

## Syria peace talks restarts in Geneva

AFP, Geneva

UN-backed Syria peace talks resumed in Geneva yesterday, with little hope of a breakthrough and the emboldened regime seen as unlikely to make concessions.

The United Nations deputy Syria envoy Ramzy Ezzeldin Ramzy met government negotiators at a high-end hotel in the Swiss city, before heading to another hotel to see the opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC).

"We have started today preliminary talks," Ramzy told reporters after his meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's representatives.

"We hope we will be starting substantive discussions tomorrow."

Ramzy's boss, UN mediator Staffan de Mistura, was wrapping up a diplomatic tour of the key powers shaping the conflict, which included trips to Moscow, Riyadh and Ankara.

De Mistura is due back in Geneva yesterday evening to take charge of the negotiations which have yielded little in four previous rounds.

The UN is aiming for a political deal to end a six-year conflict that has killed more than 320,000 people and displaced millions since it started in 2011 with protests against Assad's regime.

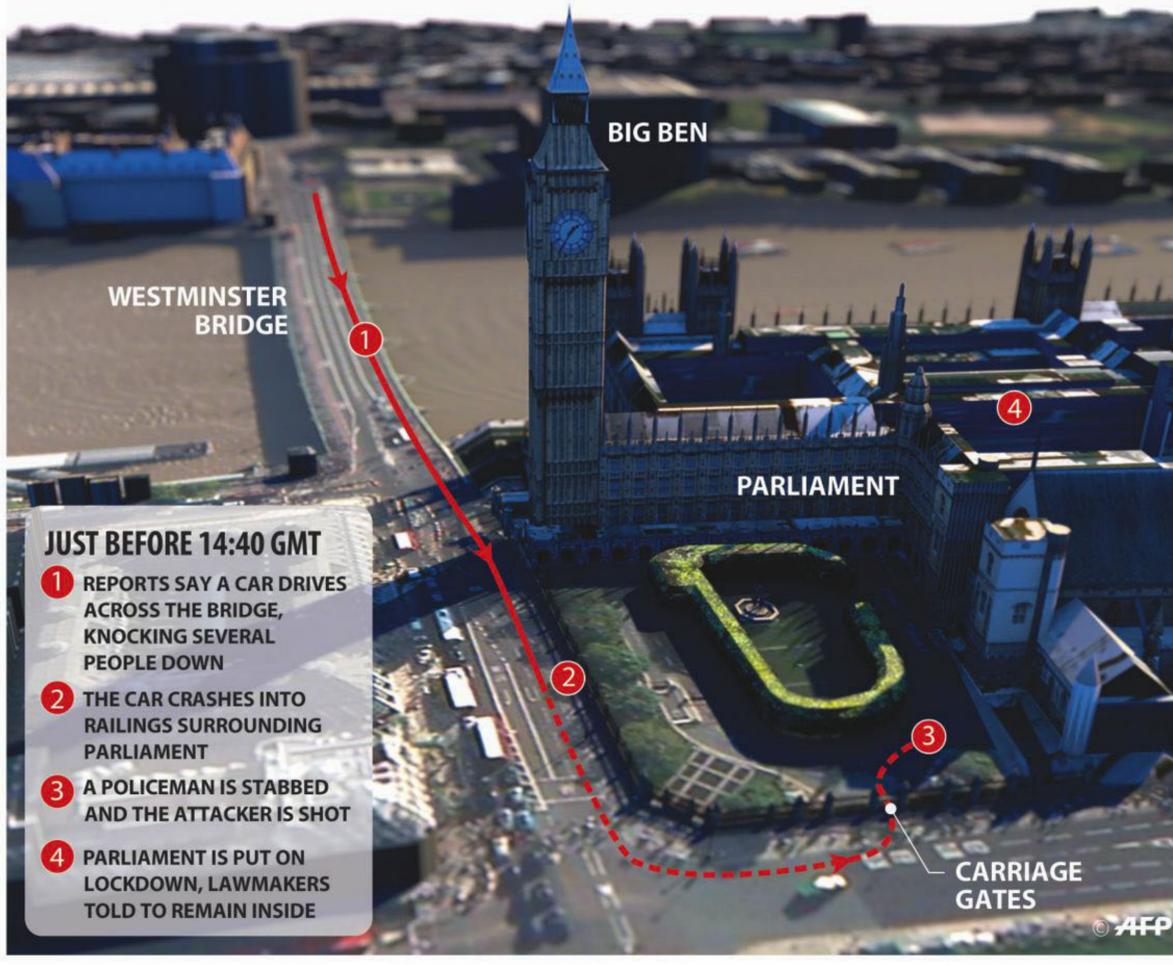
On the agenda for this round is governance -- a political transition, the constitution and elections -- as well as counter-terrorism at the request of Damascus. De Mistura tried to strike an optimistic note when the previous round ended last month, insisting that "everything is ready" for the talks to move forward while reiterating his view that there is no military solution to Syria's devastating civil war.

