



(From top, clockwise) Smoke billows as Iraqi forces attack Mosul airport during an offensive to retake the western side of the city from IS jihadis yesterday; army launch a rocket towards IS militants during a battle with militants near Ghazlani military complex; and civilians flee fighting near Mosul.

IS loses Al-Bab

Claim Syria rebels; peace talks stumble over meeting format

AFP, Beirut

Turkish-backed Syrian rebels yesterday announced that they had taken full control of the northern town of Al-Bab from the Islamic State jihadist group after weeks of deadly fighting.

Turkey's state-run Anadolu Agency reported that rebels had overrun the centre of the town, which had been a key IS stronghold just 25 kilometres south of the border.

"We are announcing Al-Bab completely liberated, and we are now clearing mines from the residential neighbourhoods," said Ahmad Othman, commander of the Sultan Mourad rebel group.

But the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that IS fighters were still present in parts of the town and the rebels were in control of less than half of it.

Turkish defence minister said armed forces and allied rebels have almost total control of the town after entering the centre of the former jihadist stronghold.

The rebels launched their offensive to capture Al-Bab last year with the support of Turkish ground troops, artillery and air strikes.

Meanwhile in Geneva, the UN's Syria envoy met rival negotiators gathered for peace talks yesterday, but even getting them into the same room appeared uncertain as hopes remained slim for a breakthrough.

Persistent violence and deadlock over Syria's political future are clouding the start of "Geneva 4," the fourth round of UN-sponsored talks on the conflict which has killed more than 310,000 people since 2011.

UN envoy Staffan de Mistura had already warned that he was not expecting a breakthrough in the first peace talks since April 2016.

Yesterday, he held separate meetings with the regime and opposition delegates, notably to discuss the agenda and the format for negotiations proper.

Mistura said he hoped to bring them together later in the day, but a tentatively-planned afternoon event was delayed amid disagreement over arrangements.

After the initial bilateral talks with De Mistura, an opposition source said the UN envoy was understood to want a "round-table" with all the parties.

But the opposition is divided between the main umbrella High Negotiations Committee (HNC) -- which wants direct negotiations with the regime -- and delegations from Cairo and Moscow.

"This is not accepted at all since it means all parties are equal and will turn to be exchanging points of view and not negotiating," the opposition source told AFP.

Neither regime delegation chief Bashar al-Jaafari nor opposition team chief negotiator Nasr al-Hariri spoke as they arrived at UN offices in the Swiss city.

On the eve of the talks, Russia called on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to stop bombing during the discussions -- but De Mistura downplayed hopes for the negotiations.

4 Indonesians wealthier than poorest 100m

AFP, Jakarta

The four richest Indonesians are wealthier than the poorest 100 million people in the country, a study has found, highlighting how huge numbers have been left behind as the economy booms.

Oxfam said that President Joko Widodo had failed to fulfil pledges to fight inequality and called on the government to urgently increase spending on public services and make corporations and the wealthy pay more tax.

Indonesia has enjoyed an economic boom that has reduced the number of people living in extreme poverty but the gap between rich and poor has risen faster than in any other Southeast Asian country in the past 20 years, the Oxfam study said.

"The benefits of growth have not been shared equally, and millions have been left behind," said the research, which was released earlier this week.

"The widening of the gap between the rich and the rest is a serious threat to Indonesia's future prosperity. If inequality is not tackled, then reducing poverty will be much more difficult, and social instability could increase."

Russia open to Syria 'safe zones'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Russia is open to the concept of "safe zones" in Syria, but only if they are approved by Bashar al-Assad.

Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, said he had briefly discussed the US-backed plan with Donald Trump's administration and was told specifics were still being worked out.

"We believe that any such initiatives concerning the territory of Syria need to be coordinated with the Syrian government - otherwise it would be hard to implement them," he said at a news conference.

"Having described our understanding of what we can talk about, we are waiting for clarifications from Washington."

"We are also ready to discuss other proposals concerning our cooperation in Syria."

Syria's state news agency said that any attempt to establish safe zones in the country without coordination with

Damascus would be a violation of national sovereignty.

Lavrov met Rex Tillerson, the US Secretary of State, at the Munich Security Conference in Germany following a speech where he called for a "post-West world order".

Russia has been at loggerheads with the US, Britain and much of the West over its support for Assad's government in the Syrian civil war.

The country's air power and deployment of "military advisors" on the ground has been key to reversing gains made by rebels, including in the battle for Aleppo.

