



TASTE OF FREEDOM A woman removes a Niqab she was wearing in her village after Kurdish forces took control of it, on the outskirts of Manbij city, Aleppo province, Syria, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Pressure mounts on IS group

Pressure mounted on the so called Islamic State group yesterday as anti-IS forces pressed on with triple offensives in Syria, Iraq and Libya. Arab-Kurdish fighters backed by the United States yesterday cut the Islamic State group's main supply route between Syria and Turkey in a major setback for the jihadists. In Libya, forces loyal to unity government bombarded the group in Sirte with heavy artillery as part of a push to recapture the jihadist bastion within days. And in Iraq, elite counterterrorism service moved to within three kilometres of central Fallujah and consolidated positions in the south of the city, the operation's commander said. Meanwhile, a senior US official on Thursday said efforts to choke off the finances of the IS have left it unable to pay its fighters and spurred corruption within the group. Daniel Glaser, the Treasury's assistant secretary for terrorist financing, told Congress that a combination of bombing attacks on IS cash stores and oil shipments, locking it out of the banking system, and cutting off Iraq government cash flows to IS-controlled areas, has left the group struggling financially. "As a result of these efforts, ISIL is struggling to pay its fighters and we have seen a number of ISIL fighters leaving the battlefield as their pay and benefits have been cut and delayed," he said, using the US's preferred acronym for Islamic State. IS has come under growing pressure on vari-

ous fronts in Syria and Iraq, where it established its self-declared "caliphate" in 2014. But the offensive in Libya means it is now under fire in every country in which it has major hold. The extremists yesterday lost control of a vital supply artery when Arab-Kurdish forces completely surrounded a key jihadist-held town in Syria. "The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) cut off the last road from Manbij to the Turkish border," said the Syrian Observatory for Human

OFFENSIVES IN SYRIA, IRAQ AND LIBYA

- LIBYA UNITY FORCES POUND MILITANTS' BASTION OF SIRTE
- US-BACKED FORCES CUT MAIN IS SYRIA-TURKEY SUPPLY ROUTE
- IRAQ SPECIAL FORCES 3KM FROM FALLUJAH CENTRE
- US SAYS IS CAN'T PAY FIGHTERS AS FINANCES CHOKED OFF

Syria's war has killed more than 280,000 people and displaced millions since it started in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-government protests. In Libya, forces aligned with the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) said they had pounded IS with "heavy artillery fire" targeting their positions around the sprawling Ouagadougou conference centre. The loss of Sirte, the hometown of ousted dictator Muammar Gaddafi, would be a major blow to the jihadists at a time when they are under mounting pressure in Syria and Iraq. The bombardment came a day after a spokesman for the GNA forces said they had pushed into the centre of Sirte, which IS has held since June 2015, and predicted that it could fall within days. Foreign intelligence services estimate IS has 5,000 fighters in Libya but its strength inside Sirte and the number of civilians living in the city are unavailable. Meanwhile, Iraq's elite counterterrorism service yesterday said its Fallujah offensive was progressing well. Speaking to AFP from the edge of the city's Shuhada neighbourhood, Lieutenant General Abdelwahab al-Saadi said the operation to retake one of the Islamic State group's most emblematic bastions was imminent. "We'll be there, in the very centre, in days. Days, not weeks," he said. The operation to retake Fallujah, which lies only 50 kilometres west of Baghdad, was launched on May 22-23. Iraqi forces said more than 500 jihadists have been killed.

CLIMATE CHANGE BREAKTHROUGH

CO2 turned into stone

Scientists have turned carbon dioxide into stone in a matter of months by pumping it deep underground, offering a revolutionary new way of storing the greenhouse gas to tackle climate change. The pioneering experiment in Iceland mixed CO2 emissions with water and pumped it hundreds of meters (feet) underground into volcanic basalt rock -- where it rapidly turned into a solid. "We need to deal with rising carbon emissions. This is the ultimate permanent storage -- turn them back to stone," said Juerg Matter, lead author of the study, which was published Thursday in the journal Science. Carbon dioxide is a key factor in global warming, and experts have long called for innovative "carbon capture and storage" (CCS) solutions. Previous attempts to inject CO2 into sandstone soils or deep saline aquifers have struggled, as they relied on capping rocks to hold the gas down -- triggering fears it could eventually leak. In contrast, the Carbfix project at Iceland's Hellisheidi plant -- the world's largest geothermal facility, which powers Reykjavik -- sought to solidify the CO2. The plant produces 40,000 tons of CO2 a year -- just five percent of the emissions of a similarly sized coal plant, but still significant. In 2012, they began pumping 250 tons of CO2 mixed with water under-

ground. Scientists had feared it could take hundreds or even thousands of years for the mildly acidic liquid to solidify. But 95 percent of the injected mixture -- which they had tagged with tracer chemicals in order to check it didn't leak out -- had become chalky white stone within two years. "It was a very welcome surprise," said Edda Aradottir, who heads the project for



