Impeachment trial looms for Rousseff

AFP, *Brasilia*

Brazil's Senate voted early yesterday to hold an impeachment trial for the nation's suspended president Dilma Rousseff, a process that could see her permanently removed from power.

The vote in favor of trying Rousseff, who was suspended from the presidency in May, was 59 in favor, 21 against.

The Senate suspended Rousseff, the South American nation's first female president, on May 12 over accusations of illegal accounting practices and fiddling the budget to mask a slumping economy.

Rousseff, 68, has likened the impeachment drive to a putsch by her political enemies.

The impeachment trial is set to open around August 25 -- four days after the Olympics closing ceremony -- and is expected to last five days, concluding with a judgment vote.

The timing of the nation's ongoing political crisis could hardly be more awkward for Brazil, which was meant to be showcasing its burgeoning economic clout and political stability with South America's first Olympics.

Impeachment would not only seal Rousseff's political fate, but would bring an end to 13 years of leftist rule in Brazil: Her political mentor, president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva preceded her in office.

Rousseff is not facing corruption charges in the wide-ranging scandal. But she has been tainted by its stain on the Workers' Party, which is accused of lining its coffers with some of the missing billions.

WARS IN SYRIA, LIBYA, IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

45,000 IS fighters killed

Claims US, says 15,000 to 30,00 'jihadists' remain with the terror group

AGENCIES

About 45,000 jihadists have been killed in Iraq and Syria since the US-led operation to defeat the Islamic State group began two years ago, a top general said yesterday.

"We estimate that over the past 11 months, we've killed about 25,000 enemy fighters. When you add that to the 20,000 estimated killed (previously), that's 45,000 enemy (fighters) taken off the battlefield," said Lieutenant General Sean MacFarland, who commands the US-led coalition campaign against IS.

MacFarland said estimates for the overall remaining strength of IS vary from about 15,000 to 30,000 but said the jihadists are having increasing difficulties replenishing their ranks.

"The number of fighters on the front line has diminished. They've diminished not only in quantity but also in quality -- we don't see them operating nearly as effectively as they have in the past, which makes them even easier targets for us," MacFarland told Pentagon reporters from Baghdad via a videocall.

"As a result their attrition has accelerated here of late," he added.

Officials also estimate IS has lost 25,000 square kilometers (9,650 square miles) of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria, or about 50 percent and 20 percent respectively in each country.

The US-led military effort against the Islamic State group started exactly two years ago, aimed at halting the jihadists as they swept across Iraq and Syria.

MacFarland was upbeat about the eventual recapture of Mosul in Iraq and Raqa in Syria, saying it would herald the "beginning of the end" of the campaign.

In Syria, the Russian Defence Ministry yesterday said there would be daily three-hour ceasefires in Syria's Aleppo starting from Thursday to allow humanitarian convoys to enter the city safely.

Speaking at a briefing, General Sergei Rudskoi, a senior Russian Defence Ministry official, said the pause in fighting would take place from 10 in the morning to one in the afternoon local time.

He said "all military action, air and artillery strikes" would be halted for that period, and that Russia - together with the Syrian authorities - was ready to help all interested organisations safely deliver humanitarian aid to Aleppo's residents.

The United Nations has called for urgent aid access to Aleppo, warning that civilians are at risk from water shortages and disease as fighting has intensified.

Rebels and regime fighters have sent hundreds of reinforcements to Aleppo in anticipation of the fighting, after opposition forces broke a government siege at the weekend and vowed to capture the entire city.

In Libya, pro-government forces in Libya said they seized control of the IS's headquarters in Sirte yesterday as they push to oust the jihadists from the coastal city.

"The Ouagadougou centre is in our hands," the operations centre for forces loyal to Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) said.

Reda Issa, a spokesman for the forces, said IS jihadists remained in three residential areas of the city and in a villa complex near the seafront.

"The announcement of the liberation (of Sirte) will only be made once the entire city is liberated," he told AFP.

Meanwhile, Afghan forces, backed by the United States, have killed an estimated 300 Islamic State fighters in an operation mounted two weeks ago, the top US and Nato commander in Afghanistan said yesterday, calling it a severe blow to the group.

General John Nicholson said the offensive in the eastern province of Nangarhar was part of US operations to degrade the capabilities of Islamic State wherever it raised its head, whether in Iraq and Syria or in Afghanistan.

The group, believed to be confined to three or four of the more than 400 districts in Afghanistan, last month claimed responsibility for bombing a demonstration by the Shia Hazara minority in the capital, Kabul, in which at least 80 people were killed.

A Civil Defence member tries to put out a fire after an airstrike on al-Jalaa street in the rebel held city of Idlib, Syria yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

DEVELOPMENTS

Russia announces daily ceasefires in Aleppo for aid to get in

Libya pro-govt forces seize IS headquarters in Sirte

US says 300 IS men killed in Afghanistan in two weeks

NEWS IN brief

Philippines' Duterte calls US envoy 'gay'

AFP, *Manila*

The Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte has sparked a fresh diplomatic row with his colourful language, calling the US ambassador "gay" in comments that prompted Washington to summon Manila's envoy to complain. Duterte used a local Tagalog language homophobic slur to express his displeasure with US Ambassador Philip Goldberg in televised comments made Friday.

