

SYRIA WAR

Obama rules out ground troops, again

Aleppo clashes kill 14

US President Barack Obama has ruled out deploying US ground troops in Syria and says military efforts alone cannot solve the country's problems.

"It would be a mistake for the United States, or Great Britain... to send in ground troops and overthrow the [Bashar al-] Assad regime," he told the BBC. Syria was a "heart-breaking situation of enormous complexity". "I don't think there are any simple solutions," he said. "In order for us to solve the long-term problems in Syria, a military solution alone - and certainly us deploying ground troops - is not going to bring that about."

He said the US-led coalition would continue "to strike ISIL (Islamic State) targets in places like Raqqa, and to try to isolate those portions of the country, and lock down those portions of the country that are sending foreign fighters into Europe".

But he said the international community would have to continue to apply pressure to all parties, including Russia, Iran and moderate opposition groups "to sit down at the table and try to broker a transition".

Meanwhile, rebel and regime bombardment in Syria's Aleppo yesterday killed at least 14 civilians, emergency workers and a monitor said, on the third day of renewed violence in the battered city, reports AFP.



NEPAL: A YEAR AFTER DEADLY QUAKE

(From top, anti-clockwise) Nepalese police push back demonstrators protesting against delayed government reconstruction efforts in Kathmandu; a Nepalese villager prepare to cook food in a temporary shelter in the village of Langtang; residents gather to light candles during a vigil to mark the first anniversary of a devastating earthquake in Durbar Square in Kathmandu, yesterday. Thousands of Nepalis grieved yesterday for their loved ones killed in the massive earthquake, as protesting victims still living in tents accused the government of failing them. More than 9,000 killed and thousands more were left injured in the 7.8-magnitude quake that triggered avalanches and landslides across the nation and flattened whole villages.

PHOTO: AFP

'It is not enough to criticise' court

India's chief justice breaks down, pleads PM for more judges

AFP, New Delhi

India's chief justice yesterday made a rare and emotional appeal to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to double the number of judges to handle an "avalanche" of backlogged cases.

T S Thakur, who took over as chief justice last year, spoke of the enormous workloads of judges who were struggling to clear an ever-growing amount of litigation in India's notoriously slow legal system.

Thakur, choking and stopping several times to wipe his eyes with a handkerchief, urged Modi -- seated nearby at a conference -- to work with the judiciary to resolve the crisis, which he said was holding back the economy.

"It is not only in the name of a litigant or people languishing in jails but also in the name of development of the country, its progress, that I beseech you to rise to the occasion and realise that it is not enough to criticise," Thakur said.

The chief justice, who sits on the Supreme Court benches, made the comments at a conference in New Delhi attended by Modi, along with India's state chief ministers and high court chief justices.

India currently has 21,000 judges even though the law commission, a government body, recommended more than two decades ago that at least 40,000 were needed.

Thakur said judges across the court system handle 2,600 cases each annually. In response, Modi reportedly told the conference that, barring constitutional problems, top judges and ministers should sit down together to resolve the problem.



TACKLING REFUGEE EXODUS TO EUROPE
Merkel bats for 'safe zones' inside Syria to solve crisis

REUTERS, Gaziantep

Germany is seeking the creation of "safe zones" to shelter refugees in Syria, Chancellor Angela Merkel said on Saturday, an idea Turkey has long championed in the face of UN caution.

Keeping refugees on the Syrian side of the border would help Brussels and Ankara, which hosts 2.7 million Syrian refugees, stem the flow of migrants to European shores. The UN has warned against the plan unless there was a way to guarantee the refugees' safety in the war-torn state. Aid workers have opposed it.

At a news conference in the Turkish city of Gaziantep, Merkel called for "zones where the ceasefire is particularly enforced and where a significant level of security can be guaranteed."

As tens of thousands of refugees fleeing the fighting in Syria are unable to cross into Turkey, and instead are camped near the Azaz border crossing where local agencies offer humanitarian support, some have accused Turkey of stealthily forming such a zone.

The EU-Turkey agreement to send back thousands of migrants from the Greek islands to Turkey has also been fiercely criticised by United Nations refugee and human rights agencies, as immoral and a violation of international humanitarian law. Rights groups say Turkey is not a country where returnees can be guaranteed proper protection.

The agreement, coupled with border

closures in Europe that meant smugglers could not secure passage to northern Europe, initially slowed the numbers of new arrivals to Greece.

One side of the bargain, used to sell the migrant deal to the Turkish public, was Turks winning quicker visa-free travel to Europe, a pledge that now could go unfulfilled, at least by the June deadline Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu had wanted.



On Saturday Davutoglu said there would be no more readmissions if visa liberalisation was not enacted, but that he believed the EU would take the necessary steps.

Davutoglu, Merkel, EU Council President Donald Tusk and Vice-President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans visited a refugee camp in Nizip and the inauguration of a child protection centre in Gaziantep.

Sharif lost 'moral authority to rule'

Pakistan's Imran Khan sees Panama Papers as second chance to oust PM

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistani opposition politician Imran Khan was leading a party rally yesterday to rail against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, seizing on the Panama Papers leak linking Sharif's family with offshore wealth as a second chance to unseat the leader.

Former cricket hero Khan, who staged protests in Islamabad for months in 2014 over alleged electoral fraud, has threatened to call new demonstrations for Sharif's resignation, saying this month the prime minister has lost the "moral authority to rule". Khan aides insist the government is wobbling and it is time to strike. Critics, however, say Khan may be overplaying his hand for the second time.

"We demand the resignation of the prime minister on moral grounds," said Shafiqat Mahmood, a senior leader of Khan's party.

This month, leaked documents from the Mossack Fonseca law firm in Panama showed Sharif's sons Hassan and Hussain, and daughter Maryam, owned at least three offshore holding companies registered in the British Virgin Islands.