But analysts disagree with the UN envoy, putting the chances of compromise at an all-time low, due in part to the regime's increasingly strong position on the ground.

Since Russia's military intervention in support of Assad in 2015, the regime has regained the upper hand, retaking the former rebel bastion of Aleppo late last year.

For Syria specialist Thomas Pierret, as "the regime continues to gain ground ... there's no reason for it to make the slightest concession."

## ATTACK NEAR BRITISH PARLIAMENT



**JUST BEFORE 14:40 GMT**

- 1 **REPORTS SAY A CAR DRIVES ACROSS THE BRIDGE, KNOCKING SEVERAL PEOPLE DOWN**
- 2 **THE CAR CRASHES INTO RAILINGS SURROUNDING PARLIAMENT**
- 3 **A POLICEMAN IS STABBED AND THE ATTACKER IS SHOT**
- 4 **PARLIAMENT IS PUT ON LOCKDOWN, LAWMAKERS TOLD TO REMAIN INSIDE**

## World stands with Britain

World leaders have unanimously condemned the attack in the heart of London by a man who was shot dead by armed police, with many saying they stand with Britain. At least four people were killed and 29 hospitalised in the attack outside parliament Wednesday when a man mowed down pedestrians with a car then leapt out and stabbed a police officer. Prime Minister Theresa May described the attack as "sick and depraved", saying the assailant chose the site as an assault on Britain's democratic values.

### GERMANY:

Chancellor Angela Merkel said Germany stood "firmly and resolutely alongside Britons in the struggle against all forms of terrorism" while President Frank-Walter Steinmeier added: "In these grave moments, we Germans feel very close to the British people."

### FRANCE:

President Francois Hollande sent a message of "support to the British people" after the attack, in which three French high school students



were wounded. The lights of the Eiffel Tower were switched off at midnight in a tribute to the victims. Hollande said France could identify with Britain's pain after a series of jihadist assaults on its own soil. "France, which has been hit so hard in recent times, knows what the British people are suffering today."

### UNITED STATES:

The White House pledged "the full support of the US government in responding to the attack and bringing those to justice who are respon-

sible," spokesman Sean Spicer said.

### EUROPEAN UNION:

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said the attack left him "highly emotional". In Brussels to commemorate the first anniversary of attacks on the airport and a metro station, Juncker said: "The fact that exactly on the same day something similar happened in London, and to London, is really putting me in the situation of someone who does not have... enough words to express how I am deeply

feeling."

### RUSSIA:

"The forces of terror are acting more and more cunningly and cynically," President Vladimir Putin said in a statement, adding that "a real uniting of the efforts of all the members of the international community" was needed to combat extremism.

### CHINA:

In a message of condolence to Queen Elizabeth II, President Xi Jinping strongly condemned the attack and said terrorism was the common enemy of the international community.

