



Syrian civil defence volunteers, known as the White Helmets, rescue a boy from the rubble following a reported barrel bomb attack on the Bab al-Nairab neighbourhood of the northern Syrian city of Aleppo, yesterday.

Iraqi forces battle deep inside Mosul

Civilians trapped; jihadists left with no escape route

AFP, Mosul

Iraqi forces battled the Islamic State group deep inside Mosul Thursday, piling pressure on jihadists who have no more escape routes but leaving trapped civilians in the crossfire. Elite forces gained new ground in east Mosul, looking for fresh momentum as stiffer-than-expected IS resistance threatened to bog down the five-week-old offensive against the jihadists' last major stronghold in Iraq.

Maan al-Saadi, a commander with the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), told AFP on the front line in Mosul that his forces were battling IS in the neighbourhood of Al-Khadraa in Iraq's second city.

"They cannot flee. They have two choices -- give up or die," he said.

Over the past few days, Iraqi forces have cut off the main supply line running from Mosul to the western border with Syria, where IS still controls the city of Raqa.

The US-led coalition also bombed bridges over the Tigris river that splits Mosul in two, reducing the jihadists' ability to resupply the eastern front. An old British-era bridge, which cannot be used by heavy vehicles, is the only one still standing in the city.

A senior CTS commander said Wednesday that 40 per cent of eastern Mosul had now been retaken.

Iraqi forces launched a major offensive on October 17 to retake Mosul, where jihadist supremo Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed a caliphate in 2014.

They are also edging towards the city from a northern front as well as from the south, where they are within striking distance of Mosul airport.

The authorities have not released casualty figures since the start of the offensive but fighters have admitted being surprised by how fierce IS resistance has been.

The intensity of the fighting has been one of the factors preventing civilians from fleeing to the safety of some of the camps being set up around Mosul.

The United Nations had expected around 200,000 people to flee their homes in the first few weeks of the offensive, but only about a third of that number have been displaced so far.

PHOTO: AFP

TRUMP'S U-TURNS

How the president-elect has changed since his election

US President-elect Donald Trump is sounding a different tune as he prepares to take on the mantle of the presidency. The brash businessman has already begun to step away from some of his rhetoric and promises he made during the presidential campaign. Here's Donald Trump then and now:

ON INVESTIGATING HILLARY CLINTON

Trump repeatedly bashed Clinton's use of a private email server during his campaign, ticking down a list of alleged misconduct and repeatedly arguing that Clinton should be behind bars as his supporters erupted in "Lock her up!" chants.

TRUMP THEN: "If I win, I am going to instruct my attorney general to get a special prosecutor to look into your situation, because there has never been so many lies, so much deception," he said at the second presidential debate last month. He added that she'd be "in jail" if he were president.

TRUMP NOW: "I want to move forward, I don't want to move back. And I don't want to hurt the Clintons. I really don't. She went through a lot. And suffered greatly in many different ways. And I am not looking to hurt them at all," Trump told The New York Times on Tuesday. "It's just not something that I feel very strongly about."

ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Donald Trump called climate change a "hoax" invented by the Chinese



before launching his presidential campaign.

TRUMP THEN: In a March interview with the Washington Post's editorial board, he said, "I think there's a change in weather. I am not a great believer in man-made climate change." And in May, he said he would "cancel" the Paris climate change accord.

TRUMP NOW: "I have an open mind to it," he told the Times on the Paris deal. "We're going to look very carefully. I have a very open mind." Asked about the scientific consensus on a connection between human activity and climate change, he added: "I think there is some connectivity. There is some, something."

ON OBAMACARE

One of Trump's core campaign promises was his pledge to "repeal and replace" Obamacare, which he repeatedly dubbed a "disaster" during the campaign. Now, it seems like things aren't so clear cut.

TRUMP THEN: "Real change begins with immediately repealing and replacing Obamacare," he said on the eve of the election.

TRUMP NOW: "Either Obamacare will be amended, or repealed and replaced," Trump told The Wall Street Journal, praising several provisions of the law he said he intends to keep. "I like those very much," he said of those provisions.

ON SOUTH CAROLINA GOV NIKKI HALEY

Trump has been meeting with a slew of his former critics as he looks to build his administration. And he's even making room for those critics in his administration.

