

BATTLE FOR WEST MOSUL

A man cries as he carries his daughter while walking from an Islamic State-controlled part of Mosul towards Iraqi special forces soldiers during a battle in Mosul; a family flees the fighting; and a special forces soldier checks men for explosive belts. Iraqi forces attacked four jihadist-held areas in Mosul yesterday, the latest push in a battle for the city's west that has displaced more than 45,000 people since it began. Iraqi forces have recaptured several areas in west Mosul since launching the push to retake it on February 19, but their pace slowed recently amid several days of bad weather, which muddies streets and makes air support more difficult. Pictures were taken on Saturday.



PHOTO: REUTERS



WAR ON IS IN NORTHERN SYRIA

More than 65,000 flee fierce fighting

AFP, Manbij

More than 65,000 people have been forced to flee fighting in northern Syria, ravaged in recent weeks by dual offensives on the Islamic State group, the United Nations said.

The UN's humanitarian agency (OCHA) said that tens of thousands of people have left their homes in northern Aleppo province, particularly around the former jihadist stronghold of Al-Bab.

"This includes nearly 40,000 people from Al-Bab city and nearby Taduf town, as well as 26,000 people from communities to the east of Al-Bab", OCHA said.

Turkey-backed rebels seized Al-Bab from IS on February 23 after several months of fighting.

OCHA said the nearly 40,000 people displaced from the town fled north to areas controlled by other rebel forces, and that the "high contamination" of unexploded bombs and booby traps set by retreating jihadists was complicating efforts to return.

And since February 25, OCHA said, another 26,000 people fled violence further east, where Syrian government forces supported by Russian air power have also been waging a fierce offensive against IS.

Many of those fleeing the violence sought refuge in areas around Manbij, a town controlled by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

H-1B VISA

US suspends fast-track processing

AFP, Washington

US authorities are temporarily suspending the speedy, premium processing of a visa which is often used by tech firms to recruit foreign skilled workers.

The H-1B visa is issued to tens of thousands of highly skilled foreign nationals each year, but as of April 3, applicants will no longer be able to use a costly shortcut to rush the processing of their visas.

On Friday, USCIS announced that the "premium processing" of H-1B visas -- which saw wait times reduced from several months to 15 days -- would be temporarily suspended for up to six months.

The US offers 85,000 H-1B visas every year, most of which are snapped up by Indian outsourcing.

Trump, Obama row flares

The president asks Congress to probe alleged illicit investigations against his campaign; US media says he to sign revised travel ban today

AGENCIES

President Donald Trump is asking Congress to probe "potentially politically motivated investigations" during the 2016 campaign, the White House said Sunday.

The announcement came one day after Trump took to Twitter to accuse his predecessor Barack Obama of tapping his phones ahead of the November election, without providing evidence of the explosive charge.

An Obama spokesman has denied Trump's accusation as "simply false."

In his statement, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer referred to unspecified reports of "potentially politically motivated investigations immediately ahead of the 2016 election" as "very troubling."

"President Donald J Trump is requesting that as part of their investigation into Russian activity, the congressional intelligence committees exercise their oversight authority to determine whether executive branch investigative powers were abused in 2016," Spicer said.

He added that there would be no more comment on the matter from Trump or the White House.

Trump leveled his charges against Obama early Saturday, at the end of a week in which his administration was battered by controversy over communications between Russian

officials and some of his senior aides including Attorney General Jeff Sessions.

"I'd bet a good lawyer could make a great case out of the fact that President Obama was tapping my phones in October, just prior to Election!" Trump wrote.

"How low has President Obama gone to tapp (sic) my phones during the very sacred election process. This is Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy!" he wrote in another tweet, referring to the political scandal that toppled president Richard Nixon in 1974.

Meanwhile, US media reported that Trump is expected to sign a revised travel ban today, just over a month after his original decree sowed controversy across the United States and chaos at airports.

The president will sign the new executive order at the Department of Homeland Security, according to Politico, which cited senior government officials.

It was unclear what changes Trump planned to make, according to the publication.

Trump's original January 27 order was widely criticised as amounting to a ban on Muslims. However, the order was halted after two judicial setbacks -- a nationwide freeze on Trump's ban by a US district judge in Seattle and a subsequent ruling by San Francisco's Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upholding the suspension.



NEWS IN brief

Three killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

A police officer and two suspected militants were killed in Indian-administered Kashmir during a fierce 15-hour gunfight overnight, an official said yesterday, triggering clashes between protesters and government forces. Defying orders to stay indoors as the skirmish escalated, hundreds of villagers descended on the scene, throwing rocks at government forces in a bid to aid the besieged militants, a police officer said.

Reward for NK defectors

AFP, Seoul

South Korea will award up to one billion won (US\$860,000) to defectors from the North with classified information about the reclusive state, reports said yesterday. The government currently offers up to \$217,000 to defectors from the North with sensitive information but this would be the first increase in reward money in two decades.

Blair to be Trump's Middle East advisor?

AFP, London

A spokesman for Tony Blair refused to be drawn on a report that the former British prime minister wants to become US President Donald Trump's advisor on the Middle East. According to The Mail on Sunday newspaper, Blair met with Trump's son-in-law and key advisor Jared Kushner last week to discuss working for the Republican president.

US drone strikes kill 2 Qaeda men in Yemen

AFP, Aden

A US drone strike killed two suspected members of al-Qaeda in southern Yemen on Saturday, a security official said, as Washington steps up a campaign against jihadists. The raid came after two days of intensive air strikes by US warplanes on jihadists in the war-torn country killing some 20 terrorists.