Turkey admiral 'claims asylum in US'

REUTERS, *Washington*

A Turkish senior military officer on a US-based assignment for Nato is seeking asylum in the United States after being recalled by the Turkish government in the wake of last month's failed military coup, US officials told Reuters. The case of Rear Admiral Mustafa Ugurlu has the potential to further strain ties between the United States and Turkey.

Sri Lanka to replace its ageing fighter jets

AFP, *Colombo*

Sri Lanka yesterday announced plans to replace its ageing jet fighters to better defend its maritime borders including rich fishing grounds, seven years after the island's separatist war ended. Cabinet approved President Maithripala Sirisena's proposal to call for expressions of interest from global manufacturers to sell Sri Lanka the jets, government spokesman Rajitha Senaratne said.

Train robbery stuns India

AFP, *Chennai*

A gang of robbers cut a hole in the roof of a train travelling through southern India and stole more than $750,000 in cash, police said yesterday. The daring heist occurred somewhere along the more than 300-kilometre (186-mile) long journey, but the missing loot was only discovered hours after the express train arrived in the city of Chennai. The train's mail carriage was carrying 3.4 billion rupees ($51 million) belonging to India's central bank and was being escorted by armed police seated in the next compartment.

Turkey-EU ties in tailspin

Ankara says bloc 'failed a test' on the night of putsch

AFP, *Ankara*

Turkey yesterday accused the EU of "encouraging" the plotters on the night of the July 15 coup in an escalating row that has raised questions over Ankara's future relationship with the bloc.

A day after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan made a highly-symbolic visit to Russia, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Turkish people's confidence in the EU had "unfortunately fallen" in the wake of the coup, saying the bloc "failed a test" on the night of the putsch.

"Let me say openly, this is because the EU adopted a favourable position to the coup (and) encouraged the putschists," the minister told reporters during a televised briefing in the capital Ankara without expanding further.

He claimed support for the EU -- which Turkey has sought to join since the 1960s -- had plummeted to some 20 percent.

Relations between Brussels and Ankara have become increasingly strained since Turkey launched a crackdown, imprisoning and dismissing tens of thousands within the military, judiciary and education in the wake of the putsch which it has blamed on US-based preacher Fethullah Gulen.

The EU has urged Ankara to act within the rule of law while condemning Erdogan for suggesting the country could bring back the death penalty, abolished in 2004 as part of Turkey's reforms to join the union.

Meanwhile, Nato said yesterday that Turkey's membership of the military alliance is "not in question" following the failed coup in July as the organisation stressed its "very clear position" of continued support for Ankara.

"Turkey's Nato membership is not in question," spokeswoman Oana Lungescu said in a statement issued in response to "speculative press reports".

Afghan Taliban close in on Helmand capital

AFP, *Kandahar*

Afghanistan rushed military reinforcements to Helmand as Taliban insurgents closed in on the besieged capital of the southern opium-rich province, with fighting intensifying in outlying districts, officials said yesterday.

Pitched battles were reported late yesterday in Nawa district, just a few kilometres south of Lashkar Gah city, compounding fears that the provincial capital could fall despite stepped up US air strikes to beat back the insurgents.

Fierce fighting in recent days across Helmand, seen as the focal point of the insurgency, has sent thousands of people fleeing to Lashkar Gah, sparking a humanitarian crisis as officials report crippling food and water shortages.

The Taliban effectively control or contest 10 of the 14 districts in Helmand, the deadliest province for British and US forces in Afghanistan over the past decade.

US sells Saudi £880m of arms as fighting resumes

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The US State Department has approved the potential sale of more than 130 Abrams battle tanks, 20 armoured recovery vehicles and other equipment, worth about £880m ($1.15bn), to Saudi Arabia, the Pentagon has said.

The approval for land force equipment coincides with Saudi Arabia leading a military coalition in support of Yemeni forces loyal to the exiled government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi who are trying to oust Iran-allied Houthi forces from the capital, Sanaa. Human rights groups have criticized the coalition's air strikes because of the deaths of civilians.

The US Defence Security Cooperation Agency, which implements foreign arms sales, said that General Dynamics will be the principal contractor for the sale.

"This sale will increase the Royal Saudi Land Force's (RSLF) interoperability with US forces and conveys US commitment to Saudi Arabia's security and armed forces modernisation," the agency said in a notice to lawmakers posted on its website.

YEMEN CRISIS

Lawmakers have 30 days to block the sale, although such action is rare. Saudi Arabia and its mostly Gulf Arab allies intervened in Yemen's civil war in March 2015 after the Houthi movement had pushed the Hadi administration into exile in Saudi Arabia.

On Tuesday, the Saudi-led military coalition conducted air strikes on Sanaa for the first time in five months, residents said, after UN-backed peace talks to end the conflict broke down at the weekend.