TRUMP THEN: "The people of South Carolina are embarrassed by Nikki Haley!" he tweeted in March.

TRUMP NOW: Wednesday, Trump picked her as his ambassador to the United Nations.

ON THE NEW YORK TIMES

The newspaper was one of Trump's prime targets for ridicule and attack during his campaign rallies.

TRUMP THEN: "No media is more corrupt than the failing New York Times."

TRUMP NOW: "I will say, The Times is, it's a great, great American jewel. A world jewel."

ON NATO COMMITMENTS

Donald Trump has assured the head of Nato that the US remains "strongly committed" to the military alliance, despite scathing criticisms made by the Republican during his successful election campaign. During speeches in recent months, the president-elect has told his supporters Nato was "obsolete", that it no longer represents good value for the US and that it wouldn't be a bad thing if it were to dissolve. Trump has reportedly rowed back on those strong criticisms of the organisation. Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg told the BBC's Today programme on Thursday morning that "Trump clearly stated to me and other European leaders after he was elected that he will be, and the United States will remain, strongly committed to Nato, and that the security guarantees to Europe stand."

CNN ONLINE

Bid launched for US vote recount

Jill Stein, liberals seek hacking probe; Clinton now leads Trump by 2m votes

CNN ONLINE

Green Party nominee Jill Stein launched a bid Wednesday to seek a vote recount in three key Rust Belt states as pressure builds among liberals to challenge election results.

The Stein campaign said it needed to raise over \$2 million by Friday to pay for recounts. That goal was reached by early Thursday morning, and the campaign has now increased the target to \$4.5 million.

"Over the last 48-72 hours, reports have come in from experts, cyberexperts, who are reporting to us some very troubling news about the possibility of security breaches in voting results across this country," Stein campaign manager David Cobb said in a video posted to Stein's Facebook page Wednesday afternoon.

Stein and others are seeking an audit and recount of the November 8 voting results in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, following reports that voting security experts alerted Hillary Clinton's campaign to the possibility of hacks in key counties in those states.

President-elect Donald Trump claimed

Pennsylvania and Wisconsin -- wins that helped push him comfortably over the threshold of 270 Electoral College votes needed for victory -- while Michigan remains too close to call, more than two weeks after Election Day.



While the loss of those states played a large part in Clinton's downfall, her lead in the popular vote has continued to grow. She now has close to 2 million more votes than Trump -- and pressure has been mounting among liberals for an investigation into what happened on Election Day.

Stein, who ran as an independent, third-party candidate in 2012 and 2016, does not stand to benefit personally from the proposed recounts -- she received only 1.1% of the vote in Wisconsin and less than 1% in Pennsylvania.

She launched her effort after computer scientists reportedly told Clinton campaign officials that the election may have indeed been rigged -- in Trump's favor.

However, her website said the recount attempt was "not intended to help Hillary Clinton," adding: "These recounts are part of an election integrity movement to attempt to shine a light on just how untrustworthy the US election system is."

The group of voting scientists alerted the campaign that Clinton's tallies fell 7% shy of expectations in counties that used electronic voting machines. Clinton fell about 27,000 votes shy of Trump in Wisconsin and 60,000 in Pennsylvania -- razor-thin margins in both states, which together account for 30 Electoral College votes. Votes still are being tallied in Michigan, which CNN has not called for either candidate yet.

Trump picks activist for education secretary

Urges unity in Thanksgiving message

AFP, Palm Beach

US President-elect Donald Trump announced Wednesday that he intends to nominate Betsy DeVos, a wealthy Republican campaigner for alternatives to public schools, as his education secretary.

DeVos is the second woman Trump has tapped to fill a cabinet position. He earlier named South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley to be US ambassador to the United Nations.

DeVos is a Republican megadonor from Michigan who has been active in promoting school choice, a movement that advocates the use of tax credits and vouchers to allow parents to opt out of the public school system.

DeVos is chairman of the Windquest Group, an investment group with a clean energy focus; the Dick and Betsy DeVos

Family Foundation; and the American Federation for Children, a group that describes itself as dedicated to "breaking down barriers to educational choice," particularly for low income families. She is the sister of Erik Prince, the founder of Blackwater USA, a security firm whose operations in Iraq aroused controversy.

Meanwhile, Trump acknowledged that a "long and bruising" presidential campaign had left emotions raw and tensions high Wednesday but urged America to come together on its Thanksgiving holiday.

