

IS attacks kill dozens in Syria

President Assad linked to Syrian chemical attacks for first time

REUTERS, Beirut

Islamic State militants launched their biggest attack in months on government-held areas of the Syrian city of Deir al-Zor yesterday, killing dozens of civilians and government troops, a war monitor said.

At least six large explosions rocked the city since dawn as the militants clashed with the army and allied forces, the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported.

Syrian government warplanes hit back against Islamic State positions, it added.

A military media unit run by Damascus's ally Hezbollah said the army was repelling attacks by the hardline jihadist group along several frontlines, including east of the city and around its military airport.

Islamic State controls most of Deir al-Zor province, which borders Iraq, including more than half the city, and has besieged the remaining government-held areas of the city for nearly two years.

The Syrian government and its

Russian ally have made regular aid drops into the encircled zone, where about 200,000 people live, lacking food and medicine.

Deir al-Zor province links Islamic State's de facto capital in the Syrian

ons in the Syrian conflict, according to a document seen by Reuters.

A joint inquiry for the United Nations and global watchdog the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) had



A Syrian boy affected by what activists say was a gas attack on the town of Telminnes receives treatment in a hospital in April 21, 2014. PHOTO: REUTERS

city of Raqqa with territory controlled by the militant group in Iraq.

Meanwhile, international investigators have said for the first time that they suspect President Bashar al-Assad and his brother are responsible for the use of chemical weap-

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Assad, his younger brother Maher and other high-ranking figures - indicating the decision to use toxic weapons came from the very top, according to a source familiar with the inquiry.

The Assads could not be reached for comment but a Syrian government official said accusations that government forces had used chemical weapons had "no basis in truth".

The government has repeatedly denied using such weapons during the civil war, which is almost six years old, saying all the attacks highlighted by the inquiry were the work of rebels or the Islamic State militant group.

The probe is mandated by the UN Security Council to identify individuals and organisations responsible for chemical attacks in Syria.

Virginia Gamba, the head of the Joint Investigative Mechanism, denied any list of individual suspects had yet been compiled by the inquiry.

The use of chemical weapons is banned under international law and could constitute a war crime.

While the inquiry has no judicial powers, any naming of suspects could lead to their prosecution.

Trump shrugs off talk of splits with cabinet picks

Says he wants his nominees to 'be themselves'

AFP, Washington

US President-elect Donald Trump on Friday downplayed talk of ideological splits within his incoming cabinet on Russia, torture and other key issues, saying he wanted his nominees to "be themselves."

With inaugural preparations gathering steam, Trump shrugged off the strikingly divergent positions adopted by several of his cabinet nominees, who publicly contradicted him in Senate confirmation hearings.

"All of my Cabinet nominee (sic) are looking good and doing a great job," he said in an early morning tweet. "I want them to be themselves and express their own thoughts, not mine!"

The 70-year-old Republican later elaborated, telling reporters at Trump Tower: "I could have said, 'Do this, say that.' I don't want that. I want them all to be themselves."

"And I'm going to do the right thing, whatever it is. I may be right. And they may be right."

Over three days of feisty hearings this week, Trump's nominees warned of the threat posed by Russia, hailed Nato, repudiated torture, defended the US intelligence

community and cautioned against withdrawing from the Iran nuclear treaty and the Paris climate accord.

On virtually every controversial foreign policy stance that Trump took during the campaign, they hedged and backtracked and sought to assure senators that they shared the consensus that has shaped Western strategic thinking and institutions since World War II.

The contrast was all the more striking against the backdrop of an ugly feud between Trump and the US intelligence agencies, stoked by the leak of an unsubstantiated report that Russia had gathered compromising personal and financial material on the president-elect.

In his confirmation hearing Thursday, Trump's choice for CIA director, Mike Pompeo, said he had not seen evidence the intelligence agencies were politicised.

Trump, who sees an opportunity to cooperate with Moscow in fighting jihadist groups like the Islamic State, has expressed admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin, and only reluctantly accepted US intelligence's conclusion that Russian hackers acting on Putin's authority interfered in the US elections.



Gondolas are seen during snowfall in the Venice lagoon, northern Italy, on Friday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Winter storms batter Europe

AFP, London

A powerful winter storm battered Europe on Friday, knocking power out for 330,000 homes in France, prompting the evacuation of thousands of seaside dwellers in Britain and disrupting travel.

Britain issued more than a dozen severe flood warnings, meaning there was a risk of danger to life, and deployed the military to help thousands of people to evacuate their homes in several seaside communities.

Since the end of last week, a winter cold snap across Europe has killed more than 60 people, with homeless people and migrants stranded in countries like Greece and Serbia most at risk.

In France, a woman was killed by a falling tree in her garden in a village near the Mediterranean resort of Nice, while another woman in Albania was found dead on Thursday outside her home in the southern town of Saranda.

The storm, officially named Egon, also battered Belgium and Germany, where the key international hub of Frankfurt airport cancelled 120 flights.

At one point overnight, 330,000 homes were without power in France, although this was reduced to 35,000 by Friday night.

Winds of up to 146 kilometres (90 miles) an hour hit France's Channel port of Dieppe overnight, while parts of Germany were bracing for up to 30 centimetres (12 inches) of snow, according to German weather officials.

In Ukraine, officials said sub-zero temperatures across the country have claimed 40 lives since late December.

Deaths could triple: report

CNN ONLINE

Coal emissions in Southeast Asia are projected to triple by 2030, resulting in an increase in pollution-related deaths, according to a new Harvard-backed report published Friday.

Researchers at Harvard and Greenpeace say the demand for electricity in Southeast Asia is projected to increase by a staggering 83% between 2011 and 2035 -- twice the global average.

