

US-LED COALITION'S 'SCORCHED EARTH POLICY' IN SYRIA Scores of civilians being killed

AGENCIES

Members of the US-led coalition have been accused of deploying a "scorched earth policy" in Syria by activists who claim to have documented scores of civilian deaths.

One group of anti-IS activists, called Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, has said air strikes supporting a key offensive in Manbij are killing innocent civilians.

"The international coalition is using a scorched earth policy in the city and supporting the Syrian Democratic forces that have been surrounding the city for two months," the group said.

Allegations that two separate bombing raids killed at least 100 civilians in nearby villages in little over a week are already under investigation, but there was concern over continuing strikes supporting the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based activist group, also said hundreds of civilians had been killed since the Manbij offensive started in May, with tens of thousands of people displaced and many more besieged.

It has documented the death of 399 civilians in the area, including almost 100 children under the age of 18 and 50 women, and countless injuries. Activists said 199 of those, including 52 children, 18 women and eight prisoners, were killed in air strikes by the US-led coalition on Manbij and the surrounding countryside.

Tens of thousands of civilians are trapped in the city centre, at risk of bombardment by the international coalition and prevented from escaping by IS fighters and IEDs planted to slow the SDF advance.



WAR ON ISLAMIC STATE
Activists report death of 399 people in Manbij
IS 'captures 3,000 civilians' trying to flee Iraqi town
Obama says 'far from freeing Mosul, Raqqa'

Meanwhile, the UN refugee agency UNHCR said in a daily report that IS fighters may have captured up to 3,000 fleeing Iraqi villagers on Thursday and subsequently executed 12 of them.

It said militants attacked them while they were fleeing villages in al-Hawija district to seek safety in Kirkuk city on Thursday.

Meanwhile, US President Barack Obama has touted gains in the campaign against IS, but cautioned that the group can still direct and inspire damaging attacks.

Speaking after meeting with top aides at the Pentagon, Obama said on Thursday that IS will continue to be a threat, highlighting the group's ability to motivate so-called "lone wolf" supporters to launch small-scale attacks that are harder to detect

and prevent. Obama cautioned against overreacting to such attacks and rejected efforts to demonise Muslims as a way to make the US safer.

"I am pleased with the progress that we've made on the ground in Iraq and Syria," Obama said, but added: "We're far from freeing Mosul and Raqqa."

He also criticised Russia for failing "to take the necessary steps" to try to reduce violence in Syria, saying it was time for Moscow "to show that it is serious" about bringing peace.

Obama said the US remains prepared to work with Russia, adding, however, that he was not confident Russia or Putin could be trusted.



We have our freedom Women burn burqas after IS flees

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Syrian women have been filmed burning the burqas IS forced them to wear in a celebration of the militants being driven out.

"Damn this stupid invention that they made us wear," one woman said as she set light to the black garment. "We're humans, we have our freedom."

The video released by the Kurdish Anha news agency, crowd of women and children cheered as the fabric went up in flames in the city of Manbij.

After adding her burqa to the fire, another woman described how Isis militants had abused civilians and abducted older boys and men.

"They banned television, the telephone, they took all the meat, they took all the bread, we've been living in hunger," she said. "They took our men and killed them, they trapped our people in prisons, we want them back."

The footage appeared to have been filmed by reporters embedded with the dominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who are advancing on IS territory backed by international air strikes.

It was taken in the al-Naimi district of Manbij on 30 July as troops forced IS to retreat further into the centre of its former stronghold, which is now surrounded by the SDF.

Guterres holds lead in race to be next UN chief

AFP, United Nations

Portugal's former prime minister Antonio Guterres held the lead in the race to be the next UN secretary-general after a second straw poll held yesterday that saw some shifts in support, diplomats said.

Guterres received 11 "encourage" votes, two "discourage" votes and two "no opinion" during the secret informal vote by the Security Council, a slightly weaker showing than in the first round last month.

During the closed-door meeting, the 15 members of the council were asked to indicate by ballot whether they "encourage", "discourage" or have "no opinion" of a candidate.