### TURKEY:

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said "Turkey feels and shares deeply in the United Kingdom's pain" after his country was hit by a string of deadly attacks in the past year. Erdogan had warned Europeans in a speech earlier Wednesday that "no European, no Westerner will be able to take steps on the street safely and peacefully," as a crisis between Ankara and the EU showed no signs of abating.

AFP, PARIS

## VEHICLE-RAMMING ATTACKS

# Easy to organise, hard to prevent

REUTERS, Paris

Militants are increasingly turning to vehicle-ramming attacks, like the one staged near Britain's parliament on Wednesday, because they are cheap, easy to organise and hard to prevent.

Experts say the tactic of mowing people down avoids the need to obtain any explosives or weapons and can be carried out by a "lone-wolf" attacker without using a network of fellow militants - all lessening the risk of alerting security agencies.

"This kind of attack doesn't need special preparation, it is very low-cost, within anybody's reach," said Sebastien Pietrasanta, a French Socialist lawmaker and terrorism expert.

"It is often a case of individual action," he told Reuters. "They can be quite spontaneous."

Four people were killed and at least 20 injured in London after a car ploughed into pedestrians and an attacker stabbed a policeman close to parliament in what police called a "marauding terrorist attack". The attacker was shot dead. Islamic State claimed the attack.

Trucks were used to devastating effect last year against crowds in Berlin and Nice, in contrast to more organised attacks that have already hit Paris and Madrid - as well as London in 2005 - using teams of bombers or gunmen.

Islamic State claimed responsibility for both the Nice attack last July, when a truck killed 86 people celebrating Bastille Day, and for the Berlin attack in December, when a truck smashed through a Christmas market, killing 12 people.

IS encouraged readers of its online magazine Rumiyaah in 2016 to use vehicles to kill and injure.

Vehicle attacks are not a new tactic in the Middle East. Palestinians often use car to ram Israeli targets.

Jean-Charles Brisard, president of the Centre for the Analysis of Terrorism, a European thinktank, said Wednesday's attack seemed to be "rudimentary in its conception".

Using a car as a battering-ram was a tactic that was highly rated by militants because it was lethal, he said. "With a



vehicle, they cause a lot more deaths than with a knife or a machete."

Tyson Barker, programme director with the Asper Institute thinktank in Germany, said the London attack underscored the difficulty of protecting "soft" targets, and the trade-offs between security and liberty in open Western societies.

Saudi Arabian Interior Ministry spokesman Mansour al-Turki, part of a delegation in Paris for talks with French officials on counter-terrorism, said the defeat of groups like Islamic State and al-Qaeda could lead to a splintering of the threat, creating new problems for governments.

"When they are defeated in Syria and Iraq we are all going to face difficulties and nobody knows where the ISIS (Islamic State) fighters will go to," he told reporters.

"I think we will be entering the next phase of terrorism which is through social media and lone wolves," he said.

## Laptop ban sparks ire among ME travellers

AFP, Dubai

Travellers across the Middle East expressed frustration Wednesday at a ban on large electronic devices for flights to the United States and Britain that has sparked confusion and speculation.

From Saturday, passengers on flights to the United States and Britain from major hubs in Turkey and the Arab world will have to check in any device larger than a smartphone, including laptops and tablets.

The United States and Britain have cited intelligence indicating passenger jets could be targeted via explosives planted in electronic devices.

Caught in the middle of the ban are thousands of travellers growing increasingly frustrated with what they see as an absurd measure.

"Is there anything else I should know before flying back home? Navy blue boxers not allowed? Should I shave?" asked an American expat living in Abu Dhabi with a direct flight to the United States next week.

As the March 25 enforcement deadline looms, passengers are growing increasingly wary of restrictions on living in and travelling from the Middle East.

The US ban affects nine airlines from eight countries: Turkey, Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The British ban, meanwhile, targets flights out of Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Lebanon.

