

Afghan casualties hit record high

Says UN in its annual report

REUTERS, Kabul

Civilian casualties of the war in Afghanistan rose to record levels for the seventh year in row in 2015, as violence spread across the country in the wake of the withdrawal of most international troops, the United Nations reported yesterday.

At least 3,545 noncombatants died and another 7,457 were injured by fighting last year in a 4-percent increase over 2014, the international organization said in its annual report on civilian casualties.

"The harm done to civilians is totally unacceptable," Nicholas Haysom, the head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, said in a statement.

Increasingly desperate fighting between Western-backed government forces and insurgent groups meant more non-combatants are being caught in the crossfire, investigators wrote.

Ground engagements were the leading cause of civilian casualties at 37 percent, followed by roadside bombs at 21 percent and suicide attacks at 17 percent.

Women and children were especially hard hit, as casualties among women spiked 37 percent while deaths and injuries increased 14 percent among children.

Casualties attributed to pro-government security forces jumped 28 percent compared to 2014, for 15 percent of the total.

A 9-percent rise in civilian casualties caused by international military forces was attributed largely to a US air strike in October on a Doctors Without Borders hospital that killed 42 staff, patients, family members and injured another 43. Overall 103 civilians were killed and 67 wounded by foreign forces last year, the report found.

As in past years, insurgent groups like the Taliban were blamed for the majority of civilian deaths and injuries, at 62 percent.



Yemenis inspect the damage at a sewing workshop that was hit by a Saudi-led coalition air strike in the capital Sanaa, yesterday. The factory owner, Faisal al-Musaabi, told AFP that two employees, including a 14-year-old boy, were killed and 15 others wounded in the overnight air raid.

PHOTO: AFP

Israel kills 3 Palestinian 'attackers'

REUTERS, Jerusalem

The Israeli army said troops shot dead two Palestinian teenagers who were throwing stones at cars in the occupied West Bank yesterday after coming under fire from one of them.

In a separate incident, a Palestinian tried to stab an Israeli paramilitary policeman at a checkpoint in the West Bank, near Jerusalem and was shot dead, police said.

Israeli soldiers have killed at least 163 Palestinians, 105 of whom Israel says were assailants, while the others were shot dead during violent anti-Israeli protests, as the bloodshed persists into a fifth month.

Stabbings, shootings and car ramming by Palestinians have killed 27 Israelis and a US citizen since early October.

The Palestinian Health Ministry said two 15-year-old Palestinians were killed.

NEWS IN brief

British indie band die in Swedish car crash

AFP, Stockholm

Five Britons, believed to be the members of indie band Viola Beach and their manager, have died in a road crash in Sweden where they staged their first international gig, police said yesterday. They died when their car hit a barrier and plunged off a canal bridge at Sodertalje, a southern district of the capital Stockholm.

Boko Haram kills 30 in two Nigeria village

AFP, Kano

At least 30 people have been killed in fresh Boko Haram raids on two villages in northeast Nigeria, vigilantes told AFP Saturday. Gun and knife-toting assailants on bikes and in vans stormed the remote villages of Yakshari and Kachifa on Friday and Saturday, said Mustapha Karimbe, a local vigilante assisting the military in the fight against Boko Haram Islamists.

150,000 penguins die in iceberg tragedy

AFP, Sydney

Some 150,000 penguins died after a massive iceberg grounded near their colony in Antarctica, forcing them to make a lengthy trek to find food, scientists say in a newly-published study. The B09B iceberg grounded in Commonwealth Bay in East Antarctica in December 2010, the researchers from Australia and New Zealand wrote in the Antarctic Science journal.

5.8-magnitude quake hits New Zealand city

AFP, Wellington

A 5.8-magnitude earthquake hit the New Zealand city of Christchurch yesterday, seismologists said, sending goods flying off shelves.

GeoNet Science, the official New Zealand earthquake monitoring service, warned of aftershocks following the "severe intensity" quake.

Sirens could be heard going off around the South Island city and at least one building was evacuated.

Cuba returns lost dummy missile to US

AFP, Washington

The United States has recovered a missile that was accidentally sent to Cuba in 2014 after a logistical mixup in Europe, bringing an end to an unusual and sensitive episode in the world of defense.

The dummy training version of a US Hellfire missile was returned to the US with the "cooperation of the Cuban government," a US state department deputy spokesman said Saturday.

1ST ANNIVERSARY GIFT OF AAP Kejriwal waives water bills

IAN S, New Delhi

Announcing a "gift" on its first anniversary, the Delhi government yesterday said water bills of households pending till November 2015 will be waived off - either partly or fully.

Addressing a gathering to mark one year of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said numerous families that had got inflated bills at some point had stopped paying water bills.

