. North Yorkshire Police's Acting Superintendent, Mark Grange, said: "It is extremely disappointing to see victims of the floods being targeted in this way."

Turkey detains two IS suspects

AFP, Ankara

Turkish police yesterday detained two IS suspects accused of plotting a suicide bomb attack on New Year's Eve celebrations in the capital Ankara. The arrests come with European countries on high alert for possible attacks over the New Year.

Mine cave-in: 8 Chinese survivors found

AFP, Beijing

Eight people were found alive in a Chinese gypsum mine yesterday, state media said, five days after it collapsed in an accident that reportedly prompted its owner to commit suicide. The mine, in the eastern province of Shandong, caved in on Friday while 29 people were working underground.