A demonstrator in support of US President Donald Trump (L) scuffles with a counter-protester during a "People 4 Trump" rally in Berkeley, California on Saturday. The clash happened on a day of mostly peaceful gatherings in support of the US president across the country.

DROUGHT AND FAMINE IN SOMALIA

110 dead in last 48 hours: PM

REUTERS, Mogadishu

Some 110 people have died in southern Somalia in the last two days from famine and diarrhoea resulting from a drought, the prime minister said on Saturday, as the area braces itself for widespread shortages of food.

In February, United Nations children's agency UNICEF said the drought in Somalia could lead to up to 270,000 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition this year.

"It is a difficult situation for the pastoralists and their livestock. Some people have been hit by famine and diarrhoea at the same time. In the last 48 hours 110 people died due to famine and diarrhoea in Bay region," Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire's office said in a statement.

"The Somali government will do its best, and we urge all Somalis wherever they are to help and save the dying Somalis," he said in the statement released after a meeting of a famine response committee.

Thousands have been arriving in Somalia's capital Mogadishu over recent days in search of food aid, with 7,000 internally displaced people having recently checked into one feeding centre.

Somalia was one of four regions singled out by the UN secretary-general in February for a £3.6 billion aid appeal to avert catastrophic hunger and famine, along with northeast Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen -- all countries connected by a thread of violent conflict.

APPOINTMENT OF FOREIGN JUDGES IN WAR CRIMES TRIAL

Sri Lanka rejects UN call

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena has rejected a fresh appeal from the United Nations to allow international judges to investigate alleged war-era atrocities, vowing to not prosecute soldiers.

"I am not going to allow non-governmental organisations to dictate how to run my government. I will not listen to their calls to prosecute my troops," the president said in remarks distributed by his office.

The UN on Friday criticised Sri Lanka's "worryingly slow" progress in addressing its wartime past, urging the government to adopt laws allowing for special hybrid courts to try war criminals.

In his first remarks since the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva handed down a new scorecard on Sri Lanka, Sirisena rebuffed calls for international judges to probe abuses committed during the island's 37-year civil war. Sri Lanka has resisted calls to establish a special court to investigate allegations that government forces killed up to 40,000 Tamil civilians in the final months of fight-

ing, which ended in May 2009.

Sirisena's response marks a sharp shift in his policy towards accountability and reconciliation, which had earned him the praise of international observers.

He had agreed to a UN Human Rights Council resolution in October 2015 which called for special tribunals and reparations for victims and gave Sri Lanka 18 months to establish credible investigations.

But the deadline lapsed without those commitments being met. Last week the main Tamil political party accused Sirisena of failing to deliver on his promises, and urged the UN to hold his administration to account.

At least 100,000 were killed during the separatist war between government forces and rebels from the Tamil Tigers group, with atrocities recorded by both sides.

In its report, the UN said abuses including torture remain widespread in the ethnically divided island nation of 21 million, with "a prevailing culture of impunity" partly to blame.



Sirisena

'Get out of our country, go back'

Sikhs shot in US in 'hate crime'

REUTERS

A Sikh man was shot and wounded in Washington state by an attacker who approached him in his driveway and told him to leave the country, police and media reported on Saturday.

The shooting, on Friday night in the city of Kent about 15 miles south of Seattle, followed a number of other attacks on Sikhs in the United States over a period of more than a decade.

Hate crime-tracking groups say assailants have occasionally mistaken Sikhs for Muslims, who have also been victimised in religiously motivated crimes.

The Sikh man was working on his car in the driveway of his home when he was shot in the arm, according to Seattle television station KIRO 7, which spoke to a woman who knows the victim and saw him after he was struck by the bullet.

"Some comments were made to the effect of 'get out of our country, go back to where you're from,' and our victim was then shot," Kent Police Chief Ken Thomas said at a news conference.

Sikh community members stood behind Thomas as he described the shooting. Police believe the suspect, who is at large, is a man, media reported.

The victim was released from hospital, the Seattle Times reported.

A spokesman for Kent police could not be reached for further comment late on Saturday.

Britons suffer 'historical amnesia' over atrocities of their empire

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Britons suffer "historical amnesia" over the atrocities and plunder committed by their empire, Indian MP and author Shashi Tharoor has said.

Dr Tharoor said the British educational system failed to tell the real story of empire, and claimed Britain would have to accept Indian workers and students freely moving across its borders if it wanted to sell its goods in Indian markets following Brexit.

The former UN under-secretary general was speaking to Channel 4 News' Jon Snow. He is the author of 15 best-selling works of fiction and non-fiction, all of which address Indian history, culture and society.

Asked whether colonialism was a British or an Indian problem, he said: "It is a British problem, first of all because there is so much historical amnesia about what the empire really entailed."

"The fact you don't really teach colonial history in your schools... children doing A-Levels in history don't learn a line of colonial

history.

"There's no real awareness of the atrocities, of the fact that Britain financed its Industrial Revolution and its prosperity from the depredations of empire, the fact that Britain came to one of the richest countries in the world in the 18th century and reduced it, after two centuries of plunder, to one of the poorest."

Dr Tharoor's latest book is titled *Inglorious Empire: What the British did for India*. He argues many of the modernising developments cited by empire apologists were built for the sole or primary benefit of the British occupiers, and that the real story of empire was one of theft, murder and expropriation of wealth.

In a viral speech given to the Oxford Union last year, he noted that Britain reduced India's share of the world economy from 23 per cent to four per cent.

He has previously estimated Britain owes £3 trillion in reparations to India, though he believes a symbolic gesture of apology is more important than an actual transfer of wealth.



Shashi Tharoor