While the economically weaker sections will get a full waiver up to November 30, others will enjoy concessions of 25 to 75 percent depending on their economic category, he said.

Water Minister Kapil Mishra said that this concession was conditional upon the affected households going for functional water meters.

"There have been cases where people got inflated bills. To avoid paying such bills, they stopped paying every bill, posing a huge problem for our accounts department," he said.

"It was posing an unnecessary burden on us, and we knew this amount wasn't recoverable.

"This waiver will help all of us to start anew. And households will resume paying bills and will also go for functional meters," Mishra said.



Hope dims for ceasefire

Damascus urges UN action as Turkey keeps shelling Kurds inside Syria

AFP, Beirut

Hopes for a ceasefire taking hold this week in Syria dimmed yesterday as Turkey renewed its shelling of Kurdish militants and Washington demanded Moscow end air strikes on rebels.

Tensions over Syria have continued to mount despite the proposal from international powers in Munich on Friday for a "cessation of hostilities" within a week.

Defying US and French calls, Turkey yesterday carried out a second day of shelling on a Kurdish-Arab alliance advancing in northern Aleppo province, prompting condemnation from Syria's government.

Turkey says it is targeting Kurdish forces it accuses of links to the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which has waged a decades-long insurgency against the Turkish state.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a US-backed Kurdish-Arab militia alliance, already controls large parts of Syria along the border and Ankara is concerned the SDF will gain new grounds facilitating the Kurdish insurgency.

Damascus said the Turkish strikes were a violation of its territory and

urged UN Security Council action to "put an end to the crimes of the Turkish regime".

It also accused Ankara of allowing some 100 gunmen to cross into Syria from Turkey. The Observatory said some 350 Islamist fighters had been allowed to travel through Turkish

territory on Saturday to reinforce Islamist rebels in Azaz and Tal Rifaat.

Washington has been working closely with Kurdish forces in northern Syria and the Turkish attacks highlighted tensions within the US-led coalition that is battling the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq.

Differences were also clear between Washington and Moscow, which is backing international diplomatic efforts to resolve the Syria conflict but has also launched air strikes in support

of President Bashar al-Assad, a key ally. The White House yesterday said that President Barack Obama had urged Moscow end the strikes in a phone call with Vladimir Putin.

"President Obama emphasised the importance now of Russia playing a constructive role by ceasing its air campaign against moderate opposition forces in Syria," the White House said.

Echoing Obama's concerns, a senior figure in the Syrian opposition yesterday criticised the truce deal as unworkable without an end to Russian strikes.

Russia has long insisted it is only targeting "terrorist" groups in Syria.

A Kremlin statement after Obama-Putin call made clear Russia would continue bombing raids against Islamic State and "other terroristic organisations", an indication that it would also be targeting groups in western Syria where jihadists such as al-Qaeda are fighting President Bashar al-Assad in close proximity to rebels deemed moderate by the West.

The Turkish shelling in northern Syria has added to an already complicated situation in Aleppo, where regime forces have been making significant advances with backing from Russian airstrikes.



Only Putin can end Syrian civil war

Says UK foreign secretary

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Russian President Vladimir Putin is the "one man on this planet" who can end the Syrian civil war, according to the British foreign secretary.

Speaking on The Andrew Marr Show, Philip Hammond said: "Whether or not Assad goes or stays ultimately will depend on whether the Russians are prepared to use their influence to remove him."

He added: "There's one man on this planet who can end the civil war in Syria by making a phone call, and that's Mr Putin."

He went on to say there were around 150,000 moderate opposition forces in Syria, which are now suffering attrition from Russian airstrikes. "The Russians have launched ferocious air attacks, rapidly increasing the intensity of them over the last few weeks, and that has forced them [Syrian opposition forces] out of some of the positions they control."

"But the important thing is the Syrian regime does not have the forces, does not have the strength and the organisation, to take control of those areas. So it's a bit of a stalemate."

The foreign secretary also called on the Russians to stop air strikes in Syria, which he said consisted of "carpet bombing tactics" and "indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas".



Former Cuban president Fidel Castro (R) and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill meet in Havana on Saturday.

SEDITION CONTROVERSY IN INDIA Student's arrest sparks protest

AFP, New Delhi

Students and teachers staged a fresh protest in New Delhi yesterday over a union leader's arrest at a top Indian university for sedition, accusing the government of cracking down on dissent.

Police on Friday arrested student union leader Kanhaiya Kumar at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University over a campus rally days earlier to mark the anniversary of a Kashmiri separatist's execution.

