

Regime air strikes kill dozens

Warplanes pound rebels in Aleppo, Idlib; Kurds launch new Mosul offensive

AFP, Beirut

Syrian and Russian warplanes have launched a wave of air strikes in northern Syria, killing dozens in areas held by a rebel alliance battling to take control of second city Aleppo.

The strikes, which began on Saturday and were continuing yesterday, killed at least 45 civilians in Aleppo and west of the city and 22 more in neighbouring Idlib province, a monitoring group said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the strikes were targeting areas held by the Army of Conquest, an alliance of rebel, Islamist and jihadist forces that has mounted a major offensive to seize Aleppo.

"The intensification of the strikes in Idlib is due to the fact that this province is the main source of fighters for the Army of Conquest," the head of the Britain-based Observatory, Rami Abdel Rahman, told AFP.

An AFP correspondent in rebel-held eastern Aleppo said the strikes were especially intense around the southern district of Ramussa, seized by rebel fighters earlier this month in a major setback for forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad.

Nine other civilians were killed in rebel shelling of regime-held western Aleppo on Saturday, the Observatory said.

After a nearly three-week siege, rebel forces took Ramussa on August 6, linking up with opposition-held neighbourhoods. Emboldened by the win, the Army of Conquest announced an

ambitious bid to capture all of Aleppo, which if successful would be the biggest opposition victory yet in Syria's conflict.

The defence ministry in Moscow yesterday said that six long-range bombers from Russia had struck around Deir Ezzor, a stronghold of the Islamic State group in Syria.

The ministry said in a statement that the Russian Tupolev bombers carried out raids to the southwest, east and northeast of the city, wiping out two command posts, six arms depots, IS vehicles and "a large number of fighters".

IS emerged amid the chaos of Syria's conflict, a complex and multi-front war that has left more than 290,000 dead and forced millions from their homes since beginning with anti-regime protests in March 2011.

In Iraq, Kurdish Peshmerga forces backed by US-led coalition airstrikes launched a fresh attack on Islamic State near Mosul in the early hours of yesterday, as part of a plan to close in on their de facto capital Mosul, a Kurdish official said.

Mosul is the largest urban center under the militants' control, with a pre-war population of nearly 2 million. Its fall would mark their effective defeat in Iraq, according to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who has said he aims to retake the city this year.

The operation that started Sunday is part of the "shaping operations" to prepare for an offensive on the city itself, said a Kurdish official who declined to be identified.

WAR IN SYRIA AND IRAQ



Clashes flare near South Sudan capital

REUTERS, Juba

Fighting flared in South Sudan late on Saturday southwest of the capital between forces loyal to the president and those backing the opposition, after clashes last month raised fears of a slide back into civil war.

Steven Lodu Onseimo, the information minister for Yei region where Saturday's clashes took place, told Reuters two civilians and a soldier were killed but said the area was calm yesterday.

Witnesses had reported heavy gunfire around Yei, which lies on a road linking the capital Juba with neighbouring Uganda. The government and opposition each blamed the other side.

Following the fighting in July, the UN Security Council authorised the deployment of a 4,000-strong protection force to support the existing 12,000-strong UN peace-keeping mission.

"Our forces have managed to close Juba-Yei road. Our forces destroyed the government's convoy that attacked our forces in the area," opposition spokesman James Gatdet said by telephone.

The Yei information minister described it as an "ambush" of a government convoy by the opposition.

Political differences between President Salva Kiir and his former deputy Riek Machar first erupted into conflict in late 2013. They signed a peace deal in August 2015, but sporadic fighting has continued.

Kiir's spokesman Ateny Wek Ateny said after Friday's vote for extra UN troops that the government would not accept the new force, describing it as a UN bid to take over South Sudan.

The United Nations had threatened an arms embargo if the government did not cooperate.

KILLING OF IMAM, ASSISTANT IN NEW YORK

Residents blame Trump for stoking Islamophobia

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

People outraged at the shooting dead of an imam and his assistant are blaming anti-Muslim hatred spurred on by Donald Trump.

The men were shot in the back of the head as they walked home from Saturday afternoon prayers in Islamic dress, according to police.

No motive for the killings has yet been established by investigators, but worshippers and community members in Queens said the killings were hate crimes.

"That's not what America is about," Khairul Islam, 33, told New York Daily News. "We blame Donald Trump for this... Trump and his drama has created Islamophobia."

More than 100 people joined a protest on Saturday night outside the mosque where they chanted: "We want Justice."

