

Peace talks muddied

Putin says Russia can make a comeback within hours

AFP, Geneva

Talks to end Syria's brutal five-year conflict were rattled yesterday by uncertainty surrounding the arrival of a second opposition group and the declaration by Syria's Kurds of an autonomous region.

UN mediator Staffan de Mistura met for the first time late Wednesday with an umbrella delegation including the so-called Moscow Group, which is demanding an equal seat at the negotiating table in Geneva.

But such a move would be hotly contested by the "official" opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC) -- a broad collection of political and armed opposition factions which joined forces in Riyadh last December.

"That is one of the most important points," a Western diplomat told AFP, requesting anonymity.

The entry into the talks of the Moscow Group, along with the so-called Cairo and Istanan groups, followed Russia's surprise decision this week to withdraw most of its forces from Syria, where they had been fighting in support of President Bashar al-Assad.

Western governments had voiced hopes the pullout, expected to be completed by the end of the week, could boost the talks by

pressuring Assad.

But Russian President Vladimir Putin said yesterday his country could ramp up its presence again if needed "literally within several hours".

Meanwhile, Syria's Kurds yesterday declared a federal region in areas under their control in the north of the conflict-riven country, but both the government and an opposition coalition rejected the move.

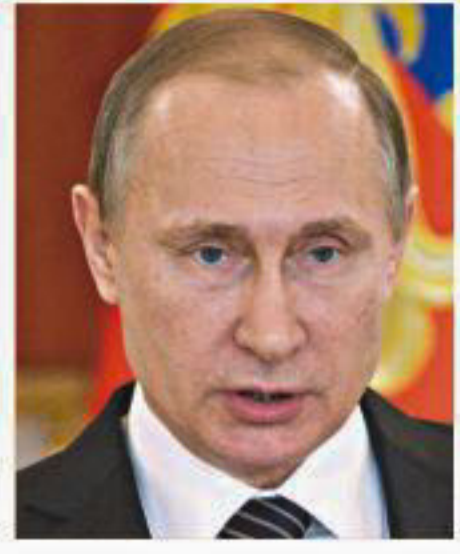
More than 150 delegates from Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian and other parties meeting in Syria agreed to create a "federal system" unifying territory run by Kurds across several Syrian provinces.

In Geneva, it was not immediately clear what impact the inclusion of the pro-Moscow group would have on the talks, or whether it was a gesture from de Mistura to Russia following the pullout.

The UN has not yet clarified what role the Moscow Group would play but its co-president Randa Kassis told reporters Wednesday her camp was in Geneva "as a negotiating delegation".

Jihad Makkissi, a member of the Cairo group, told AFP yesterday: "We will sit at the table as two (opposition) delegations," adding that de Mistura had agreed to meet again with the new delegation in the coming days.

SYRIA CRISIS



Refugee adult and children play around a campfire at a makeshift camp at the Greek-Macedonian border, near the Greek village of Idomeni yesterday, where thousands of refugees and migrants are stranded by the Balkan border blockade.

PHOTO: AFP



'I will not run for president'

Says Michelle Obama

AFP, Washington

First lady Michelle Obama said Wednesday she had no desire to follow Hillary Clinton and run for president herself, saying she could have more impact outside of Washington's polarized politics.

Obama made the remarks as she addressed the South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas, where she introduced a song for charity to support a UN-backed campaign to improve education access for the 62 million unschooled girls around the world.

"I will not run for president. Nope, nope, not going to do it," she said in response to a question. "There is so much that I can do outside of the White House, and sometimes there is much more that you can do outside the White House without the constraints, and the lights and the cameras, and the partisanship," she added. "There is a potential that my voice could be heard by many people who can't hear me now because I'm 'Michelle Obama, the first lady.'"

Part of the first African American first family, the 52-year-old is a Harvard-educated lawyer who has made no secret of her distaste for the glare of political life and has tried to steer clear of controversy, instead focusing on issues such as fighting obesity.

IS committed genocide: US

BBC ONLINE

The US says the Islamic State group has committed genocide against Yazidis, Christians and Shia Muslims.

