

# Russian warplanes leave Syria

## UN, opposition hails Putin's surprise move to withdraw troops from the country

AFP, Moscow

The first of Russia's warplanes to leave Syria received a hero's welcome back home yesterday, starting a surprise withdrawal the West hopes could boost peace talks by pressuring Damascus.

UN peace envoy Staffan de Mistura described the withdrawal announcement as a "significant development" for negotiations that began in Geneva on Monday in the latest push to end the brutal conflict as it enters its sixth year.

The White House yesterday said Russia so far appears to be fulfilling the decision to withdraw troops from Syria, but cautioned it was too soon to judge the impact.

President Vladimir Putin on Monday ordered the "main part" of Russia's forces out of the war-torn nation, but the Kremlin denied it was trying to pressure its long-time ally President Bashar al-Assad.

Putin said Russia had largely fulfilled its objectives of a campaign which has so far cost Russia \$700-\$800 million according to a Reuters estimate, an additional financial burden for Moscow at a time of low oil prices.

Russia will, however, keep a contingent at its air and naval



Russian military jets take off from the country's air base in Hmeymin, Syria yesterday to head back to Russia, part of a partial withdrawal ordered by President Vladimir Putin.

bases in Syria and a senior official said strikes against "terrorist targets" would continue. It would also be keeping its most advanced air defence system, the S-400, in Syria.

Despite the initial pullout, a monitoring group said Russian helicopters -- and likely warplanes -- which are still in Syria had pounded Islamic State group positions as regime troops pressed an advance.

Syrian Observatory for Human Rights director Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP that "Russian helicopters and warplanes, that are likely

Russian" had struck IS targets around the ancient city of Palmyra. There was no official confirmation from Moscow.

Meanwhile, one Al-Qaeda linked group branded the withdrawal a "defeat" and vowed to launch a new offensive in Syria.

The West reacted cautiously to the announcement, since Moscow is yet to specify a timeframe for completing the withdrawal. The White House said President Barack Obama had spoken to Putin following Russia's announcement, and discussed the "next steps required to fully implement the cessation of

hostilities".

Some governments expressed hope the Russian move could push Assad to negotiate, but in Geneva both sides remained locked in a bitter dispute over his fate.

The talks opened after a temporary ceasefire between Assad's forces and opponents went into force on February 27 and has largely held, although it does not cover IS jihadists and al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate the al-Nusra Front.

Syria's main opposition said it hoped Russia's move could lead to an end to the war, but wanted to see change on the ground.

In a positive development, High Negotiations Committee (HNC) also said it was not against a direct meeting with the government.

Damascus sparked Western anger by staking out an uncompromising stance before the talks, insisting that discussions on Assad's removal were a "red line" they would not cross.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said a Russian withdrawal "increases the pressure" on Assad to negotiate, while France's foreign ministry said "anything that helps towards a de-escalation in Syria should be encouraged".

### RACE TO WHITE HOUSE

## Millions vote in make-or-break Super Tuesday II

AGENCIES

Five US states are holding primaries for November's presidential election on what has been dubbed Super Tuesday II, giving Democrat and Republican front-runners a chance to cement their leads.

Polls have opened in Ohio and Florida -- both deemed key states -- as well as in North Carolina, Illinois and Missouri.

Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton will hope to fend off a challenge from her resurgent rival, Bernie Sanders.

Meanwhile Donald Trump will aim to edge out his Republican rivals in the race.

The New York real estate mogul is the favourite to win his party's nomination but has run into fierce opposition from within the Republican establishment, as well as facing condemnation from the Democrats.

Sanders, a Vermont senator, and Clinton, a former Secretary of State, have accused Trump of encouraging his supporters to beat up protesters, after violence broke out at a planned appearance by Trump in Chicago.

The latest polls showed the Republican frontrunner poised to win the Tuesday contests, although Ohio's Governor John Kasich held a narrow lead in his state in some surveys.

Victories for any of Trump's rivals -- Rubio, Kasich, or Senator Ted Cruz of Texas -- would give hope to the Republicans fighting

to block him.

Florida, Illinois and Ohio are the day's biggest prizes for both parties, as each state offers large delegate hauls.

### DELEGATE TRACKER

DEMOCRATS NEED 2383 TO WIN NOMINATION

	
CLINTON 1235 (1148 short)	SANDERS 580 (1803 short)

REPUBLICANS NEED 1237 TO WIN NOMINATION

	TRUMP 469 (768 short)		RUBIO 163 (1074 short)
	CRUZ 370 (867 short)		KASICH 63 (1114 short)

Among Democrats, if polls prove accurate Clinton will extend her lead over rival Sanders. She is comfortably ahead in Florida, but in Ohio the former secretary of state only held a five-point lead, according to a Quinnipiac University poll out Monday.

## NEWSIN brief

### Thai referendum on charter on August 7

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's military government yesterday set August 7 as the date for a referendum on a controversial constitution it has drafted since seizing power in a coup two years ago. The referendum will be the country's first return to the ballot box since junta chief Prayut Chan-O-Cha toppled an elected government and suspended democracy in May 2014.

### US Congress calls IS atrocities 'genocide'

AFP, Washington

American lawmakers voted Monday to label IS atrocities in Syria and Iraq "genocide," and called for setting up Syrian war crimes tribunal under UN. House of Representatives unanimously passed a non-binding resolution pressuring Obama's administration to call attacks against Christians, Yezidis and other minorities "war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide."

