

Aleppo down to 'last food rations': UN

Sandstorm hampers offensive on IS-held Raqa

AFP, Geneva

The last remaining food rations are currently being handed out in Syria's rebel-held eastern Aleppo and there will be nothing left to distribute next week without a resupply, the UN said yesterday.

United Nations aid convoys have not reached the besieged eastern part of Aleppo since July, when regime forces cut off the last supply route.

"The reports we have now from within East Aleppo is that the last food rations are being distributed as we speak," the head of a UN-backed humanitarian taskforce for Syria, Jan Egeland, told journalists.

Egeland insisted that, with winter approaching, the need to avoid mass starvation would force all sides -- including the regime, its key ally Russia and the rebels -- to grant humanitarian access.

"I don't think anybody wants a quarter of a million people to be starving in east Aleppo," Egeland said, referring to the number of civilians the UN says are living under siege.

Egeland said he was confident access would be possible after four months of deadlock because "the consequences of no

help and no supplies will be so catastrophic I cannot even see that scenario".

Meanwhile, a US-backed militia advance on the Islamic State group's Syria stronghold Raqa was being hampered by a sandstorm yesterday, a commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) said.

"The situation is dangerous today because there is no visibility due to a desert sandstorm," the commander told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

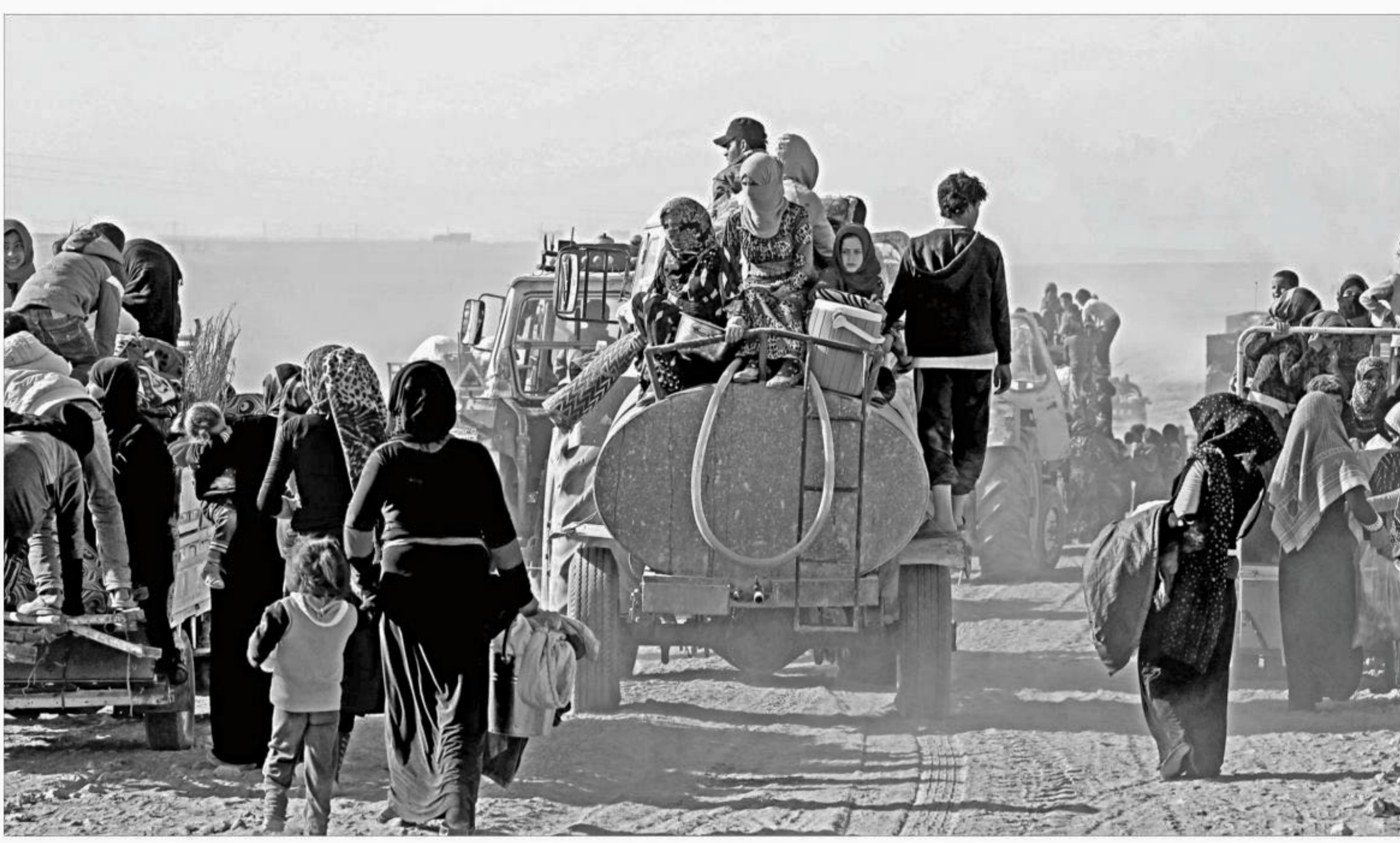
"We fear that Daesh will take advantage of this to move in and launch a counter-attack," he said, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

