

MYANMAR'S TROUBLED RAKHINE STATE

Rohingyas blockaded amid fresh tensions

Hundreds of Rohingya Muslims have been blockaded inside their area by their Buddhist neighbours in a western Myanmar village, residents say, as religious tensions in troubled Rakhine state spread to a more ethnically mixed part of the region. Monitors and aid workers worry that violence that has until now been largely confined to the Rohingya-majority northern part of Rakhine, bordering Bangladesh, could erupt in an area where the two communities live side-by-side in much larger numbers. Residents, aid workers and monitors told Reuters that Muslims in the village of Zay Di Pyin had been blocked from going to work or fetching food and water for the last three weeks, although a small number had been allowed through the blockade to buy provisions yesterday. Police said Rakhine Buddhist villagers were restricting the amount of food the Rohingya could buy, but denied their movement around the village and access to work had been blocked. "I think they are just afraid and aren't going out," said Myanmar police headquarters spokesman Colonel Myo Thu Soe. The government said it was working to improve security in the area. The stand-off has raised fears of a repeat of the communal violence that broke out in the Rakhine state capital Sittoung in 2012, leading to the killing of nearly 200 people and displacement of some 140,000 - most of them Rohingya. "The concern in Zay Di Pyin is that this could escalate into violence between the two communities," said Chris Lewa of Arakan Project, a Rohingya monitoring group.



Italian firemen and emergency workers search through rubble of a collapsed house in Ischia yesterday after an earthquake hit the popular Italian tourist island off the coast of Naples, causing several buildings to collapse overnight and leaving two people dead. PHOTO: AFP

NORTH KOREA TENSION US dismisses calls to pause military drills

As North Korea vowed "merciless retaliation" against US-South Korean military drills that it claims are an invasion rehearsal, senior US military commanders yesterday dismissed calls to pause or downsize exercises they called crucial to countering a clear threat from Pyongyang. The heated North Korean rhetoric, along with occasional weapons tests, is standard fare during the spring and summer war games by allies Seoul and Washington, but always uneasy ties between the Koreas are worse than normal this year following weeks of tit-for-tat threats between President Donald Trump and Pyongyang in the wake of the North's two intercontinental ballistic missile tests last month. There have been calls in both the United States and South Korea to postpone or modify the drills in an attempt to ease hostility on the Korean Peninsula following North Korea's threat to lob missiles toward the US territory of Guam. But a visiting group of senior US military commanders, including Adm Harry Harris, the commander of US forces in the Pacific, said the drills are critical for the allies to maintain readiness against an aggressive North Korea. "A strong diplomatic effort backed by a strong military effort is key because credible combat power should be in support of diplomacy and not the other way around," Harris said during a news conference at South Korea's Osan Air Base. Vincent Brooks, commander of US Forces Korea, said the allies should continue the war games until they "have reason not to." "That reason has not yet emerged," he said. The US military officials were to travel to the site of a contentious US missile-defense system in South Korea later yesterday.

Thousands flee Tal Afar: UN Mattis in Iraq to show US support on eradicating jihadists

Iraqi forces yesterday recaptured from the Islamic State group the first two districts of jihadist bastion Tal Afar, as the Pentagon chief visited Baghdad in a show of support. The United Nations said thousands of civilians have fled Tal Afar in the two days since the start of the broad offensive backed by the US-led coalition fighting IS. In remarks before meeting in Baghdad with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis said he wanted to keep the spotlight on eradicating the jihadists. "Right now our focus is on defeating ISIS inside Iraq, restoring Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity," said the Pentagon chief, using an alternative acronym for IS. Iraqi troops, supported by the forces of a US-led international coalition, routed IS in Mosul in July after a gruelling nine-month fight for Iraq's second city. They launched the offensive on Sunday to recapture Tal Afar, once a key IS supply hub between Mosul -- around 70 kilometres (45 miles) to the east -- and the Syrian border. The jihadists inside Tal Afar, estimated to number around 1,000, responded with artillery fire yesterday as the Iraqi forces massed outside the city, reported AFP. Army, police and units of the Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary coalition later took "full control" of Al-Kifah and Al-Nur districts in Tal Afar, the Hashed said. The Iraqi forces had encircled the city despite what