Serbia's former foreign minister Vuk Jeremic made a surprisingly strong showing, taking the second spot while Argentina's Foreign Minister Susana Malcorra climbed up the rankings, taking third place and becoming the leading woman in the race.

Guterres came out on top during the first round with 12 "encourage" votes and three "no opinion".

Diplomats speculated that one of the two negative votes cast in this round may have come from veto power Russia in a bid to block or slow down his lead.

Slovenia's ex-president Danilo Turk, who was the runner-up in the first round of voting, dropped to fourth place, and UNESCO chief Irina Bokova of Bulgaria also fell from her third-place ranking to fifth place.

New Zealand's ex-prime minister and head of the UN Development Program, Helen Clark, also lost some ground, taking the number seven spot after Macedonia's ex-foreign minister Srgjan Kerim.

The new UN secretary-general will begin his or her five-year term on January 1.



An Indian policeman fires tear gas towards protesters during a protest against the recent killings in Kashmir, on the outskirts of Srinagar, yesterday. Fresh protests in Indian-administered Kashmir left at least two protesters dead and more than 100 injured yesterday, taking the death toll from nearly a month of unrest to 54, a police officer said. Thousands of residents clashed with government forces, defying a curfew authorities extended to large parts of the disputed territory, including the main city of Srinagar, for the 28th straight day.

NEWSIN brief

Turkey sacks 167 staff from scientific council

REUTERS, Ankara

Turkey has dismissed 167 staff from its Scientific and Technological Research Council (Tubitak) as a purge of state institutions continued after last month's failed coup. More than 60,000 people in the military, judiciary, civil service and education have been detained, suspended or placed under investigation for alleged links to the July 15 attempted putsch.

India bridge collapse: 17 bodies recovered

BBC ONLINE

The bodies of seventeen people who died when a road bridge between Mumbai and Goa collapsed have been recovered from the flooded river below. At least 38 people are now feared dead after two buses and a car fell into the Savitri river in Maharashtra. Officials say the collapse late on Tuesday was likely caused by heavy rains and flooding which had thrashed the ageing bridge for days.

Sonia Gandhi has shoulder surgery

REUTERS, New Delhi

Sonia Gandhi, the leader of India's main opposition party, has undergone shoulder surgery at a New Delhi hospital after suffering a fall on a campaign stop this week, senior Congress party officials said yesterday. Gandhi, 69, dislocated her left shoulder when she fainted on Tuesday while launching the party's campaign for next year's Uttar Pradesh state election in the holy city of Varanasi.

ANC shaken by South Africa election losses

AFP, Johannesburg

The African National Congress (ANC) yesterday vowed to learn from bruising local election results that showed South African voters drifting away from the party that led the anti-apartheid struggle.

With about 95 percent of the nationwide vote counted, the ANC was ahead overall but recorded its worst electoral performance since white-minority rule fell 22 years ago.

The party once headed by Nelson Mandela was on 54 percent -- sharply down from 62 percent in the last municipal elections in 2011.

Yesterday, it conceded defeat to the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) in Port Elizabeth, an industrial city that was a key battleground of Wednesday's election.

The two parties were in a close fight for Pretoria, the capital, and Johannesburg, the country's economic centre, with the ANC set

to lose its outright majorities in both cities.

According to official results yesterday, the DA was on 25 percent with the radical leftist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) on nine percent.

"We are now going to do an introspective look at ourselves," said Cyril Ramaphosa, vice president of the ANC and the country.

"(Our critics) think that we are arrogant, they think we are self-centred... I would like to dispute that and say we are a listening organisation."

Defeat in Port Elizabeth was a humiliating blow for the ANC as the municipality is officially known as "Nelson Mandela Bay" in tribute to its past as a hotbed of anti-apartheid activism.

The results were seen as a marker ahead of the next general election due in 2019. President Jacob Zuma will not stand again after serving the maximum two terms.

IS-linked rocket attack plot foiled in Singapore

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian police yesterday arrested six suspected militants over an Islamic State-linked plot to fire a rocket at an upmarket Singapore waterfront district from a nearby island.

Singapore stepped up security after the elite anti-terror unit detained the men, aged between 19 and 46, on the Indonesian island of Batam, which lies just south of the affluent city-state.

