

Syrian rebels push to break Aleppo siege

AFP, Aleppo

Syrian rebels yesterday launched a major assault aimed at breaking a months-long siege of opposition-held districts of Aleppo, as regime ally Russia held off on renewed air strikes.

Rebel groups including the powerful Ahrar al-Sham faction and former al-Qaeda affiliate Fateh al-Sham Front fired waves of rockets into government-held western Aleppo, killing at least 15 civilians, a monitor said. More than 100 were injured including women and children.

The rebels also targeted government positions east of Aleppo city and in the coastal province of Latakia, including the Hmeimim military base used by Russian forces allied with the regime.

Moscow says it has not bombed Aleppo since October 18, but senior Russian military official Sergei Rudskoi told a briefing that the military had asked President Vladimir Putin for authorisation to resume its air strikes.

But the Kremlin said Putin did not agree saying it was inappropriate at the current moment to resume strikes on Aleppo.

The rebel assault comes more than three months into a government siege of eastern Aleppo, where more than 250,000 people live, and several weeks after the army began an operation to retake the rebel east.

RUSSIA LOSES UN RIGHTS POST

Meanwhile, Russia yesterday failed to win re-election at the UN Human Rights Council during a vote that capped a campaign by rights groups to reject Moscow over its role in the war in Syria.

The UN General Assembly elected Hungary and Croatia instead to represent eastern Europe at the rights council, in a major upset for Moscow which has been a member for all but one year since the council was set up in 2006.

OFFENSIVE TO LIBERATE MOSUL FROM ISLAMIC STATE



Newly internally displaced people sit upon their arrival at a refugee camp near Mosul, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Kurdish PM wants independence

Says he will launch talks with Baghdad after Mosul win

AFP, Berlin

Iraq's Kurdish autonomous region plans to renew its push for independence once the city of Mosul is retaken from Islamic State group jihadists, its prime minister said yesterday.

"The time has long been ripe for it, but we are currently concentrating on the fight against IS," Kurdish prime minister Nechirvan Barzani told Germany's Bild daily.

"As soon as Mosul is liberated, we will meet with our partners in Baghdad and talk about our independence," he said according to the German translation.

The premier of the Kurdistan Regional Government added that "we have been waiting for too long, we thought that after 2003 there would be a real new beginning for a democratic Iraq. But this Iraq has failed."

"We are not Arabs, we are our own Kurdish nation ... At some point there will be a referendum on the independence of Kurdistan, and then we will let the people decide."

In February, Kurdish president Massoud Barzani, the premier's uncle, had called for a referendum on a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, raising tension with Baghdad which opposes secession.



Shia militias join the fray

Say ops to encircle Mosul, cut Syria link; Turkey vows response

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi Shia militias backed by Iran yesterday said they would soon join the fight against Islamic State on a new front west of Mosul, a move which could block any retreat by the jihadists into Syria but might alarm Turkey and the United States.

The Shia militias, with thousands of battle-hardened fighters trained by Iran, would bring important extra firepower to what is expected to be the biggest battle in Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003.

But their arrival on the battlefield in one of the most diverse parts of Iraq also creates worry for Western countries backing the Iraqi government offensive, who fear that the Shia fighters could alienate residents in mainly Sunni areas.

A spokesman for the paramilitary groups said the advance towards the Islamic State-held town of Tal Afar, about 55 km (35 miles) west of Mosul, would start within "a few days or hours".

If successful, the offensive would leave Islamic State fighters - and the 1.5 million civilians still living in Mosul - encircled by an advancing

coalition of forces which seeks to crush the hardline Sunni militants in their Iraq stronghold.

Iraqi and Western military sources say there has been debate about whether or not to close off the western route in and out of Mosul. Leaving it open would offer Islamic State fighters a chance to retreat, potentially

ers, backed by US-led air strikes and support on the ground, have advanced on Mosul for nearly two weeks from the south, north and east.

They have already recaptured scores of villages on the flat plains east of Mosul and along the Tigris river to the south of the city, Islamic State's last big bastion in Iraq.

Rights groups have called on Baghdad to keep the Shia militias away from the battlefield, accusing them of carrying out revenge killings and kidnappings in other areas freed from Islamic State. The militias and the Baghdad government say any such abuses were isolated incidents and not widespread.

The United Nations yesterday said Islamic State had abducted 8,000 families from around Mosul to use as human shields, and had killed 232 people near the city on Wednesday who refused to comply with orders.

