

Syria victory in sight

Says Assad in an interview with French media, rules out truce with rebels in Wadi Barada

AFP, Paris

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said in an interview with French media aired yesterday that his forces are on the road to victory after recapturing the key city of Aleppo last month. "We don't consider it (retaking Aleppo from the rebels) as a victory. The victory will be when you get rid of all the terrorists," Assad said in the interview with France Info, LCP and RTL television.

"But it's a tipping point in the course of the war and it is on the way to victory," he said in excerpts provided by RTL.

Assad also ruled out a truce with rebels in an area near Damascus which supplies the capital with its water needs.

Millions of people have been without water for weeks after fighting damaged key infrastructure in the Wadi Barada region that is the main water source for Damascus.

It was Assad's first interview with French media since the December 22 recapture of the rebel-held east of Aleppo, which had been under siege for months.

Rebel forces, who seized eastern districts

of the city in 2012, agreed to withdraw after a month-long army offensive that drove them from more than 90 percent of their former territory.

Asked about heavy bombing raids that ravaged the city and claimed large numbers of civilian lives, Assad said, in excerpts provided by France Info: "But you have to liberate, and this is the price sometimes."

He added: "But at the end, the people are liberated from the terrorists" -- Assad's term for all fighters opposed to his rule.

"Of course it's very painful for us as Syrians to see any part of our country destroyed, or to see any bloodshed anywhere," he said, adding "Everywarisbad."

The Syrian president asked, "Is it better to leave (civilians) under their (rebels') supervision, under their oppression, by beheading, by killing?"

Earlier Sunday in Damascus, Assad told visiting French lawmakers that he was "optimistic" about new peace talks planned for later this month in Kazakhstan.

The talks in Astana are being organised by Syria's allies Russia and Iran and rebel backer Turkey.



Riot police disperse protesters trying to march to the Turkish Parliament in Ankara, Turkey, yesterday. Turkish lawmakers gather to debate the proposed constitutional changes aimed at expanding the powers of the presidency under Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The new constitution, which would replace the basic law drawn up after Turkey's 1980 military coup, seeks to establish for the first time a presidential system for ruling the modern republic created from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWSIN brief

Militants kill 3 Indian workers in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Three civilian workers were killed yesterday when unidentified militants attacked a military road construction camp in Indian-administered Kashmir. A spokesman said the army had launched a search for the attackers, who fled after firing at the General Reserve Engineering Force camp near the international border with Pakistan while the workers were sleeping.

Truck bomb kills 8 cops in Egypt's Sinai

AFP, Cairo

An assault involving a car bomb against an Egyptian security checkpoint in the Sinai Peninsula killed seven policemen and a civilian yesterday, the interior ministry said. The ministry said assailants tried driving a vehicle packed with explosives into a checkpoint, but police fired on it, setting it off before it reached the post.

Boko Haram attacks Nigeria military base

AFP, Kano

Boko Haram killed at least five soldiers at a military base in northeast Nigeria, while suicide bombers killed three people in the key city of Maiduguri, the authorities said yesterday. The weekend attacks will again prompt questions about the extent to which the Islamic State group affiliate is a spent force, as Nigeria's government has claimed.

Iran mourns 'sheikh of moderation' Rafsanjani

AFP, Tehran

Iran began three days of mourning yesterday after the death of ex-president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a pillar of the Islamic revolution who became a leading counterweight to hardliners. Tributes poured in for the moderate cleric, including from President Hassan Rouhani, who was reportedly at Rafsanjani's bedside before he died of a heart attack aged 82.

Chinese cops kill three "rioters" in Xinjiang

AFP, Beijing

Chinese police shot dead three "rioters" in the restive Xinjiang region after they resisted arrest, state media reported yesterday, in the second such incident in less than a fortnight. The shooting happened Sunday following a manhunt for three suspected members of a "violent terror group" linked to a 2015 attack in Pishan county, according to the regional government's official Tianshan website.

US INTELLIGENCE REPORT ON PUTIN UK launches cyber security review

REUTERS, London

The British government said yesterday it is launching a national inquiry into cyber security to assess the extent to which the UK is protected from an ever-increasing tide of attacks worldwide.

The inquiry comes only two days after US intelligence agencies said Russian president Vladimir Putin ordered an effort to help US president-elect Donald Trump's electoral chances by discrediting Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US presidential campaign.

