

## Clashes near Damascus despite truce

AFP, Beirut  
 Syrian pro-government forces clashed with rebels around the main water source for Damascus yesterday, a monitor said, threatening a fragile ceasefire as it entered its seventh day.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said regime troops backed by fighters from Lebanon's Hezbollah movement were battling to recapture parts of the Wadi Barada region from rebels.

The area north of Damascus is the main source of water to the capital.

The Observatory, a Britain-based monitor of Syria's conflict, said regime forces had late on Wednesday launched "dozens of air strikes on parts of Wadi Barada along with artillery and rocket fire, killing a firefighter."

Fighting has continued in the area despite a nationwide ceasefire brokered by regime backer Russia and rebel sponsor Turkey, which has brought quiet to large parts of Syria.

The regime says forces in Wadi Barada include former Al-Qaeda affiliate Fateh al-Sham Front, previously known as Al-Nusra Front, which Moscow and Damascus say is excluded from the ceasefire.

The capital's water supply has been cut since December 22, with the regime and rebels trading accusations over responsibility.

Regime forces late Wednesday also bombed several parts of rebel-held Eastern Ghouta near Damascus, while regime and loyalist forces battled Islamist militants there, the Observatory said.

The opposition-controlled Rashidin district on the western outskirts of Aleppo was also bombed, it said, killing a rebel fighter and wounding eight others.

The ceasefire agreement is meant to pave the way for peace negotiations later this month in the Kazakh capital Astana, but Ankara warned on Wednesday that violations of the truce by President Bashar al-Assad's government were putting the talks at risk.



Members of the Iraqi rapid response forces clash with Islamic State militants in the Mithaq district of eastern Mosul, Iraq, yesterday.

## ATTEMPTED TURKEY COUP 2 troops jailed for life in first verdict

AFP, Istanbul  
 A Turkish court yesterday sentenced two army officers to life in jail over their roles in the failed July coup, the first verdicts to be handed out in the biggest legal process in the country's history.

The colonel and major were deployed with the gendarmerie, which was then part of the army, in the northeastern city of Erzurum, the state-run Anadolu news agency said.

They were charged with violating the constitution. After the coup, the gendarmerie was brought within the control of the interior ministry.

Ankara blames the attempted putsch on the US-based Islamic preacher Fethullah Gulen and has embarked on a relentless purge to eradicate his influence from public life. Gulen denies the charges.

Turkey's parliament on Tuesday approved a government-backed motion to extend by another three months the state of emergency imposed in the wake of the July 15 attempt to overthrow President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

According to the latest figures published by Anadolu, more than 41,000 people have been arrested over suspected links to Gulen within the state of emergency.

With a record number of suspects behind bars, the trials are only now getting under way and are expected to last for months.

Twenty-nine Turkish police officers went on trial on December 29 in Istanbul accused of failing to defend Erdogan during the failed coup, the first such case in the city.

There has been growing international alarm over the extent of the crackdown amid the state of emergency imposed after the coup, with critics concerned it has been used to target Erdogan's opponents.

## 70pc of east Mosul retaken

Forces launch offensive on IS near Syria border; car bomb kills 6 in capital

AGENCIES  
 Iraqi forces have retaken around 70 percent of eastern Mosul from Islamic State militants and expect to reach the river bisecting the city in the coming days, Iraq's joint operations commander told Reuters.

Lieutenant General Talib Shaghati, who is also head of the elite counter-terrorism service (CTS) spearheading the campaign to retake the northern city, said the cooperation of residents was helping them advance against Islamic State.

In its 12th week, the offensive has gained momentum since Iraqi forces backed by a US-led coalition renewed their push for the city a week ago, clearing several more eastern districts despite fierce resistance.

Meanwhile, Iraqi forces launched an offensive against the Islamic State group near the Syrian border yesterday, piling further pressure on the jihadists' crumbling "caliphate".

Baghdad and its allies also turned up the heat on IS in its last remaining Iraqi stronghold of Mosul, where the US-led coalition said it had doubled the number of its advisors.

"A military operation has begun in the western areas of Anbar (province) to liberate them from Daesh," said Lieutenant General Qassem Mohammedi, head of Jazeera Operations Command, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

He said the operation was led by the army's 7th division, police, and fighters from local tribes that have opposed the jihadists, with aerial backing from the coalition.

IS has lost more than half of the territory it once controlled in Iraq and the loss of Mosul would deal a major blow to the "caliphate" it proclaimed there in June 2014.

