

KURDS PARTICIPATION

Syria congress to go ahead despite Turkey opposition

AFP, Sochi

The Kremlin yesterday said Turkey's opposition to the participation of Kurdish militias in Syria's political process would not stand in the way of a peace "congress" Moscow is seeking to organise in the near future.

"We know that there are certain reservations on the part of our Turkish partners with regards to the forces they believe pose a threat to their national security," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters at the Black Sea resort of Sochi.

"But this does not mean that work will not be conducted. Intense expert work to agree and check the lists (of congress participants) lies ahead."

He said the congress would be convened "in the near future" but did not provide more details.

On Wednesday, President Vladimir Putin hosted the leaders of Iran and Turkey for a key trilateral summit aimed at finding a political settlement of Syria's six-year civil war.

The trio sought to show a united front, saying they hoped a Moscow-championed "congress" would bring together Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad's forces and various opposition groups and reinvigorate a hobbled peace process.

But Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan appeared to fume at the prospect of inviting the Kurdish group PYD and its armed wing, the Kurdish Popular Protection Units (YPG) fighting in Syria to take part in the peace conference.

Without referring to the Kurdish militias by name, Erdogan said at the Sochi summit: "We cannot consider a terrorist gang with blood on their hands a legitimate actor."

"The exclusion of terrorist elements that threaten Syria's political unity and territorial integrity, as well as our national security, will continue to be a priority for Turkey," Erdogan said.



SYRIA WAR

A picture taken yesterday shows smoke rising following a reported air strike on the rebel-held besieged town of Arbin, in the Eastern Ghouta region on the outskirts of Damascus. Inset, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani, Russia's Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Tayyip Erdogan pose for photo after a meeting in Sochi, Russia on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Iraq 'flushing out IS'

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraqi forces launched an operation yesterday to clear the desert bordering Syria of Islamic State in a final push to rid Iraq of the militant group, the military said.

Troops from the Iraqi army and Shia Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) were taking part in the campaign against militants hiding in a large strip of borderland, Iraqi military officials said.

"The objective behind the operation is to prevent remaining Daesh groups from melting into the desert region and using it as a base for future attacks," said army colonel Salah Kareem, referring to Islamic State by an Arabic acronym.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said on Tuesday Islamic State had been defeated from a military perspective but he would only declare final victory after IS militants were routed in the desert.

Iraqi forces on Friday captured the border town of Rawa, the last remain-

ing town under Islamic State control, signalling the collapse of the group's "caliphate" proclaimed after it overran much of Iraq's north and west in 2014.

Iraqi army commanders say the military campaign will continue until all the frontier with Syria is secured to

Prime Minister Abadi is expected to officially announce the final victory over Islamic State in Iraq, said official sources.

Army officials said troops advancing through sprawling desert towards the Syria border are facing landmines and roadside bombs placed by retreating militants.

"We need to clean scattered villages from terrorists to make sure they no longer operate in the desert area with Syria," said army Lieutenant colonel Ahmed Fairs.

Iraqi military helicopters provided cover for the advancing troops and destroyed at least three vehicles used by Islamic State militants as they were trying to flee a village in the western desert, said the army officer.

Islamic State's self-declared caliphate collapsed in effect in July, when US-backed Iraqi forces captured Mosul, the group's de facto capital in Iraq, after a grueling battle that had lasted nine months.

Campaign targets clearing IS from desert with Syria  
Iraq seeks to fully secure borders, end IS border attacks  
Abadi to declare final victory over IS after campaign ends

prevent Islamic State from launching cross border attacks.

"We will completely secure the desert from all terrorist groups of Daesh and declare Iraq clean of those germs," said army Brigadier General Shakir Kadhim.

Once the desert operations end,

JFK's assassination aided by his 'bad back, poor health'

CNN ONLINE

Every November, America remembers the end of Camelot: a shining time of promise led by John F Kennedy, US's youngest president, brought to an abrupt and bloody end by Lee Harvey Oswald's second shot, a bullet to the brain.

While conspiracy theorists debate who pulled that trigger, there's another culprit that often goes unmentioned: Kennedy's lifelong struggle with back pain.

It was his habit of wearing a tightly laced back brace that may have kept him from recoiling to the floor of his car after the assassin's first bullet to the neck, setting him up for the kill shot.

"The brace was a firmly bound corset, around his hips and lower back and higher up," said Dr Thomas Pait, a spinal neurosurgeon who co-authored a paper about Kennedy's failed back surgeries.

The Kennedy clan closely guarded the true extent of John Kennedy's medical prob-

lems well past his death.

Though details escaped over the years -- it's hard to hide news photos of him walking on crutches before and after one of his numerous back surgeries -- it wasn't until 2002, when historian Robert Dallek was allowed access to a collection of documents spanning 1955 and 1963, that specifics began to emerge.

Pait and his co-author, neurosurgeon Dr Justin Dowdy, pored over Dallek's subsequent book, numerous other biographies and scores of documents and X-rays at the JFK Library in Boston to prepare their paper, published in September.

"He was one of our youngest presidents, and he was also one of our sickest presidents. Yet it was important politically for him to keep up the appearance of youthfulness and vigor," said Pait.

A sickly child -- Kennedy had scarlet fever at age 2 -- he spent his teenage years in and out of hospitals with abdominal and joint pain, flu-like symptoms and extreme weight loss.



Time running out for missing sub

Argentine navy says 'explosion' heard near its last known position

AFP, Mar Del Plata

Argentina's navy yesterday confirmed that an unusual noise heard in the ocean near the last known position of an Argentine navy submarine appeared to be an explosion, dashing the last hopes of finding the vessel and its 44 crewmembers.

