

HRW REPORT ON MOSUL OFFENSIVE IS 'indiscriminately' attacks civilians

AFP, Baghdad

The Islamic State group is "indiscriminately" attacking civilians who refused to retreat along with the jihadists in the Iraqi city of Mosul, Human Rights Watch said yesterday.

Iraqi forces launched a massive operation to retake the last IS-held city in Iraq more than two months ago, and have pushed the jihadists out of several neighbourhoods on Mosul's eastern side.

"Fighters with the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) have indiscriminately attacked civilian areas in eastern Mosul with mortar rounds and explosives, and deliberately shot at fleeing residents," HRW said.

"Residents said ISIS members told them in person, by radio, and over mosque loudspeakers that those who stayed behind were 'unbelievers' and therefore valid targets along with the Iraqi and coalition forces," the rights group said.

But Iraqi and US-led coalition forces seeking to oust IS from Mosul are also responsible for endangering civilians, HRW said.

Some IS attacks occurred in places "where Iraqi military forces had positioned soldiers inside homes or on residential rooftops in densely populated areas," it said.

And five witnesses described three separate strikes carried out by either Iraq or the coalition that targeted IS fighters but also killed civilians, HRW said.



A massive explosion guts Mexico's biggest fireworks market in Mexico City, on Tuesday. The explosion killed at least 31 people and injured 72, authorities said. Inset, relatives grieve by the corpse of a victim of the blast in the market. Story on page 16. PHOTO: AFP



UN seeks probe into Duterte's killing claim

AFP, Manila

The Philippines said yesterday that President Rodrigo Duterte's killing of three people in the 1980s was part of a police operation, after the United Nations rights chief urged Manila to investigate him for murder.

In several speeches last week, Duterte recounted how in 1988, early in the first of his several terms as mayor of the southern city of Davao, he and local police ambushed and killed three suspected kidnappers.

UN rights chief Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said in a statement Tuesday that Duterte's killings, by his own admission, "clearly constitute murder" and Philippine judicial authorities must launch a murder investigation.

Duterte spokesman Ernesto Abella said yesterday Zeid's comments were nothing more than "his (Zeid's) opinion".

"Again, let me just remind one and all, that the incident referred to by the president was actually covered by media and it was (a) legitimate police action," Abella added.

He did not address Duterte's possession and discharge of a firearm while not a policeman.

Duterte has said he routinely carried a gun during his early years as mayor of Davao to protect himself in a high-crime environment. He has not said if the weapon used in the ambush was licensed.

He won the presidential election by a landslide in May largely on a vow to kill 100,000 criminals to stop the country's slide into a "narco-state".

According to the UN, nearly 6,100 people have been killed since Duterte took office in late June.

Philippine police put the figure at about 5,300 violent deaths, with Duterte consistently rejecting allegations his incendiary comments could be encouraging police to commit murder.

NEWSIN brief

Kremlin slams new US sanctions

REUTERS, Moscow

The Kremlin said yesterday that new sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States would damage relations between the two countries and that Moscow would respond with its own measures.

"We regret that Washington is continuing on this destructive path," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on a conference call.

UN nuclear chief set for re-election

REUTERS, Vienna

The UN nuclear watchdog's chief, Yukiya Amano, will secure a third term in office since his most likely challenger has chosen not to run against him, according to diplomats who follow the Vienna-based agency.

Amano, a 69-year-old career diplomat from Japan, has headed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) since 2009.

US makes biggest Okinawa land return

AFP, Tokyo

A deal to return American military land on Okinawa to the Japanese government was hailed yesterday as the biggest such land transfer in more than four decades.

But the move is unlikely to reduce frustration on the strategic island that remains crowded with American bases -- a legacy of World War II. The agreement covers 4,000 hectares of the 7,500-hectare Camp Gonsalves jungle warfare training centre.

China welcomes Sao Tome's split with Taiwan

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday welcomed Sao Tome and Principe's decision to sever ties with Taiwan, a move that comes after President-elect Donald Trump questioned long-standing US policy towards the self-ruled island. Taiwan, stung by the loss of one of its few allies, accused Beijing of taking advantage of the small West African nation's financial woes to impose its "One China" policy.

26 people killed in Congo protests

AP, Kinshasa

Security forces in Congo have killed at least 26 demonstrators and arrested scores more amid protests against President Joseph Kabila's hold on power, a rights group says. Military and police forces were firing live bullets, raising fears that more people were killed in the first day after Kabila's mandate expired, Human Rights Watch said.

Manhunt on across Europe

Prosecutors identify a Tunisian suspect after finding a document under the driver's seat of the truck

AGENCIES

A manhunt is under way across Europe's Schengen states after prosecutors yesterday identified a suspect in the lorry attack on a Berlin Christmas market.