Meanwhile, the United Nations on Wednesday said more than 2,000 Iraqis a day are fleeing Mosul.

More than 125,000 people have been displaced out of a population of roughly 1.5 million, but the numbers have increased by nearly 50 percent to 2,300 daily from 1,600 over the last few days, the UN refugee agency said.

The humanitarian situation was "dire", with food stockpiles dwindling and the price of staples spiralling, boreholes drying up or turning brackish from over-use and camps and emergency sites to the south and east reaching maximum capacity, it said.

Most of the fleeing civilians are from the eastern districts but people from the besieged west, still under the militants' control, are increasingly attempting to escape, scaling bridges bombed by the coalition and crossing the Tigris by boat.

Meanwhile, a car bomb in eastern Baghdad claimed by Islamic State killed six civilians and wounded 15 on Thursday, police and medics said.



Displaced Iraqis stand in line as they leave a camp near Mosul to go home on Wednesday.

## Blast targets Turkey court

4 killed; nightclub gunman probably an ethnic Uighur

AGENCIES  
 A police officer and a court worker were killed when a car bomb exploded outside a courthouse in the western Turkish city of Izmir yesterday, state-run news agency reported.

At least 11 people were wounded, Dogan news agency reported, after the blast outside the prosecutors and judges' entrance in the usually peaceful city on the Aegean Sea.

Police shot dead two attackers and were searching for a third, sources said.

The bombing comes less than a week after a gunman shot dead 39 people at a nightclub in Istanbul on New Year's Day in an attack claimed by Islamic State. The gunman is still at large.

There has so far been no claim of responsibility for the latest bombing after a year of bloodshed in the Muslim-majority Nato member.

But Izmir governor Erol Ayyildiz said that initial evidence suggested the PKK -- which has fought a deadly insurgency for over three decades -- was behind the attack, rather than IS.

Police detained 20 suspected Islamic State militants thought to be of Central Asian and North African origin in Izmir on Wednesday, in raids Turkish media said were linked to the Istanbul nightclub attack.

The man who killed 39 people in an

attack on an Istanbul nightclub on New Year's Day is probably an ethnic Uighur and Turkish security services now know where he might be hiding, Deputy Prime Minister Veysi Kaynak said yesterday.

Kaynak described the man as a "specially trained" member of a cell who carried out the attack alone and said that while the possibility of him fleeing abroad could not be ruled out, security operations inside



Turkey were more likely to find him.

The suspect, who authorities have not named, shot his way into exclusive Istanbul nightclub Reina early on Sunday and opened fire with an automatic rifle, throwing stun grenades to allow himself to reload and shooting the wounded on the ground.

Turkey faces multiple security threats. It has been hit by a series of bombings over the past 18 months, some of them blamed on

## Dementia risk higher near heavy traffic: Study

AFP, London

People who live near roads laden with heavy traffic face a higher risk of developing dementia than those living further away, possibly because pollutants get into their brains via the blood stream, according to researchers in Canada.

A study in The Lancet medical journal found that people who lived within 50 metres of high-traffic roads had a 7.0 percent higher chance of developing dementia compared to those who lived more than 300 metres away from busy roadways.

"Air pollutants can get into the blood stream and lead to inflammation, which is linked with cardiovascular disease and possibly other conditions such as diabetes. This study suggests air pollutants that can get into the brain via the blood stream can lead to neurological problems," said Ray Copes, an environmental and occupational health expert at Public Health Ontario (PHO) who conducted the study with colleagues from Canada's Institute for

Clinical Evaluative Sciences.

Dementia is caused by brain diseases, most commonly Alzheimer's disease, which result in the loss of brain cells and affect memory, thinking, behaviour, navigational and spatial abilities and the ability to perform everyday activities.

The World Health Organization estimates the number of people with dementia in 2015 at 47.5 million, and that total is rising rapidly as life expectancy increases and societies age. The incurable condition is a leading cause of disability and dependency, and is starting to overtake heart disease as a cause of death in some developed countries.

Independent experts said the Canadian study had important implications for public health around the world. Tom Denning of the Centre for Old Age and Dementia at Britain's Nottingham University said the findings were "interesting and provocative".

The increase in the risk of developing dementia went down to 4.0 percent if people lived 50 to 100 metres from major traffic, and to 2.0 percent if they lived within 101 to 200 metres. At more than 200 metres,



US President Barack Obama is awarded the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service by US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter during the Armed Forces Full Honor Review Farewell Ceremony for Obama at Joint Base Myers-Henderson Hall in Arlington, Virginia, on Wednesday.

