

Raqa offensive to begin 'in days'

Iraqi forces to deploy new tactics in Mosul, civilians flee city

AGENCIES

The international coalition battling the Islamic State group will begin a final push on the jihadists' Syrian stronghold Raqa in the coming days, French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said yesterday.

But on the ground, the US-backed Kurdish-Arab alliance spearheading the battle for the jihadist group's de facto Syrian capital expressed caution about how soon the battle for Raqa would begin.

IS has come under growing pressure from twin US-backed ground offensives targeting Raqa and their other main stronghold, Mosul in Iraq.

"Today, we can say that Raqa is surrounded and the battle will begin in the coming days," Le Drian told France's CNEWS television.

"This will be a very hard battle but essential."

The jihadists are under attack from several directions in northern Syria, with Russia supporting its Syrian ally President Bashar al-Assad on one front and Turkey providing air cover for rebel groups battling the jihadists on another.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-Arab alliance, has been working for months to encircle Raqa.

But a spokesman for the alliance said there was still work to do.

"The operation to besiege Raqa will take several weeks and that will then lead to the official launch of the operation," Talal Sello told AFP.

For now, the alliance is focused on the strategically important Tabqa Dam near Raqa and the adjacent town of Tabqa and its airport.

The US military has provided air and artillery support involving

Apache helicopter gunships to help the SDF in the battle for the dam and the surrounding area, as well as airlifting in fighters.

The US has several hundred troops on the ground in Syria supporting the SDF.

But the alliance is still around eight kilometres (five miles) from Raqa at its closest point, to the northeast, and is mostly stationed further away, between 18 and 29 kilometres from the city, according to the Observatory.

A US official said last week that up to 1,000 additional American troops could deploy to northern Syria under provisional plans drawn up by the Pentagon.

The anti-IS coalition estimates that between 3,000 and 4,000 jihadists are in Raqa, a city of about 300,000.

Iraqi forces to deploy new tactics in Mosul, civilians flee city

(Adds military spokesman)

In Iraq, forces are to deploy new tactics in a fresh push against Islamic State in Mosul, military officials said yesterday, after advances slowed recently.

Families meanwhile streamed out of the northern Iraqi city in an ongoing exodus of people fleeing in their thousands each day, headed for cold, crowded camps or to stay with relatives.

The US-backed offensive to drive Islamic State out of Mosul, now in its sixth month, has recaptured most of the city. The entire eastern side and around half of the west is under Iraqi control.

The latest round of UN-backed Syria peace talks entered a second day in Geneva yesterday but there was little hope of a breakthrough in negotiations that have yielded little in previous rounds.

ROHINGYA CRISIS

UN agrees to launch probe 'urgently'

AFP, Geneva

The UN rights council yesterday agreed to "urgently" launch an investigation into violations against Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims, including torture, murder and rapes allegedly committed by troops.

The Geneva-based body decided to "dispatch urgently an independent international fact-finding mission" to Myanmar, particularly focused in northern Rakhine state, in a resolution adopted by consensus.

The mission must provide an oral update in September and a full report by this time next year, said the resolution backed by the European Union.

The decision marks a partial diplomatic victory for Myanmar's new civilian government led by Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

The United Nations special rapporteur on rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, had urged the council to set up a Commission of Inquiry -- the world body's highest level probe -- to document anti-Rohingya violations.

But Lee's call found little support, including among EU powers with major influence in the council.



VEHICLE RAMMING ATTACK IN BELGIUM

Driver charged with 'terror' offences

AFP, Brussels

A man has been charged with terror offences including attempted murder after he was arrested driving at high speed into a crowded shopping area in the Belgian port city of Antwerp, prosecutors said yesterday.

However, a source close to the investigation told AFP on condition of anonymity that investigators could not confirm if it was a terrorist attack and said the driver made little sense during interrogation.

The suspect, a 39-year-old Tunisian identified as Mohamed R., was charged with "an attempt to murder in a terrorist manner, an attempt to hit and wound in a terrorist manner and arms infractions," the federal prosecutor's office said.

The authorities said they found a rifle and bladed weapons in the car after they arrested the suspect on Thursday.

The incident came a day after a similar attack on the British parliament killed four people plus the attacker. Wednesday was also the first anniversary of the Brussels suicide bombings in which 32 people died.

Mohamed R drove at high speed through the busy Meir shopping area in Antwerp, forcing people to jump out of the way. He also ignored an initial order to stop by soldiers.

The Antwerp incident put Europe further on edge after the London attack and the incident at Paris's Orly airport last Saturday when a man was shot dead after grabbing a soldier's rifle.



People gather for a vigil in Trafalgar Square in central London on Thursday in solidarity with the victims of the March 22 terror attack at the British parliament and on Westminster Bridge.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Canada passes anti-Islamophobia motion

AFP, Ottawa

Lawmakers in Canada's House of Commons, passed a motion Thursday paving the way for future measures to combat Islamophobia.

The motion, which passed easily, asks the government to "recognize the need to quell the increasing public climate of hate and fear" and "condemn Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination."

