

WAR ON IS IN PHILIPPINES

Five-month battle ends in Marawi

A five-month battle against Islamic State supporters in the southern Philippines that claimed more than 1,100 lives has ended following a final battle inside a mosque, defence chiefs said yesterday.

The conclusion of the conflict ended immediate fears that IS would establish a Southeast Asian base in the southern city of Marawi. But concerns remained about its longer-term intentions and capabilities for the region.

"We now announce the termination of all combat operations in Marawi," Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana told reporters on the sidelines of a regional security meeting in Clark, a northern Philippine city.

"There are no more militants inside Marawi city."

Hundreds of local and foreign gunmen who had pledged allegiance to IS rampaged through Marawi, the principal Islamic city in the mainly Catholic Philippines, on May 23. They then took over parts of the city using civilians as human shields.

An ensuing US-backed military campaign claimed the lives of at least 920 militants, 165 soldiers and 47 civilians, according to the military.

More than 400,000 residents were displaced as nearly daily air strikes and intense ground combat left large parts of the city in ruins.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte travelled to Marawi on Tuesday last week and declared the city had been "liberated", a day after the Southeast Asian leader for IS, a Filipino militant named Isnilon Hapilon, was shot dead there.



Flame rises as damaged buildings are seen after government troops cleared the area from pro-Islamic State militant groups inside a war-torn area in Marawi city, southern Philippines yesterday.

WAR ON TALIBAN

Tillerson pays surprise visit to Afghanistan

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson paid a surprise visit to Afghanistan yesterday to discuss Washington's new strategy with President Ashraf Ghani.

Tillerson reiterated the US commitment to working with the Kabul government and regional partners "to achieve peace in Afghanistan and deny safe havens to terrorists who threaten that goal," said a US embassy statement posted on Twitter.

The meeting took place at Bagram Airfield, America's largest base in Afghanistan, as the resurgent Taliban stepped up attacks on Afghan police and troops in response to the US strategy announced in August.

"Clearly we have to continue to fight against the Taliban to bring stability in order for them to understand they will never win a military



majority" in North Korea after majority vote win

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday pledged to work with the US, China and Russia to contain North Korea's nuclear threat with "strong, resolute diplomacy," as he "humbly" accepted his landslide victory in a snap election.

Fresh from clinching a two-thirds "super-majority" that enables the nationalist premier to realise his dream of revising Japan's pacifist constitution, Abe vowed to forge a "national consensus" on the divisive issue.

"Addressing reporters on his election win, Abe said he would "confirm close co-operation" on North Korea with Donald Trump when the US president visits Japan next month and then discuss the issue with the Chinese and Russian leaders.

"I have renewed my determination to secure people's lives and peaceful living, no matter what," said the 63-year-old.

North Korea, which has threatened to "sink" Japan and fired two missiles over the northern islands, dominated the 12-day election campaign that Abe eventually won comfortably.

"We will solve North Korea's missile, nuclear and abduction issues with strong, resolute diplomacy," he said in reference to the abduction of Japanese by Pyongyang in the 1970s and 1980s.

Abe's conservative coalition was on track to win at least 313 seats with only a handful left to call, according to public broadcaster NHK, giving him the coveted two-thirds majority in the lower house of parliament.

He is now on course to become Japan's longest-serving premier, winning a fresh term at the helm of the world's third-biggest economy and key US regional ally.

North Korea belligerence helped the ruling coalition because "people are scared" and voted for Abe's hard-line stance, said Gerald Curtis, professor of political science at Columbia University.

"I focused on the national defence issue, because I am concerned about North Korea. So I chose the party that will work firmly on this issue," one voter, 66-year-old pensioner Tsuyoshi Ushijima, told AFP.

REVENGE CAMPAIGN IN AL-QARYAYIN

IS executed 116 in Syria

The Islamic State group executed dozens of civilians this month in the Syrian desert, a British-based monitor said yesterday in a gruesome massacre as the jihadists see their "caliphate" collapse.

The extremist group last week lost its key Syrian stronghold of Raqqa, the latest in a string of setbacks for the jihadists who are facing multiple defeats in both Syria and neighbouring Iraq.

Killings were carried out in Al-Qaryayin before IS lost it to regime.

Most of the IS fighters who attacked the town were sleeper cells: monitor

lost it to Russian-backed Syria forces last year.

"After the regime retook it (on Saturday), the town's residents found the bodies on the streets. They had been shot dead or executed with knives," Abdel Rahman said.

"Most of the IS fighters who attacked the town a month ago were sleeper cells... They are from the town, know the town's residents and who is for or against the regime," he said.

The majority of those killed were executed in the last two days before IS lost the town again, he added.

The regime seized back Al-Qaryayin on Saturday after more than 200 jihadists withdrew from the town overnight, pulling back into the vast desert region that stretches all the way to the Iraqi border.

Al-Qaryayin was a symbol of religious coexistence before the civil war broke out in 2011, with some 900 Christians among its population of 30,000.

But it was ravaged by IS during the group's eight-month-long occupation of the town in 2015-16, with its Christian sites including a fifth-century church reduced to rubble.

2 Italy regions claim victory in autonomy votes

Two of Italy's wealthiest regions were drawing up plans yesterday to claw back power and money from Rome after a victory for autonomy campaigners that could deepen divisions in Europe.

Over 95 per cent of voters who flocked to the polls in the Veneto and Lombardy regions, home to Venice and Milan, supported a mandate to negotiate a better deal with the Italian capital.

Turnout was higher than expected and the results should not be underestimated in the context of the crisis created by Catalonia's push for independence, analysts warned.

Voter participation stood at 57 per cent in Veneto and nearly 39 per cent in Lombardy.