Hashed spokesman Ahmed al-Assadi described as "intense" fighting. He said the fighting for the city would likely last weeks. The International Organization for Migration said its teams were "responding to thousands of civilians fleeing Tal Afar since the launch of the military campaign". Since Friday, more than 3,000 people had arrived at two IOM emergency sites, many with just the clothes on their back, said the UN agency. The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) said it had received some 9,000 people at the Hamman Al Alil transit centre in the past week, and it was preparing to accommodate nearly 30,000 more. Mattis declined to make any predictions on the battle. "ISIS's days are certainly numbered, but it's not over yet and it's not going to be over anytime soon," he said. Iraqi forces had "fought like the dickens in Mosul, (it) cost them over 6,000 wounded, somewhere over 1,200 killed," he noted. A US official also said Mattis would press Massoud Barzani, president of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government, to call off a planned referendum on independence, reported Reuters. Iraq's Kurds have said they will hold the referendum on Sept. 25 despite concerns from Iraq's neighbors who have Kurdish minorities within their borders and a US request to postpone it.

**WAR AGAINST IS**  
Iraqi forces retake two districts of IS bastion  
Mattis to ask Kurdish leaders to call off independence vote



WAR IN SYRIA Dozens of civilians killed in US-led strikes in Raqa

Dozens of civilians have died in two days of intense US-led strikes on Raqa, a monitor said yesterday, as fighting to retake the Syrian city from jihadists nears its densely populated centre. At least 250 US-led coalition strikes have hit Raqa city and the surrounding area in the last week, a coalition spokesman told AFP, as the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces press an offensive in the city. The SDF has so far captured just under 60 percent of Raqa, monitors say, leaving jihadists from the Islamic State group in control of about 10 square kilometres (four square miles) in the heart of the city. But as clashes approach central Raqa, monitors and activists have reported scores killed in intensifying coalition bombardment of the city. On Monday, US-led air strikes killed at least 42 civilians in several neighbourhoods in Raqa under IS control, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor. Nineteen children and 12 women were among the dead. That takes to 167 the number of civilians killed in coalition strikes since August 14, after the Observatory said at least 27 were killed on Sunday. "The tolls are high because the air strikes are hitting neighbourhoods in the city centre that are densely packed with civilians," Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman said. "There are buildings full of civilians who are trying to get away from the front lines." The coalition says avoiding civilian casualties is its "highest priority." Coalition spokesman Colonel Ryan Dillon told AFP that the latest allegations of civilian deaths would be taken seriously and investigated.



NEWS IN brief

Remains found inside damaged US warship

Divers searching for 10 missing sailors on a US destroyer that collided with a tanker off Singapore have found human remains, a US admiral said yesterday. The accident off Singapore was the second deadly collision in two months involving an American warship.

Jailed HK activist back in court

With hair newly shaven in accordance with Hong Kong prison rules, jailed pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong was in court again yesterday on more protest-related charges. Wong, Nathan Law and Alex Chow were sent to prison last Thursday for their leading role in Umbrella Movement.

Austrian football fan jailed for Hitler salute

An Austrian football fan has been given an 18-month prison sentence for a Hitler salute during a match, falling foul of the country's tough laws against Nazi glorification. The 39-year-old from Rapid Vienna's "ultra" wing was spotted performing the banned gesture during a match in August 2016.

Uzbekistan frees UN staffer after 11 yrs

Uzbekistan has released a former United Nations employee held for 11 years over treason, the UN said yesterday. Erkin Musayev was running a joint UN-EU programme when he was arrested in Uzbek capital in 2006.



