



Syrians celebrate as pro-government forces drive through the Shia town of Zahraa yesterday during a regime operation aimed at severing the main rebel supply route into Aleppo city and breaking an opposition siege on Zahraa and another regime-held town.

PHOTO: AFP

Turkey getting ready to invade Syria

Says Russia
AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday accused Turkey of actively preparing to invade Syria, saying it had spotted troops and military equipment on the border with the war-torn country.

"We have serious grounds to suspect Turkey is in intensive preparations for an armed invasion of the territory of a sovereign state -- the Syrian Arab Republic," the defence ministry said in a statement.

Ties between Moscow, which supports the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and Ankara, which is a staunch backer of the opposition, have been in tatters since Turkey shot down a Russian bomber on the Syrian border in November.

Moscow's claims came as Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, speaking at an international aid conference for Syria in London, implicitly accused Russia of "war crimes" in the country.

Ankara earlier yesterday said that it had refused to allow a Russian reconnaissance plane to overfly its territory near Syria because of a disagreement over the flight plan.

Russia said Turkey had not given Moscow any clear explanation for the decision.

"Moreover, we are recording more and more signs of covert preparations by the Turkish armed forces for active action on Syrian territory," it said, adding that Russia has ramped up reconnaissance in the Middle East.

Russia also said it was surprised that representatives of Pentagon, Nato and human rights organisations in Syria did not issue any reaction. The Turkish foreign ministry declined to immediately comment on the Russian claim.

Assange's embassy confinement illegal

Rules UN panel
AFP, Stockholm

A UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has ruled that Julian Assange's confinement in the Ecuadorian embassy in London amounts to illegal detention, Sweden's foreign ministry said Thursday.

"We can only note that the working panel has come to another conclusion than Swedish judicial authorities," a ministry spokeswoman told AFP, a day before the panel was to formally publish its report.

The WikiLeaks founder, who is wanted for extradition on a rape accusation in Sweden and has lived in the embassy since June 2012, said earlier Thursday that he expected to be treated as a free man if the panel rules in his favour.

In September 2014, Assange filed a complaint against Sweden and Britain to the UNWGAD, claiming his confinement in the embassy amounted to illegal detention.

"Should I prevail and the state parties be found to have acted unlawfully, I expect the immediate return of my passport and the termination of further attempts to arrest me," he said.

The report is due to be published today. The British police said Assange would face arrest if he leaves the embassy even after a positive ruling in his favour.

Rulings by the UN group are not legally binding, although the Justice for Assange group claims its rulings influenced the release of prominent figures including Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi and Washington Post journalist Jason Rezaian, who was held by Iran for 18 months.

Assange's Swedish lawyer Per Samuelsson told AFP that a ruling in his client's favour meant prosecutor Marianne Ny would have to ask a court to lift the arrest warrant issued against him.

Assange, 44, fears Sweden will extradite him to the United States, where he could be put on trial over WikiLeaks' publication of the classified military and diplomatic documents, one of the largest information leaks in US history.

He made international headlines in early 2010 when WikiLeaks published classified U.S. military video showing a 2007 attack by Apache helicopters that killed a dozen people in Baghdad, including two Reuters news staff.



Blame game as crisis worsens

Donors pledge 10 billions in London for refugees after UN talks collapse

AGENCIES

Tens of thousands of Syrians were reported to have fled their homes yesterday as regime troops pressed a major Russian-backed offensive around second city Aleppo.

Turkey's Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, speaking at a donors conference in London, warned that up to 70,000 people were headed towards his country to escape the fighting.

The conference saw more than \$10 billion pledged to help ease the plight of Syrians affected by the nearly five-year war, just hours after the collapse of UN-sponsored peace talks in Geneva.

Several Western nations accused Syria's regime of torpedoing the talks with its military offensive, and Washington yesterday demanded Russia halt its bombing campaign in support of President Bashar al-Assad's government.

The growing offensive around Aleppo this week overshadowed peace and aid efforts, as regime forces sought to build on a series of important gains since Russia launched air strikes in September.

The advance threatens to completely encircle rebels in Aleppo city, Syria's former economic powerhouse which has been divided between opposition control in the east and regime control in the west since mid-2012.

The Aleppo rebels' main supply line to Turkey was severed on Wednesday when regime troops broke an opposition siege of two Shiite towns, Nubol and Zahraa, on the route to the border.

Regime forces entered the two towns yesterday to

the cheers of residents, who chanted pro-government slogans and showered the fighters with rice.

But elsewhere in the region the advance prompted tens of thousands to flee for fear of being caught up in the fighting.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor, said nearly 40,000 people in Aleppo province had fled their homes, with many massing at the border.

SYRIA WAR

West accuses Russia of seeking military solution to crisis

Washington demands end to Russian air campaign

Tens of thousands flee heavy fighting in Aleppo

Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said the regime was now likely to target the Aleppo rebels' last remaining supply route, through the neighbouring opposition-held Idlib province.

"The regime has managed to achieve in 72 hours what it failed to for the last three years," he said.

"If the rebels lose this last route, it will be the beginning of the end for them in Aleppo, they will be under complete siege," he added.

A high-ranking Syrian government official described the Aleppo advances as important, but said the regime had even more ambitious goals.

"The next objectives are to close the borders with Turkey to prevent the arrival of troops and weapons, then taking Aleppo province, then Idlib

province, and finally Idlib city," he told AFP.