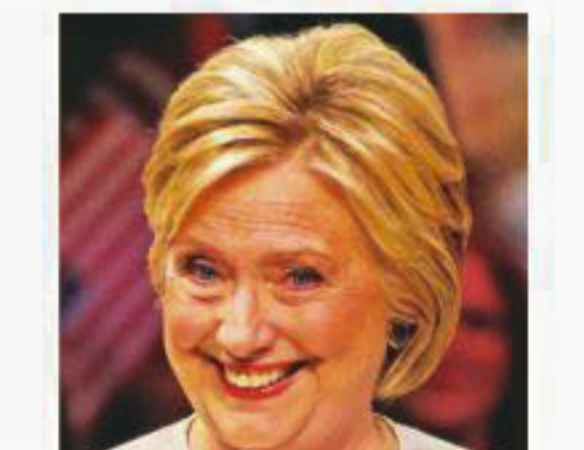
Reykjavik Energy. Encouraged by the success, the company has scaled up the project and from this summer will be burying some 10,000 tonnes of CO2 each year, Aradottir said. "This means that we can pump down large amounts of CO2 and store it in a very safe way over a very short period of time," said study co-author Martin Stute, a hydrologist at Columbia University's Earth Observatory.

ALLEGED PLOT TO KILL PRESIDENT Maldives jails ex-VP

Former Maldives deputy leader Ahmed Adeb has been jailed for 15 years for plotting to assassinate the president, the latest in a string of prosecutions of senior politicians and opposition figures in the troubled island nation. Adeb was convicted late Thursday of attempting to kill President Abdulla Yameen by setting off a bomb on his speedboat last September, his lawyer said. Two of the vice president's military bodyguards were also convicted after the trial, which was held behind closed doors. The verdicts mean almost all of Yameen's key rivals are in jail or exiled from the Maldives. Adeb's lawyer said he would appeal against the verdict. The verdicts come weeks after Mohamed Nasheed, the country's first democratically elected president, was granted asylum in Britain. Nasheed was sentenced to 13 years in prison on controversial terrorism charges last year but was allowed to travel to Britain for surgery in January and was granted political asylum last month. Adeb, 34, was considered a close confidant of Yameen until he was dramatically impeached in November following allegations he was trying to topple the president. Yameen escaped the blast unscathed, but his wife and two others were slightly injured. The FBI was called in to investigate the incident, but found no evidence the blast was caused by a bomb.

NEWS IN brief

- Kurdish group claims Istanbul bombing**
AFP, Istanbul
Militant Kurdish group the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) yesterday claimed a car bombing in the centre of Istanbul that killed 11 people, warning foreign tourists that Turkey was no longer safe for them to visit. The TAK -- seen as a splinter group of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) -- said Tuesday's attack was revenge for operations by the Turkish army in the Kurdish-dominated southeast.
- 'New MH370 debris' found in Madagascar**
BBC ONLINE
New pieces of debris have been found in Madagascar by a man searching for parts of missing flight MH370. One of the parts resembles an aeroplane seat part. MH370, flying from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, had 239 people on board when it vanished in March 2014. The Malaysia Airlines flight is presumed to have crashed into the southern Indian Ocean after veering off course. A number of other pieces of debris, some confirmed to have come from MH370, have been found in countries near Madagascar.
- Indian aid worker abducted in Kabul**
REUTERS, Kabul
An Indian woman working for an international aid group has been abducted in the Afghan capital, Kabul, her family said yesterday and her country's foreign minister promised to do everything possible to rescue her. Judith D'Souza, who works for the Aga Khan Foundation, is believed to have been kidnapped on Thursday night, her sister, Agnes, told reporters in her home city of Kolkata, in eastern India.



'HONOUR KILLING' Now, Pak couple killed in Lahore

A Pakistani couple were murdered in Lahore yesterday for marrying without their family's consent, according to officials, the second so-called "honour killing" in the South Asian nation this week. Muhammad Ashraf, 56, killed his daughter Saba and her husband Karamat Ali a day after the couple returned to Lahore's Kahna area to smooth over rocky relations with the family, who disapproved of the marriage, according to police. "18-year-old Saba had married Karamat Ali, who is 35, around a year and a half ago against the will of her family and returned to her home on Thursday night to settle matters with father and other family members," Falak Sher, a local police official, told AFP. Ashraf, a security guard by profession, opened fire on his daughter and son-in-law after becoming infuriated during a heated conversation. "He also killed his neighbour Muhammad Akram for supporting his daughter's marriage," said Sher, adding that Ashraf and his son Safdar later surrendered to police and confessed to the murders. The incident comes just days after another woman in Lahore, Zeenat Bibi, was set on fire by her mother for marrying a man of her own choice. Bibi's mother later confessed to the crime.