Vladimir Putin characterised the launch of his intervention in 2015 as an operation against Isis and jihadis but observers have accused the Russian air force of committing war crimes by bombing civilian areas controlled by opposition groups.

US President Donald Trump has supported the idea of "safe zones" to

prevent refugees from leaving Syria, telling a rally of supporters in Florida they would be funded by Gulf nations.

"We're going to have the Gulf states pay for those safe zones, they have nothing but money," Mr Trump said.

He discussed the plan with King Salman of Saudi Arabia in January, who reportedly agreed that safe zones were the best way forward in Syria and Yemen, although no concrete plans have emerged.

The previous Obama administration assessed the prospect of no-fly zones in Syria to protect civilians from Syrian government air strikes but Russia's intervention raised the threat that moves to enforce restrictions could trigger a military confrontation between the two countries.

Concerns have also been raised about the logistics of installing the ground forces and air power needed to protect such areas and the cooperation it would require between warring factions.



Poll: Trump's approval rating dips further

CNN ONLINE

President Donald Trump's approval rating has dropped over the last month, with a majority of American voters now disapproving of his job performance, a new poll has found.

In a national survey released Wednesday, Quinnipiac University found that 38% of American voters approve of Trump's job performance, while 55% disapprove.

A poll released earlier this month by Quinnipiac taken shortly after Trump's inauguration found that 42% of American voters approve of his job performance, while 51% disapprove.

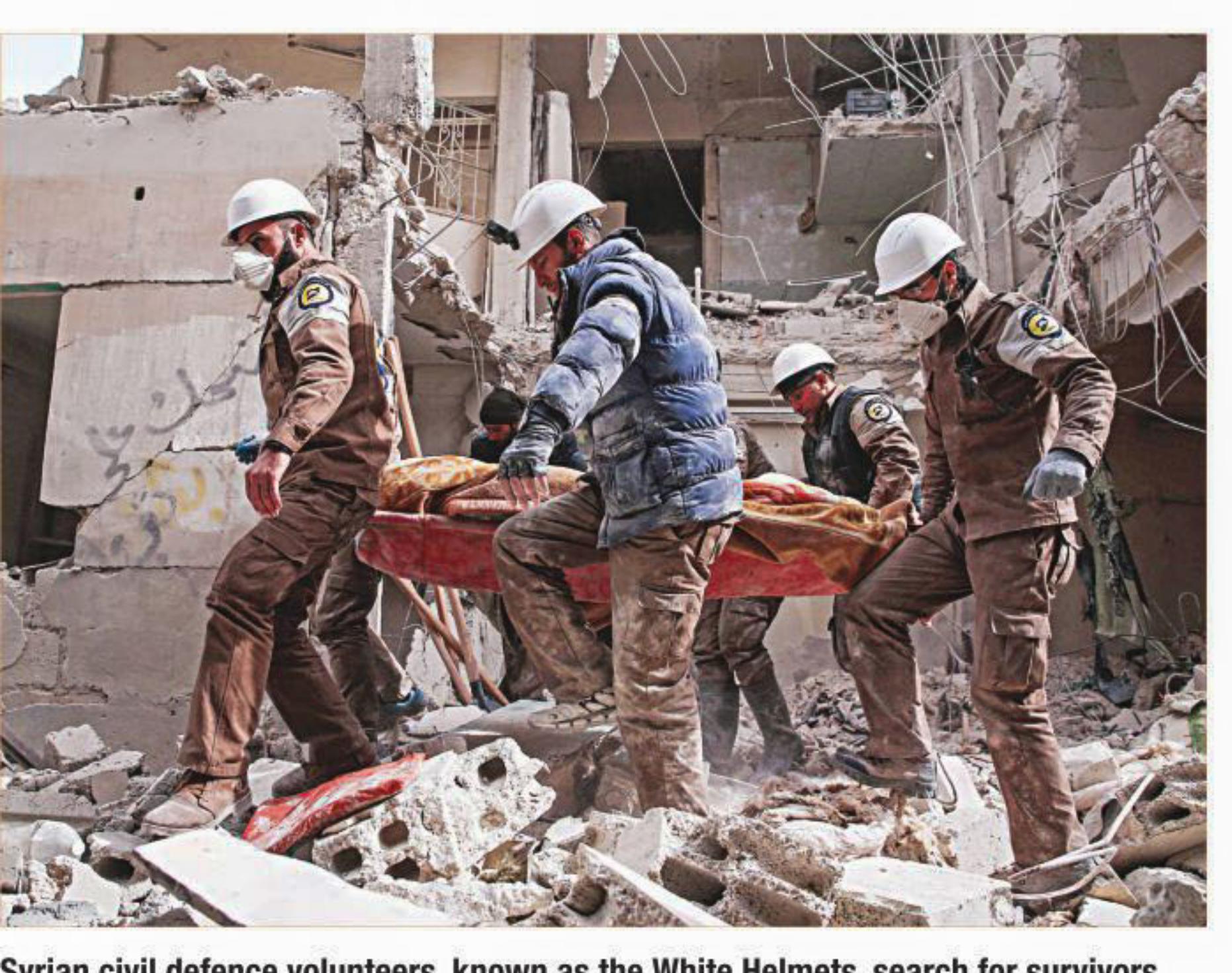
Since then, Trump has instituted a variety of controversial measures, including his executive order on immigration and new deportation policies. His administration has many positions currently unfilled, and town halls of Republican members of Congress have been the sites of protests and outbursts, largely concerning Trump's call to repeal and replace Obamacare.

