

UN probes new Syria gas attack

AGENCIES

The UN yesterday said it was investigating evidence of a toxic gas attack on a rebel-held area of the Syrian city of Aleppo which killed 4 people including a mother and her 3 children.

The UN special envoy for Syria said a chlorine attack, if confirmed, would amount to a "war crime".

Footage obtained by the BBC shows people with breathing difficulties receiving treatment at a hospital. Men, women and children are shown being fitted with oxygen masks by medical staff.

The gas is thought to have been chlorine dropped in a barrel bomb, said the Syrian Civil Defence - volunteer emergency response workers who operate in opposition-held areas.

A man receiving treatment in hospital said he had been in the Zebdeh area of the city, where he lives, when two missiles landed near him and a group of friends.

Fighting has escalated in Aleppo in recent days, with rebels severing the government's main route to the west of the city.

The offensive sought to break a siege by pro-government forces, who encircled the east in July with the support of Russian aircraft.

Russia has announced a daily halt to hostilities between 10:00 (07:00 GMT) and 13:00 from yesterday, to allow in aid.

But rebels and regime forces clashed in southern Aleppo yesterday, including during the period when the pause was meant to take hold, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Syrian's state news agency said army troops seized territory south of Aleppo yesterday, adding that rebel fire killed four civilians in a government-held district.

Russia also carried out raids further east on the Islamic State group bastion of Raqa that a monitor said killed 24 civilians and wounding 70 more.

Moscow was meanwhile offered the possibility of joint operations against IS by Turkey, which has backed rebel groups against President Bashar al-Assad.

The offer came one day after crucial talks between President Vladimir Putin and Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan aimed at ending a crisis in ties.

The United Nations said Russia was considering expanding three-hour pauses in fighting every morning to bring in desperately-needed aid.

"Any pause obviously should always be seen and looked at with great interest, because a pause means no fighting, but three hours is not enough," said UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura.

A senior Russian senator yesterday said Moscow was planning to expand its Hmeimim airbase on Syria's coast into a permanent facility.

"After its legal status is agreed upon, Hmeimim will become a Russian military base. The appropriate infrastructure will be built and our servicemen will live in worthy conditions," Frants Klintsevich, the deputy head of Russia's senate committee for defence, told *Izvestia* newspaper.

Syria's conflict erupted in March 2011 and has since killed more than 290,000 people and drawn in world powers on all sides of the war.

WAR IN SYRIA

Aleppo bleeds on despite 'humanitarian ceasefire'

Turkey offers Russia joint operations against IS

Russian raids on Raqa kill 24 civilians



A helicopter carries an extinguisher in the struggle against a fire that spread near Vitrolles, southern France on Wednesday. High winds and tinderbox conditions fuelled fears of new fires in southern France yesterday as blazes which killed three people on the Portuguese holiday island of Madeira were brought under control.

PHOTO: AFP

'Children die in our arms'

Syria doctors write to Obama urging action

AFP, Aleppo

Doctors in rebel-held districts of Aleppo have made an urgent plea to US President Barack Obama to take action to help civilians following repeated atrocities in the devastated Syrian city.

In a letter addressed to Obama, 15 of the 35 doctors in eastern neighbourhoods of Syria's second city warned the situation would be desperate for civilians if regime forces reimpose a siege.

One pediatrician who signed the letter and spoke to AFP in the eastern districts said he was forced to watch children "die in our arms" because of dwindling medical supplies and repeated bombardment.

On Saturday, rebels and allied jihadists broke a three-week government encirclement that had left residents of eastern Aleppo reeling from skyrocketing prices and food shortages.

But the pediatricians, surgeons and other physicians who signed the letter said the situation remained dire.

"Unless a permanent lifeline to Aleppo is

opened it will be only a matter of time until we are again surrounded by regime troops, hunger takes hold and hospitals' supplies run completely dry."

The letter accuses Washington of inaction, saying it had seen "no effort on behalf of the United States to lift the siege or even use its influence to push the parties to protect civilians."

"We do not need tears or sympathy or even prayers, we need your action. Prove that you are the friend of Syrians."

The World Health Organisation said Syria was the most dangerous place for health care workers to operate last year.

An estimated 250,000 people still live in the rebel-held eastern parts, with around 1.2 million in the government-controlled west.

"What pains us most, as doctors, is choosing who will live and who will die," the doctors wrote.

"Young children are sometimes brought into our emergency rooms so badly injured that we have to prioritise those with better chances, or simply don't have the equipment to help them."



WAR ON IS IN LIBYA

Battle for Sirte in 'final phase'

AFP, Tripoli

Pro-government forces yesterday battled to clear the Islamic State group from its main Libyan stronghold of Sirte, after dealing a major blow to the jihadists by seizing their headquarters.

