

Priority will be on IS, not Assad

Says Saudi minister on Syria ground ops

AFP, Riyadh

Any participation by Saudi forces in a US-led ground operation in Syria would focus on fighting the Islamic State group not President Bashar al-Assad, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister told AFP yesterday. "Saudi Arabia has expressed its readiness to send special forces to Syria as part of the coalition, with the goal of eliminating Daesh. This is the mission and the responsibility," Adel al-Jubeir said, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

Riyadh has been a fierce opponent of Assad, but Jubeir said any participating Saudi force would make the battle against IS the priority.

Asked if the mission could be expanded to include operations against Assad's forces, Jubeir said: "This would be something the international coalition would have to make a decision on."



Turkish soldiers walk in front of a damaged army vehicle at Lice in Diyarbakir, southeastern Turkey, yesterday. At least six soldiers were killed in the attack. Inset, Family members and relatives mourn outside a morgue in Ankara yesterday, a day after a car bombing targeted military vehicles in Ankara, killing 28.

PHOTO: AFP



Won't hesitate to send troops to Gulf if asked

Says Egypt president

AFP, Cairo

Egypt will not hesitate to send military forces into the territory of Arab Gulf allies to offer protection if asked by the leaders of those countries, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said on Wednesday.

The most populous Arab state, the recipient of billions of dollars in aid from the Gulf, has entered a Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen but has yet to formally commit to sending ground troops. Sisi has often said that the Gulf's security is synonymous with Egyptian national security.

"The president made it clear that Egypt will not hesitate to send forces to brotherly Gulf countries to defend them if they face any direct threat or aggression," the presidency said in a statement. Sisi made his comments at a briefing with Kuwaiti journalists on Wednesday.

Egypt has received billions of dollars in aid from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates after Sisi, as military chief, ousted President Mohamed Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 following mass protests against his rule.

Tensions are high between Sunni Arab Gulf nations led by Saudi Arabia on one side and Shia Iran on the other after Iranian protesters in January attacked Saudi diplomatic buildings in response to the kingdom's execution of a prominent Shia cleric.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are involved in several proxy conflicts in Yemen, where Iran backs Shia Houthis rebels and Saudi Arabia backs the Sunni government, and Syria where Saudi-backed Sunni rebels fight the forces of Iran-backed President Bashar al-Assad.

Military sources yesterday said Yemeni pro-government forces seized Al-Misrakh



EU launches talks to avoid 'Brexit'

Cameron warns he will reject bad deal

REUTERS, Brussels

Prime Minister David Cameron yesterday said that hard work and goodwill should help him to clinch a deal at a European Union summit, described by leaders of the 28-nation bloc as the best chance of preventing Britain leaving.

Ahead of the 'now or never' talks, the latest draft agreement sent to EU leaders overnight and seen by Reuters offered several ways of overcoming differences on the most contentious areas of Cameron's renegotiation - migration curbs and financial safeguards - but much was still open for debate.

Cameron wants change in four areas: measures to curb migration, safeguards to protect London's financial sector from decisions binding the 19 EU members using the euro, for Britain to be excluded from "ever closer union", and for greater competition in the bloc.

Cameron is keen to end the week in Brussels with a deal that he can call a victory so he can then start campaigning to keep Britain in the EU before a referendum widely expected to be held in late June.

"We've got some important work to do today and tomorrow, and it's going to be hard. I'll be battling for Britain. If we can get a good deal, I'll take that deal, but I will not take a deal that doesn't meet what we need," Cameron said as he arrived at the two-day summit.

The stakes are high. A vote to leave would not only transform Britain's future in world affairs but would also shake the EU, which has struggled to maintain unity over migration and financial crises, by ripping away its second-largest economy and one of its two main military powers.

The British public is split over whether to remain in the European Union, but with opinion polls showing the 'out' campaign gaining ground. Both sides argue Britain would be financially better off if their cause succeeds.

Despite some obstacles, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said she is optimistic about a deal. But French President Francois Hollande made clear any accommodation of British demands must not undermine the bloc.

Summing up how many saw the evening talks playing out, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė said: "I think everybody will have his own drama. And then we will agree."