"Attention has recently focused on the potential exploitation of the cyber domain by other states and associated actors for political purposes," said Margaret Beckett, chair of parliament's joint committee on national security strategy.

"But this is just one source of threat that the government must address," she added, in a statement.

Cyber attacks in the UK have been on the rise, with businesses such as banks and retailers increasingly becoming targets for hackers.

Reported attacks on financial institutions in Britain rose from just five in 2014 to 75 in the year to October 2016, data from Britain's Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) show. Last year, retailer Tesco's banking arm suffered an attack which saw some 2.5 million pounds stolen from 9,000 current accounts.

The inquiry will look at issues including the types of cyber threats faced by the UK, the extent of human, financial and technical capital committed to address threats, and the development of offensive cyber capabilities.

Troops reach the Tigris

Iraqi forces eye recapture of the city from IS militants within days

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi forces will retake east Mosul from the jihadists within days, a top commander said yesterday, after his fighters in the city reached the Tigris River for the first time.

Baghdad's forces have retaken a series of areas in eastern Mosul since launching an operation to recapture the city from the Islamic State group on October 17, but the west remains under IS control.

East Mosul will be retaken within "a few days, God willing," Staff Lieutenant General Abdulghani al-Assadi, a top commander in Iraq's elite Counter-Terrorism Service, told AFP.

Assadi's remarks came a day after officials said Iraqi forces in Mosul had reached the eastern side of a bridge across the Tigris River, which divides the city, for the first time during the operation.

Assadi said that "the bridge fell tactically," though Iraqi forces were still some 150 metres (yards) away.

The general also said that "our units... are close to encircling Mosul University," whose sprawling campus is located east of the Tigris.

IS overran Mosul and swathes of other territory north and west of Baghdad in 2014, sweeping aside security forces that were ill-prepared to face the assault.



An Iraqi soldier holds an IS flag during a battle with militants in Mosul yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Tens of thousands of Iraqi forces launched an offensive on October 17 to retake Mosul, the last major urban centre in Iraq still controlled by the group that seized around a third of the country in 2014.

Several areas around the city, Iraq's second largest, were swiftly reconquered, but the elite forces that pushed into the streets of Mosul itself have faced stiffer than expected resistance.

In late December, the federal advance inside the city had slowed to a crawl but a fresh coordination effort between CTS and other forces gave fresh impetus to the operation.

Iraqi forces, backed by increased support from the US-led coalition that has carried out the bulk of air strikes against IS and deployed military advisers on the ground, made rapid progress since the start of 2017.

"It's pretty excellent progress that they've made over the last couple of weeks, since they restarted the operation on the 29th" of December, coalition spokesman Colonel John Dorrian said.

"They have synchronised three axes of advance... and that's more than the enemy can solve," he said, referring to elite interior ministry and other forces also operating inside Mosul.



Streep takes on Trump at Golden Globes

AFP, Los Angeles

Three-time Oscar winner Meryl Streep berated President-elect Donald Trump for his divisive rhetoric as she received a lifetime achievement award at the Golden Globes on Sunday.

The 67-year-old fought to control her emotions as she received a standing ovation during her acceptance speech for the Cecil B DeMille Award, handed out by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association.

"You and all of us in this room, really, belong to the most vilified segments in American society right now. Think about it. Hollywood, foreigners, and the press," she said to her peers with a laugh.

"But who are we? And, you know, what is Hollywood anyway? It's just a bunch of people from other places."

"Hollywood is crawling with outsiders and foreigners. If you kick 'em all out, you'll have nothing to watch but football and mixed martial arts, which are not the arts," she said, holding back tears.

Meanwhile, Trump yesterday lashed out at Meryl Streep, accusing her of being a Hillary Clinton "flunky" after the actress berated him at the Golden Globes ceremony.

"Meryl Streep, one of the most over-rated actresses in Hollywood, doesn't know me but attacked last night at the Golden Globes," Trump wrote on Twitter.

"She is a Hillary flunky who lost big. For the 100th time, I never 'mocked' a disabled reporter (would never do that) but simply showed him 'groveling' when he totally changed a 16 year old story that he had written in order to make me look bad," Trump wrote in a series of tweets.

ICBM test-launch anytime: N Korea

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea said on Sunday it can test launch an intercontinental ballistic missile at any time from any location set by leader Kim Jong Un, saying the United States' hostile policy was to blame for its arms development.

Kim said on Jan. 1 that his nuclear-capable country was close to test-launching an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).