"Air pollution in China and India has received a lot of scientific attention," said Harvard University's Shannon Kopplitz, a lead researcher in the project, in a statement.

However, she says the "impacts of planned coal power expansion in the rest of the Southeast and East Asian region have been understudied."

The peer-reviewed study cites economic development, population growth and urban migration as reasons for the huge leap in energy demand, and says that in Southeast Asia -- unlike in the US, Europe, China or India -- these demands are still likely to be met by coal-fired power plants rather than renewable energy. It states the public health consequences could be "severe."

The report estimates that approximately 20,000 people in the region die every year from coal-fired power station

emissions, and it projects this number will increase to 70,000 by 2030 if all the proposed power plant projects in the region go ahead.

The number of power stations in Indonesia is projected to more than double, from 147 to 323. Myanmar is expected to see its current number grow more than five times, from three to 16.

Emissions from coal in Southeast Asia will therefore triple by 2030, with the largest increases in Indonesia and Vietnam, it says.

However, some analysts argue that the damage these nations are doing is just a drop in the ocean.

An estimated 100,000 people die annually from coal-fired power plants in India.

IEA analysts argue that attractive government incentives and long-term energy sector planning would help Southeast Asian nations prioritise renewable technology in the face of ambitious development targets and accessible, affordable coal.

"To reach competitive power generation costs, the renewable energy industry needs to reach a certain scale," says Lauri Myllyvirta, an air pollution specialist with Greenpeace and one of the authors of the study. "This renewable energy take-off has not happened yet in most of the countries in our study."

AIR POLLUTION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA



ALARMING RISE OF DANGEROUS SUPERBUGS

US woman dies of infection resistant to all 26 antibiotics

AFP, Miami

A US woman has died from an infection that was resistant to all 26 available antibiotics, health officials said this week, raising new concerns about the rise of dangerous superbugs.

The woman, who was in her 70s, died in Nevada in September, and had recently been hospitalized in India with fractured leg bones, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported.

The cause of death was sepsis, following infection from a rare bacteria known as carbapenem-resistant Enterobacteriaceae (CRE), which is resistant to all antibiotics available in the United States.

The specific strain of CRE, known as Klebsiella pneumoniae, was isolated from one of her wounds in August.

Tests were negative for the mcr-1 gene -- a great concern to health experts because it makes bacteria resistant to the

antibiotic of last resort, colistin.

Postmortem tests showed her infection might have responded to a treatment called fosfomycin, which is not approved in the United States.

Paul Hoskisson, a researcher at the University of Strathclyde, in Scotland, said that several European countries, including Britain, license fosfomycin for intravenous use in such cases.

"This is important because we are seeing increasing numbers of drug-resistant infections, and this is one of the first cases for Klebsiella where no drug options were open to the medical staff."

Multi-drug-resistant Klebsiella pneumoniae has been described by the World Health Organization as "an urgent threat to human health."

According to Nick Thomson, leader of the bacterial genomics and evolution group at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute in England, this bacteria is likely to become more and more resistant.

UK PM given one-month Brexit plan deadline

MPs demand it by mid-Feb, urge clarity, transitional deal

AFP, London

An influential group of MPs called on Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday to publish by mid-February her plans for leaving the EU, and urged her to prepare for a transitional deal to limit uncertainty for business.

The cross-party Brexit committee called for a policy document clarifying the government's "broad aims", including whether Britain should stay in the single market and customs union, to allow proper scrutiny before exit talks start.

May has promised to trigger Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty, which sets out a two-year timeframe for exit negotiations, by the end of March.

"We're not asking the government to give away its red lines or negotiating fallback positions, but we do want clarity on its broad aims given the significance and complexity of the negotiating task," said committee chairman Hilary Benn.

Ministers have said they want to agree both the terms of Britain's departure and a new trade relationship with the EU within the two-year timeframe, but European leaders have warned this will be tough.

Echoing calls by many business leaders, the committee said it would be wise to prepare for a transition deal in the event that a new trade agreement was not ready.

The committee said the government should seek continued access to EU markets in financial services, for the benefit of both sides, and warned against a return to tariffs in other sectors.

It also called for a commitment that British lawmakers -- most of whom opposed leaving the EU in the June referendum -- will have a vote on the final deal.

May has said that giving a "running commentary" on her plans could harm Britain's negotiating position, but has promised more details in a major speech on Tuesday.



Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas (L) exchange gifts with Pope Francis, during a private audience at the Vatican, yesterday. Abbas yesterday warned that moving the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem would "not help the peace process," as he opened a Palestinian embassy to the Vatican.

PHOTO: AFP

OBAMACARE

Congress okays first step for repealing bill

AFP, Washington

The US House of Representatives on Friday joined the Senate in passing a critical measure that marks the first major step toward repealing outgoing President Barack Obama's landmark but controversial health care reforms.

The House's near party-line vote of 227 to 198 approved a budget blueprint which provides Republicans, who control both chambers of Congress, with a framework for dismantling the Affordable Care Act.

The Senate passed the resolution Thursday. It received no Democratic support in either chamber, highlighting the intensely partisan fight that lies ahead.

The resolution provides Republicans with a powerful tool, called reconciliation, which allows repeal legislation to proceed through the 100-member Senate with a simple majority, protected from a Democratic filibuster that requires a 60-vote threshold to overcome.

Unwinding Obamacare will be a monumental task. Republican leadership is moving carefully, stressing it does not want to "pull the rug out from anyone" who might lose coverage if there is no replacement plan on offer.

The White House touts Obamacare as a success, saying more than 20 million Americans have gained health insurance through the law.

The Affordable Care Act forbids insurance companies from denying health care due to pre-existing conditions, abolishes lifetime caps on care, and allows children to stay on their parents' plans until age 26, three provisions that have proved popular nationwide.