Mosque leader, Malama Akonjee, 55, a married father of seven from Bangladesh, was pronounced dead at the scene, one block away from the mosque. Thura Uddin, 65, also from Bangladesh, was rushed to Jamaica Hospital but later died.

A leader of another mosque in the area, Kobir Chowdhury, said religious intoler-

ance was to blame for the attack. "Read my lips: this is a hate crime. We are peace loving", he said at a news conference.

But police yesterday morning had not yet determined the motive for the attack. City Hall issued a statement: "While it is too early to tell what led to these murders, it is certain that the NYPD will stop at nothing to ensure justice is served."

Police were still hunting for the man who shot the pair dead shortly before 2pm the previous day. Witnesses described a tall Hispanic gunman, who was wearing a dark blue shirt and shorts.

Trump has made multiple anti-Muslim statements while running for office. In December, he said he supported a blanket ban on Muslims entering the US. Despite claims from Trump's campaign he has changed his position on the issue, Trump has not publicly disavowed the proposal.

A report by Georgetown University in May found that hate violence has spiked in the US, in accordance with the US Presidential election.

After the Trump called for shutting down mosques in the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks and the San Bernardino mass killings, anti-Muslim crimes initially tripled. Almost half the attacks targeted mosques.



Brexit could be delayed until late 2019

AFP, London

Britain's departure from the EU could be delayed until late 2019 as civil servants struggle with the task and French and German elections may hold up the start of exit negotiations, a report said yesterday.

Prime Minister Theresa May's government has indicated that it is planning to trigger Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty, which would start a two-year countdown to leaving the bloc, early in 2017.

But the Sunday Times newspaper said ministers had privately warned senior figures in the City of London financial sector that this may not now happen until later in the year, delaying Brexit until late 2019.

"Ministers are now thinking the trigger could be delayed to autumn 2017," said one City source who had spoken to two senior ministers on the issue.

"They don't have the infrastructure for the people they need to hire. They say they don't even know the right questions to ask when they finally begin bargaining with Europe."

An unnamed cabinet minister told the paper there were "some challenges" in the German and French electoral timetables.

France has presidential elections in April and May next year, and Germany has elections in the autumn.

May created a new ministry to oversee Brexit talks following the June 23 referendum vote to leave the EU, but the minister in charge, David Davis, has reportedly only hired about half of the staff that he needs.

Another new department, the ministry for international trade under Liam Fox, also has an uphill task to recruit experts after decades of leaving the job to Brussels left Britain with only a handful of experienced negotiators.



A girl reacts as a crowd of community members gather at the place where Imam Maulama Akonjee and his associate were killed in the Queens borough of New York City, on Saturday. Inset, Religious leaders hold a press conference to denounce the killings.

PHOTO: REUTERS



No compromise on Gulen

Turkey PM says extradition only way to improve ties with US

REUTERS, Istanbul

Turkey will not compromise with Washington over the extradition of the Islamic cleric it accuses of orchestrating a failed coup, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said on Saturday, warning of rising anti-Americanism if the United States fails to extradite.

Yildirim's comments, at a briefing for local reporters, were the latest to take aim at Turkey's top Nato ally and coincided with a report that an Istanbul prosecutor wrote to US authorities asking for the detention of cleric Fethullah Gulen.

Turkey says Gulen, who has lived in self-imposed exile in rural Pennsylvania since 1999, masterminded the failed July 15 putsch when a group of rogue soldiers commandeered tanks, warplanes and helicopters in an attempt to overthrow the government. Gulen has denied the charge and condemned the coup.

"There is no compromise apart from this chief terrorist coming to

Turkey and being prosecuted," Yildirim was quoted as saying by state-run Anadolu Agency.

"The only way to prevent the rising (negative) sentiment against America is for the US to hand over this man and make sure Turkey's justice system holds him accountable."



Turkey's foreign minister said this week documents had been sent to the United States and that Turkey had received "positive signals" about Gulen's possible extradition. Turkey has not said clearly whether it has filed a formal extradition request.

The White House said on Saturday

that US Vice President Joe Biden would visit Turkey on Aug 24, the first trip by a high-ranking US official since the abortive coup.

Yildirim said a US technical team would visit Turkey on Aug 22 to discuss legal issues relating to the possible extradition, according to Anadolu. He said Secretary of State John Kerry is due in October, according to broadcaster CNN Turk.

Yildirim said he believed there would be a "positive outcome" with Washington on the extradition, Anadolu said.