Canada and France have also said they are looking into similar regulations.

Many were quick to flag a lack of logic behind justifications of the ban.

"Every criminal in the Middle East: 'Oh no! We can't take the direct flight to the US! I hate connecting flights! 'Cancels criminal plans'," Egyptian analyst Mohamed El Dahshan wrote on Twitter.

Ankara has said it plans on requesting that the US repeal the measure.

The British ban has sparked concern in tourism-dependant Tunisia, which is trying to recover from 2015 jihadist attacks that killed holidaymakers.

American officials have publicly cited security concerns. "From what we know, the ban is linked to intelligence on al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula gathered by the US military," said Mustafa Alani, a security analyst at the Dubai-based Gulf Research Center.

But experts do not rule out other motives behind the ban, including business lost to increasingly popular Gulf carriers Emirates, Etihad and Qatar Airways.

US airlines do not have direct flights from the airports affected by its new restrictions.



Iraqi families fleeing fighting between Iraqi forces and jihadists of the Islamic State group walk in Mosul, yesterday. About 600,000 people remain in the areas of west Mosul held by the Islamic State group, including 400,000 who are "trapped" in the Old City under siege-like conditions, the UN said yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## New Trump-Russia links spark row

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump's communications may have been swept up in intelligence gathering on suspected foreign agents, according to explosive allegations made Wednesday by the Republican head of the House intelligence committee.

Devin Nunes -- who worked on Trump's transition team and is now leading an investigation into possible links between that campaign team and Russia -- said Trump's communications may have been intercepted late last year.

Nunes however said there was no

evidence that then-president Barack Obama ordered the surveillance -- as Trump has claimed -- or that the Republican billionaire was the target.

Rather, Nunes suggested, Trump's communications were picked up during court-approved targeting of suspected foreign intelligence operatives.

The information collected -- spanning the November-January period between Trump's election victory and his inauguration -- was

"widely disseminated" in US intelligence circles, he said.

US intelligence community rules dictate that information on Americans picked up incidentally in surveillance must be scrubbed or masked in intelligence reports.

Nunes suggested those involved in the surveillance had violated those rules.

Meanwhile CNN on Wednesday reported that the FBI has reportedly obtained information suggesting that aides of Trump communicated with suspected Russian operatives to coordinate the release of information to damage Hillary Clinton's campaign.

US officials told CNN that the agency is currently reviewing human intelligence, travel, business and phone records, and several accounts of in-person meetings. However, the officials did caution that the information was not conclusive.

The bombshell report comes several days after FBI Director James Comey announced that his agency had begun looking into the Trump campaign's activities because his agents had gathered a "credible allegation of wrongdoing" or "reasonable basis to believe an American may be acting as an agent of a foreign power."

## Sea ice at poles hits record low

AFP, Miami

The sea ice cover in the Arctic and Antarctic hit new record lows for this time of year, marking the smallest polar ice caps in the 38-year satellite record, US government scientists said Wednesday.

In March, the Arctic ice sheet should be at its biggest, but on March 7 the ice cover reached "a record low wintertime maximum extent," said a statement by the US space agency NASA.

Data from the NASA-supported National Snow and Ice Data Center (NSIDC) in Boulder, Colorado, also showed that on March 3, "sea ice around Antarctica hit its lowest extent ever recorded by satellites at the end of summer in the Southern Hemisphere."

The disappearing sea ice comes as the planet has marked three years in a row of record-breaking heat, raising new concerns about the accelerating pace of global warming and the need to curb burning of fossil fuels which spew heat-trapping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

The ice floating in the Arctic Ocean grows and shrinks on a seasonal cycle, reaching its largest size in March and its smallest at the end of the summer melt in September.

This year's Arctic maximum spanned 5.57 million square miles. That is 37,000 square miles below the previous record low in 2015.

The ice in the Antarctic also follows a seasonal cycle but its maximum comes in September and its minimum around February.