

Syria peace talks restart in Geneva

Assad calls UN process 'null'

AFP, Geneva
A new round of Syria peace talks opened in Geneva yesterday, the latest United Nations push to resolve a six-year conflict that has killed more than 320,000 people.

Five previous rounds of UN-backed negotiations have failed to yield concrete results and hopes for a major breakthrough remain dim.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has strengthened this position on the ground, with the rebels reeling from a major setback in the capital Damascus.

Assad has also recently called the Geneva process "null", telling Belarus's ONT channel that it had become "merely a meeting for the media".

The Syrian leader has however given more credit to a separate diplomatic track in Kazakhstan's capital Astana, which is being led by his allies Russia and Iran along with opposition supporter Turkey.

The Astana track produced a May 4 deal to create four "de-escalation" zones across some of Syria's bloodiest battlegrounds.

The UN's Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura has dismissed suggestions that the Astana negotiations were overshadowing the Geneva track.

"We're working in tandem" he told reporters on Monday. Syrian regime delegation chief Bashar al-Jaafari was holding an initial meeting with de Mistura at the UN yesterday.

The main opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC), led by Nasr al-Hariri and Mohammad Sabra, was due to meet the UN envoy later in the day.

The UN negotiations are focused on four separate "baskets": governance, a new constitution, elections and combating "terrorism" in the war-ravaged country.



Journalists take cover as a suicide car bomb explodes during clashes between Iraqi forces and Islamic State militants in western Mosul, yesterday. Inset, Families flee conflict zone in western Mosul.

PHOTO: REUTERS



IS 'on brink of defeat'

Officials say Iraqi forces recapture nearly 90 percent of the city

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi forces have recaptured nearly 90 percent of west Mosul from the Islamic State group and jihadists in the city are on the "brink of total defeat," military spokesmen said yesterday.

Iraqi forces launched the massive operation to retake Mosul from IS nearly seven months ago, fighting their way to the jihadist-held city, retaking its eastern side and then attacking the west.

Brigadier General Yahya Rasool, spokesman for Iraq's Joint Operations Command, told a news conference in Baghdad that IS now controls just over 10 percent of west Mosul.

Colonel John Dorrian, the spokesman for the US-led international coalition against IS, said that the end was near for jihadists in the city.

"The enemy is completely surrounded," Dorrian told the news conference. "The enemy is on the brink of total defeat in Mosul."

The drive to retake Mosul has been supported by a campaign of coalition air strikes in and around the city.

"More than 300 vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (car bombs) have been destroyed by coalition strikes in Mosul," Dorrian said.

"Our strikes have also destroyed more than 200 Daesh tunnels and more than 1,000 of their fighting positions," he said, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

The jihadist group now controls just a handful of neighbourhoods around the Old City, one of the country's heritage jewels.

The area's narrow streets and closely spaced buildings make it difficult for federal forces to take on the jihadists, requiring them to fight on foot instead of from vehicles as they have previously done.

Half a million people are currently displaced as a result of the battle for Mosul, and some 250,000 civilians are estimated to still be trapped inside the city's west.

The number of those fleeing has been on the rise, with Thursday seeing around 20,000 people fleeing west Mosul, the Norwegian Refugee Council said, in the biggest single-day displacement since the start of the operation.

The presence of a large civilian population, which either chose not to leave or was prevented from doing so by IS, complicates any final assault to seal victory in Mosul.

While coalition air strikes have aided the advance of Iraqi forces, they have also reportedly caused hundreds of civilian casualties in the city.

Human shields have become a central feature of the vastly outnumbered jihadists' defences, and IS has stopped at nothing to deter people from escaping the city, including killing people who seek to flee.

Trapped residents reached by AFP inside IS-held areas have also recently warned that hunger was starting to kill more people than the fighting.

In eastern Mosul, life returned to a semblance of normality fairly quickly after Iraqi forces drove the jihadists back neighbourhood until the area was fully recaptured earlier this year.

Duterte open to South China Sea deals

AFP, Davao

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said yesterday he was open to exploring the South China Sea's natural resources with rival claimants China and Vietnam, after securing a "windfall" while in Beijing.

Duterte also emphasised he had no immediate plans to pressure China over an international tribunal's ruling last year that its sweeping claims to most of the sea were unlawful.

"If we can get something there with no hassle at all, why not," Duterte told reporters when asked about a proposal for jointly exploring the sea with China and Vietnam.