A Palestinian woman is being checked at the Israeli checkpoint between the West Bank town of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, as Palestinians wait to cross to Jerusalem to attend the first Friday noon prayers of the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, yesterday. (Story on page 16) PHOTO: REUTERS

'Delete your account'

Clinton trolls Trump on Twitter
AFP, Washington
"Delete your account." Hillary Clinton's snarky tweet Thursday to her White House rival Donald Trump was among the funniest of the campaign. Almost as funny as it was awkward. The message by the 68-year-old former secretary of state -- actually written by a young staffer, a Clinton aide told AFP -- was in response to the latest broadside by Trump, who had commented on how "Obama just endorsed 'Crooked Hillary'" on Thursday. "He wants four more years of Obama - but nobody else does!" the presumptive Republican nominee added. When Clinton trolled back, social media exploded. Within two hours her message was retweeted 200,000 times, making it "the most retweeted tweet of the campaign!" according to Clinton's social media director Alex Wall. But it also triggered ferocious comebacks from her critics over use of a private email account while she served as America's top diplomat -- a scandal she has been unable to shake. Republicans including Trump have savaged her for her judgment, saying she put US national security at risk, and have accused her of deleting key emails that she did not want Americans to see.

REMOVAL OF SAUDI-LED COALITION FROM CHILD RIGHTS BLACKLIST

UN chief slams Saudis for 'undue pressure'

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Thursday criticized Saudi Arabia and its allies for resorting to "undue pressure" to remove the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen from a UN blacklist by threatening to cut off funding. Ban's decision to take the coalition off the list of child rights violators triggered a storm of protest from rights groups who charge the UN chief caved in to Saudi pressure and damaged the world body's credibility. In his first public remarks about the uproar, Ban said he took the "painful and difficult" decision when he faced the "very real prospect" that millions of children would suffer if countries defunded many programs. "It is unacceptable for member-states to exert undue pressure," Ban told reporters.



"Scrutiny is a natural and necessary part of the United Nations." The United Nations blacklisted the coalition after concluding in a report released a week ago that it was responsible for 60 percent of the 785 children killed in Yemen last year. But in an embarrassing climbdown for the United Nations, Ban announced on Monday that the coalition would be scratched from the list of shame pending a joint review with the Saudi-led alliance. Saudi Ambassador Abdullah al-Mouallimi denied that his government had put pressure on the United Nations to reverse its decision by threatening to cut off millions of dollars in funding. "We did say that such a listing and such unfair treatment would obviously have an impact on relations," said Mouallimi. "But we did not use threats or intimidation and we did not talk about funding," he added.

TOURIST GANG RAPE India court jails five for life

Five men convicted of gang-raping a Danish tourist in the Indian capital in 2014 were yesterday sentenced to life in jail, a prosecutor said, the maximum term possible. The men were convicted on Monday of assaulting the 52-year-old woman at knife-point as she returned to her Delhi hotel, a crime that raised fresh fears about the safety of women in the city. Shrivastava said the men were also given jail terms for more minor offences including robbery, which will run concurrently with the main sentence. The victim in this case had approached a group of men for directions as she returned to an area popular with backpackers in January 2014.

Obama expands role of US forces in Afghanistan

Asks Pakistan to stop attacks on India using its soil
AGENCIES
President Barack Obama has approved giving the US military greater ability to accompany and enable Afghan forces battling a resilient Taliban insurgency, in a move to assist them more proactively on the battlefield, a US official told Reuters. The senior US defense official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the decision would also allow greater use of US air power, particularly close air support. However, the official cautioned: "This is not a blanket order to target the Taliban." Obama's decision again redefines America's support role in Afghanistan's grinding conflict, more than a year after international forces wrapped up their combat mission and shifted the burden to Afghan troops. It also comes ahead of Obama's eagerly anticipated decision on whether to forge ahead with a scheduled reduction in the numbers of US troops from about 9,800 currently to 5,500 by the start of 2017. A group of retired generals and senior diplomats urged Obama last week to forgo those plans, warning they could undermine the fight against the Afghan Taliban, whose leader was killed in a US drone strike in Pakistan last month. Under the new policy, the US commander in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, will be able to decide when it is appropriate for American troops to accompany conventional Afghan forces into the field -- something they have so far only been doing with Afghan special forces, the official said. Meanwhile, US yesterday asked Pakistan to ensure that its territory is not used for planning attacks in India, after Prime Minister Narendra Modi said terrorism is being "incubated in India's neighbourhood." "This is one of the steps that the US is encouraging Pakistan to do for the improvement of its relations with India," a state department spokesman said on Thursday.