UNSC condemns latest N Korea missile tests

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Thursday "strongly condemned" recent North Korean missile and ballistic missile engine tests, denouncing Pyongyang's "increasingly destabilizing behavior." The condemnation came as the US military said on Thursday that it has observed activity in North Korea that suggests Pyongyang may be gearing up for another nuclear test.

Palestinian teen killed in West Bank

AFP, Ramallah

Israeli troops shot dead a 16-year-old Palestinian Thursday in the occupied West Bank and seriously wounded three other Palestinians, the Palestinian health ministry said in a statement. It did not give the circumstances, but said the shooting happened near the Jelazoun Palestinian refugee camp.

Keystone XL pipeline clears final hurdle

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump's administration yesterday said it has granted a permit for TransCanada to build the Keystone XL oil pipeline, giving final approval to a project his predecessor had halted over environmental concerns.

Pass bill or Obamacare stays

Facing obstacle, Trump issues ultimatum to Republicans

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump warned Republicans that he is done negotiating and wants a vote Friday on dismantling Obamacare, setting up a high-stakes showdown with members of the president's own party over his embattled health care plan.

House leaders were forced to postpone a Thursday vote on the measure amid a revolt by mainly conservative Republicans, who were complicating the first major legislative test for the new president by signaling it would not pass without key changes.

Trump himself set the stage, dispatching an aide to a closed-door meeting of Republican lawmakers to demand a Friday vote.

"The message is tomorrow it's up, it's down -- we expect it to be up -- but it's done tomorrow," White House budget director Mick Mulvaney told the lawmakers, according to congressman Chris Collins.

Mulvaney then delivered Trump's extraordinary ultimatum.

"If it doesn't pass, we're moving beyond health care," Mulvaney said, paraphrasing Collins.

"We would be moving on to other parts of his agenda."

The idea that Trump -- who campaigned relentlessly on a pledge to bury Barack Obama's signature legislative accomplishment -- would wash his hands of the fight and let Obamacare stand is a startling departure from the party playbook.

But Mulvaney's blunt take-it-or-leave-it approach could be part of Trump's hardball strategy to get Republican rebels to fall in line.

Russia denies helping Taliban after Nato claim

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday denied allegations by the commander of Nato that Moscow may be assisting the Taliban as the insurgents fight US and Nato forces in Afghanistan.

"These claims are absolutely false," Zamir Kabulov, head of the Russian foreign ministry's department responsible for Afghanistan and the Kremlin's special envoy in the country, told RIA Novosti state news agency.

"These fabrications are designed, as we have repeatedly underlined, to justify the failure of the US military and politicians in the Afghan campaign. There is no other explanation."

Nato's Supreme Allied Commander, US General Curtis Scaparrotti, who also heads the US military's European Command, told lawmakers in Washington on Thursday that he had witnessed Russia's influence grow in many regions, including in Afghanistan.

CONGO WAR CRIMES

ICC awards \$250 each to victims

AFP, The Hague

The International Criminal Court yesterday ordered 297 victims of ex-Congolese warlord Germain Katanga to each receive "a symbolic" \$250 in damages for a brutal 2003 attack on their village, in the tribunal's first such award.

Awarding both individual and collective damages, the court also found that Katanga was liable for \$1-million of the total material, psychological and physical damage caused, estimated by the court to stand at \$3.7-million.

Katanga was sentenced by the ICC to 12 years in jail in 2014, after being convicted on five charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity for the February 2003 ethnic attack on Bogoro village in troubled Ituri province of the Democratic Republic of Congo.



Lifeguards from the Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms sanitise five dead bodies of migrants on-board the former fishing trawler Golfo Azzurro following a search and rescue operation in central Mediterranean Sea off the Libyan coast, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

EU 'sons of bitches': Duterte

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte has hit out at the European Union (EU) for hypocrisy and called the bloc "sons of bitches" after its lawmakers issued a resolution calling for restraint and a rethink in his bloody war on drugs.

Duterte castigated the EU for urging him to focus his campaign on drugs rehabilitation and stood by his security-centred approach to a crackdown that has left thousands of people dead since he took office nine months ago.

He turned angry during a speech to Chinese businessmen, where he praised China for its no-strings-attached loans and aid and said he did not need the EU, or "idiotic" rehabilitation programmes that failed to stop addicts committing robbery, rape and murder.

"So we're getting a relief now from our hardships because a lot of (Chinese) money is coming in. The EU, they communicated to us, and they want a health-based solution for the drugs. These sons of bitches," he said.

The EU's rehabilitation approach, he said, entailed administering drugs like cocaine, marijuana and heroin.

"They want us to build clinics, then instead of arresting, putting them in prisons, just like in other countries, you go there and if you want shabu, they will inject you and give you shabu and you go out," he said, referring to the methamphetamine used in the Philippines.

EU lawmakers last week condemned the "many extrajudicial killings" taking place in the Philippines and said the sources of illegal drugs should be targeted, not the consumer.

Duterte's aides accused the EU of meddling.

It was not the first time Duterte has scolded the EU. In September he made a middle-finger gesture and made profane comments about the EU, then complained he had been insulted.