Thirty-eight percent of American voters said they trust Trump to do the right thing "almost all of the time" or "most of the time," while 61% said they trust him to do what is right "some of the time" or "hardly ever."



Floodwaters surround children's park on Wednesday, in San Jose, California. Thousands of people were ordered to evacuate their homes early Wednesday in the northern California city of San Jose as floodwaters inundated neighborhoods and forced the shutdown of a major highway.

PHOTO: AFP



Syrian civil defence volunteers, known as the White Helmets, search for survivors following reported government airstrike on the rebel-held neighbourhood of Tishrin, on the northeastern outskirts of the capital Damascus, on Wednesday.

Trump's new travel ban 'delayed'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Donald Trump's new travel ban has been delayed until next week, a White House official has said.

The new executive order, replacing the directive suspending entry to the US to citizens of seven mostly Muslim countries, was expected this week but will now be issued "sometime next week," said the official.

Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly has called the revised order a "more streamlined version" of the original travel ban, which sparked mass protests.

The first ban, signed on 27 January, temporarily restricted entry to the US for citizens of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen and Libya -- and indefinitely to Syrian refugees.

It caused widespread confusion at airports in the US and elsewhere, but was blocked after three federal judges ruled that it was not legitimate.

Instead of fighting for the order to be reinstated, the president is submitting a new one with only "minor technical differences", said senior White House adviser Stephen Miller.

Mexico angrily rejects new US deportation policy

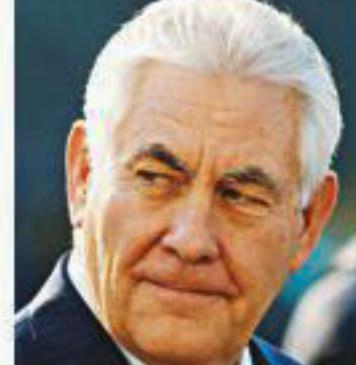
AGENCIES

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson meets with Mexican leaders on Thursday to try to calm a row over President Donald Trump's trade and immigration policies.

A bid by US President Donald Trump to deport non-Mexican illegal migrants to Mexico that has enraged Mexicans will top the agenda of meetings, Mexico sources said.

The US government on Tuesday said it would seek to deport many illegal immigrants to Mexico if they entered the United States from there, regardless of their nationality, prompting a fiery response from Mexican officials.

Calling the measure "unilateral" and "unprecedented," Mexican Foreign Minister Luis Videgaray said new immigration guidelines would top the agenda of meetings in Mexico City with Tillerson and Homeland



Security Secretary John Kelly.

Trump has outraged Mexico by vowing to build a wall along the border to keep out migrants, whom he branded rapists and criminals during his presidential campaign.

Apart from deportations, Trump has also threatened to put up barriers to Mexican exports, shift jobs from that country back to the United States and even halt remittances by US-based Mexicans back to their families.

Tillerson and Kelly were scheduled to meet with Pena Nieto at 1900 GMT after talks with Mexico's ministers of foreign affairs, finance and government.

Trump's stance on Mexico has driven the countries' relations to their lowest point in the countries.

Pena Nieto canceled a planned meeting with Trump in Washington last month over the US leader's vow to make Mexico pay for the wall.