Syria's main opposition group has urged US president-elect Donald Trump to protect civilians and help end the bloodshed in the country.

Riad Hijab, head of the opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC), said Syrian civilians were in urgent need of protection from President Bashar al-Assad's regime, in a statement released on Wednesday night.

He called for American support to "establish peace in our region and to find fair and swift solutions for the threat of terrorism... especially the state terrorism practiced by the Syrian regime against the Syrian people," Hijab said.

SYRIA WAR



Syrian women and children travel from areas controlled by jihadists of the Islamic State (IS) group, en route to safety in areas held by Kurdish-Arab Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance, on Wednesday, near the village of Mazraat Khaled, some 40 km away from the Islamic State group's (IS) de-facto capital of Raqa.

PHOTO: AFP

Modi heads to Japan to seal nuke deal

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi headed to Japan yesterday to seal a landmark nuclear energy pact and strengthen ties, as China's regional influence grows and Donald Trump's election throws US policies across Asia into doubt.

India, Japan and the United States have been building security ties and holding three-way naval exercises, but Trump's "America First" campaign promise has stirred concern about a reduced US engagement in the region.

Such an approach by Washington could draw Modi and his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe even closer, said foreign policy commentator and former Indian ambassador M K Bhadrakumar.

China, EU warns Trump against isolationism

AGENCIES

Chinese state media has warned the US president-elect against isolationism and interventionism, calling instead for the United States to actively work with China to maintain the international status quo.

President-elect Donald Trump threatened to tear up trade deals and pursue a more unilateral foreign policy under his "America First" principle during a tempestuous election campaign.

Trump often targeted China in the campaign, blaming Beijing for US job losses and vowing to impose 45 percent tariffs on Chinese imports. The Republican also promised to call China a currency manipulator on his first day in office.

US isolationist policies had "accelerated the country's economic crisis" during the Great Depression, warned a commentary by China's official Xinhua News Agency, though it added that "election talk is just election talk".

The commentary also cautioned against any tilt towards intervention.

Hillary Clinton was widely seen in China as the more hawkish of the two candidates,

while some Chinese commentators saw Trump as a potential pragmatist on foreign policy.

Meanwhile, the EU's top leaders on Wednesday invited Donald Trump to a summit as soon as possible as they warned of uncertainty in relations and a need to respect democratic values.

"I do not believe that any country today can be great in isolation," European Council chief Donald Tusk told reporters in Brussels, referring to Trump's campaign slogan of "Make America Great Again".

"Europe and the United States simply have no option but to cooperate as closely as possible."

Tusk and European Commission boss Jean-Claude Juncker said in a letter that they wanted to discuss "unprecedented challenges" including the Islamic State jihadist group, the conflict in Ukraine, and a troubled EU-US trade deal under negotiation.

Following Trump's victory, EU foreign ministers will hold a special meeting in Brussels on Sunday at the invitation of the bloc's foreign policy supremo Federica Mogherini.

N Korea urges shift from US

Seoul says it has Trump's support

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday warned the incoming Donald Trump administration will have to acknowledge it as a nuclear state, as the South said the maverick billionaire had pledged to protect it.

The United States maintains it cannot accept North Korea as a nuclear power, despite it conducting five nuclear tests -- including two in 2016 -- and has pushed harsh international sanctions against the Pyongyang regime.

"If there is anything the Obama administration has done... it has put the security of the US mainland in the greatest danger," said an editorial carried by North Korea's ruling party newspaper Rodong Sinmun.