The leaders of the two regions will now embark on negotiations with the central government on the devolution of powers and tax revenues from Rome.

Abe aims at North Korea after majority vote win

Vows to work with US, China, Russia to contain threat

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NEWS IN brief

UN urges Lanka to start probing war crimes

AFP, Colombo

A United Nations expert warned yesterday that Sri Lanka must speed up its own long-stalled investigation into war crimes by troops or risk action by the international community, Pablo de Greiff said. Sri Lanka had been slow to deliver on its promise of justice for atrocities during 37-year civil war.

Israel police arrest 51 Palestinians in raid

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli police raided a Palestinian neighbourhood in an annexed east Jerusalem area and arrested 51 people accused of violent protests against security forces, authorities said.

Police officers detain a man who stabbed Tatiana Felgenhauer, a presenter of Echo of Moscow radio station, in Moscow yesterday. The unknown assailant forced his way into the office of the radio station that is critical of the Kremlin and stabbed the presenter in the neck before he was detained, the chief editor said.

PHOTO: REUTERS



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London pollution tax comes into force

AFP, London

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Hawking's thesis made available for first time

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

You can finally take a peek into the mind of one of the greatest students in the world: Stephen Hawking, and his PhD thesis.

The University of Cambridge has long looked after the doctorate presented by the young Professor Hawking, and all of them will actually understand it; the thesis' title is 'Properties of expanding universes' and it continues in a similarly mind-blowing but difficult vein throughout.

At the time of writing the paper, Professor Hawking was just a 24-year-old postgraduate student in Cambridge. But it began a process that would see him become the most famous scientist in the world - and the beginnings of much of that work is contained within the paper.

The university said the thesis is by far the most popular in its system, with even the internal catalogue page receiving hundreds of views each month.

Professor Hawking and his university said they hoped that putting the thesis online would not simply encourage people to read it and think about the ideas it contains, but also to share their own views on it.

"By making my PhD thesis Open Access, I hope to inspire people around the world to look up at the stars and not down at their feet," said Professor Hawking.

May begged for help in talks

Says killed referring to comments reportedly made by Juncker; EU denies account, accuses some people of undermining bloc's position

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The European Commission has accused "some people" of leaking an account of Theresa May's dinner with president Jean-Claude Juncker to undermine the EU's position on Brexit talks.

In an unprecedented move Commission chief spokesperson Margaritis Schinas broke the body's silence and told reporters in Brussels that other people had their "own political agendas" for leaking the claims that May had "begged Juncker for help on Brexit."

He urged the unnamed party to "leave us alone" after the unnamed source told a German newspaper that the PM looked like "someone who can't sleep a wink" at the meeting.

Downing Street has entirely declined to comment on the affair, which is the second leak of a private dinner between the two leaders in as many months.

"Normally we do not comment on leaks, but today I will. Some people like to point at us to serve their own political agendas, their own political priorities, or even to undermine our negotiating position," the Commission spokesperson said yesterday.

"We would appreciate if these people would leave us alone, we have lots of work and no time for gossip."

"I have to be very clear that President Juncker would never have used the words attributed to him and never would he have said anything like this. We have never been punitive on Brexit, we have said at all levels and on many occasions that we are working for a fair deal."

The Commission spokesperson would not be drawn on who he thought had leaked the details of the two-party dinner between May and Juncker.

"Why don't you have a BBC investigation out for this. I stated the position of the institution very clear, no time for gossip," he told a BBC reporter who asked a follow-up question about who might have been behind the report.

The report emerged as May's former chief of staff Nick Timothy, who resigned from his position after the disastrous election result, accused his old number one in Juncker's office of leaking details of the dinner last week.



Trump call 'made me cry even worse'

Says widow of fallen US soldier

REUTERS, Washington

The widow of a US Army sergeant killed in Niger this month said yesterday that President Donald Trump "made me cry even worse" in a condolence telephone call when he said that her husband "knew what he signed up for."

In an interview with ABC's "Good Morning America," Myshia Johnson, widow of Sergeant David L. Johnson, also said she has been told little about how her husband was killed and has not been allowed to see his body.

Johnson's comments, her first to the media about the condolence call from Trump, were likely to fuel a controversy that has swirled for days around the president's handling of the call to the widow.

La David Johnson was one of four US Army soldiers killed on Oct 4 in an attack in the West African nation. Last week, a member of the US House of Representatives, Frederica Wilson, said she had listened to the call from Trump and that he had upset the family by saying Johnson "knew what he signed up for."

That drew a sharp rebuke from the president, who dubbed Wilson "whacky" and denied her account of the call. "I didn't say what that congresswoman said," Trump told reporters last week.

Ag Khan gets UN's Global Change Award

INTERNATIONAL DESK

The United Nations Foundation has honoured His Highness the Aga Khan with 2017 Champion for Global Change Award for his considerable contribution to the humanitarian cooperation and changing people's life for better.

Ag Khan received UN Foundation's Global Change Award from former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on Wednesday.

Recognized as one of New York's top events, the Global Leadership Dinner is distinguished by Ag Khan's attendance representing the highest levels of the diplomatic, business, government, philanthropic, media, entertainment and cultural sectors.

The Global Leadership Dinner is central to calling the world's attention to the work of the UN and supporting a peaceful, prosperous and just future. Proceeds benefit UNA-USA and its work to inform, educate, and inspire Americans in support of the UN.

Ag Khan received the Clab Change Award. Ag Khan held talks with the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

Ag Khan, the founder and chairman of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), is the 49th hereditary Imam (Spiritual Leader) of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslim community.

In the context of his hereditary responsibilities, Ag Khan has been deeply engaged with the development of countries around the world for close to 60 years through the work of the AKDN.