TRAGIC

12 newborns killed in Baghdad hospital blaze

AFP, *Baghdad*

A fire tore through the maternity ward of one of Baghdad's largest hospitalsyesterday, killing at least 12 premature babies, medical and security officials said.

Only seven babies could be saved and were taken to another ward in the Iraqi capital. A health ministry spokesman said the blaze at the Yarmuk hospital in west Baghdad was started by an electrical fault just after midnight.

The grief of the bereaved parents and relatives was compounded by the fact that the babies' young age and the effects of the fire made it very difficult to identify the bodies.

Umm Ahmed came to Yarmuk on Tuesday when a close relative of hers gave birth. The baby died in the inferno and the mother suffered burns, she said.

"I am looking for our child, they told me 'go find him in the fridge'," said the middle-aged woman.

"I just want our child, somebody give

SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW

Vietnam sends rocket launchers to Spratly islands

REUTERS, *Hong Kong*

Vietnam has discreetly fortified several of its islands in the disputed South China Sea with new mobile rocket launchers capable of striking China's runways and military installations across the vital trade route, according to Western officials.

Diplomats and military officers told Reuters that intelligence shows Hanoi has shipped the launchers from the Vietnamese mainland into position on five bases in the Spratly islands in recent months, a move likely to raise tensions with Beijing.

The launchers have been hidden from aerial surveillance and they have yet to be armed, but could be made operational with rocket artillery rounds within two or three days, according to the three sources.

Vietnam's Foreign Ministry said the information was "inaccurate", without elaborating.

Deputy Defence Minister, Senior Lieutenant-General Nguyen Chi Vinh, told Reuters in Singapore in June that Hanoi had no such launchers or weapons ready in the Spratlys but reserved the right to take any such measures.

"It is within our legitimate right to self-defence to move any of our weapons to any area at any time within our sovereign territory," he said.

The move is designed to counter China's build-up on its seven reclaimed islands in the Spratlys archipelago. Vietnam's military strategists fear the building runways, radars and other military installations on those holdings have left Vietnam's southern and island defences increasingly vulnerable.

CRIMEA TENSIONS

Russia 'foils' Ukraine's terror plot

AFP, *Moscow*

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday accused Ukraine of waging "terror" over alleged attempted incursions into annexed Crimea that Kiev has fiercely denied.

Russia's security agency announced it had thwarted "terrorist attacks" in Crimea by Ukrainian military intelligence and beaten back an armed assault, claims that have ratcheted up tensions first sparked by Moscow's 2014 annexation of the strategic Black Sea peninsula.

The FSB said in a statement that one of its officers was killed in armed clashes while arresting "terrorists" on the night of August 6-7 while a Russian soldier died in a firefight with "sabotage-terrorist" groups sent by the Ukrainian defence ministry on August 8.

The Kremlin leader accused the authorities in Kiev of "practising terror" and pledged not to leave the deaths of the two Russian officers unanswered. "This is a very dangerous game."

Moscow and Kiev have been locked in a bitter feud since the Kremlin seized Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014 after Russian-backed president Viktor Yanukovych was ousted.

A general view of Sitio de Curral dos Romeiros during the wildfires at Funchal, Madeira island, Portugal, on Tuesday. The wildfires raging killed at least four people and more than 1,000 people were evacuated on the tourist destination island of Madeira. PHOTO: REUTERS

Out of sight, out of mind?

Migrants are still crossing seas, dying but focus is not there

REUTERS, *Athens/Zagreb*

A year after hundreds of thousands of refugees snaked their way across southeastern Europe and onto global television screens, the roads through the Balkans are now clear, depriving an arguably worsening tragedy of poignant visibility.

Europe's migrant crisis is at the very least numerically worse than it was last year. More people are arriving and more are dying. But the twist is that, compared with last year, a lot of it is out of sight.

More than one million people fleeing conflict in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan made their way to Europe last year, with the majority of them crossing the precarious sea corridor separating Greece and Turkey, the temporary home for more than 2 million refugees displaced from Syria. They came carrying their worldly belongings in plastic bags and hauling babies on weary shoulders, a visual exodus of the kind not seen in Europe since the end of World War Two.

But they are not so nearly visible there - nor are the ones still coming.

According to data from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), arrivals are up 17 percent on last year. Deaths among those trying to get to Europe, mainly due to drowning, are up more than 15 percent.

"By outsourcing the responsibility to Turkey and to Greece, European governments are basically saying 'we have solved the crisis because we don't see it, and we can't smell it and we can't hear it," said Gauri van Gulik, deputy Europe director at Amnesty International.

"The crisis is as big as ever, and as yet unsolved by governments," she told Reuters.

IOM data says that 258,186 people arrived in Europe by the end of July, compared with 219,854 over the same period in 2015.

There were 3,176 fatalities by Aug. 7, outpacing the 2,754 who died in the first eight months of last year, a slightly longer period.

"Its absolutely incredible because if you think about the panic this caused last year and the incentive there was to really get some policy changes in place, nothing has happened," Van Gulik said.