EU officials have said some leaders are still concerned that Cameron's demands will encourage other countries to ask for changes to their membership agreements. But the new draft signalled that, especially on migration, any solution would be tailor-made to take note of Britain's specific welfare system.

Halt attacks on moderate rebels

EU leaders demand from Russia, regime; more aid reaches to besieged towns

AGENCIES

EU leaders will demand at a summit that Russia and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, its long-term ally, immediately halt attacks on moderate opposition groups and bolster peace efforts, a draft document said yesterday.

The 28 European Union leaders were due to issue the appeal after the two-day meeting in Brussels amid efforts to implement an agreement reached by world powers in Munich last week to cease hostilities and ramp up humanitarian access.

"The European Council calls on Russia and the Syrian regime to stop at once attacking moderate opposition groups, which threatens the prospects for peace, benefits Daesh and drives the refugee crisis," the council said in a draft obtained by AFP.

The council, which gathers the 28 EU leaders, is concerned that Russian military support for Assad is undermining US-led efforts to quash Daesh, or the Islamic State group, and is fuelling the worst migrant

crisis in Europe since World War II.

A ceasefire based on the Munich deal is due to come into effect today, but prospects of a lasting truce appear weak as a Russian-backed regime offensive around second city Aleppo has forced tens of thousands from their homes this month.

The report came after US on Wednesday said Russian air strikes in Syria have intensified despite Western calls for Russia to stop the air campaign.

Meanwhile, a senior official yesterday said UN should be able to deliver aid to all of Syria's 18 besieged areas within a week.

The UN on Wednesday reached five besieged towns in Syria to distribute life-saving supplies. Almost half a million people in Syria are in areas under siege, according to the UN.

Jan Egeland, who is the special advisor to the UN's Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura, made the comments after a meeting of representatives from the 17-nation International Syria Support

Group (ISSG).

Egeland said the just concluded mission to five besieged areas included 114 trucks and delivered supplies to an estimated 80,000 people.

On the ground, at least 38 people were killed in air strikes carried out

SYRIA WAR

US-led strikes kill 38 civilians in northeast of the country

Hundreds of Syria rebels cross from Turkey to join Aleppo battles

US says Russian air strikes in Syria intensifying

by a US-led coalition in Hasaka province in northeast Syria in the past two days, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group said yesterday.

The toll included at least 15 people who were killed when strikes hit a bakery in the city of al-Shadadi

near the border with Iraq on Tuesday, the Britain-based Observatory said.

Air raids in at least three other villages killed 15 others, including three children, it said.

Meanwhile, rebel sources yesterday said at least two thousand Syrian rebel fighters have re-entered the country from Turkey over the last week to reinforce insurgents fending off an assault by Syrian Kurdish-led militias.

On Sunday, the Syrian government had said Turkish forces were among 100 gunmen who had entered Aleppo accompanied by 12 pick-up trucks mounted with heavy machine guns, in an ongoing supply operation to insurgents.

The rapid advance of US-backed Kurdish fighters in the area, taking advantage of Russian air strikes to seize territory near the Turkish border, has infuriated Ankara and threatened to drive a wedge between Nato allies.



Refugees and migrants including children, wait on a ship of the Greek coastguard, at the port of Mytilene, on the Greek island of Lesbos, after crossing the Aegean sea from Turkey, yesterday. Greece yesterday said that closing the borders to the Balkans would trigger a "major humanitarian crisis" in his country and would not stop the influx of migrants.

PHOTO: AFP

Strong El Nino on the decline: UN

'Jan 2016 hottest since records began'

AFP, Geneva

The 2015-2016 El Nino weather phenomenon, one of the most powerful on record, has begun its decline but continues to have a strong influence on global climate patterns, the UN's weather agency said yesterday.

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said El Nino, which occurs every two to seven years, has "passed its peak" but ocean temperature rises in recent months proved its considerable impact.

"We have just witnessed one of the most powerful ever El Nino events which caused extreme weather in countries on all continents and helped fuel record global heat in 2015," WMO Secretary General Petteri Taalas said in a statement.