Mohammed Afzal Guru was hanged in 2013 following his conviction over an attack on the Indian parliament in 2001 that left 10 people dead. Kumar has been accused of "anti-Indian" behaviour at Tuesday's rally, during which some protesters allegedly shouted support for Guru and for India's arch-rival Pakistan.

Students and the opposition have accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government of misusing British-era anti-sedition laws to quell dissent.

"The government and police can't just shut down voices that don't agree with them. Everyone in this country has a right to his opinion and that must be respected," Delhi University student Arzoo Sahani said at a protest that drew more than 100 in the city centre, one of several since Friday.

Home Minister Rajnath Singh reiterated yesterday that "anyone who raises anti-India slogans or tries to question national unity will not be spared by this government".

Kumar, who remains in police custody has denied any wrongdoing. Sedition is punishable by imprisonment. The arrest is the latest incident to fuel claims of religious and cultural intolerance under Modi.

Justice's death shakes US

Triggers a political showdown in the run-up to presidential race

AFP, Washington

Justice Antonin Scalia, a towering conservative voice on the US Supreme Court, has died at the age of 79, triggering a political showdown over his succession in the run-up to the presidential election.

President Barack Obama ordered flags to fly at half-staff across the United States until the long-serving justice, first appointed by Ronald Reagan in 1986, is laid to rest.

Scalia's death after three decades on the Supreme Court bench has profound ramifications, and could potentially tip the balance of the highest court in the land from its current 5-4 conservative majority to a liberal one.

Obama led the chorus of tributes pouring in for the stalwart conservative, who died in his sleep at a private residence in the Big Bend area of West Texas, according to the US Marshals Service.

But the US leader also fired the first shot in a tense battle over Scalia's succession.

Obama said he fully intended to nominate a successor, in accordance with his "constitutional responsibilities," after leading Republicans -- including all six conservative White House contenders -- argued that the outgoing president should not be allowed to fill Scalia's vacant seat.

He called for the Republican-controlled Senate to give his nominee a "fair hearing and a timely vote."

The president nominates a Supreme Court candidate, who requires Senate approval before taking up the lifetime post.

For three decades, Scalia's outsized personality gave voice to the values of conservative America on the Supreme Court bench, on matters of religion, family, patriotism and law enforcement. A staunch defender of gun rights and the death penalty, the Roman Catholic justice was also openly opposed to abortion, gay marriage and affirmative action.

The Supreme Court's conservative majority had recently stalled key efforts by Obama's administration on climate change and immigration, and replacing Scalia with a Democratic appointee could significantly alter the court balance.

Republicans immediately drew battles lines over the implications of the vacancy.

Senate Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said his vacancy should not be filled until America has a new president.

McConnell's Democratic counterpart Harry Reid pressed for Obama to send a nominee to the Senate "right away," stressing that a yearlong vacancy -- raising the prospect of 4 to 4 splits on major issues -- would be "unprecedented."

The often belligerent Scalia, the first Italian-American to serve on the Supreme Court, was known for his brash demeanor and sharp tongue. His biting opinions made him a conservative hero, and gave his liberal foes dyspepsia.

Scalia championed originalism, a theory that views the meaning of the Constitution as fixed at the time it was ratified in 1788. In this view, the validity of the death penalty and the right to bear arms is unquestionable.



Antonin Scalia



Trump, Bush clash in debate

REUTERS, Greenville

Republican presidential candidates Donald Trump and Jeb Bush clashed angrily over the Iraq war, the Bush family and Trump's business dealings at an acrimonious debate that underscored the importance of South Carolina's primary in a week.

Leading in the polls, Trump came under sustained fire from his rivals in the two-hour debate hosted by CBS on Saturday night and there also were plenty of finger-pointing exchanges between Trump and Texas Senator Ted Cruz.

Trump attacked Bush's brother, former President George W Bush, for launching the Iraq war in 2003. "A big, fat mistake," Trump said.

It was the most bitter exchange between them over the course of nine debates ahead of the Nov 8 presidential election and was a sign of how critical both see a strong showing in South Carolina.

"George Bush made a mistake," Trump thundered. "We all make mistakes. But that one was a beauty ... They lied! They said there were weapons of mass destruction. And there were none."

Many in the crowd booed Trump and the Republican front-runner dismissed them as "lobbyists and special interests" who supported Jeb Bush, the former Florida governor.

Bush also criticized Trump for remarks praising Russian President Vladimir Putin, saying Putin is stirring turmoil in Syria by launching air strikes in support of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Bush, who will campaign today with his brother George, rejected Trump's comments and defended his family. "I'm sick and tired of him going after my family," Bush said.

Bush provoked another outburst from Trump by saying the GoP nominee should be someone "who doesn't brag, for example, that he has been bankrupt four times."