US Secretary of State John Kerry said IS was "genocidal by self-proclamation, by ideology and by actions".

He did not say whether his declaration would lead to a change of US policy in the Middle East.

But he did call for an independent international investigation and criminal charges for those thought to be responsible for the atrocities.

"Naming these crimes is important," Kerry said, "but what is essential is to stop them."

Kerry also said IS was responsible for crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing in areas it controls in Syria and Iraq.

He said his conclusions had been based on a wealth of evidence provided by the US state department, intelligence teams and other sources.

Tens of thousands of Yazidis became stranded on an exposed mountain, and Kerry said "without our intervention, it is clear those people would have been slaughtered".

He also highlighted the killings of Christians in northern Iraq and Libya, and of Shia Turkmen in Iraq.

"The fact is that Daesh [IS] kills Christians because they are Christians, Yazidis because they are Yazidis, Shia because they are Shia," he said,

using an Arabic acronym for the group.

"This is the message it conveys to children under its control. Its entire world view is based on eliminating those who do not subscribe to its perverse ideology."

Mr Kerry admitted that a lack of access to IS areas meant the US did not have a "complete picture" of the atrocities that had been carried out, and said he was "neither judge, nor prosecutor, nor jury".

But he said he hoped its victims would take comfort in the fact that "the United States recognises and confirms the despicable nature of the crimes committed against them".

It is only the second time the US administration has declared a genocide during a conflict. The previous time was in 2004 when then-Secretary of State Colin Powell used it to describe the killings in Darfur.

Such a declaration is a powerful signal, says the BBC's diplomatic correspondent Jonathan Marcus, and Mr Kerry may hope that it bolsters the fight against the IS and possibly opens the way to action at the UN Security Council.

But in every other sense its practical impact will be limited, our correspondent adds, as the US and its allies are already engaged in a war against IS and the struggle is likely to continue for months and probably years yet.

Kerry had been given a congressional deadline of 17 March to announce whether IS's actions in

EU seeks to clinch Turkey migrant deal

AFP, Brussels

European Union leaders voiced caution yesterday about the chances of clinching a deal with Turkey to curb the migration crisis, warning of a long list of difficult issues to overcome.

The deal faces hurdles including threats by Cyprus to block Ankara's demands for faster EU membership, and legal concerns over a plan to send all migrants who land in Greece, including Syrians, back to Turkey.

A divided EU has pinned its hopes on a bargain with Turkey to cut off the main route for the 1.2 million asylum seekers who have landed in the bloc since January 2015, sparking the continent's biggest migration crisis since World War II.

The 28 EU leaders will thrash out their negotiating position in Brussels before meeting Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu today to push for a deal.

"I am cautiously optimistic but frankly, more cautious than optimistic," said European Council President Donald Tusk, warning of a "catalogue of issues" to resolve. "If we keep our cool we will achieve success," he added.

European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker said that he was "fairly optimistic that we will reach an agreement" and that it would "of course respect European law and the Geneva Convention". Juncker added that Russia's recent military withdrawal from war-torn Syria could also stem the flow of refugees.

Meanwhile, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said yesterday the EU has "no alternative" but to sign a deal with Turkey to curb the migration crisis, which could halt the flow of migrants to Europe within a month.

"What we clearly want is that the crossings stop because we are sending people back to Turkey. We expect that that would stop the crossings within three, four weeks" Rutte, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, told reporters.

NEWS IN brief

IS has 'committed genocide': US

BBC ONLINE

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Missing Japanese journo video emerges

AFP, Tokyo

Footage has emerged of a Japanese journalist who went missing in Syria apparently asking for Tokyo's help in securing his release. The Japanese government said yesterday it was studying the video of Jumpei Yasuda, who has not been heard from since the middle of last year.