US officials have said that the United States has a formal process for dealing with extradition requests and that Turkey must provide solid evidence of Gulen's involvement.

The Istanbul chief prosecutor wrote to US authorities asking for Gulen's detention, CNN Turk said. Turkey's Justice Ministry passed on the letter - which contained 10 charges against Gulen - including attempting to overthrow the government - to the United States, it added.

TRAIN ATTACK IN SWITZERLAND

'No indication' of terrorism found

Woman and suspect die of injuries

AFP, Geneva

Swiss police yesterday said there was no indication a stabbing and fire attack on a passenger train was an act of terror, as a female victim and the assailant died of their injuries.

Five other people were hurt in Saturday's assault in eastern Switzerland, including a six-year-old girl who was seriously injured.

"The question of motive remains," police in the Saint Gallen region said in a statement. "To date there is no indication this was a terrorist or politically-motivated act."

While no motives have been ruled out, the police statement should calm some of the speculation circulating since Saturday's attack, which followed several violent, often deadly assaults in Europe, many of which were claimed by the Islamic State group.

A 27-year-old Swiss national used flammable liquid to start a fire on a moving train in eastern Switzerland at about 2:20pm before stabbing passengers.

The incident took place on the line between Buchs and Sennwald near Salez station, not far from the eastern border with Liechtenstein and Austria.

Police said images of the attack had been caught on surveillance footage, allowing them to determine that the man had acted alone.

We know who is behind this

Say police, find more unexploded bombs following coordinated blasts

AGENCIES

Thai police investigating a wave of bombings that rocked tourist destinations and killed four people yesterday said they know who was behind the attacks.

Police said two men have been held for questioning over the blasts in Hua Hin -- a resort town struck by four of the bombs -- with a third arrested over a suspected arson attack in Nakhon Si Thammarat province.

"Our investigation is progressing. We know who was behind it," deputy national police spokesman Piyapan Pingmuang told AFP yesterday, declining to provide further details on those detained or offer a possible motive.

Some analysts suggest the bombs were the work of Muslim rebels waging a long-running insurgency in Thailand's southern tip.

Police have rejected that theory and

also ruled out international terrorist groups, insisting the bombings were acts of "local sabotage".

At least 11 bombs and a series of suspected arson attacks ripped across

THAI TOURIST SPOT BLASTS



seven southern provinces on Thursday and Friday, killing four locals and wounding more than 30 people including European tourists.

Thai police over the weekend found

and defused five explosive devices that had failed to detonate.

No one has claimed responsibility for the blasts, which are seen as an affront to a military government that prides itself on having brought some stability to Thailand since its 2014 coup.

The attacks came just days after Thai voted to accept a military-backed constitution that the ruling junta, which seized power in 2014, has said will lead to an election by the end next year.

Analysts say suspicion would inevitably fall on enemies of the ruling junta aggrieved by the referendum results.

Fears that followers of former prime ministers Thaksin Shinawatra and his sister Yingluck Shinawatra could be blamed prompted a senior figure in their Puea Thai Party to issue a sharp denial on Saturday.

NEWSIN brief

Violent protest in US city over police shooting

REUTERS, Milwaukee

Protesters fired gunshots, hurled bricks and set a gas station on fire in the US mid-western city of Milwaukee on Saturday night, hours after a patrol officer shot and killed an armed suspect who took flight after a traffic stop. The 23-year-old suspect was carrying a stolen handgun loaded with 23 rounds of ammunition when police pulled over the vehicle for unspecified "suspicious activity," authorities said.

'Rebels' kill at least 36 in eastern Congo

REUTERS, Kinshasa

Suspected rebels killed at least 36 civilians in north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the provincial governor said yesterday, marking the deadliest massacre in the conflict-ravaged region this year. The assailants hacked to death 22 men and 14 women late on Saturday in their homes and fields on the outskirts of the local commercial hub of Beni, Julien Paluku said in a statement.

Five dead, thousands flee Philippine floods

AFP, Manila

Five people have been killed in the Philippines and tens of thousands have fled from floods caused by days of unrelenting rain, rescuers said yesterday. Civil defence officials warned residents of Manila and nearby provinces to expect more heavy seasonal rain over the coming days as more than 24,000 people sought refuge in schools and government buildings.



Former Cuban President Fidel Castro (C) sits with Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his successor and brother Raul Castro during the celebration of his 90th birthday at Karl Marx theatre in Havana on Saturday. The outing marked his first public appearance since April 19, when he was seen at the close of the Cuban Communist Party Congress.

PHOTO: AFP