



Aleppo win will be a 'huge step'

Confident Assad rules out truce; no breakthrough in Kerry-Lavrov talks

President Bashar al-Assad said victory for his forces in Aleppo would be a "huge step" in ending Syria's war, as government troops battled yesterday to retake more rebel ground. Despite pleas from increasingly cornered opposition fighters, Western countries and the United Nations, Assad also rejected talk of a ceasefire in Aleppo.

Repeated diplomatic efforts this week to end the fighting have stalled, with US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov failing to make a breakthrough in their latest talks on Wednesday.

In a wide-ranging interview with Syrian daily Al-Watan, Assad was confident of victory in Aleppo, though he admitted retaking the city would not end the country's conflict entirely.

"It's true that Aleppo will be a win for us," Assad said. "Let's be realistic -- it won't mean the end of the war in Syria," Assad said. "But it will be a huge step towards this end."

Regime forces have retaken about 80 percent of former rebel territory in Aleppo since launching an all-out offensive three weeks ago to recapture Syria's second city.

After a highly symbolic retreat from Aleppo's Old City, the rebels on Wednesday called for a five-day ceasefire to allow for the evacuation of thousands of civilians still in opposition-held territory.

But Assad's government has said a truce is only possible after a full rebel withdrawal from Aleppo, and opposition fighters have rejected any talk of abandoning the city.

The assault has prompted a mass exodus of residents, with the Observatory saying at least 80,000 have fled their homes. The International Committee of the Red Cross said Thursday it carried out an operation overnight with Syria's Red Crescent to evacuate 150 civilians, many disabled or sick, from a health facility in the Old City.

It was unclear how many civilians remained in rebel-held territory, but there were an estimated 250,000 in east Aleppo prior to the latest offensive.



ALEPPO IN RUINS

Syrian residents of the newly retaken eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo walk through the Bab al-Hadid district as they go back home under supervision of the Syrian pro-government forces yesterday; a general view shows destruction in the Al-Safa neighbourhood; and a tank moves through the rubbles of Aleppo's Old City.

PHOTO: AFP



Erdogan's son-in-law linked with IS

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

WikiLeaks has released a cache of thousands of personal emails allegedly from the account of senior Turkish government minister Berat Albayrak, son-in-law of the country's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which it says shows the extent of links between Albayrak and a company implicated in deals with Isis-controlled oil fields.

The 60,000 strong searchable cache, released on Monday, spans the time period between April 2000 - September 23 2016, and shows Albayrak had intimate knowledge of staffing and salary issues at Powertrans, a company which was controversially given a monopoly on the road and rail transportation of oil into the country from Iraqi Kurdistan.

Turkish media reported in 2014 and 2015 that Powertrans has been accused of mixing in oil produced by IS in neighbouring Syria and adding it to local shipments which eventually reached Turkey, although the charges have not been substantiated by any solid evidence.

Albayrak has previously denied he has any connections to Powertrans. The Independent's attempts to reach him were unsuccessful.

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange said that they were published in response to the Turkish government's widening crackdown on dissent.

Albayrak is widely seen as being groomed to be Erdogan's successor.

The emails also offer a look at the close relationship between Albayrak and Mehmet Ali Yalcindag, US President-elect Donald Trump's business partner in Turkey.

Erdogan was accused of having links to the smuggling of IS oil in 2015 by opposition politician Eren Erdem, who was put on trial for treason for making the allegations.



Berat Albayrak

Trump fills major US posts

Picks controversial figures for homeland security, environment, China ambassador jobs

AGENCIES

President-elect Donald Trump on Wednesday picked a fossil fuel industry defender as his top environmental official, another retired general as homeland security chief and Iowa's governor as US ambassador to China in choices at odds with some of his recent pronouncements.

Trump, continuing to build his Cabinet as he prepares to take office on Jan 20, said Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, 48, would be nominated to head the Environmental Protection Agency. Pruitt sued the EPA in a bid to undo a key regulation under outgoing President Barack Obama that would curb greenhouse gas emissions blamed for climate change, mainly from coal-fired power plants.

Trump tapped retired Marine Corps General John Kelly, 66, for secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, whose responsibilities include immigration. Kelly, the third retired general named by Trump to a senior administration post, last year told Congress that a lack of security on the US-Mexican border posed a threat to the United States. He was also a proponent of keeping open the US military prison in

Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Trump's transition team said Republican Iowa Governor Terry Branstad, 70, who has boasted of close ties to Beijing's leaders, was picked as US ambassador to China. His choice came after Trump rattled the world's second-largest economy with tough talk on trade and a telephone call with the leader of Taiwan.

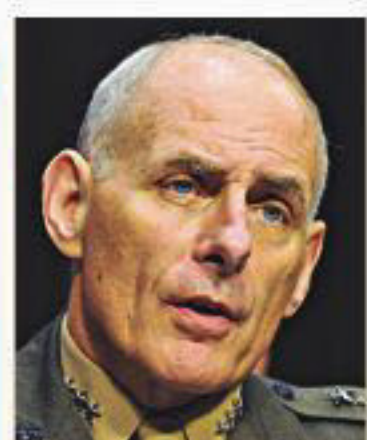
In addition, transition officials

Meanwhile, Trump said he had consulted with outgoing US president Barack Obama on his picks. Trump told NBC that he had "really good chemistry" with Obama, and even had discussed some of his possible appointments with the outgoing Democratic president.

Pruitt's selection came despite a softer tone Trump has struck on environmental regulation since his



Scott Pruitt



John Kelly



Linda McMahon



Terry Branstad

said Linda McMahon, 68, former CEO of professional wrestling company WWE and wife of wrestling kingpin Vince McMahon, was Trump's choice to head the Small Business Administration. Trump has taken part in WWE events in the past and has close ties to the McMahons. He is a member of the WWE Hall of Fame.