Two Palestinians shot dead in West Bank

AFP, Jerusalem

Two Palestinians stabbed an Israeli soldier near a group of Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank yesterday before being shot dead, the army said. The incident occurred at the Ariel junction in the West Bank. The female soldier was being taken to hospital, while the two

Myanmar plans ethnic ministry

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's incoming government announced plans yesterday to create a ministry for ethnic affairs, marking the importance it places on relations with minorities in a country scarred by festering civil wars and sectarian tensions. The move was contained within a wider civil service reform plan announced in parliament that aims to streamline the unwieldy junta-era bureaucracy, slashing the total number of ministries from 36

Bomb scare: Air India flight evacuated

AFP, Bangkok

Passengers on an Air India flight were evacuated on an emergency slide at Bangkok's main international airport late Wednesday following a false bomb threat. The Bangkok-bound Air India Flight 332 was ordered to park in an isolated part of Suvarnabhumi airport



Youths stand on a car as French high school and university students take part in a demonstration against the labour reform bill proposal in Paris, France, yesterday as part of a nationwide labor reform protest.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Women have 'unfavourable' view of Trump: poll

REUTERS, New York

Real estate billionaire Donald Trump's coarse rhetoric has won him some fans, but there's at least one large group in America that is increasingly unimpressed: women.

Half of US women say they have a "very unfavourable" view of the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination, according to Reuters/Ipsos polling, up from the 40 percent who felt that way in October. The survey was taken from March 1-15, and included 5,400 respondents.

The rise in anti-Trump sentiment among women could pose a problem for the New York billionaire in his quest for the White House. Women form just over half of the US population, and they have turned out at higher rates than men in every election since 1996, according to the US Census Bureau.

"If the presidential election were tomorrow, women would be a big problem for Trump," Republican strategist David Carney said. "But he has time to fix it."

A Trump campaign official did not immediately respond to a request for comment, but Trump has said that he has had good relationships with women in his business career and is well-liked by women voters.

Several women who oppose Trump, interviewed by Reuters this week, said their disapproval was based on a range of factors from his disparaging comments about women he dislikes - such as Fox News host Megyn Kelly - to his hard-line views on immigration and his ribald exchanges with rivals.



Saudi to scale down Yemen campaign

AP, Sanaa

Saudi Arabia said yesterday its military coalition will scale down operations in Yemen, an announcement that came as the death toll from an airstrike by the alliance on a market north of the Yemeni capital this week nearly doubled, reaching 119.

A UN official said 22 children were among those killed on Tuesday in the Hajja province, an area controlled by Yemen's Shia rebels known as Houthis, the latest in a series of similar airstrikes that have killed hundreds of civilians since the Yemen war began.

Saudi military spokesman Brig Gen Ahmed al-Asiri told The Associated Press over the phone from the kingdom's capital, Riyadh, that his country and its coalition partners would continue to provide air support to Yemeni forces battling the Houthis and their allies.

He gave no further details but defended the coalition's goals in Yemen. The conflict pits the Shia rebels and military units loyal to a former president against the internationally-recognized government, which is largely confined to the southern city of Aden. The fighting has killed more than 6,200 civilians, displaced millions and pushed the Arab world's poorest country to the brink of famine.

The US-backed, Saudi-led coalition of mostly Arab states intervened militarily in Yemen a year ago, launching first an airstrikes campaign in support of the internationally recognized government, then sending in elite forces, mostly from Gulf Arab states, in an effort to roll back the rebel

Penalty points for Chinese dog owners

BBC ONLINE

A city in eastern China is tackling negligent dog owners with a new driving licence-style system.

The pilot scheme, which started this month, gives pooches in the city of Shaoxing a licence pre-loaded with 12 points which are then gradually docked for breaking the rules, Qianjiang Evening News reports.

Taking a dog into a public place such as a school or restaurant will cost an owner three points, while "failing to take effective measures" to stop a badly behaving dog results in six points being docked. A microchip under the dog's skin will hold data on the penalties incurred.

The biggest penalties are reserved for owners who use their pets to cause deliberate wounding, and those who abandon or abuse their animals - they'll lose all 12 points and be banned from reapplying for an ownership licence.

"Like drink-driving and other bad behaviour, dog owners will be blacklisted, and won't be able to raise dogs again," says city official Zhang Zhuoming. The paper says Shaoxing has experienced problems with both stray and domestic dogs, with more than 7,000 dog biting incidents registered last year.