Mosul and Raqqa, IS's main bastion in Syria, form the two symbolic capitals of a cross-border "caliphate" declared by the group's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi from the pulpit of a Mosul mosque in August 2014.

As many as 50,000 Iraqi soldiers, police and Kurdish peshmerga fight-

sparing civilians inside the city who might otherwise be trapped in a bloody fight to the finish.

Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said this week his country, which has troops deployed north of Mosul inside Iraqi territory, will take measures if there is an attack on Tal Afar.

US says Islamic State took 8,000 families as human shields

At least 232 executed for disobedience

US says IS tricking out of city as losses mount

Lennon's letter to British Queen found

CNN ONLINE

A letter John Lennon wrote to Queen Elizabeth half a century ago explaining why he was returning a medal was found tucked in the sleeve of a record in a man's attic.

The man who found the letter had bought the record as part of a collection at a used-item sale for £10.

The letter is now valued at an estimated £60,000 (\$72,000).

In the letter, the Beatles Legend outlines his reason for returning his MBE (Member of the British Empire) medal.

The Queen awards the medals to those who have left a notable mark in their fields. Lennon, along with the rest of the Beatles, received theirs in October 1965.

The typed message reads: "Your Majesty, I am returning this MBE in protest against Britain's involvement in the Nigeria-Biafra thing, against our support of America in Vietnam and against Cold Turkey slipping down the charts."

It's signed "John Lennon of Bag".

"Bagism" is a term Lennon and his wife, Yoko Ono, coined during their peace campaign in the late 60s. Its objective was to break down stereotypes and eliminate prejudice.

The letter was discovered 51 years to the day since the Beatles received their award.

The owner, who wishes to remain anonymous, brought it to a special memorabilia day at The Beatles Story exhibition in Liverpool on Wednesday.

"You can quite clearly see that the signature in this letter has been smudged. My theory is that John Lennon never sent this draft because of the smeared ink," music memorabilia expert Darren Julien said.



Yemeni rebels launch missile towards Makkah

AFP, Riyadh

Yemeni rebels have launched one of their longest-range strikes against Saudi Arabia, firing a ballistic missile that was shot down near the holy city of Makkah, the Saudi-led coalition fighting them said yesterday.

The coalition has been carrying out a bombing campaign against the rebels since March last year and there have been rebel strikes towards the bases from which the coalition mounts air raids.

Saudi Arabia has deployed Patriot missiles to intercept the rebel fire. Huthi rebels launched the missile "toward the Makkah area" on Thursday evening from their Saada province stronghold just across the border, a coalition statement said.

"The air defence was able to intercept and destroyed it about 65 kilometres (40 miles) from Makkah without any damage."



Opposition lawmakers protect themselves while they try to reach the National Assembly in Caracas on Thursday. Venezuela's opposition ratcheted up the pressure on President Nicolas Maduro with nationwide strike yesterday, which the leftist leader vowed to crush.

PHOTO: AFP

US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION



US First Lady Michelle Obama hugs Hillary Clinton at a campaign stop in North Carolina on Thursday. Michelle urged Americans to vote accusing Trump of trying to deter voters by making the campaign ugly.

PHOTO: AFP

Trouble brews for Clinton

FBI reopens email probe as race enters final stretch

AGENCIES

Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's campaign was hit yesterday by the FBI's reopening of its investigation into her use of a private email server while secretary of state, eroding a political boost from a strong US economic report.

With just 11 days to go before the Nov 8 election, FBI Director James Comey said in a letter to several congressional Republicans that the agency had learned of the existence of emails that appeared to be pertinent to its investigation.

However, he said the FBI did not know if the emails were significant and did not provide a time frame for the probe.

Republican Donald Trump's campaign reacted with glee. His campaign manager, Kellyanne Conway, said on Twitter that "a great day in our campaign just got even better."

Trump triumphantly welcomed the FBI's decision saying "perhaps finally, justice will be done."

"Hillary Clinton's corruption is on a scale that we have never seen before," he told cheering supporters in Manchester, New Hampshire, who chanted "Lock her up!"

"I have great respect for the fact that the FBI and the Department of Justice are now willing to have the courage to right the horrible mistake that they made" in closing their initial investigation without filing any charges against

the Democrat, he said.

The resurrection of the email issue, which has dogged Clinton's campaign from the start, dimmed a day that had featured good news for her effort to win the White House.