In a video address from his Florida golf resort, the 70-year-old tycoon said: "It is my prayer, that on this Thanksgiving, we begin to heal our divisions and move forward as one country, strengthened by a shared purpose and very, very common resolve."



EU Parliament blocks Turkey's EU dream

AFP, Strasbourg

The European Parliament yesterday voted in favour of a freeze of membership talks with Turkey over its post-coup crackdown, further escalating tensions with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Erdogan has already dismissed the vote as having "no value" as it is non-binding, and as most European Union member states so far want to keep the Turkey talks on track.

But the motion, approved by a big majority, is a fresh blow to ties that have unravelled in the wake of the failed July 15 failed putsch and threatened a key migration deal between Brussels and Ankara.

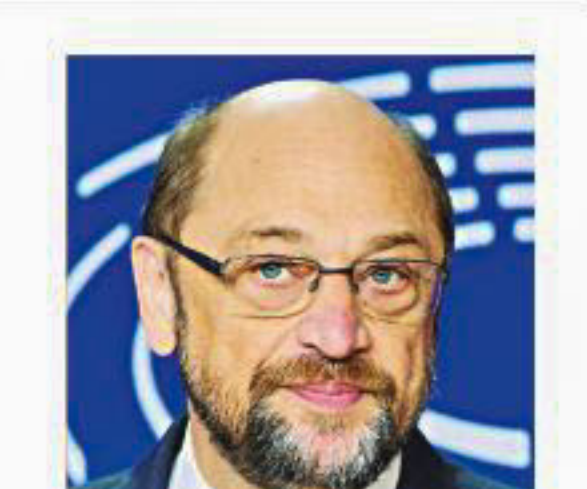
MEPs voting in Strasbourg, France, said the parliament "strongly condemns the disproportionate repressive measures taken in Turkey since the failed military coup attempt".

They said they remained "committed to keeping Turkey anchored to the EU" but said parliament "calls on the Commission and the Member States, however, to initiate a temporary freeze of the ongoing accession negotiations with Turkey."

The motion was approved by 479 votes to 37, with 107 abstentions.

Europe's message has however been increasingly clear about its concerns over rights and democracy in Turkey, especially over the coup crackdown that has seen almost 37,000 arrested.

Turkey formally applied to become an EU member in 1987 and accession talks only began in 2005, even though Ankara's aspirations to become part of the bloc dates back to the 1960s.



Schulz quits EU role, eyes German

AFP, Brussels

Germany's Martin Schulz yesterday said he would step down as head of the European Parliament and return to national politics, where speculation grew he could emerge as a challenge to Angela Merkel.

The outspoken former bookseller will quit in January after four years in office, during which he became one of the European Union's most high-profile politicians and gave its assembly sorely-needed visibility.

The bearded 60-year-old did not say if he would run for chancellor against Merkel, although he is widely expected to slot into a prime position for the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which is currently in coalition with her.

A key figure of the Brussels establishment, his return to Germany may require a painful reshuffle of the EU's top posts amid deep nervousness over Brexit and the rise of populism in Europe.

"I will not run as president of the European Parliament for a third term next year, I will run for the German Bundestag (parliament)," an emotional Schulz told reporters in Brussels.

"It was not an easy decision, as it is an honour to be the president of the European parliament, said Schulz, who is fluent in German, French, English and Dutch.

Tens of thousands flee Israeli bushfires

AFP, Haifa

Raging bushfires forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people from parts of Israel's third city Haifa yesterday as firefighters struggled to control blazes across the country.

Some residents were trapped in their homes as the army called up reservists to help cope with a third day of fires which authorities speculated could have been started deliberately.

Haifa municipality spokeswoman Or Doron told AFP that 50,000 of the city's roughly 250,000 residents had been evacuated.

Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said residents in eight neighbourhoods had been told to leave due to six separate fires, with four evacuation centres set up.

Around 30 people were hospitalised with mild injuries, according to the city's Ramban Hospital. Haifa University was evacuated as a precautionary measure.

A number of countries made immediate pledges of support including planes, as meteorologists said conditions meant fires were likely to continue for the coming days.

Areas in southern Haifa were engulfed in smoke, the air thick with ash carried by the strong dry winds, an AFP correspondent at the scene said.

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