A pregnant mother and her one-and-a-half-year-old daughter Amanda, who stated they were from Haiti, are watched by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers as they prepare to cross the US-Canada border into Hemmingford, Quebec, Canada, from Champlain in New York, USA, on Monday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Uranium enrichment in days Says Iran's atomic chief if US quits nuclear deal struck in 2015

Iran close to the level needed for a nuclear weapon. US President Donald Trump repeatedly threatened to tear up the nuclear deal during his campaign, and it has come under mounting pressure after Tehran carried out missile tests and Washington imposed new sanctions -- with each accusing the other of violating the spirit of the agreement. But Salehi said that scrapping the nuclear deal would backfire on Washington in its efforts to tackle North Korea's atomic programme. "If they call off the JCPOA, North Korea will say you are not committed to your pledges," he said. "The credibility of the US will fall apart and the question will be raised as to why they committed themselves and then violated their commitments." Under the deal, Iran is allowed to enrich uranium to low levels of 3.5 percent, which can be used to power reactors. At 20-percent, uranium can be used for nuclear medicines, but crucially leaves only a small amount of work to get to the 90-percent level needed for a nuclear weapon. For this reason, when in February 2010 Iran began enriching to 20 percent alarm bells rang, since it dramatically shortened the time needed to produce a bomb's worth of weapons-grade uranium. Iran denied seeking a nuclear weapon, but the international community imposed heavy sanctions that were only eased with the 2015 deal with Britain, France, Germany, China, the United States and the European Union.



Bigger attack was planned Spain suspect admits in Madrid court

An alleged member of the terror cell that unleashed carnage in Spain last week admitted to a judge yesterday that he and other suspects had planned a bigger attack, a judicial source said. Mohamed Houli Chemlal, 21, was the first of four surviving suspects to be questioned in Madrid's National Court, which deals with terror-related cases, over the attacks in Barcelona and a seaside resort that claimed 15 lives and wounded more than 100 people. The Spaniard was injured in an accidental explosion at a makeshift bomb factory on Wednesday evening that killed an imam, Abdelbaki Es Satty, thought to have radicalised him and other young suspects. Police had previously revealed that the suspected jihadists had been preparing bombs for "one or more attacks in Barcelona". Josep Lluís Traperó, head of police in Catalonia, said 120 gas canisters and traces of TATP components -- a homemade explosive that is a hallmark of the Islamic State group that claimed the attacks -- had been found at their bomb factory. The accidental explosion in the house in Alcanar, south of Barcelona, may have forced the suspects to modify their plans. The questioning of the four suspects caps five days of angst following the vehicle ramming attacks in Barcelona and the seaside resort of Cambrils. Spanish police shot dead Younes Abouyaaqoub, the suspected Barcelona van driver, on Monday in a dramatic end to the manhunt for the Moroccan national, who shouted "God is greatest" when he was killed.

TRUMP'S AFGHANISTAN PLAN

New strategy or repeating history?

President Donald Trump has opened the door to the deployment to Afghanistan of thousands more US troops, in his first speech outlining American policy after nearly 16 years of grinding war. Here are some key questions about the impact Trump's strategy could have in a country known as "the graveyard of empires". WHAT HAS TRUMP ANNOUNCED? He refused to give figures or details. But the strategy appears to amount to around 4,000 new troops, largely freed from Obama-era restrictions and thus able to take on greater frontline combat roles to target "terrorist and criminal networks". The 8,500 US personnel currently in-country are largely restricted to Nato's mission of training the Afghan Army and offering strategic support on certain missions, though some are already conducting frontline operations. The other main plank of Trump's outline strategy was to pressure Pakistan, a move which has already been attempted repeatedly by Washington. HOW WILL THE TALIBAN REACT? With predictable violence and from a position of relative strength, observers say. They are likely to seek to send an early message, perhaps with a major urban attack -- the like of which they proved themselves capable with a massive truck bomb in Kabul's diplomatic quarter in May.



"The Taliban and other belligerents are likely to respond with a new wave of violence across the country," including in urban areas, said Javid Ahmad from West Point's Modern War Institute. WILL THE PRESSURE ON PAKISTAN WORK? Trump returned to the theme that has been a near-constant refrain from Washington since shortly after the 9/11 attacks: Pakistan must stop supporting extremists. With its long, porous border and poorly policed tribal areas, Pakistan makes a near-perfect refuge for Taliban, out of the range of Afghanistan's under-performing army and its American protectors. Despite being a signed-up ally in the US "War on Terror", Pakistan stands accused of fuelling the insurgency next door, in part as a bulwark against the influence of India -- a modern-day "Great Game" reminiscent of the imperial rivalry between Britain and Russia in the 19th century. SOURCE: AFP