



A man reacts as he carries the body of a girl, dug out from the rubble, following a reported attack by Syrian government forces on the Sakhour eastern neighbourhood, in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo, yesterday. Mohammed Alloush, chief peace negotiator of Syria's mainstream opposition, said late Sunday he was resigning over the failure of the UN-backed Geneva peace talks to bring a political settlement.

Fight for Falluja begins

Iraqi army launches concerted effort to retake the city from IS; suicide bombings kill 20 in Baghdad

REUTERS, Falluja

The Iraqi army stormed to the southern edge of Falluja under US air support yesterday and captured a police station inside the city limits, launching a direct assault to retake one of the main strongholds of Islamic State militants.

A Reuters TV crew about a mile from the city's edge said explosions and gunfire were ripping through Naimiya, a district of Falluja on its southern outskirts.

An elite military unit, the Rapid Response Team, seized the district's police station at midday, state television reported.

The battle for Falluja is shaping up to be one of the biggest ever fought against Islamic State, in the city where US forces waged the heaviest battles of their 2003-2011 occupation against the Sunni Muslim militant group's precursors.

Falluja is Islamic State's closest bastion to Baghdad, and believed to be the base from which the group has plotted an escalating campaign of



suicide bombings against Shia civilians and government targets inside the capital.

As government forces pressed their onslaught, suicide bombers driving a car and a motorcycle and another bomb planted in a car killed more than 20 people and injured more than 50 in three districts of Baghdad, police and medical sources said.

Separately, Kurdish security forces announced advances against Islamic State in northern Iraq, capturing villages from militants outside Mosul,

the biggest city under militant control.

The Iraqi army launched its operation to recover Falluja a week ago, first by tightening a six-month-old siege around the city 50 km west of Baghdad.

Yesterday, army units advanced to the city's southern entrance, "steadily advancing" under air cover from a US-led coalition helping to fight against the militants, according to a military statement read out on state TV.

The latest offensive is causing alarm among international aid organization over the humanitarian situation in the city, where more than 50,000 civilians remain trapped with limited access to water, food and health care.

Falluja is the second-largest Iraqi city still under control of the militants, north of Mosul, their de facto capital in the north that had a pre-war population of about 2 million.

It would be the third major city in Iraq recaptured by the government after Saddam's home town Tikrit and Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's vast western Anbar province.

JOINT EXERCISES

India deploys naval ships to S China Sea

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

As part of its outreach to Asean, India has dispatched its naval warships to Vietnam and the Philippines for joint exercises with the two South East Asian countries with which China has territorial disputes.

"In a demonstration of India's 'Act East' policy and Indian Navy's increasing footprint and operational reach, Indian Naval Ships Satpura and Kirch... have arrived at Cam Ranh Bay on a four-day visit as part of deployment of the Eastern Fleet to the South China Sea and Western Pacific," an official statement said here yesterday.

During the visit, the Indian Navy ships will have professional interaction with the Vietnam Navy towards further enhancing co-operation between the two forces and are also likely to conduct exercises with the Vietnam People's Navy, aimed at enhancing interoperability in communication as well as search and rescue procedures, it said.

India-Vietnam relations have been strengthened in recent times by vibrant economic ties and growing convergence on security issues.

India's increasing defence ties with Vietnam has been closely monitored by China. India believes the current visit by its naval ships to Vietnam "will further bolster the strong bonds of friendship between" the two countries "and contribute to security and stability in this vital part of the world."

Separately, two Indian Naval warships reached Subic Bay, the Philippines, on a three-day visit, as part of deployment of the Eastern Fleet to the South China Sea and Western Pacific.

Picture captures tragedy in Med

REUTERS, Rome

A photograph of a drowned migrant baby in the arms of a German rescuer was distributed yesterday by a humanitarian organization aiming to persuade European authorities to ensure safe passage to migrants, after hundreds are feared to have drowned in the Mediterranean last week.

The baby, who appears to be no more than a year old, was pulled from the sea on Friday after the capsizing of a wooden boat. Forty-five bodies arrived in the southern Italian port of Reggio Calabria on Sunday aboard an Italian navy ship, which picked up 135 survivors from the same incident.

German humanitarian organization Sea-Watch, operating a rescue boat in the sea between Libya and Italy, distributed the picture taken by a media production company on board and which showed a rescuer cradling the child like a sleeping baby.

In an email, the rescuer, who gave his name as Martin but did not want his family name published, said he had spotted the baby in the water "like a doll, arms outstretched".