Police are looking for a Tunisian man after finding an identity document under the driver's seat of the truck that ploughed into the market, killing 12 people, on Monday evening, security sources said.

The document was in the name of Anis A, born in the southern city of Tataouine in 1992, the sources said, using a convention whereby suspects are identified by their first name and initial. The man was also believed to use false names, reports Reuters.

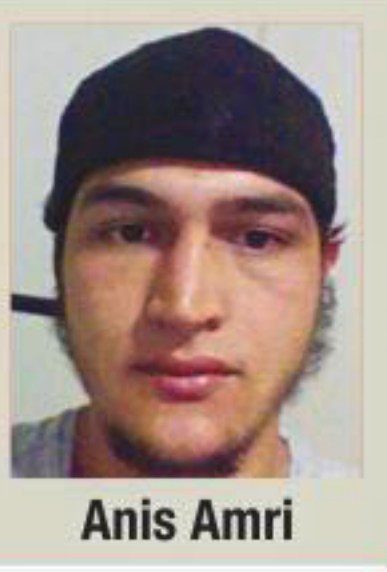
He may have been injured in a struggle with the driver of the truck.

A spokesperson for Tunisia's foreign ministry said it was trying to verify the information. Daily newspaper Bild reported the man was known to police as a possibly dangerous individual, and part of a large Islamist network.

"There is a new suspect we are searching for -- he is a suspect but not necessarily the assailant," German

CARNAGE AT BERLIN MARKET

Germany's Bild newspaper published a photo of the suspect said to be taken from the papers, which give asylum seekers temporary leave to stay in the country while their claims are decided. The image appeared to match those on a Facebook profile of a Tunisian man called Anis Amri. The suspect was born in 1992 in the city of Tataouine, although he was also believed to go under at least two other aliases and gave authorities differing dates of birth.



Anis Amri

Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere told reporters.

He declined to immediately confirm numerous media reports that the suspect was a Tunisian asylum seeker with links to the Islamic extremist scene, reports AFP.

However a conservative lawmaker at the same news conference, Stephan Meyer, said the suspect was in fact from Tunisia and being watched by police.

"We are apparently talking about a potentially dangerous suspect who was known to authorities and belonged to the Salafist-Islamist scene," he told reporters after a meeting of parliament's

interior affairs committee.

Some 150 police officers are said to be involved in searches in the Emmerich area of North Rhine-Westphalia, western Germany, where the suspect's permit was issued.

Ralf Jaeger, interior minister of North Rhine-Westphalia state, said the Tunisian man had already been under investigation for planning an attack.

Counter-terrorism officials had exchanged information about him, most recently in November, and a probe had been launched suspecting he was preparing "a serious act of violence against the state," he said.

INDIAN CASH CRACKDOWN Modi losing friends

REUTERS, New Delhi

A leading political ally of Narendra Modi has abruptly distanced himself from the Indian prime minister's move to scrap high-value banknotes, as broad initial support for the radical monetary reform showed signs of crumbling.

The shift by N Chandrababu Naidu, chief minister of the southern state Andhra Pradesh, came six weeks after Modi announced to a stunned nation that he would scrap 86 percent of the cash in circulation.

While Modi remains by far India's most popular politician, any crack in his authority could have negative implications in state elections next year that will set the tone for his expected bid for a second term in 2019.

Naidu's regional party is allied to Modi's nationalists and he heads a federal committee set up to find ways to soften the impact on ordinary people of the crackdown against tax evaders, racketeers and bribe takers who rely on so-called "black cash".

"I am breaking my head daily but we are unable to find a solution to this problem," Naidu told party workers on Tuesday in the city of Vijayawada.

Modi, announcing the reform on Nov 8, cautioned that people would face temporary hardship. He promised to restore normalcy by the end of the year, when a deadline to deposit old 500 and 1,000 rupee banknotes expires.

His announcement enjoyed popular support at first, with many people prepared to endure hardship as long as others are forced to give up their ill-gotten wealth or pay tax.



Members of the New York Police Department's Counterterrorism Bureau stand watch at the Union Square Holiday market in Manhattan, New York City, US, on Tuesday following the Berlin Christmas market attacks. Cities around the US bolstered security around holiday events following the attack in Berlin. PHOTO: REUTERS

Indonesia police kill three IS-linked militants

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian police have foiled plans by an IS-linked group for a Christmas-time suicide bombing after killing three suspected militants yesterday and discovering a cache of bombs, authorities said.

A firefight erupted at a house in South Tangerang 25 kilometres west of the capital Jakarta, with police saying the alleged militants had opened fire at officers.

"We asked the three men to surrender but they fought, with one of them throwing a bomb (at officers). Thankfully the bomb didn't explode and we took firm action against them," said national police spokesman Rikwanto, who goes by one name.