He emphasised the deal would have to be "fair and balanced".

Duterte made no mention of Malaysia and Brunei, the two other Southeast Asian nations that also have claims to the sea.

WORLDWIDE CYBERATTACK

Experts suspect N Korea link

Europol warns against rash judgement, says it's 'too early' to say who is behind attacks

AFP, Washington

Security researchers investigating the massive cyberattack campaign that sparked havoc in computer systems worldwide have reported signs of a possible North Korean link, but Europe's cross-border police agency said yesterday it was "too early" to tell.

After days of disruptions affecting networks worldwide, a top US official said the number of computers affected had reached 300,000, but that infection rates had slowed.

In the first clues of the origin of the massive ransomware attacks, Google researcher Neel Mehta posted computer code that showed similarities between the "WannaCry" malware and a vast hacking effort widely attributed to Pyongyang.

The code used in the latest attack shared many similarities with past hacks blamed on the North, including the targeting of Sony Pictures, said Simon Choi, director of Seoul internet security firm Hauri.

"I saw signs last year that the North was preparing ransomware attacks or even already beginning to do so, targeting some South Korean companies," he told AFP.

Isolated, nuclear-armed North Korea is known to operate an army of thousands of hackers operating in both the North, and apparently China, and has been blamed for a number of major cyberattacks.

But police agency Europol said yesterday the investigation is ongoing, warning against a rush to judgement.



"We are open to investigate in all directions, but we don't speculate and we cannot confirm this. It's still too early to say anything," said senior agency spokesman, Jan Op Gen Oorth.

In November 2014, Sony Pictures Entertainment became the target of the biggest cyberattack in US corporate history, linked to its release of North Korea satire "The Interview".

More attacks were possible, Choi said, "especially given that, unlike missile or nuclear tests, they can deny their involvement in attacks in cyberspace and get away with it".

Israeli-based security firm Intezer Labs said it agreed with the North Korea attribution. The group's chief executive Itai Tevet said in a tweet: "@IntezerLabs confirms attribution to North Korea for #WannaCry, not only because of the function from Lazarus. More info to come."

Europol said the situation was "stable" after attacks that struck computers in British hospital wards, European car factories and Russian banks. But according to Michel Van Den Bergh, director of telecom group Orange's cyber security arm, a "second wave" is to be expected.

Russia, China and India have blamed the United States government for developing the original code.

NEWS IN brief

Clinton returns to political stage

AFP, Washington

Hillary Clinton returned to the political stage on Monday with a new organization to "resist" Donald Trump, who defeated her in last year's presidential election. The new group's (Onwards Together) website said it aimed to advance progressive values and reminded visitors that Clinton had won nearly 66 million votes in November's showdown with Trump.

Indian cops raid ex-FM's house

AFP, New Delhi

India's federal police yesterday searched the homes of former finance minister P Chidambaram and his son as part of an investigation into suspected corruption during his time in government. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) is investigating whether a finance company owned by Chidambaram's son Karti helped a client to circumvent limits on foreign investment.

Renowned reporter shot dead in Mexico

AFP, Mexico City

Authorities in Mexico yesterday searched for gunmen who fatally shot an award-winning journalist and Agence France-Presse contributor who reported on the country's violent drug gangs. Javier Valdez, 50, was shot in the street Monday near the premises of Riodoce, a Mexican news weekly he founded in his hometown of Culiacan in northwestern Sinaloa state, sources said. Valdez was the fifth journalist killed this year in Mexico.



Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (C) waves towards the media as his Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherjee (L) and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi look on during Abbas's ceremonial reception at the forecourt of India's Rashtrapati Bhavan presidential palace in New Delhi, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Indian girl, 10, seeks abortion after rape

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian court will decide whether a 10-year-old Indian girl left pregnant after she was repeatedly raped should be allowed to have an abortion, police said yesterday.

The child, who was often left at home while her mother went out to work on construction sites, has said she was raped by her stepfather, who has since been arrested.

Her case only came to light last week, by which time she had crossed the 20-week legal limit after which terminations are only allowed where there is a danger to the life of the mother or the baby.

"We have filed an application in the concerned court seeking an order for abortion," said Pankaj Nain, the police chief of Rohtak district in northern Haryana state.