IS fighters still control several areas of the Mediterranean city, whose capture in June last year sparked fears that the extremist group would use it as a springboard for attacks on Europe.

The fall of Sirte would be a huge setback to the jihadists' efforts to expand their self-proclaimed "caliphate" beyond Syria and Iraq where they have also suffered a string of losses.

Forces loyal to Libya's UN-backed unity government made a significant breakthrough Wednesday in their nearly three-month-old offensive to retake the city, seizing a conference centre where IS had set up a base.

The rapid advance comes after the United States launched air strikes on IS positions in the city for the first time on August 1. The US Africa Command said 36 strikes had been carried out against IS positions since the start of "Operation Odyssey Lightning", including seven on Tuesday.

IS took advantage of the chaos that followed the ouster and killing of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 to gain a foothold in the oil-rich North African country.



A woman crying aboard of the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) rescue vessel Phoenix after being rescued from international waters between Malta and Libya on Wednesday. According to data from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), migrant arrivals are up 17 percent on last year. Deaths among those trying to get to Europe, mainly due to drowning, are also up more than 15 percent.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Canada cops foil 'advanced terror plot' on FBI's tip off

Germany mulls taking away citizenship from jihadists

AFP, Ottawa

A Canadian man who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group in a video was shot dead in a taxi after setting off an explosive device, police said yesterday.

Aaron Driver, 24, was killed on Wednesday after a tip to Canadian authorities from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), who had intercepted the video, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police told a press conference.

RCMP Deputy Commissioner Mike Cabana said that early Wednesday, they had received information from the FBI, including "a martyr video" that had been prepared by an individual who at that time was unknown to us but who was clearly in the final stages of preparing an attack using homemade bombs."

Based on the information received, police believed an attack was possible "within the following 72 hours" in an "urban center," Cabana said.

Police and counterterrorism experts quickly identified the man in the video as Driver.

They intercepted Driver in Strathroy, Ontario, about 220 kilometers southwest of Toronto, outside the home where he lived with his sister, about 4:30 pm local time Wednesday.

He had just gotten into the back seat of a taxi that had just arrived.

When police approached, Driver detonated an

explosive device in the back seat of the cab, causing minor injuries to the driver, before he was shot dead by officers, authorities said.

Driver had been arrested in June 2015 and released under court supervision after police received complaints of extremist posts on social media. He was ordered to undergo counseling from a religious leader, wear an electronic monitoring bracelet and stay off the internet, but was not on surveillance, police said.

Those restrictions were gradually loosened and were scheduled to expire this month.

Meanwhile, Germany yesterday unveiled tough new anti-terror measures after two attacks claimed by the Islamic State group, including a controversial proposal to strip jihadist fighters of their German nationality.

Deportations of convicted criminal migrants will also be sped up while police resources are to be greatly boosted under the security package drawn up by Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere.

Around 820 people have left Germany to fight alongside jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, according to estimates by German secret services. With about one in three fighters having since returned to Germany, fears are running high of the threat they may pose on European soil.

CRIMEA 'INCURSIONS'

Russia to hold war games in Black Sea

AGENCIES

Vladimir Putin yesterday summoned his security council and the Russian Navy announced war games in the Black Sea, a day after the Russian president accused Ukraine of trying to provoke a conflict over Crimea, which Moscow seized and annexed in 2014.