All four posts require Senate confirmation.

Nov 8 election. He has stepped back from casting climate change as a hoax, signaled he might be willing to allow the United States to continue participating in the Paris climate change deal aimed at lowering world carbon emissions, and met with former Vice President Al Gore, a leading environmental voice.

Kelly would work in tandem with Republican Senator Jeff Sessions, Trump's pick for attorney general,

US IN TRANSITION

Fossil fuel supporter to head US environment agency

Wrestling tycoon to head small-business agency

Another retired general takes homeland security post

who is a leading advocate of cracking down on illegal immigration.

The former four-star general would head a department in charge of securing borders against illegal immigration, protecting the president, responding to natural disasters and coordinating intelligence and counterterrorism.

Trump previously picked retired Marine Corps General James Mattis as defense secretary and retired Army Lieutenant General Michael Flynn as national security adviser.

Trump has more key appointments to make in coming days, including the high-profile job of secretary of state. His team said former Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, a fierce Trump critic during the campaign, is still under consideration for a diplomatic job.

Italy PM Renzi resigns, hints at early polls

AFP, Rome

Matteo Renzi bowed out as Italian prime minister with a combination of jokes, regrets and a strong hint that he wants to lead his party into an early election battle.

Political consultations on forming a caretaker government were set to begin yesterday, after Renzi formally submitted his resignation to President Sergio Mattarella following a crushing referendum defeat.

Before handing back the keys to his Palazzo Chigi residence, the 41-year-old chaired a meeting of the executive of his Democratic Party (PD).



"We are not afraid of anything or anybody, if other parties want to go to the polls the PD is not afraid of democracy or elections," Renzi said, in reference to opposition clamour for a nationwide vote due in early 2018 to be brought forward by up to a year.

Ironically, Renzi's rule came to an end with his government winning a vote of confidence in the Senate, the parliamentary chamber he tried to emasculate with a referendum in which he suffered a crushing defeat on Sunday.

The confidence vote curtailed prolonged discussion on the approval of Italy's 2017 budget -- an unfinished task which had prompted Mattarella to ask Renzi to delay his departure for a few days.



Japan city tags senior citizens with barcodes

AFP, Tokyo

A Japanese city has introduced a novel way to keep track of senior citizens with dementia who are prone to getting lost -- tagging their fingers and toes with scannable barcodes.

A company in Iruma, north of Tokyo, developed tiny nail stickers, each of which carries a unique identity number to help concerned families find missing loved ones, according to the city's social welfare office.

The adhesive QR-coded seals for nails -- part of a free service launched this month and a first in Japan -- measure just one centimetre (0.4 inches) in size.

"Being able to attach the seals on nails is a great advantage," a city worker told AFP.

IMPEACHMENT BID IN SOUTH KOREA

Lawmakers move bill to oust Park

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's parliament yesterday introduced an impeachment motion against President Park Geun-Hye, ahead of a vote seeking her ouster over a corruption scandal that has riveted the country and paralysed her administration.

The motion, which accuses Park of constitutional and criminal violations ranging from a failure to protect people's lives to bribery and abuse of power, will be put to a full vote of the National Assembly today.

If adopted, it will go to the Constitutional Court for final approval which, if granted, would result in Park becoming the first democratically elected South Korean president not to complete her full five-year term.

Park has said she would accept a parliamentary decision to impeach her, but also that she would remain in office while the motion is being considered by the court -- a process that could take months. In the meantime, however, her powers would be suspended and transferred to her prime minister, leaving her with nothing but the title.

The passage to impeachment has been to a large extent driven by massive protests that have seen millions take to the streets of Seoul and other cities in recent weeks, demanding political parties remove Park if she refuses to step down.



Lawmakers of South Korea's main opposition Democratic Party hold candles at a protest urging the impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye in Seoul, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi boy holds the hand of his sister as they wait to receive aid outside a distribution point run by United Nations agencies at Zahra district, east of Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. Story on page 16.



PHOTO: REUTERS

'ILLEGAL' SETTLER HOMES PLAN

Israel votes to advance bill

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli lawmakers voted Wednesday to advance a bill legalising some 4,000 settler homes in the occupied West Bank despite international criticism and warnings over its implications.

Fifty-seven members of the parliament, or Knesset, voted to approve the draft legislation in the first of three readings, while 51 were against it.

Supporters of the bill submitted by the party of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday called it a step towards eventual annexation of most of the West Bank.

Some 400,000 Israeli settlers currently live in the West Bank, excluding annexed east Jerusalem, along with 2.6 million Palestinians.

The United States, UN officials and the European Union have warned that continued settlement building is eating away at the possibility of a two-state solution to the conflict.

All Israeli settlements are viewed as illegal under international law and major stumbling blocks to peace efforts as they are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state.

Israel differentiates between those it has authorised and those it has not. The bill would legalise nearly 4,000 settler homes built on private Palestinian land.

Key figures in Netanyahu's coalition, considered the most right-wing in Israeli history, openly oppose a Palestinian state.

No free edu for illegal migrants: Le Pen

AFP, Paris

French far-right leader Marine Le Pen yesterday proposed that the children of illegal immigrants should be refused public school places as part of tough proposals to restrict state services.

"I've got nothing against foreigners but I say to them: if you come to our country, don't expect that you will be taken care of, treated (by the health system) and that your children will be educated for free," Le Pen said.

"That's finished now, it's the end of playtime," she told an audience at a conference organised by a polling group in Paris.

The leader of the National Front (FN) is forecast by opinion polls to finish second in next year's presidential election.

Speaking to AFP afterwards, she clarified that she only wanted to block education for immigrants who are in the country illegally, not all foreigners.