

More IS attacks likely

Says top US general, claims group suffers setbacks in Iraq, Syria

AFP, Washington

Islamic State jihadists will likely increase the tempo of attacks around the world as they come under increased pressure in Iraq and Syria, a top US general warned Thursday.

General Lloyd Austin, who currently heads the military's Central Command (CENTCOM) overseeing Middle East operations, made the argument that recent IS-claimed attacks like the ones this week in Istanbul and Jakarta are in fact evidence the group is faltering. "ISIL has assumed a defensive posture in Iraq and Syria," Austin said at a news conference in Florida.



"Going forward, we can expect to see him rely increasingly on acts of terrorism such as we saw this week in Baghdad and in Turkey, and most recently in Jakarta," he added.

Austin, who has headed CENTCOM since March 2013 and will shortly be stepping down, said the IS group is upping its overseas actions to distract from such losses.

"ISIL wants to draw attention away from the growing number of setbacks" that it is experiencing," Austin said, using an alternative name for the IS group.

"It is important to understand that these

terrorist acts don't necessarily mean ISIL is getting stronger," he added.

"ISIL by its nature is a terrorist organization and by conducting these attacks, he is attempting to produce an image of invincibility in the wake of setbacks. So overall, we are making progress."

The IS group, which swept through vast regions of Iraq and Syria in 2014 and 2015 and captured a string of cities, has seen recent setbacks across its self-proclaimed caliphate, including the loss of the key Iraqi city of Ramadi to US-supported local forces.

A US-led coalition has also been hammering the group's oil infrastructure, including by blowing up hundreds of trucks used to ferry illicit crude oil around Syria, and this week bombed a financial facility in the Iraqi city of Mosul that US officials said held millions of dollars in cash.

Pentagon chief Ashton Carter said he will recommend that President Barack Obama nominate General Joseph Votel to replace Austin.

Votel currently heads the Special Operations Command. His nomination would reflect the increased role special operations troops are carrying out in the region as elite US commandos launch raids



People carry a banner reading "We grieve. We are not afraid" during a rally at the scene of Thursday's gun and bomb attack in Jakarta, Indonesia yesterday. Inset, Smoke rises after a bomb exploded outside a Starbucks shop in Jakarta in this still image taken from amateur video shot on Thursday. PHOTO: REUTERS



NEWS IN brief

Turkey detains 21 academics

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish police yesterday detained over a dozen academics who signed a petition criticising the military crackdown in the Kurdish-dominated southeast that angered President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Police launched an operation to detain 21 Turkish academics as part of an investigation accusing them of disseminating "terror propaganda" by signing the

Japan mountain bus crash kills 14

AFP, Tokyo

Fourteen people were killed and dozens injured when their bus plunged off a mountain road in Japan on its way to a ski resort, in the country's worst such accident for 25 years.

Young skiers -- many in their teens or early 20s -- were asleep on the bus when it careened off the road before dawn in the resort town of Karuizawa yesterday.

Morales sworn in as Guatemala president

AFP, Guatemala City

Jimmy Morales, a former TV comic elected Guatemala's new president on a wave of public revulsion against widespread graft, took office Thursday in a ceremony attended by leaders from the Americas.

Invites to the swearing-in included US Vice President Joe Biden, and the presidents of Mexico, Ecuador and most Central American nations.

Delhi ends car ban trial

AFP, New Delhi

New Delhi yesterday wrapped up a trial of draconian driving restrictions that has taken around a million cars off the roads and seen even judges and diplomats carpool, but made little obvious difference to air quality in the world's most polluted capital. Air quality levels remained "unhealthy" yesterday, the final day of the two-week experiment.

New Ebola death in Sierra Leone

AFP, Freetown

The World Health Organization confirmed yesterday a new death from Ebola in Sierra Leone just a day after west Africa celebrated the end of the outbreak. A 22-year-old female student was taken ill near the Guinean border on Thursday last week and died on Tuesday, according to local health officials.

Shabab storm Somali army base

Claim killing of dozens of Kenyan peacekeepers in African Union force

REUTERS, Mogadishu

Al Shabaab fighters attacked a remote Somali army base and entered a nearby town close to the border with Kenya yesterday, saying they had killed dozens of Kenyan soldiers in an African Union force supporting the government during the assault.