"The ICBM will be launched anytime and anywhere determined by the supreme headquarters of the DPRK," an unnamed Foreign Ministry spokesman was quoted as saying by the official KCNA news agency, using the acronym for the country's name.

The North is formally known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

The United States said on Thursday that North Korea had demonstrated a "qualitative" improvement in its nuclear and missile capabilities after an unprecedented level of tests last year.

Experts have said that while North Korea may be close to testing an ICBM, it would likely take years to perfect the weapon.

Once fully developed, a North Korean ICBM could threaten the continental United States, which is around 9,000 km (5,500 miles) from the North. ICBMs have a minimum range of about 5,500 km.



Devotees carry a woman who fainted while taking part in the annual procession of the Black Nazarene in Manila, Philippines, yesterday. About a million and a half barefoot devotees praying for miracles joined the procession for a black statue of Jesus Christ being paraded through the old commercial centre of Manila.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Lanka strips suit from dress code

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka President Maithripala Sirisena yesterday overturned a 26-year-old decree that required top bureaucrats to wear a suit and tie, saying they could now opt for "more comfortable" clothing instead.

"We must adopt clothing that suits our weather and climate," Sirisena said. "That is why I say that officials no longer need to wear suits. From now on, it is not a mandatory requirement."

He made the announcement while speaking at a conference in Colombo and said that the 1991 decree had forced officials in the tropical country to suffer in uncomfortable clothing.

Sri Lanka's civil service is largely based on traditions inherited from the country's former British colonial rulers who governed the island nation from 1815 until 1948.

Unlike bureaucrats, male Sri Lankan politicians have traditionally opted to wear the national dress -- a long-sleeved cotton tunic and sarong -- instead of Western clothing while in public in an effort to burnish their nationalistic credentials.

A diverse and multicultural country, Sri Lanka is home to many religions, ethnic groups, and languages.

Pak test-fires first submarine cruise missile

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday test-fired its first submarine-launched cruise missile, capable of carrying a nuclear warhead and giving the country a credible second strike capability, the military said.

The missile was fired from an underwater mobile platform and hit its target with precise accuracy, it said in a statement.

A military spokesman confirmed to AFP the missile, with a range of 450 km (280 miles), could carry a nuclear warhead.

"Babur-3 is a sea-based variant of Ground Launched Cruise Missile (GLCM) Babur-2, which was successfully tested earlier in December, last year," the statement said.

Cold snap grips Europe

10 killed in Poland; thousands stranded in Turkey

AFP, Warsaw

A cold snap gripping Europe has killed 10 more people in Poland, stranded thousands in snow-covered Turkey and brought fresh misery for both migrants and the homeless.

Double-digit sub-zero temperatures have claimed more than 30 lives over the past few days, many of them migrants or homeless people found frozen to death.

Sunday was the deadliest day this winter for cold-related deaths in Poland, where temperatures have plunged to below minus 20 degrees Celsius (minus 4 Fahrenheit) in some regions.

"Yesterday, 10 people died of cold," Poland's centre for national security (RCB) said yesterday in a statement, adding that "the number of hypothermia victims has reached 65," since November 1.

Heavy snowfall in Turkey's main city Istanbul paralysed traffic for a third straight day with the Bosphorus Strait closed to ships and hundreds of flights cancelled.

Ferry services between the European and Asian sides of the city were scrapped and schools across the city closed.

Flagship carrier Turkish Airlines said only 292 departures

from Istanbul's Ataturk Airport were expected yesterday. On a normal day, the airport can accommodate over 1,500 landings and take-offs.

Turkish Airlines CEO Bilal Eksi said more than 600 flights had been cancelled on Sunday and over 10,000 travellers unable to reach Istanbul had been put up in hotels worldwide.

A 68-year-old homeless man was found frozen to death in the Macedonian capital Skopje while in Serbia, the southeastern town of Sjenica saw the mercury plunge to -33 degrees Celsius.

Traffic on the Danube and Sava rivers was halted in Serbia. Scores of migrants in the capital Belgrade took shelter in a warehouse near the railway station, spurning shelters provided by the government for fear they would be deported back to their countries.

"It's very difficult, especially at night," said Niamat, a 13-year-old Afghan. The temperature overnight was -15 degrees Celsius.

"I have been waiting here for three months and I do not know when I will be able to continue my journey," said the young migrant, who is travelling alone.