WARPO Water Resources Planning Organization
 WARPO Bhaban
 72 Green Road, Dhaka-1215
REQUEST FOR EXPRESSION OF INTEREST (REOI)

পানি সম্পদ পরিকল্পনা সংস্থা

1. Ministry/Division	Ministry of Water Resources
2. Agency	Water Resources Planning Organization (WARPO)
3. Procuring Entity Name	Director General, WARPO
4. Procuring Entity Code	
5. Procuring Entity District	Dhaka
6. Expression of Interest for Selection of	Consulting Firm (Time Based)
7. Title of Service	Expression of Interest (EOI) for Selection of Consultancy Services for Feasibility Study and Detailed Engineering Design of Brahmaputra Barrage
8. EOI Ref. No.	42.102.007.47.00.036.2017-261
9. Date	22-03-2017
KEY INFORMATION	
10. Procurement Sub-Method	Quality and Cost Based Selection (QCBS)
FUNDING INFORMATION	
11. Budget and Sources of Funds	GOB
12. Development Partners	Not Applicable
PARTICULAR INFORMATION	
13. Project/Programme Name	Feasibility Study and Detailed Engineering Design of Brahmaputra Barrage
14. EOI Closing Date and Time	24 April 2017 16:30 hours
INFORMATION FOR APPLICANT	
15. Brief Description of Assignment	The overall objective of the services shall cover, but not limited to the following scope: The Brahmaputra is a major trans-boundary river and contributes about two-thirds of the total dry season flows in Bangladesh. It plays an important role in overall socio-economic development of the country. Flows in the Brahmaputra and her distributaries in the Brahmaputra Dependent Area, especially in the dry season, are needed locally for maintaining a favorable environment, for carrying out agricultural activities and for domestic, commercial and industrial uses. The Brahmaputra Barrage is required to supply flows in the Northwest as well as North central region. The main objective of the study is to conduct a detailed feasibility study, socio-economic, environment and other hydraulic and hydro-morphological survey and study, and detailed engineering design for the construction of a barrage and associated engineering infrastructures across the river Brahmaputra for integrated water resources development in the Brahmaputra Barrage Command Area in Bangladesh. Consulting services are required to assess the technical, economic, social and environmental aspects; establish the appropriate solutions and prepare the background for the detailed engineering design of the barrage. Prepare financial and economic analysis to determine financial implication of the proposed investment and to assist investment decision making. Carry out appropriate physical and mathematical modelling for the Barrage and the river regime. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) will be carried out at this stage together with resettlement plans as appropriate. Prepare environmental management programme. It would contain the detail economic and financial analysis which includes to analyze the IRR and Sensitivity Analysis of the Project with due consideration of MCA (Multi Criteria Analysis).
16. Experience, Resources and Delivery Capacity Required	The consulting firm(s)/Institutions are encouraged to have association with qualified national and international consulting firm(s). The form association, if any, should be clearly indicated either "joint venture" or "sub-consultancy"; and all members should have well defined inputs to the assignment. In the case of joint-venture, all firms/entities shall be jointly and severally liable for the entire consultant's obligations under the contract. In case of sub-consultancy, the lead firm shall sign the contract and shall be liable for the entire consultant's obligations under the contract. The EOIs would be reviewed on the basis of the following aspects to prepare a short list: (a) Registration of Firm (b) Age of Firm (c) Availability of Professional with Appropriate skills (d) Annual Turnover (e) Availability of Resources (f) Experience of the Firm in Similar Task (g) Experience of the Firm in Other Services (h) Support Services of the Firm. WARPO invites eligible consulting firm(s)/Institutions to indicate their interest in providing the aforesaid consultancy services. Interested consulting Firms/Institutions must provide information indicating that they are qualified to perform the services (such as: brochures, description of similar assignments, experience in similar conditions, availability of appropriate skills among staff, etc.). The financial capability should be shown as Financial Turn Over supported by audited financial reports for the last five years. • Interested consulting Firms/Institutions may obtain further information about detail TOR at the WARPO's website: www.warpo.gov.bd and CPTU's official website: www.cptu.gov.bd. • Expressions of Interest in 4 sets (1 original+ 3 copies) shall be submitted in sealed envelope, delivered to the address of the undersigned
17. Other Details (if applicable)	(a) The PPA-2006, PPR-2008 and its amendment will be followed (b) The authority reserves the right to accept or reject any or all of the EOIs or annul the EOI process at any stage without assigning any reason(s) whatsoever and without incurring any liability to the affected applicant(s)
18. Association with foreign firms is	Encouraged
PROCURING ENTITY DETAILS	
19. Name of Official Inviting EOI	Dr. Md. Aminul Haque
20. Designation of Official Inviting EOI	Project Director
21. Address of Official Inviting EOI	Water Resources Planning Organization (WARPO) WARPO Bhaban, 72 Green Road, Dhaka-1215
22. Contract Details of Official Inviting EOI	Phone: 02-44819012, Fax: 02-44819002

Dr. Md. Aminul Haque
Project Director