

Nigeria 'crushes' Boko Haram in key stronghold

AFP, Abuja

Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari yesterday claimed the military had routed Boko Haram in a key northeastern stronghold, a year after saying the Islamist militants had been "technically" defeated. A campaign lasting for months in the 1,300 square-kilometre (500 square-mile) forest in northeastern Borno state led to the "final crushing of Boko Haram terrorists in their last enclave in Sambisa Forest" on Thursday, Buhari said in a statement.

The government in Abuja and the military have frequently claimed victories against the Islamic State group affiliate but access to the epicentre of the conflict in Borno state is strictly controlled.

That has made independent verification of official statements about victories virtually impossible. Attacks have meanwhile continued, making claims of defeating Boko Haram questionable despite undoubted progress in pushing back the group.

"The terrorists are on the run, and no longer have a place to hide. I urge you to maintain the tempo by pursuing them and bringing them to justice," Buhari said.

The announcement came after Nigeria launched a barrage of land and air assaults in Borno state at the heart of the insurgency that has spread to three neighbouring countries -- Chad, Cameroon and Niger.

While the counter-insurgency has clawed back some territory, Boko Haram has responded by stepping up guerrilla tactics, ambushing troops when it can and terrorising civilians when it cannot.

Buhari's statement made no mention of the whereabouts of Abubakar Shekau, the leader of the Boko Haram faction based in the forest.

Boko Haram, which last year pledged allegiance to IS, has been in the grips of a power struggle since late last year.



A policeman holds a rifle as he checks inside the Jakarta Cathedral ahead of Christmas celebrations in Indonesia, yesterday. *Inset*, 'Santa Claus' gives out sweets to schoolchildren during Christmas celebrations at a school in Amritsar, India. Fearing terror attacks, security forces across Asia were on alert ahead of the Christmas and New Year holidays.

FBI warns of IS-inspired attacks in US

AFP, Washington

US federal authorities cautioned local law enforcement on Friday to be aware that supporters of Islamic State have been calling for their sympathizers to attack holiday gatherings in the United States, including churches, a law enforcement official said.

The warning, issued in a bulletin to local law enforcement, said there were no known specific, credible threats.

The notice from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of Homeland Security was issued out of an abundance of caution after a publicly available list of US churches was published on pro-Islamic State websites.

"The FBI is aware of the recent link published online that urges attacks against US churches. As with similar threats, the FBI is tracking this matter while we investigate its credibility," the FBI said in a statement.

Shelling, air strikes hit Aleppo

Civilians returning as govt consolidates position; Assad urges broader peace talks

AGENCIES

Syrian rebels shelled Aleppo and air strikes resumed around the city on Friday as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his allies said the insurgents' withdrawal from the city could pave the way towards a political solution for the country.

A day after the last rebels left their remaining pocket of territory in the city, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights - a war monitor based in Britain - said about 10 shells fell in its southwestern al-Hamdaniya district.

The Observatory said six people, including two children, were killed. State television said at least three people died.

Meanwhile, Syrian rebels backed by Turkish warplanes killed 68 Islamic State militants in northern Syria overnight, the Turkish military said yesterday, as intense fighting around the town of al-Bab continued.

And in Palmyra, IS group killed 27 Syrian soldiers and allied militiamen in a series of attacks near Palmyra in the past 24 hours, a monitor said on Friday.

Air strikes resumed in rebel-held areas of the countryside near Aleppo on Friday for the first time since the end of the evacuation operation.

Strikes hit to the west, south-west and south of the city, areas which had not been hit for at least a week. The Britain-based Observatory had no information on casualties yet.

After months of bombardment and a final few

weeks of intense air strikes and Syrian army advances on the besieged, rebel-held part of Aleppo, a local ceasefire was reached on Dec 15 which allowed thousand of civilians and then fighters to leave.

The last left the city late on Thursday for countryside immediately to the west. The International Committee of the Red Cross said about 35,000 people, mostly civilians, had departed.