"Parts of South America and East Africa are still recovering from torrential rains and flooding," the statement said, linking those events to El Nino, which sparks global climate extremes.

US data showed Wednesday that the last month was the hottest January in modern times.

The average temperature across global land and ocean surfaces was 1.87 degrees Fahrenheit (1.04 Celsius) above the 20th century average for January, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said.

Radioactive material stolen in Iraq raises dirty bomb threat

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq is searching for "highly dangerous" radioactive material whose theft last year has raised fears among Iraqi officials that it could be used as a weapon if acquired by Islamic State.

Baghdad reported the stolen material to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in November but has not requested assistance to recover it, the U.N. nuclear watchdog said on Wednesday.

The material, stored in a protective case the size of a laptop computer, went missing from a storage facility near the southern city of Basra belonging to U.S. oilfield services company Weatherford, an environment ministry document seen by Reuters showed and security, environmental and provincial officials confirmed.

A spokesman for Iraq's environment ministry said he could not discuss the issue, citing national security concerns.

was not responsible or liable for the theft.

The material, which uses gamma rays to test flaws in materials used for oil and gas pipelines in a process called industrial gamma radiography, is owned by Istanbul-based SGS Turkey, according to the document and officials.

A senior environment ministry official based in Basra, who declined to be named as he is not authorised to speak publicly, told Reuters the device contained up to 10 grams of Ir-192 "capsules", a radioactive isotope of iridium also used to treat cancer.

Large quantities of Ir-192 have gone missing before in the United States, Britain and other countries, stoking fears among security officials that it could be used to make a dirty bomb.

A dirty bomb combines nuclear material with conventional explosives to contaminate an area with radiation, in contrast to a nuclear weapon, which uses nuclear fission to trigger a vastly more powerful blast.

LAND GRAB IN INDIA Court slaps Hindu god with summons

AFP, New Delhi

A court has served a Hindu god with a summons for illegally encroaching on government land in eastern India after a roadside temple was built in his honour, officials said yesterday.

Photos in local media showed the summons, addressed to Lord Hanuman, pasted on an idol of the monkey god, worshipped for his courage and strength, at the temple in Bihar.

"The summons was issued after the public works department filed a case against the temple for encroaching on the road," a court official in Rohtas district told AFP.

The department petitioned the local magistrate's court to have the temple removed for obstructing traffic, but local Hindu groups have protested against the legal action.

A local official in Rohtas said the summons had been erroneously addressed to the Hindu god, and would be soon corrected. "The summons was meant for the temple management and not the god," Hashim Khan, Rohtas deputy development commissioner, told AFP.

Encroachment of public land is rampant in India, including by religious groups who construct temples, shrines and other places of worship on public walkways,

Trump 'not Christian': Pope

Bruised US billionaire says comment 'disgraceful'

REUTERS, Mexico

Pope Francis assailed Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's views on US immigration as "not Christian" yesterday, prompting the billionaire businessman to assail the religious leader as "disgraceful" for questioning his faith.

Trump, the longtime party front-runner in national opinion polls, has been at the center of controversies, including one over his vow as president to build a wall between the United States and Mexico to keep out illegal immigrants.

In a freewheeling conversation on his flight home from a visit to Mexico, Francis told reporters: "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian."

Trump, a real estate developer and former reality TV star, said: "If and when the Vatican is attacked by the ISIS, which as everyone knows is ISIS's ultimate trophy, I

can promise you that the pope would have only wished and prayed that Donald Trump would have been president," Trump said in a speech in South Carolina, using an acronym for the Islamic State militant group.

"No leader, especially a religious leader, should have the right to question another man's religion or faith," Trump said.

Trump has also said he would deport millions of illegal immigrants if he wins his party's nomination and then the Nov. 8 election. Last week, responding to the pope's plan to visit the US-Mexican border, he said that Pope Francis did not understand the Mexican border issues.

"The pope is a very political person. I think he doesn't understand the problems our country has," he said.

Asked about being called a "political person", Francis said: "Thank God he said I was a politician because Aristotle defined the human person as 'animal politicus.'"