Somali and Kenyan military officials said the fighters had seized the Somali army base near the town of Ceel Cadde, about 550 km west of Mogadishu in a region near Kenya's border. A spokesman for the African Union peacekeeping force AMISOM said the battle for the base was still under way.

Al Shabaab said it had killed more than 60 Kenyan soldiers from AMISOM. Kenya's Defence Ministry said both sides had suffered casualties but said numbers were not confirmed. An AMISOM spokesman said the al Shabaab toll was exaggerated but did not give a figure. There was no independent figure.

"The fighting is ongoing," AMISOM spokesman Paul Njuguna said. A shopkeeper in the Ceel Cadde town said soldiers from AMISOM appeared to have left the town and fighters were now on the streets.

"We see al Shabaab in every corner of town," shopkeeper Abdullahi Iidle told Reuters. "Some residents have fled."

Al Shabaab has been driven out of major strongholds in Somalia by an offensive by AMISOM and the Somali army that was launched last year. But the fighters still control



some parts of the countryside and often launch guerrilla-style assaults and bomb attacks.

The group, which is aligned with al Qaeda, said it took over the base after a suicide bomber rammed its gates, and also controlled the town, capturing nearly 30 trucks and armoured vehicles.

The group's military operations spokesman, Sheikh Abdiyas Abu Musab, told Reuters it had killed more than 60 Kenyan soldiers serving with AMISOM, while others escaped. Al Shabaab has often inflated casualty figures in the past, while the Somali government and other official estimates have often played down the numbers.

A spokesman for the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) said al Shabaab fighters overran the Somali army base and AMISOM

had counter attacked. "The number of casualties on both sides is unknown," Col. David Obonyo, KDF spokesman, said in a statement.

A senior Somali military official confirmed the militants had taken over the base.

"AMISOM has gone out of the town and base for strategic reasons," Colonel Farah Surow, who is based about 100 km from the Ceel Cadde base, told Reuters.

African Union troops, now numbering about 22,000 from several African nations, have spent nearly a decade battling al Shabaab insurgents in Somalia, a country mired in conflict since civil war broke out in 1991.

Sri Lanka PM vows greater political power for Tamils

Assures action against war crimes accused

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's prime minister yesterday promised greater political power to the island's Tamil minority under a new constitution aimed at preventing a return to ethnic war and healing the wounds of the past.

Speaking in the Tamil heartland of Jaffna, Ranil Wickremesinghe marked the Hindu festival of Pongal with a pledge to devolve power and demilitarise a former war zone -- two of the minority's key demands.

"We are ready to devolve power (to minority Tamils) and protect democracy," Wickremesinghe said in a nationally televised ceremony.

The premier also promised to "take action" against both state forces and Tamil rebels accused of war crimes in the final stages of the island's 37-year-old separatist war, in line with pledges to the UN Human Rights Council last year.

"Who has violated (humanitarian law), it could be the security forces or the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)," he said. "We will take action accordingly."

Sri Lanka's year-old government has begun drafting a new constitution aimed at

resolving the drawn-out ethnic conflict which ended in 2009 and claimed 100,000 lives, the premier said.

The issue has been fraught, however, with hardline members of the Sinhalese majority opposing a federal system that would ensure more political power for minority Tamils.

Some minorities fear a "unitary" constitution would see them lose out while moderate Tamils who want to remain in a single union have pressed for greater power in areas where they are in the majority.

"The Constitutional Assembly will discuss with all, including (Tamil-dominated) provincial councils to have a new constitution," Wickremesinghe said. "We will do that in a transparent manner."

The prime minister also promised yesterday to do more to help families of victims resolve the issue of dozens of Tamils who have been imprisoned for years without charge.

Other measures announced include recruiting hundreds of Tamils to the police and military to reduce the mistrust between Jaffna residents and the security establishment, and further support for families of war victims.



AFTERMATH OF INDIAN AIR BASE ATTACK

Pakistan shuts down Jaish seminaries

REUTERS, Lahore

Pakistani authorities have shut down several religious schools run by the Jaish-e-Mohammad militant group accused of masterminding an attack this month on an air base in India, the provincial law minister said yesterday.

The crackdown in Punjab province, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's power base and the headquarters of Jaish-e-Mohammad, follows the arrest this week of several members of the militant group, including its leader, Maulana Masood Azhar, an Islamist hardliner and long-time foe of India.