On Friday, the army and its allies, including

Syrian capital for a few days and use reserves instead after rebels polluted the water with diesel, it said on Friday.

On Friday, Assad thanked Russian President Vladimir Putin for having been Syria's main partner in the battle, and said the city's fall had opened the door to a political process.

Putin said Russia, Iran, Turkey and Assad had agreed the Kazakh capital of Astana should be the

WAR IN SYRIA

Damascus water supply cut after rebels pollute it

Turkey-backed rebels kill 68 IS fighters near al-Bab

IS kills 27 Syria regime fighters near Palmyra



Lebanese group Hezbollah, searched districts abandoned by the rebels, to clear them of mines and other dangers, the Observatory reported.

State television showed empty streets lined with apartment blocks smashed by air strikes in the al-Ansari district.

In the capital Damascus, the water authority has been forced to cut supplies coming into the

venue for new peace negotiations, and Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said the defeat of the rebels in the city could pave the way to a political solution. Turkey backs rebels fighting Assad and Islamic State.

United Nations-backed peace talks in Geneva broke down earlier this year as violence escalated, particularly around Aleppo.

'Let it be an arms race'

Confusion as Trump launches into nuclear debate; gets 'very nice letter' from Putin

AFP, Washington

President-elect Donald Trump indicated Friday he did not fear a new arms race and warned the United States would match any move by another country to boost its nuclear arsenal, in a spectacular new foray into foreign policy.

His stunning -- and initially unexplained -- use of language reminiscent of the Cold War rocked the Washington establishment two days before Christmas, and left Americans baffled by the seemingly mixed messages Trump is sending Russia.

Trump began upping the nuclear rhetoric with a bombshell tweet Thursday calling for America to "greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes."

Anti-proliferation campaigners and lawmakers were aghast at the saber-rattling talk, though some observers wondered how much stock to put into Trump's words -- and even whether they may be part of a deliberate strategy to bring about a promised rapprochement with Russia.

His remarks came hours after President Vladimir Putin declared Russia needs to "strengthen the military potential of strategic nuclear forces," and a day after the president-elect met with Pentagon brass.

When asked for clarity, Sean Spicer, the incoming White House press secretary, said

Trump would not tolerate other countries increasing their nuclear arsenal without responding.

Early Friday, Trump was quoted telling MSNBC -- when asked in an off-air telephone call to clarify his nuclear policy tweet -- that his administration had no reservations about entering "an arms race."

"This morning he told me on the phone, 'Let it be an arms race. We'll outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all,'" network host Mika Brzezinski said.

Ties between Moscow and Washington hit their lowest point since the Cold War under Obama due to the Ukraine crisis and Russia's military intervention in Syria.

Even as the country reeled from his Twitter outburst, Trump sowed further confusion Friday by releasing a copy of what he called a "very nice letter" in which the Kremlin strongman offered him Christmas greetings and called for greater bilateral cooperation.

Trump has often said he admires Putin's leadership qualities and the US intelligence community concluded that Russia was responsible for cyber attacks ahead of November's election that sought to tip the balance in favor of the Republican.

Democratic Congressman Brad Sherman, a senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, suggested something more was at play between Trump and Putin.



TRUMP SHAKES US POLICIES

It was once conventional wisdom in Washington that the prospect of assuming command of US foreign relations would force Donald Trump to tone down the shoot-from-the-hip style of his campaign. Instead, undaunted, he has ploughed on as before, breaking diplomatic taboos, unsettling America's friends and foes alike.

NUCLEAR ARMS RACE

On Thursday, Trump launched a solo bid to restart the Cold War arms race, Tweeting: "The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes." Outgoing US leader President Barack Obama won a Nobel Prize for his vision, expressed in a famous 2009 speech in Prague, of a world without nuclear weapons. Trump threw it out in fewer than 140 characters.

ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Trump has already made his intentions clear. Frustrated at the failure of the Middle East peace process, US on Friday refrained from vetoing the adoption of a Security Council measure calling on Israel to halt settlement activities in Palestinian territory. US President-elect on Friday vowed that the country's policies at the United Nations will change after he takes office. "As to the UN, things will be different after Jan 20th," he said on Twitter, referring to the date of his inauguration.

RELATIONSHIP WITH CHINA

Until now, Washington refrained from overtly challenge Beijing's core interests. For four decades Washington's stance towards the Asian giant has been determined by the framework agreed by president Richard Nixon on his famous opening to Beijing: "One China." But Trump is not impressed. "I don't know why we have to be bound by a One China policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade," Trump said last week.

Thousands flee typhoon in Philippines

AFP, Tabaco

Philippine authorities began evacuating thousands of people and shut down dozens of ports yesterday as a strong typhoon threatened to wallop the country's east coast on Christmas Day.

Nock-Ten is expected to be packing winds of between 203-250 kilometres per hour (126-155 miles per hour) when it crosses over Catanduanes, a remote island of 250,000 people in the Bicol region, late Sunday, the US Joint Typhoon Warning Center said.

It is then expected to hit the country's main island of Luzon, including the capital Manila, on Monday.

CRACKDOWN IN RAKHINE Muslim man found dead after speaking to media

AFP, Yangon

The headless body of a Muslim villager has been found days after he spoke to reporters on a rare government-guided media tour of restive northern Rakhine State, Myanmar police said on Friday.

Troops have taken control of the remote region bordering Bangladesh since October 9 when armed men raided police posts, killing nine officers.

At least 34,000 Rohingya Muslims have since fled to Bangladesh, taking with them allegations of mass killings, rape and torture at the hands of Myanmar security forces.

The Myanmar government has vigorously denied the accusations, setting off the latest war of words over a stateless minority whose status is one of the country's most incendiary issues.

Police did not give a motive for the killing of the 41-year-old man, whose body was found floating in a river, but said he spoke to

Burmese journalists on Wednesday in Ngakhura village.

Troops have killed more than 80 people in Rakhine since the start of crackdown, according to official figures.

In a statement Friday, the President's Office confirmed that a man -- whom they identified as Shu Nar Myar -- had been killed, adding that he had denied stories of military abuse when speaking to the reporters.

Northern Rakhine has been under lockdown for more than two months since the hundreds of armed militants launched surprise attacks on border posts.

ICG says the attackers are from a Saudi-backed group called Harakah al-Yaqin which emerged after a wave of sectarian violence cut through Rakhine in 2012.

The Rohingya have languished under years of dire poverty and discrimination from a government that denies them citizenship.



People dressed in Santa's costumes attend a protest demanding South Korean President Park Geun-hye's resignation in Seoul, South Korea, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWSIN brief

Google launches public toilet locator in Delhi

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Google has launched a feature that will assist people in India's capital locate the nearest public toilet. Launched on Thursday, the initiative is part of the government's nationwide campaign to stop public urination and open. People searching for toilets in Delhi can type "public toilet" in Google Maps and access the 5,162 toilets in the capital as well as its surrounding areas and cities in the central state of Madhya Pradesh.

Breakthrough in Ebola virus vaccine search

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

An experimental vaccine has been found to be highly successful against the deadly Ebola virus when used in a major trial in Guinea. The study, led by the World Health Organisation (WHO), was the first to find a way to stop infection from the pathogen. The drug has not yet been approved by regulatory authorities but an emergency stockpile of 300,000 doses has been created in case the virus flares up.

UNSC rejects arms embargo on S Sudan

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Friday rejected a US-drafted resolution on imposing an arms embargo and sanctions on South Sudan, now in its fourth year of war. The measure garnered only seven votes in favor in the 15-member council, while eight countries including Russia, China and Japan abstained. Nine votes and no veto are required for resolutions to be adopted in the council.