## Obama, Team Trump in health care showdown

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama called on congressional Democrats Wednesday to "fight" to preserve his signature health care reform, with its future in doubt as Donald Trump's incoming administration vowed a swift repeal of the controversial law.

Obamacare, the fruit of an eight-year drive to extend medical coverage to tens of millions of Americans, will come under sustained assault when Trump takes office on January 20 with Republican majorities in both chambers of Congress.

But the debate over US health care began in earnest Wednesday at the highest levels, with Obama and Vice President-elect Mike Pence making duelling visits to Capitol Hill to urge their legislative foot soldiers to gird for battle.

"I envy you for the opportunity you are going to have to engage in this fight to protect health care for the American people," the outgoing president told Senate and House Democrats, according to Senator Ed Markey, who attended the 100-minute meeting.

After a crushing election loss, Democrats may have limited options for stalling a repeal of Obamacare without significant Republican defections.

They also face criticism that Obama's reforms have led to rising insurance premiums and a string of technical problems.

But certain elements of Obamacare remain popular, notably the provisions barring companies from refusing coverage due to pre-existing conditions and allowing children to retain coverage on family plans

## UK PM appoints career diplomat as envoy to EU

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May appointed a senior career diplomat as envoy to the European Union to replace an ambassador who quit with a scathing resignation letter that exposed frustration among officials over her strategy.

Tim Barrow, political director of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and a former ambassador to Moscow, would take up the post next week, May's Downing Street office said, following the abrupt resignation of Ivan Rogers.

May intends to launch the two-year process of negotiating to leave the bloc by the end of March.



## Bluefin Tuna fetches \$614,000 at auction

REUTERS, Tokyo

In what could be the last New Year's auction at Tokyo's famed Tsukiji fish market, the owner of the Sushizanmai restaurant chain yesterday paid top price for a single fish, forking over more than \$600,000 for a Pacific bluefin tuna.

For the sixth straight year, Kiyoshi Kimura, president of Kiyomura Corp., which owns the Sushizanmai chain, had the winning bid, paying 72 million yen (\$614,000) for a 212 kilogram (467 pound) Pacific bluefin tuna -- a species experts warn is being overfished.

## ALLEGED RUSSIAN MEDDLING IN US POLLS

### US intel chiefs to testify

AFP, Washington

Top US spy chiefs was to testify yesterday in Congress on alleged Russian interference in the US election as President-elect Donald Trump continued to question intelligence that Moscow was behind the hacking of Democratic party computers.

The American public could get a better idea of the strength of the evidence on the alleged hacking as the Senate Armed Services Committee holds a hearing led by strong Russia critic John McCain, who on Wednesday called Moscow's actions to subvert the US presidential vote an "act of war."

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and National Security Agency Director Michael Rogers are due to testify amid a heated rift between Trump and the intelligence bodies he will rely upon for crucial advice when he becomes president on January 20.

In tweets this week, Trump ridiculed the CIA and FBI conclusions, which are supported by outgoing President Barack Obama, that hackers working at the bidding of the Russian government stole embarrassing Democratic Party documents from the party's computers and leaked the via WikiLeaks to undermine the presidential campaign of Trump rival Hillary Clinton.

Referring to a planned presentation to him by intelligence

chiefs, Trump tweeted: "The 'Intelligence' briefing on so-called 'Russian hacking' was delayed until Friday, perhaps more time needed to build a case. Very strange!"

He then added to the insult by citing WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in his dismissal of the findings of multiple US agencies that Russia was behind the hacking.

"Julian Assange said 'a 14 year old could have hacked Podesta' - why was DNC so careless?" Trump said, referring to the thousands of emails and documents robbed from the computers of the Democratic National Committee and from Clinton campaign chief John Podesta.

Trump's taunts have boosted pressure on the White House, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Director of National Intelligence to back up their claims last month that the Russian government was behind the hacking, intentionally divulging the documents via WikiLeaks to disrupt the election and help Trump.



The intelligence chiefs and Obama have pointed the finger at Russian President Vladimir Putin, saying no such operation could go on in Moscow without the highest level of approval.

On December 29, Obama retaliated, expelling 35 Russian "intelligence operatives," placing sanctions on Russian government officials and intelligence services, and