Pakistan has said it is clamping down on Azhar's group, which India has long accused Pakistani authorities of tolerating, while it investigates Indian assertions that the Jan 2 attack on the Pathankot air base was the work of the Pakistan-based militants.

"Officials of the Counter-Terrorism Department raided the Jamiatul Nur seminary in the Daska area on Thursday and arrested more than a dozen people," Rana Sanaullah, the law minister of the Punjab province where Jaish-e-Mohammad is headquartered, told Reuters.

Sanaullah said several other offices and seminaries run by Jaish-e-Mohammad had also been raided and shut down, with many of its staff arrested. He declined to share further details.



Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Chairperson and presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen greets supporters during a campaign rally ahead of the election in New Taipei City, Taiwan yesterday. Momentum is gathering across Taiwan ahead of today's pivotal election, in which voters are expected to turn their backs on eight years of rapprochement with China, as scepticism over closer ties grows. PHOTO: REUTERS



Trial begins for ousted Thai premier

AFP, Bangkok

Ousted Thai premier Yingluck Shinawatra went on trial yesterday over a costly rice subsidy policy that could see her jailed for a decade, as the ruling junta seeks to ward off a political comeback by her family.

Yingluck, Thailand's first female premier, was booted from office by a court days before army chief Prayut Chan-O-Cha seized power in May 2014. She faces charges of negligence over a multi-billion-dollar rice subsidy scheme which paid farmers up to twice the market rate for their crop. Critics say the scheme cynically tapped state coffers to prop the Shinawatra's political base, incubated corruption and resulted in massive rice stockpiles. But Yingluck remains popular and was greeted by dozens of supporters at court, some in red shirts, carrying roses and shouting "We Love Yingluck".

They gathered in defiance of a ban on political meetings by a junta which has cracked down hard on Shinawatra loyalists. Yingluck told supporters she was "confident" of being vindicated by the court.

She was not due to address the court yesterday. Yingluck has denied any wrongdoing, saying the rice subsidy aimed to help poor farmers after decades of neglect by Bangkok's wealthy elite.

US REPUBLICAN DEBATE

Trump challenges Cruz over Canada birth

BBC ONLINE

Republican frontrunner Donald Trump has attacked Ted Cruz over his birth in Canada, saying it raises questions about his presidential eligibility.

In the latest Republican debate for White House hopefuls, Trump told his rival: "There's a big question mark over your head." The constitution mandates the president be a "natural born citizen" of the US.

Issues of national security, the economy and foreign policy have also played heavily in the debate. The debate came just two weeks before the first real test of the campaign, when voters in Iowa pick their Republican and Democratic



India couple attacked over beef rumour

BBC ONLINE

Police in India's Madhya Pradesh state yesterday arrested some members of a Hindu group for attacking a Muslim couple on suspicion that they were carrying beef.

The police said the couple was in a train when members of the Gauraksha Samiti seized a bag from them. The couple said they were not carrying any bag containing beef. The incident took place when the train Mohammed Hussain and his wife

Naseema Bano were travelling on, reached the Khirkhya station in the central Madhya Pradesh state. "The members of the Gauraksha Samiti were checking everyone's bags... Others remained silent and continued with their journey," Hossain added.

Meet Hyperion

The world's tallest tree

ODDITYCENTRAL.COM

Up until August 2006, the tallest known tree in the world was a 369-foot California redwood nicknamed 'Stratosphere Giant', located somewhere in the Humboldt Redwoods State Park in California.

But the Giant lost its status when two naturalists, Chris Atkins and Michael Taylor, stumbled upon group of trees in California's Redwood National Park that were taller than any they'd ever seen before. They made preliminary measurements using professional laser equipment based on goniometry, and found not one, not two, but three trees that were taller than the Stratosphere Giant.

The tallest of the lot, named Hyperion, was found to be a good 10ft taller than the Giant, standing at a whopping 379 ft. When Atkins and Taylor announced their discovery, a team of scientists led by Humboldt State University ecologist Steve Sillett arrived at the park to measure it again in September 2006. They were aiming for more accuracy, so they actually used a tape this time.

To get to the top, Sillett and his team used a powerful crossbow to launch a fishing line up and over the tree branches. Over the course of a couple of hours, dropping the tape around every 100 meters, the team confirmed what Atkins and Taylor originally discovered. They declared the tree the tallest in the world at 379.1 ft.