"I took hold of the forearm of the baby and

pulled the light body protectively into my arms at once, as if it were still alive ... It held out its arms with tiny fingers into the air, the sun shone into its bright, friendly but motionless eyes."

The rescuer, a father of three and by profession a music therapist, added: "I began to sing to comfort myself and to give some kind of expression to this incomprehensible, heart-rending moment. Just six hours ago this child was alive."

Like the photograph of the three-year-old Syrian boy Aylan lying lifeless on a Turkish beach last year, the image puts a human face on the more than 8,000 people who have died in the Mediterranean since the start of 2014.

Little is known about the child, who according to Sea-Watch was immediately handed over to the Italian navy. Rescuers could not confirm whether the partially clothed infant was a boy or a girl and it is not known whether the child's mother or father are among the survivors.

Sea-Watch collected about 25 other bodies, including another child, according to testimony from the crew seen by Reuters. The Sea-Watch team said it unanimously decided to publish the photo.



EU MIGRANT CRISIS

CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

Chad's Habre gets life

AFP, Dakar

A special court in Senegal sentenced former Chadian dictator Hissene Habre to life in prison yesterday for war crimes, crimes against humanity and a litany of other charges, including rape.

The verdict brings a long-awaited day of reckoning to up to 40,000 people kidnapped, raped and tortured under his rule as president of Chad from 1982-1990.

"Hissene Habre, this court finds you guilty of crimes against humanity, rape, forced slavery, and kidnapping," as well as war crimes, said Gberdao Gustave Kam, president of the special court.

"The court condemns you to life in prison," Kam added.

The court also heard that Habre had raped a woman named Khadija Hassan Zidane on several occasions.

Upon hearing the verdict, Habre raised his arms into the air, shouting "Down with France-afrique!" referring to the term used for France's continuing influence on its former colonies.

The case was heard at the Extraordinary African Chambers (CAE) -- a special tribunal set up by the African Union under a deal with Senegal - and is the first time a country has prosecuted a former leader of another nation for rights abuses.

The former leader has 15 days to appeal the sentence.

Victims groups who had travelled to Dakar to hear the verdict were visibly moved by a judgement that comes a quarter century after the abuses they suffered.

Reed Brody, a lawyer for Human Rights Watch who has spent the last 15 years working with victims to bring Habre to justice, said the conviction was a warning to other despots.

Known as a skilled desert warrior who often wore combat fatigues to fit the role, Habre fled to Senegal after his 1990 ouster by Chad's current President Idriss Deby.

NEWS IN brief

- Comedian in trouble for Tendulkar video**
BBC ONLINE
- An Indian comedian is being investigated by police after posting a video mocking cricketer Sachin Tendulkar and singer Lata Mangeshkar. Tanmay Bhat had used Snapchat's face swap feature to stage an argument between the two Indian icons. Hindu nationalist parties Shiv Sena and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena have complained to police, demanding action.
- Family planning not for Muslims: Erdogan**
AFP, Istanbul
- Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said yesterday that family planning and contraception were not for Muslim families. Erdogan said it was the responsibility of mothers to ensure the continued growth of Turkey's population, which has expanded at a rate of around 1.3 percent in the last few years.
- Tug-of-war resumes over Thai temple tigers**
AFP, Kanchanaburi
- Thai officials armed with a court order yesterday resumed the removal of tigers from a controversial temple which attracts tourists as a petting zoo, but stands accused of selling off the big cats for slaughter. The temple in Kanchanaburi province has long proved a hit among visitors who flock there to visit the monks and be photographed.
- HK protester given 5 weeks for assault**
AFP, Hong Kong
- A Hong Kong pro-democracy activist was sentenced to five weeks in prison yesterday after he was found guilty of assaulting and resisting officers during mass rallies in 2014 when he splashed liquid on police. Political activist Ken Tsang vowed to appeal the sentence. Tsang's is the first conviction for a high-profile figure involved in the rallies, dubbed the "Umbrella Revolution", which blocked major highways in the city for over two months.
- Airlines blast: Somalia sentences two to life**
AFP, Mogadishu
- A Somali military court yesterday jailed two men for life for their role in a botched laptop bomb attack on an aeroplane claimed by the al-Qaeda-linked Shebab. The February 2 blast left a metre-wide hole in the fuselage of the Daallo Airlines plane shortly after it took off from Somalia's main airport in Mogadishu, killing only the suspected bomber and forcing an emergency landing.