But in a phone call with South Korean President Park Geun-Hye yesterday, Trump vowed that US commitment on protecting its ally against the North "will not waver".

"We are going to be with you 100 percent," Trump said, according to a statement from South Korea's Blue House.

Trump may favour India: Pak analysts

Afghans urge US president-elect to stay engaged as war drags on

REUTERS, Islamabad

Donald Trump's surprise election as US president has Pakistanis wary that he may accelerate what they see as a shift in American policy to favour arch-foe India in the long rivalry between nuclear-armed neighbours, analysts said on Wednesday.

Historical allies in the region, Islamabad and Washington have seen relations sour over US accusations that Pakistan shelters Islamist militants, a charge Pakistan denies.

They hit new lows in May when a US drone killed the leader of the Afghan Taliban movement on Pakistani territory.

At the same time, Pakistan's ties with traditional rival India have also deteriorated this year, with India saying Pakistan-based militants killed 19 of its soldiers in a September attack on an army base in the disputed Kashmir region.

"America will not abandon Pakistan, but definitely, Trump will be a tougher president than Hillary Clinton for Pakistan," said Hasan Askari Rizvi, Lahore-based foreign policy analyst.

Trump will also have to decide whether to maintain the number of US troops in Afghanistan or change the scope of the mission, 15 years after a US-led campaign toppled the hardline Islamist Taliban government.

Afghan officials have voiced concern that the conflict is being forgotten in Washington, and warned privately that the West will pay a huge price if that continues.

"The people of Afghanistan are tired of war. We want (Trump) to invest heavily in bringing peace to war-torn Afghanistan and stabilize our region," said Umer Daudzai, former Afghan minister of interior.



Stop quarrels with the US

Says Duterte after Trump win

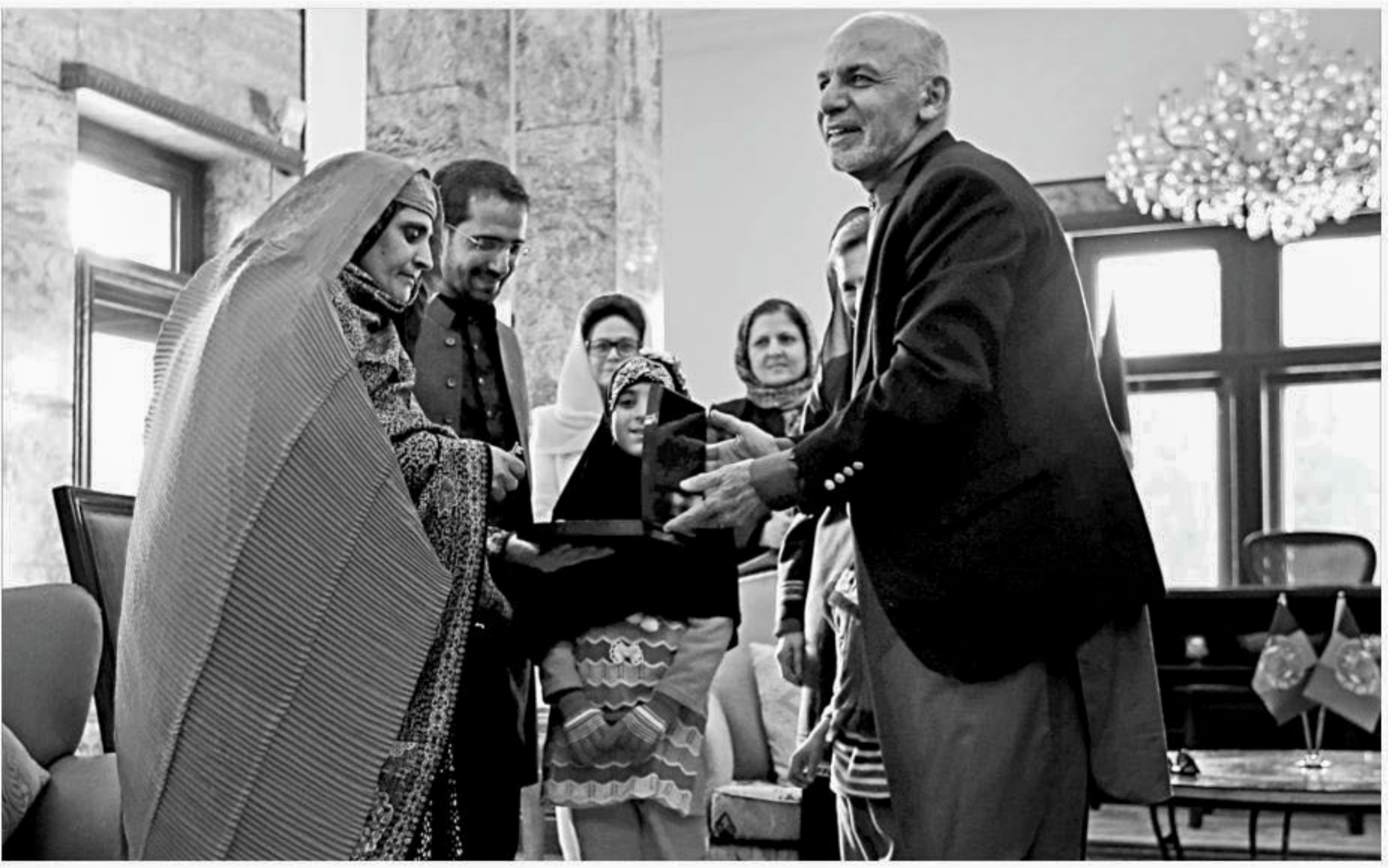
REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte congratulated Donald Trump on his election win and said on Wednesday he now wishes to stop quarrelling with the United States, recalling his anger at the Obama administration for criticising him.