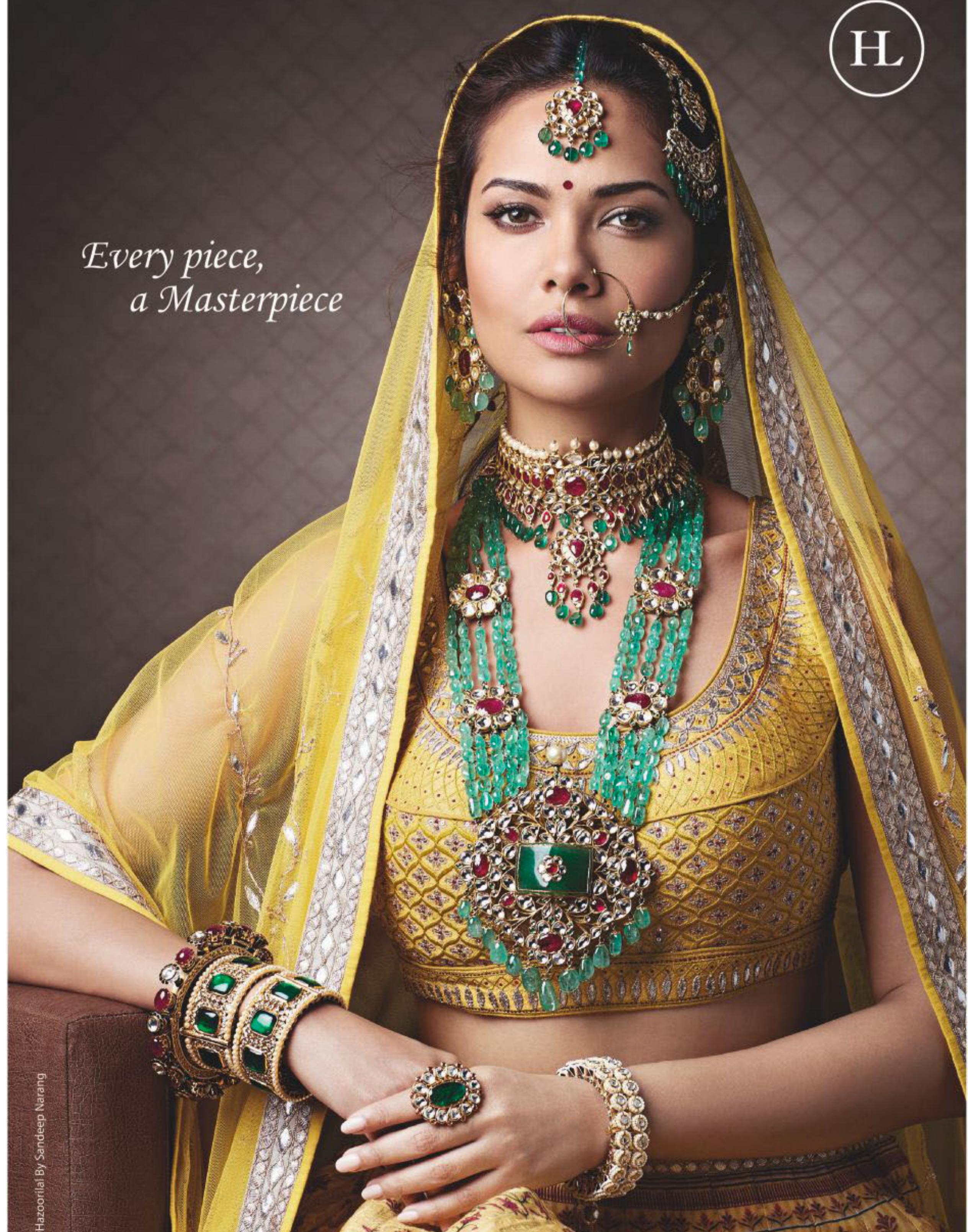
The belligerent posture heightened worries in Ukraine that Russia may plan to ramp up fighting in a war between Kiev and pro-Russian eastern separatists that had been de-escalated by a shaky peace process.

Using some of his most aggressive rhetoric against Kiev since the height of the war two years ago, Putin has pledged to take countermeasures against Ukraine, which he accused of sending saboteurs into Crimea to carry out terrorist acts.

Ukraine has called the accusations false and says they look like a pretext for Russia to escalate hostilities. Such an escalation could be used by Putin to demand better terms in the Ukraine peace process, or to inflame nationalist passions at home ahead of Russian parliamentary elections next month.

The Russian leader met his top military and intelligence service brass yesterday and reviewed "scenarios for counter-terrorism security measures along the land border, offshore and in Crimean air space," the Kremlin said.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said he had ordered all Ukrainian units near Crimea and in eastern Ukraine onto the highest state of combat readiness. He was seeking to urgently speak to Putin, the leaders of France and Germany, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden and European Council President Donald Tusk.



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NEWS IN brief

Assange to be grilled at London embassy

AFP, Quito

Ecuador says it will let Swedish officials interview Julian Assange at its embassy in London, where the WikiLeaks founder has been sheltering for the past four years. Prosecutors in Sweden have said they want to interview Assange in connection with a 2010 rape allegation against him. She said however that the exact date of the interview has not yet been pinned down. For his part, Assange, through his attorneys, welcomed the development.

Palestinian stabs man in Jerusalem

AFP, Jerusalem

A Palestinian man stabbed and wounded a young Jewish man in Jerusalem yesterday before fleeing, in what Israeli police said was a suspected "terrorist" attack. The attacker fled the scene and police were searching for him, Rosenfeld said, describing the fugitive as an "Arab terrorist". He said the victim was 18 years old. Jerusalem has been at the heart of a wave of violence since last October in which 219 Palestinians, 34 Israelis, two Americans, an Eritrean and a Sudanese have died, according to an AFP count.

Huff Post's editor-in-chief to resign

REUTERS, Washington

Huffington Post co-founder Arianna Huffington yesterday said she would leave the company to focus on running her new venture, health and wellness startup Thrive Global. "I thought HuffPost would be my last act. But I've decided to step down as HuffPost's editor-in-chief to run my new venture, Thrive Global," she tweeted.