N Korea prepares missile launch

Says South; Japan puts military on alert

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's defence ministry yesterday said it had detected signs that North Korea was preparing a ballistic missile launch, as Japan reportedly put its military on intercept alert.

UN resolutions ban North Korea from any use of ballistic missile technology, although it regularly fires short-range missiles into the sea off its east coast.

Tensions have been running high on the divided Korean peninsula since the North's fourth nuclear test in January, followed by a long-range rocket launch the following month.

And in recent weeks Pyongyang has voiced anger at Seoul's refusal to accept repeated offers of military talks to de-escalate the situation.

"We are tracking signs that North Korea is preparing a ballistic missile test and are maintaining combat readiness," a defence ministry official told AFP.

The official did not specify the missile type, but the fact that signs of a launch had been detected would point to a medium-range missile or larger.

In April the North tried and failed three times to test-fire a powerful new mid-range missile known as a Musudan.

In Tokyo, public broadcaster NHK said the Japanese government had put its military on alert for a possible launch, with orders to intercept any missile that threatened Japanese territory.



Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron makes a joint appearance with the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, as they launch the 'Britain Stronger In Europe' guarantee card in west London yesterday, ahead of the EU referendum in Britain on June 23, 2016.

Pope 'praises vloggers, beauty videos'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Pope Francis has praised online vloggers and professed an admiration for fashion and beauty videos during a meeting with a group of YouTubers.

Twelve YouTubers from six continents joined the Pope on Sunday to discuss how bloggers could help young people craft virtual identities and support those of their followers who felt alienated.

"You can create a virtual identity; you belong to this circle at least virtually. From that you can start taking a path of optimism and hope," said Pope Francis, the Guardian reports.

The 50-minute meeting included guests such as Hayla Ghazal, a Dubai-based Syrian teenager whose YouTube channel aims to empower Middle Eastern women and introverted teenagers, and Dulce Candy, a Mexican-American who travelled to the US illegally as a child in 1994.

Key topics at the meeting, which saw the Pope laughing along with the vloggers, included identity, migration and extremism.

The Pope reportedly criticised European politicians over their immigration policies and said extremist groups should not be cast as belonging to one particular faith.

"In all religions there is also a group of fundamentalists that believe they are the holders of the truth," said Pope Francis.

The Pope also commended British fashion and beauty vlogger Louise Pentland, who runs the YouTube channel Sprinkle of Glitter, saying: "I am glad that you carry out the type of work you said, following the line of beauty, it's a great thing. To preach beauty and show beauty helps neutralise aggression."

OVERSEAS TRAVEL

Thailand lifts ban on politicians

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thailand will lift a ban this week on overseas travel by some politicians, the defence minister said yesterday, more than two years after the measure was imposed.

Over the last few months, Thailand's military government, which took power in a May 2014 coup, has begun easing some of its strict restrictions on political activity, in the runup to an August referendum on a draft constitution.

The lifting of the ban showed the junta's trust in politicians, Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Prawit Wongsuwan said.

"Politicians who have no legal cases are able to travel," Prawit told reporters.

"Whether they go abroad and then take part in political activities is up to them."

The lifting takes effect on Wednesday, the junta has said.

But it excludes politicians such as former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, ousted in the coup, who faces criminal charges over alleged corruption in her government's rice subsidy program.

Illegals get better care than veterans: Trump

AGENCIES

Illegal immigrants in the US often get better care than the nation's military veterans, Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump has said.

"We're not going to allow that to happen any longer," he told a bikers' rally in Washington DC.

Trump did not provide any evidence for his assertion.

Last year, the billionaire sparked anger by attacking the military record of Senator John McCain, a former prisoner of war. Trump said Sen McCain was only considered a hero because he was a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War.

He then added: "I like people who weren't captured." Since then Trump, who never served in the military, has tried to repair the damage by frequently honouring veterans at his rallies and holding fundraising events for them.

His latest comments came at the annual Rolling Thunder motorcycle rally on Sunday, which was dedicated to remembering POWs and those missing in action. Despite previous criticism, many in the crowd cheered Trump, reports BBC.

Meanwhile, a US judge, called a "hater" by Trump for his handling of a lawsuit related to the businessman's Trump University real estate school, has unsealed documents related to the case.

Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee for the Nov 8 election, is fighting a lawsuit that accuses his school venture of misleading thousands of people who paid up to \$35,000 for seminars to learn about the billionaire's real estate investment strategies.