The Commerce Department reported that the economy grew at a 2.9 percent annual rate in the third quarter, its fastest pace in two years and higher than the expected 2.6 percent, thanks to a surge in exports and a

rebound in investment.

The report had bolstered Clinton, who has positioned herself as the best candidate to continue years of economic expansion under Democratic President Barack Obama.

More Americans say jobs and the economy are their No. 1 priority when they decide who to vote for than any other issue.

The latest rolling poll average compiled by tracker RealClearPolitics

showed Clinton, who turned 69 on Wednesday, with a 5.4 point lead in a national race against Trump and two outsiders -- pointing to a likely electoral college victory for the Democrat.

Meanwhile, the race suffered a scare when Donald Trump's running mate's plane skidded off the runway.

No one was reported hurt in the incident, in which the plane carrying Indiana Governor and Republican vice presidential candidate Mike Pence came to rest in grass next to the runway after landing at New York's rain-soaked LaGuardia airport.

Besides the FBI decision, new WikiLeaks disclosures threatened her campaign, notably an email in which aide Douglas Band detailed his own money-making efforts both on behalf of Bill Clinton personally and the foundation.

In the 2011 memo, Band said he personally provided the former president with more than 50 million dollars in "for profit" activities while he was leader of the foundation.

The latest disclosures have added to a drip-drip of WikiLeaks revelations plaguing Hillary Clinton in the final stretch of her run for the White House as the Democratic nominee.

Band wrote of helping the former president "secure and engage in for-profit activities -- including speeches, books, and advisory service engagements."



'God told me to stop swearing'

AGENCIES

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has made a solemn promise: no more swearing.

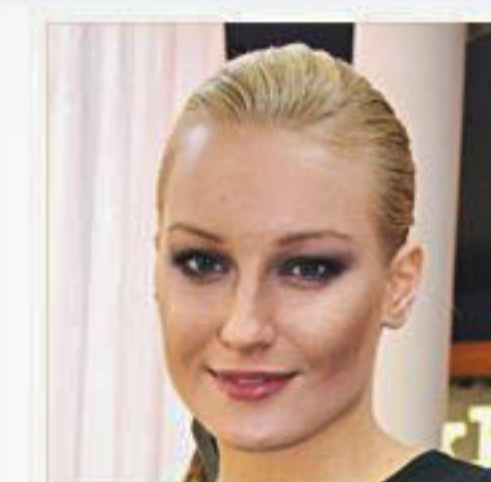
Duterte, who famously cursed the pope and used a slang term that translates a "son of a whore" in reference to President Obama, was flying back from Japan late Thursday, looking at a vast expanse of sky, listening to his colleagues snore, when he heard a voice say, "If you don't stop epithets, I will bring this plane down now."

"And I said, 'Who is this?' So, of course, 'it's God,'" he told Filipino journalists late Thursday.

"So, I promise God," he continued, "Not [to] express slang, cuss words and everything. So you guys hear me right always because [a] promise to God is a promise to the Filipino people."

Duterte, once nicknamed "the Death Squad Mayor," swept to power in July promising to "kill all" the country's drug users and dealers. Since then, more than 4,000 Filipinos have been killed in his self-proclaimed "war on drugs," according to police figures, either gunned down in raids or shot by masked assailants.

Rather than call for calm, the president has urged on the killing. He told troops to "massacre" criminals and promised police officers they would not be jailed for killing suspects on the job. Faced with criticism from the United Nations and others, he denied that the suspected drug users are human beings.



Ex-Miss Finland says Trump groped her

AFP, Helsinki

A former Miss Finland has accused Donald Trump of groping her in 2006 when she was representing the country in the Miss Universe beauty contest. Ninni Laaksonen told the Itä-Sanomat newspaper that Trump had grabbed her behind before she appeared on a television show in New York with other contestants.

"He really grabbed my butt. I don't think anybody saw it but I flinched and thought: 'What is happening?'," Laaksonen was quoted as saying in the newspaper.



Biden to replace John Kerry!

REUTERS, Washington

Vice President Joe Biden tops a short list for secretary of state that is being compiled by the transition team of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, two media outlets reported. Politico on Thursday cited an unidentified source as saying Clinton and her aides were discussing how to approach Biden about the post, should she win the Nov 8 presidential election. NBC News later confirmed that Biden was under consideration for the job of top US diplomat.