The alleged leader of the group is accused of planning the attack with a leading Indonesian militant who is now believed to be fighting with the Islamic State (IS) group in Syria.

It was the latest terror plot in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, where there has been a surge in attacks and attempted attacks this year due to the growing influence of IS.

The pair "planned a terror attack in Singapore. They wanted to attack Singapore with a rocket from Batam," national police spokesman Agus Rianto told reporters.

Police said the target was Marina Bay, a district that is home to Marina Bay Sands, a luxury complex that includes shopping malls, hotels and a casino.

Rianto added police had "preliminary data" and were still investigating the plot, and named the alleged ringleader as 31-year-old Gighi Rahmat Dewa.

Singapore, a financial hub which is home to many expatriates and the Asian headquarters of numerous global companies, said it was stepping up security inland and at its borders after the plot was uncovered.

"This does not come as a surprise," said Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam.

Police suspect Dewa, 31, received and distributed funds sent by Bahrin Naim, the militant fighting in Syria with whom he was believed to have plotted the rocket attack.

Naim has been linked to several recent terror plots in Indonesia, including a suicide bomb attack on a police station in the city of Solo last month that left one police officer injured.



Sasha Obama serves seafood in summer job

BBC ONLINE

Sasha Obama, daughter of US President Barack Obama, has swapped the comforts of the White House for the counter of a seafood restaurant, US media report.

The 15-year-old has taken a summer job serving food at the business in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

Sasha, using her full name, Natasha, has been accompanied to the restaurant by a contingent of six secret service agents, the Boston Herald reports.

The town has been a favourite location for the Obamas on their summer breaks.

Photographs show the president's youngest daughter wearing the restaurant's uniform of blue T-shirt and cap and working at a till.

A co-worker told the Herald: "She's been working downstairs at takeout. We were wondering why there were six people helping this girl, but then we found out who it was."

As well as working on the takeaway counter, Sasha Obama's other duties reportedly include waiting on tables and helping to prepare the restaurant for its lunchtime opening.

Her security team has been seen waiting nearby in a large car or sitting on benches while the First Daughter deals with tourists' meals.



People demonstrate against the Rio 2016 Olympic Games and the interim President Michel Temer in Rio de Janeiro, a few hours ahead of the opening ceremony, yesterday. Waving signs reading "No to the Olympics!", a crowd of about 3,000 blocked an avenue outside the luxury Copacabana Palace Hotel. They also demanded reinstatement of president Dilma Rousseff, who is facing impeachment over a corruption scandal.

Protests as Rio readies for Olympic carnival

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

The Olympic flame wound its way around Rio de Janeiro's iconic landmarks Friday as protesters unleashed a fresh blast of anger ahead of the opening ceremony of the trouble-plagued sporting spectacle.

The carnival capital of the world is hoping Friday's extravaganza at the Maracana Stadium will draw a line under a turbulent seven-year build-up dogged by recession, rising crime and doping scandals.

But as the clock ticked down to the start of the first South American Olympics in history, demonstrators took to the streets to vent their fury at Brazil's rulers and the multi-billion-dollar cost of the Games.

Brazil has spent more than \$10 billion on new infrastructure and preparing for the Games at a time of economic crisis.

But the billions lavished on the Games has angered many Brazilians as the country grapples with a tanking economy and a grim litany of social problems.

later Friday as the 78,600-seat venue hosts a parade of athletes from 207 teams and dozens of world leaders.

The four-hour ceremony launches 17 days of sporting drama featuring about 10,500 competitors which wraps up on August 21.

The party will kick-off after the most crisis-ridden build-up to an Olympics in history, with a biting recession, double-digit unemployment, soaring crime and a public health crisis caused by the Zika virus just a few of the problems ravaging the city.

A political crisis led to the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, meaning the Brazilian leader will miss Friday's ceremony. Interim president Michel Temer will take Rousseff's place, but could face a hostile reception from the crowd.

A vast security blanket of 85,000 military personnel and police -- twice the number on duty at the 2012 London Games -- will be draped over the city to ward off the threat of street crime and terror attacks.