The maverick leader, dubbed "Trump of the East" for his unrestrained rants, has repeatedly hit out at Washington in recent months, threatening to cut defence pacts and end military joint drills.

"I would like to congratulate Mr Donald Trump. Long live," Duterte said in a speech to the Filipino community during a visit to Malaysia.

"We are both making curses. Even with trivial matters we curse. I was supposed to stop because Trump is there. I don't want to quarrel anymore, because Trump has won."



Sharbat Gula (L), the green-eyed "Afghan Girl" whose 1985 photo in National Geographic became a symbol of her country's wars, receives a key to an apartment from Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani, after deportation from Pakistan on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Trump presidency buoys Israel, rattles Palestinians

Weary Iran says has options if nuclear deal fails

AGENCIES

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was one of the first Arab leaders to congratulate Donald Trump on his election win on Wednesday, but analysts say a Trump presidency may be profoundly negative for Palestinian aspirations while buoying Israel's confidence.

Israel's right-wing prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, expressed confidence that he and Trump could work together to bring US-Israeli relations to "new heights" and his office later said that Trump, in a phone conversation, had invited him to a meeting in the United States "at the first opportunity".

Abbas appeared to hold out some hope that Trump, with no clear foreign policy programme, may turn a new leaf when it comes to the Middle East, a statement said.

That may be wishful thinking.

During the campaign, Trump won support in Israel with a promise to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, all but enshrining the ancient city as Israel's capital. While that has been promised many times by presidential candidates in the past, Trump is the sort of leader who may well

make it happen, and he would likely have full backing from the Republican-dominated US Congress, too.

If it does occur, it would override decades of international diplomacy that holds that the status of Jerusalem is not finalised until a negotiated settlement is reached between Israel and the Palestinians, who want East Jerusalem as the capital of their state, together with the West Bank and Gaza.

Israeli Education Minister Naftali Bennett, a right-wing party leader who backs Israeli settlement building and opposes a Palestinian state, made the implications of Trump's win very clear in a rapidly released statement.

"The era of a Palestinian state is over," Bennett said.

Meanwhile, Iran wants all parties to stick to an international nuclear deal but has options if that does not happen, its foreign minister said yesterday after the US election victory of Trump, who has vowed to pull out of the pact.

The Republican Trump called the nuclear pact a "disaster" and "the worst deal ever negotiated" during his election campaign and said it could lead to a "nuclear holocaust".

RUPEE NOTE BAN Indian farmer commits suicide

AFP, New Delhi

A farmer in southern India committed suicide fearing she would be left penniless after the government's shock decision to withdraw high denomination notes from circulation, police said yesterday.

Kandukuri Vinoda, 55, had a large amount of cash at her home in 1,000 and 500 rupee notes and panicked that her savings had become worthless when she heard Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprise announcement on Tuesday.

"The family told us she panicked after hearing about the note ban and hanged herself at her home," local police officer Raj said.

Vinoda from Mahabubabad district, east of Hyderabad city, had sold some land last month and was paid around 5.5 million rupees for it in cash.



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