The Aleppo offensive has been backed by a wave of Russian air raids, including strikes yesterday that killed at least 21 civilians, including three children, according to the Observatory.

In London for the donors conference, US Secretary of State John Kerry said he had warned Moscow to stop bombing the Syrian opposition, in a "robust" phone call with Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.

Opposition delegates cited continued regime attacks as the key obstacle to this week's peace efforts, which struggled from the beginning.

UN envoy Staffan de Mistura said on Wednesday the talks had been suspended but insisted the process had not failed, saying he hoped to resume on February 25.

The UN Security Council said it would meet today for consultations with De Mistura on the breakdown.

Top diplomats from countries involved in trying to resolve the conflict are also set to meet again on February 11.

London conference host Prime Minister David Cameron said the gathering had seen pledges of more than \$10 billion.

More than 260,000 people have died in Syria's conflict and more than half the country's population have been forced from their homes, including over four million who fled abroad.

Most Syrian refugees have fled to neighbouring countries, including Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, but hundreds of thousands have also headed to Europe this year.



Riot police react to petrol bombs thrown by masked youths in Syntagma Square during a 24-hour general strike against planned pension reforms in Athens, Greece yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Drone kills key Qaeda leader in Yemen

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The leader of an al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist group controlling swathes of war-torn Yemen has reportedly been killed in a US drone strike.

Jalal Baleedi was among 12 Islamist militants killed overnight in the south of the country, where the government backed by Saudi-led forces, Houthi rebels, Isis and al-Qaeda are battling for control.

One strike killed six men in a car travelling in Ar Rawdah, Shabwa province. Another attack hit militants in their car in the coastal Abyan province, killing six occupants said to include Baleedi.

Also known as Hamza al-Zinjibari, he was the leader of Ansar al-Sharia, which is an alias for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The group has claimed responsibility for a series of attacks killing hundreds of Yemeni soldiers and security forces.

Republican race gets personal

Cruz questions Trump's sanity after he is accused of 'stealing' Iowa

AFP, New York

Donald Trump launched a full-blown attack on Republican arch-rival Ted Cruz on Wednesday, accusing him of stealing victory in Iowa as the Texas senator bit back, rubbishing the mogul's presidential credentials and questioning his sanity.

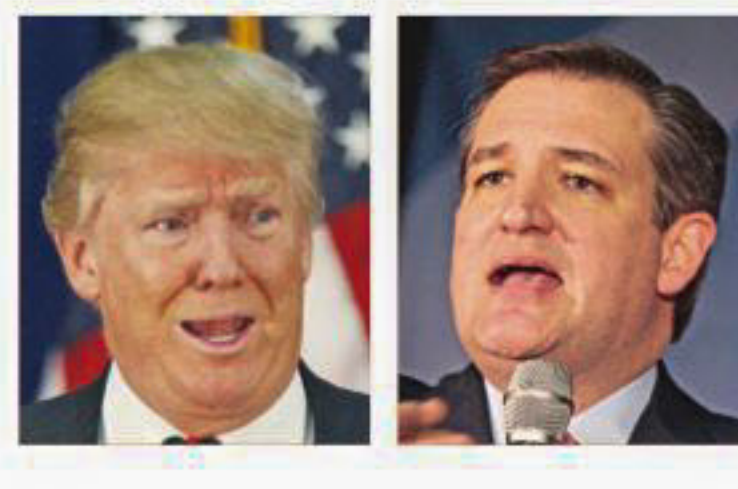
Fighting back from second place in the Iowa caucus this week, Trump lashed out on Twitter, telling his six million followers that the evangelical conservative had only won the first vote of the 2016 election by fraud.

"Ted Cruz didn't win Iowa, he stole it. That is why all of the polls were so wrong and why he got far more votes than anticipated. Bad!" Trump wrote.

Cruz fired back a salvo several hours later.

"I wake up every day and laugh at the latest thing Donald has tweeted. Because he's losing it," said Cruz. "We need a commander in chief, not a twitterer in chief."

Trump has run a media blitzkrieg campaign, dishing out insults against his political rivals, Mexicans, women and Muslims, sucking the television air time away from every other candidate in the race. But his Iowa tally in the first vote raises serious questions about whether showmanship has a winning strategy.



ZIKA EPIDEMIC

South America holds crisis meeting

AFP, Montevideo

South American health ministers held an emergency meeting Wednesday on slowing the spread of the Zika virus, dubbed a "nightmare" by hard-hit Brazil, where it is blamed for brain damage in babies.

With health authorities warning the disease could infect up to four million people in the Americas, ministers from 14 countries held talks in Uruguay to plot their response to the growing crisis, with fears the virus could spread worldwide.

The meeting focused on ways to control the mosquito population spreading the virus, though reports of a US patient catching the disease by having sex fuelled fears that it will not be easy to contain.

Brazil said it was sending more than 500,000 personnel out to clean up mosquito breeding grounds and advise people about the disease.

Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff said her government was directing "all resources" available toward the crisis, and vowed to do "absolutely everything" for the families of babies born with microcephaly, or abnormally small heads and brains.

Florida Governor Rick Scott meanwhile declared a health emergency in four counties after six new Zika cases were detected in the US state. The new infections bring the number of Zika cases in Florida to nine.

The World Health Organization has declared the spike in serious birth defects an international emergency and launched a global Zika response unit.

Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Jamaica and the US territory of Puerto Rico have all warned women not to get pregnant.

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