Sharif said his children have done nothing wrong - he gave in to opposition demands for a Supreme Court appointed inquiry commission on Friday and said he would resign if it found wrongdoing.

The ruling party has dismissed Khan's threat of fresh protests and says the 2014 demonstrations against electoral rigging had also damaged Khan's credibility after election tribunals ruled that the 2013 poll was largely free and fair.

"Imran is just really desperate for any kind of shortcut to becoming prime minister and with these leaks he thinks he's hit the jackpot," Muhammad Zubair, minister for privatisation and a member of the prime minister's media team, told Reuters.

NEWS IN brief

Armenia marks 101th genocide anniversary

AFP, Yerevan

Thousands of Armenians yesterday commemorated the 101st anniversary of the World War I-era Armenian genocide carried out by Ottoman rulers. Armenians say up to 1.5 million people were killed during World War I as the Ottoman Empire was falling apart, a claim supported by many other countries. Turkey fiercely rejects the genocide label.

Car bomb attacks kill 12 in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

At least 12 people were killed on Saturday in two separate car bomb attacks in Baghdad targeting security forces, police sources said. Islamic State claimed responsibility of the attack on a security checkpoint in the northern al-Husseiniya district killed nine people and wounded 28 others. Three people were killed there, and 11 others were wounded in a second blast outside Baghdad.

Saudi-led air strikes kill 10 in Yemen

REUTERS, Aden

A Saudi-led coalition carried out air strikes on the al-Qaeda-held port of Mukalla in southern Yemen yesterday, killing at least ten militants, medical sources and residents said, part of an offensive to recapture the city. Mukalla, a shipping hub and provincial capital, is a stronghold of the powerful al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) which has taken advantage of Yemen's year-long civil war to win control over parts of the south and east.

Hailstones, storms kill 8 in Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

Violent storms which saw hailstones the size of golf balls rain down across Myanmar have killed at least eight people in recent days, toppled pagodas and damaged thousands of buildings, officials said yesterday. The freak storms struck across five states on Friday and Saturday after weeks of heatwave temperatures regularly topping 40C.

ANTI-ERDOGAN TWEET
Dutch journo detained in Turkey

AFP, Ankara

A Dutch journalist was briefly detained by Turkish police yesterday after sending tweets deemed critical of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, according to her Twitter account.

Ebru Umar, a well-known atheist and feminist journalist of Turkish origin, said she was arrested at her home in Kusadasi, a resort town in western Turkey, early yesterday and brought before a judge.

She later said she was "free but forbidden to leave the country".

Umar, 45, recently wrote a piece critical of Erdogan for the Dutch daily Metro, extracts of which she then tweeted.

Dutch blog Geenstijl said they had received an sms message from Umar saying that she had been arrested after someone reported her tweets on a hotline set up by the Turkish officials.



Happiness is not an app, Pope tells teens

AFP, Vatican City

Happiness is not an app you can download on your mobile phone, Pope Francis told thousands of teenagers yesterday at a mass to mark a weekend dedicated to youth.

"Freedom is not always about doing what you want. In fact it is the gift of being able to choose the right way," he said in a homily punctuated by regular bursts of applause from the crowd on a packed St Peter's Square.

"Your happiness has no price. It cannot be bought and sold: it is not an application you download on a mobile phone. Even the latest version cannot help you to grow and become free in love."

In a surprise move on Saturday, the 79-year-old pontiff heard confessions from 16 of them and a video message from him was broadcast at a rock and rap concert in the Stadio Olimpico.

The importance of mobile phones to contemporary teenagers was also reflected in Francis's message to the concert. Clutching an iPhone, he told his audience that living without Jesus was like not having any signal. "Always be sure to go where there is a network: family, parish, school," he said.

'Stop war drills, we'll stop tests' N Korea tells US

AP, New York

North Korea is ready to halt its nuclear tests if the United States suspends its annual military exercises with South Korea, the North Korean foreign minister told The Associated Press in an interview in which he also warned that his country won't be cowed by international sanctions.

Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong defended the country's right to maintain a nuclear deterrent, and for those waiting for the North's regime to collapse, he had this to say: "Don't hold your breath."

"Stop the nuclear war exercises in the Korean Peninsula, then we should also cease our nuclear tests," he said in his first interview Saturday with a Western news organization.

Ri held firm to Pyongyang's longstanding position that the US drove his country to develop nuclear weapons as an act of self-defense.



Solar plane makes history

Solar Impulse 2 lands in US after crossing Pacific

AFP, Mountain View

Solar Impulse 2, an experimental plane flying around the world without consuming a drop of fuel, has landed in California, one leg closer to completing its trailblazing trip.

"The Pacific is done, my friend. I love it, but it's done," said clearly relieved Swiss adventurer Bertrand Piccard, who piloted the craft from Hawaii to California, just before landing late Saturday.

"It's great to be in California, the land of pioneers," he said once on the ground, with Google co-founder and alternative energy enthusiast Sergey Brin on hand.

"Innovation and pioneering must continue. The clean tech revolution has to keep moving forward."

Piccard, a 58-year-old doctor by train-

ing, said that enduring the 62-hour stretch between Hawaii and the Silicon Valley town of Mountain View was one of the "most amazing" experiences of his life.

"I bet that in 10 years, electric airplanes will be transporting up to 50 people. This will happen," he added. "This is not science fiction. It is real," Piccard said.

The arrival at Moffett Airfield south-east of San Francisco, marked the completion of the ninth of 13 legs in a journey that began last year in the United Arab Emirates.

The mission aims to promote the use of renewable energy, with an aircraft powered by 17,000 solar cells. The plane's wingspan is wider than that of a jumbo jet but its weight is roughly the same as a car's.