### IS commander 'Omar the Chechen' dead: US

AFP, Washington

A top Islamic State group commander known as "Omar the Chechen" is dead after suffering injuries in a US-led coalition strike in northeastern Syria, the Pentagon confirmed Monday. The announcement would appear to clear up the fate of the notorious Omar al-Shishani, a week after a US official said the militant had been targeted in a March 4 attack on a jihadist's convoy.

### Car bomb kills driver in Berlin

AFP, Berlin

German police opened a homicide probe yesterday after a car bomb killed a driver on a central Berlin street, with authorities saying there was currently no terrorism link. The blast caused by an explosive device "on or in the vehicle" occurred during morning rush-hour traffic on Bismarckstrasse.

### 12 die in Russian rehab centre blaze

AFP, Moscow

Twelve people died overnight as a fire swept through a rehab centre with barred windows in central Russia, investigators said yesterday. The bodies of 12 people, two of them women, were found in the residential building in the mainly Muslim Bashkortostan region, the regional Investigative Committee, which probes serious crimes, said in a statement.



United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Special Envoy Angelina Jolie reacts as it rains during a news conference during her visit to Syrian refugees in the Bekaa valley, Lebanon, yesterday. Some 1,500 migrants who managed to cross into Macedonia, despite the border being closed to them for a week, have been sent back to Greece by Macedonian troops, officials said yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## US further eases Cuba restrictions

AFP, Washington

The United States further eased travel and trade restrictions with Cuba yesterday, just days before a historic visit to the communist-ruled island by President Barack Obama.

The US Treasury said the rule changes will make it easier for Americans to travel to the island for "educational" purposes, for US banks to provide more services in the Caribbean country, and US businesses to work more freely there.

The various steps were mostly minor and technical but add up to the continuing erosion of Congress-mandated restrictions on interactions with Cuba and Cubans as the Obama administration seeks to end the decades-old embargo on the country.

"Today's steps build on the actions of the last 15 months as we continue to break down economic barriers, empower the Cuban people and advance their financial freedoms, and chart a new course in US-Cuba relations," said Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew in a statement.

Obama flies into Cuba Sunday ahead of an official March 21-22 visit in a symbolically charged capstone to the rapprochement that he and President Raul Castro announced in December 2014.

From the 1960s until a just over a year ago Americans were mostly banned from tourism, trade and investment with the island barely 90 miles south of Florida.

While the US Congress continues to resist completely lifting the 1960s-era trade embargo and the 1996 Helms Burton Act which ban outright tourism, the new rules expand on previous exceptions that the Obama administration has announced to further allow travel.

Earlier moves opened the door to individuals and groups visiting for business, humanitarian, and cultural purposes. The new rules allow for individual "people-to-people educational" visits, which widens the opening for many kinds of travel.

## Lanka rations power after worst blackout

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka announced lengthy daily power cuts nationwide as the state-run electricity monopoly struggled to restore supply after the island's worst blackout in 20 years.

The Ceylon Electricity Board said its main Chinese-built coal-fired power plant that supplied more than half the country's electricity was still offline following a massive system breakdown on Sunday.

The cuts will occur for seven and a half hours the official said, without saying how long the rationing would last.

### SAUDI-LED COALITION RAID ON MARKET

## 41 civilians killed in Yemen

AFP, Aden

At least 41 Yemeni civilians were killed yesterday when Saudi-led coalition warplanes hit a market in the rebel-held northern Hajja province, medics and tribal sources said.

An official at a hospital run by Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said the facility had received the bodies of 41 people killed in the raids, along with 35 people who were wounded.

A health official in Hajja said the casualties were civilians and included children, adding that "the toll could rise".

Local officials and tribal sources told AFP that coalition warplanes carried out several raids on the market in the town of Mustabaa.

The rebel-run sabanews.net website said that the coalition carried out two raids targeting the market and a restaurant in the area and gave a toll of 65 civilians dead and

55 wounded.

It quoted an unnamed source as saying that health facilities in Mustabaa and the neighbouring town of Abs were receiving the casualties but were short on medical supplies.

The coalition launched its campaign against Iran-backed rebels in support of the Yemen's internationally-recognised government on March 26 last year.

Rights groups have repeatedly urged the coalition to avoid causing civilian casualties.

Last month, Human Rights Watch accused the coalition of using US-supplied cluster bombs.

The coalition has said that an independent inquiry would examine charges of possible abuses against civilians in the conflict.

A panel of UN experts says the coalition has carried out 119 sorties that violated humanitarian law, and called for an international probe.



## N Korea leader orders nuke warhead test

AFP, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un has ordered an upcoming nuclear warhead test and multiple ballistic missile launches, escalating Pyongyang's face-off with the international community just days after being slapped with tough UN sanctions.

The order came after Kim monitored what was described as the successful simulated test of the warhead re-entry technology required for a long-range nuclear strike on the US mainland, the North's official KCNA news agency said yesterday.

In order to boost the reliability of the nation's nuclear deterrent still further, Kim said a nuclear warhead explosion test and firings of "several kinds" of ballistic rockets would be carried out "in a short time".

Military tensions have been soaring on the divided Korean peninsula since the North carried out its fourth nuclear test on January 6, followed a month later by a long-range rocket launch that was widely seen as a disguised ballistic missile test. The UN Security Council responded earlier this month by imposing its toughest sanctions on North Korea to date.



Relatives and friends of Destina Peri Parlak, one of the victims of the suicide bomb attack on March 13, mourn at her coffin during a funeral ceremony in Ankara, yesterday. Turkey yesterday said a female suicide bomber who killed 35 people in Ankara had links to a Syrian Kurdish militia, as security forces clashed with rebels in the restive southeast.

PHOTO: AFP