"Now it is for the courts to decide," Nain told AFP. In recent months India's top court has received a number of petitions from women -- including rape survivors and trafficking victims -- seeking abortions where pregnancies had gone beyond 20 weeks.

Activists say the restriction should be extended to 24 weeks as victims of rape are often late to report their pregnancies.

In 2015, the Supreme Court allowed a 14-year-old rape survivor to abort a foetus after the 20-week limit.

Nain said the 10-year-old had made a statement to police and was being given counselling and medical care.

UNSC vows tough sanctions

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council has strongly condemned North Korea's latest ballistic missile test and vowed strong measures, including sanctions, to derail Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme.

North Korea's long-term bid to develop a credible nuclear attack threat to the US mainland saw it launch Sunday what appeared to be its longest-range missile yet.

Pyongyang said the new weapon -- called the Hwasong-12 -- was capable of carrying a "heavy nuclear warhead". Its ambassador to China said in Beijing on Monday it would continue such test launches "any time, any place".

Meanwhile, South Korea's defence minister yesterday said North Korea's missile programme is progressing faster than expected.

South Korean Defence Minister Han Min-woo told parliament Sunday's test-launch was "successful in flight".

"It is considered an IRBM (intermediate range ballistic missile) of enhanced calibre compared to Musudan missiles that have continually failed," he said, referring to a

RECONCILIATION PROCESS IN SRI LANKA

Lack of progress risks peace: ICG

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's failure to address its wartime past nearly a decade after its bloody conflict jeopardises any hope of a lasting peace in the ethnically-divided island, a global rights group warned yesterday.

In a new report, the International Crisis Group urged President Maithripala Sirisena to come good on his promise to deliver justice for tens of thousands of war victims or risk renewed conflict.

"Two years into President Sirisena's term, Sri Lanka's fragile hopes for lasting peace and cooperation across party and ethnic lines are imperilled," ICG stated in its report "Sri Lanka's Transition to Nowhere".

Sirisena came to power in January 2015 with strong backing from Tamils, the largest ethnic minority in Sri Lanka, who bore the brunt of the 37-year separatist war that ended in May 2009.

He had promised to investigate atrocities under his predecessor Mahinda Rajapakse, especially in the final months of the war, when Sri Lanka's security forces were accused of massacring up to 40,000 Tamil civilians.

But the president has resisted calls for internationally-backed courts to try generals and soldiers accused of atrocities.



UK Labour unveils polls manifesto

AFP, Bradford

Britain's opposition Labour Party pledged to raise taxes on the well-off, renationalise key industries and end austerity in its manifesto yesterday, presenting voters with their starkest choice in decades in next month's election.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn called the programme "radical and responsible", saying the country had been run "for the rich, the elite and the vested interests" in seven years of Conservative government.

"It will change our country," he said in his speech at the presentation of the manifesto in Bradford in northwest England.

"It will lead us through Brexit while putting the preservation of jobs first," he said, appearing in front of Labour's election manifesto: "For the many, not the few."

Corbyn promised a Labour government would immediately guarantee the rights of EU citizens in Britain and during Brexit negotiations would aim to maintain access to the European single market.

The manifesto included a tax increase from 40 percent to 45 percent for salaries of between £80,000 (94,000 euros, \$103,000) and £123,000 a year, above which there will be a new 50 percent top rate of income tax.

The party also plans a levy on businesses with staff earning large salaries over £330,000.

NEW NORTH KOREA MISSILE TEST

UNSC vows tough sanctions

South warns nuke programme progressing faster than expected

AFP, United Nations

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class of missile designed to travel up to 3,000 to 4,000 km (1,860 to 2,485 miles).

Asked if North Korea's missile programme was developing faster than the South had expected, he said: "Yes."

Trump and new South Korean President Moon Jae-in will meet in Washington next month, with North Korea expected to be high on the agenda, the South's presidential Blue House said.

In a unanimous statement backed by the North's main ally China, the council on Monday vowed to punish Pyongyang's "highly destabilizing behavior" and demanded a halt to any further nuclear or missile tests.

Pyongyang carried out two atomic tests last year, and has accelerated its missile launch programme, despite tough UN sanctions aimed at denying leader Kim Jong-Un the hard currency needed to fund his weapons ambitions.

The United States is in talks with China -- Pyongyang's main trading partner -- on a possible new sanctions resolution and the Security Council is expected to hold a closed-door emergency meeting starting around 2000 GMT yesterday.