He said the group to which the three belong, which is linked to the Islamic State

group (IS), had planned to stab a police officer at a police station and wait for crowds to gather before launching a suicide bomb attack around the Christmas holidays.

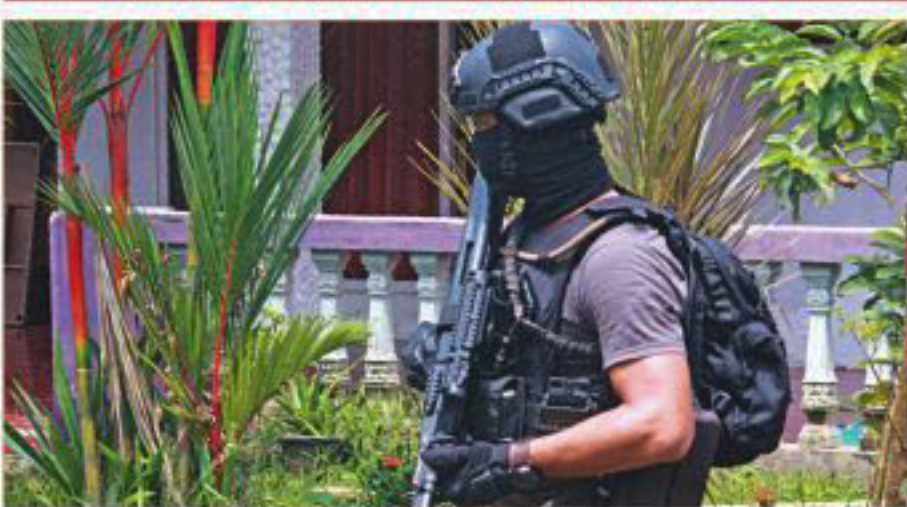
The targeted location is near a private hospital west of Jakarta, police added.

Bomb squad officers in protective gear have so far detonated six bombs seized from the house and more are expected to be blown up before investigators can enter the building.

Police have yet to disclose the total number of bombs discovered yesterday.

The plot was disclosed by a group member who was arrested earlier yesterday and tipped off police about the three militants and their whereabouts, police said.

CHRISTMAS TERROR PLOT



World War Two 'remains' found in India

AFP, New Delhi

A US agency which deals with soldiers missing in action has found the suspected remains of more airmen who went missing over the Himalayas more than 70 years ago, the US embassy said.

The men were probably among the Allied pilots who flew the perilous route over the world's highest mountains to deliver military supplies from hundreds of Indian airfields to Chinese forces in World War II.

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) sent a team to India's north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh last September to try to locate the wreckage of a B-24 Liberator plane which crashed in 1944 with eight men on board.

Syrian girl blogger meets Erdogan

AFP, Ankara

Seven-year-old Bana al-Abed, whose Twitter account gave a tragic description of the bombing of Aleppo in Syria, yesterday met Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at his palace in Ankara.

Erdogan received Bana and her family at his palace, the state-run Anadolu agency said, publishing a picture of Erdogan hugging the girl.

A video published by the agency also showed a seated Erdogan holding Bana and an unidentified boy sitting on his knees, flanked by his wife Emine.

The young Syrian girl was one of thousands of people evacuated from once rebel-held areas of Aleppo in the last days under a deal brokered by Turkey and Russia.

She was evacuated on Monday and Turkish officials promised she would come to Turkey with her family. But it was not clear when she had crossed over.

For her 330,000 followers, Bana is a symbol of the tragedy unfolding in Syria, although Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime has slammed her and her mother's nearly daily tweets as propaganda.



ALEPPO CRISIS Last evacuees wait to leave Syrian city

AFP, Aleppo

The last residents hoping to leave rebel-held Aleppo waited in the snow yesterday as delays hit an evacuation that will leave Syria's army in full control of the devastated city.

An AFP correspondent in the government-held neighbourhood of Ramussa -- through which thousands of evacuees have passed in recent days -- saw no convoys leaving the last pocket of opposition-controlled Aleppo yesterday morning.

Heavy snow was blanketing the city and swirling through crumbled buildings, adding to the misery of thousands still inside the last pocket of what was once a crucial stronghold of Syrian rebel forces.

Workers in the red uniforms of the Syrian Red Crescent, which has been helping with the evacuations, huddled by the side of the road, their white ambulances parked nearby barely visible in the snow.

At least 25,000 people have left rebel districts of Aleppo since opposition fighters agreed last week to withdraw from the city after years of fighting, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross, which is overseeing the operation.

The retreat from Aleppo -- which had been divided into a rebel-held east and government-controlled west since 2012 -- marks the biggest victory for President Bashar al-Assad's forces in nearly six years of civil war.

It follows a month-long army offensive and weeks of siege that killed hundreds and left rebels with less than 10 percent of the territory they once controlled in the city.