Concern for the missing submarine and its crew has gripped Argentina since it was reported overdue at its Mar del Plata base on November 17, two days after the explosion.

"An anomalous, singular, short, violent and non-nuclear event consistent with an explosion," occurred shortly after the submarine's last communication, navy spokesman Captain Enrique Baldi told a news conference in Buenos Aires.

After days of false hopes, families of the crewmembers keeping vigil at the base reacted angrily to the news, saying the navy had lied to them over the past week.

"I feel cheated," said Itati Leguizamón, whose husband was on the San Juan.

Underwater sounds detected in the first days of the search by two Argentine search ships were determined to originate from a sea creature, not the vessel. Satellite signals were also determined to be false alarms.

Russia was the latest navy to volunteer to a multinational sea search, sending an oceanographic research ship as the operation shifted focus from rescue to recovery.

The week-long search has focused on the sub's last known position, around 200 miles off the Argentine coast, but has been hampered by bad weather.



Relatives and comrades of 44 crew members of Argentine missing submarine express their grief at Argentina's Navy base in Mar del Plata, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

The San Juan, a 34-year-old German-built diesel-electric submarine, had reported a battery problem on November 15 and said it was diverting to its home base at Mar del Plata, but did not send a distress signal, according to the navy. A former submarine commander told AFP a problem with batteries, as the sub had reported, could cause an explosion.

Argentina is leading an air-and-sea search with help from several countries including Brazil, Britain, Chile, Colombia, France, Germany, Peru, Russia, the United States and Uruguay.

Despite mechanical problems, the crew could survive indefinitely if the sub retained the ability to rise to the surface to "snort" or replenish its air.



Zimbabwe's incoming president Emmerson Mnangagwa (3rd L) speaks to supporters flanked by his wife Auxilia (2nd R) surrounded by their bodyguards at Zimbabwe's ruling Zanu-PF party headquarters in Harare on Wednesday. Mnangagwa will be sworn in as president at an inauguration ceremony today, officials said.

PHOTO: AFP

Cuba expresses Support for North Korea

Calls for US 'dialogue'

AFP, Havana

Cuba, one of North Korea's few allies, called on Wednesday for "peace and stability" in the Korean peninsula and stressed the need for dialogue to reduce tensions between Pyongyang and Washington.

Upon receiving his North Korean counterpart Ri Yong-Ho in Havana, foreign affairs minister Bruno Rodríguez said Cuba is "in favor of peace and stability," adding that "only after dialogue and negotiations can a lasting political solution be achieved," according to Cuban media.

In the wake of President Trump's declaration of North Korea as a state sponsor of terror on Monday, Rodríguez also rejected what he called the United States' "unilateral certifications and dictates" on North Korea -- insisting they served as a basis for "the application of coercive measures contrary to international law."

Meanwhile, Ri blamed the "increased use of imperialist military force" for the worsening situation in the Korean peninsula, and stressed the importance of Cuba-North Korea relations as "two socialism-building countries."

His visit comes as Pyongyang and Washington continue to clash over North Korea's numerous ballistic missile and nuclear tests -- while US-Cuba relations, re-established in 2015 after a 50-year stand-off, have also deteriorated under President Trump.

On September 23, Ri denounced Trump in a speech at the United Nations, and expressed "strong support and solidarity with the Cuban government and people."

In May, President Raul Castro also expressed Cuba's solidarity with Pyongyang to visiting North Korean union leader Ju Yong-Gil.

Catalan separatist party shelves 'unilateral' independence push

AFP, Madrid

The party of ousted Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont now favours talks with Madrid to achieve independence instead of pushing to break away from Spain unilaterally, its coordinator said yesterday, the latest sign it was softening its position.

Spanish media have reported that Puigdemont's PdeCat party and its former government ally, the far-left ERC party, were planning to abandon a call for Catalonia to break away from Spain "unilaterally" in their programmes for a December 21 regional election.

"The draft follows this line. It is not finished. It seems like a good route to work on," PdeCat party coordinator Marta Pascal said in an interview with Cadena Ser news radio when asked about the reports.

Catalonia "lacks two things" to declare independence, Pascal added: "That this be

effective and above all to count on the support of more people."

Madrid imposed direct rule on Catalonia and dismissed its government after the parliament of the once semi-autonomous region voted in favour of independence last month, and called the new elections in a bid to "restore normality".

The assembly approved the independence declaration following a banned secession referendum on October 1, which sparked Spain's worst political crisis since the country returned to democracy after the death of longtime dictator Francisco Franco in 1975.

Puigdemont had hoped to form a united separatist front for the new elections, as was the case in the region's last elections in 2015, when the pro-independence camp secured a majority of 72 seats in the 135-seat parliament, even though it won just 47.8 percent of the vote. But the ERC rejected a joint ticket this time.



IS media channels offline for a day!

AFP, Beirut

The Islamic State group's online propaganda channels went mysteriously quiet for more than a full day between Wednesday and yesterday, in what analysts said was an "unprecedented" silence.

IS, which uses messaging application Telegram to broadcast daily updates on military operations and claims of attacks, published nothing between 0900 GMT on Wednesday and 1001 GMT on Thursday.

Charlie Winter, senior research fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, called the silence "unprecedented."

IS's Telegram channels usually post more than a dozen messages each day, ranging from multilingual radio broadcasts on battlefield achievements to pictures of civilian life in the group's self-styled "caliphate."

On Wednesday, however, the group posted in a brief 30-minute window, skipping its usual "daily broadcast" entirely. It then went dark until yesterday, breaking its silence with a four-minute radio segment on operations in eastern Syria and Iraq, only in Arabic.

"IS media infrastructure has taken a real battering over the last few months and because of that, something is changing," Winter said.