

Fears raised over child evacuation

AGENCIES

A senior UN official said he fears children waiting to be evacuated from the besieged rebel-held Eastern Ghouta area near the Syrian capital, Damascus, are being used as bargaining chips.

The UN's humanitarian co-ordinator, Jan Egeland, told the BBC he believed that rebels had agreed to free government workers in exchange for the children.

Another 12 patients were evacuated on Wednesday, following four on Tuesday. Thirteen more urgent cases were expected to be evacuated yesterday.

News of the latest evacuations from the Eastern Ghouta came in a tweet from the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), a medical relief organisation that supports hospitals in rebel-held Syria.

A total of 29 emergency medical cases are expected to be evacuated under a deal with the government that saw rebels release 26 individuals, including workers detained during fierce clashes with the army in March.

The numbers are still a far cry from the nearly 500 patients in the Damascus suburb the UN said weeks ago would die if they did not urgently receive better treatment.

"Yesterday we evacuated 12 patients together with their family members, the majority of them are children," International Committee of the Red Cross spokeswoman Ingy Sedky said.

At the Syrian Red Crescent headquarters in Douma, an AFP correspondent saw the latest group of evacuees waiting

SYRIA CONFLICT

UN official alleges that rebels agreed to free government workers in exchange for children

12 more patients evacuated from rebel enclave



for ambulances to pick them up.

Among them was Abdel Rahman, a seven-month-old baby with respiratory assistance in his mother's arms. A Red Crescent worker tried to make another baby smile.

"Most of them suffer from cancer, chronic diseases and heart diseases," Sedky said, adding that the evacuees were transferred to Damascus.

From the list of 500 urgent cases announced in November at least 16 have already died for lack of medical assistance.

Around 400,000 people live in the Eastern Ghouta area on the edge of the Syrian capital.

The enclave is controlled by rebels, the dominant faction among them Jaish al-Islam (Army of Islam), and has been under siege by the government for four years.

Jan Egeland, head of the Norwegian Refugee Council and currently a UN special envoy for humanitarian access in Syria, was critical of the deal that allowed the patients to leave.

The agreement between the rebels and the government was reached with support from Turkey, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and led to the release of 26 men held by Jaish al-Islam rebels.



Vehicles of emergency services are parked near a supermarket after an explosion in St Petersburg, Russia on Wednesday night. *Inset*, an interior view of the supermarket is seen after the explosion that left 10 people injured.

PHOTO: REUTERS



St Petersburg blast was act of terror: Putin

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday said an explosion that tore through a Saint Petersburg supermarket, wounding 13 people, was an act of terror, as footage of the suspected bomber spread on the internet.

Speaking at a meeting with military officers in the Kremlin, Putin ordered the nation's security services to "act decisively" and "liquidate bandits on the spot" if armed militants put up resistance.

His spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters later that the Russian leader was referring to all those "who harbour plans to carry out acts of terror in our country."

On Wednesday evening, a homemade bomb placed in a locker at the supermarket in northwestern Saint Petersburg, Russia's second city and Putin's hometown, exploded.

"As you know, an act of terror took place in Saint Petersburg yesterday," Putin said at a ceremony to award officers who took part in the Syria campaign.

Those wounded in the attack included a 35-year-old pregnant woman.

Putin's 2015 decision to intervene in Syria militarily on the side of Bashar al-Assad has made Russia a priority target for the Islamic State group.

Anna Mityanina, vice governor of Saint Petersburg, said on Twitter that six people remain in hospital care.

The bomb came after the FSB security service said earlier this month it had prevented a terror attack on a key Orthodox cathedral in Saint Petersburg with the help of America's CIA, which led Putin to thank US President Donald Trump.

The explosion occurred at around 1845 local time (1545 GMT) as people geared up to celebrate the New Year -- the country's biggest holiday -- followed by Russian Orthodox Christmas, which falls on January 7.

Israel passes disputed law altering cop powers

Critics say it is meant to shield Netanyahu

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel's parliament yesterday ratified a law barring police investigators from going public with their findings, in what opposition lawmakers saw as a bid to soften scrutiny of corruption probes against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The so-called Recommendations Bill, approved in the final reading by a vote of 59-to-54, prevents police from announcing whether they have found enough evidence for an indictment before prosecutors decide whether or not to press such charges.

Netanyahu is a suspect in two cases. In one, he is alleged to have meddled in the media industry. The other concerns gifts he received from wealthy businessmen. He denies any wrongdoing.

Opposition lawmakers have said that the bill, tabled by Netanyahu's rightist Likud party, was designed to dampen public anger over the investigations, which has fuelled weekly demonstrations in Tel

Aviv and calls for the premier's ouster.

Netanyahu defended the bill on December 3 as "intended to prevent publication of police recommendations which would leave a cloud over innocent people, something that happens every day". In 60 percent of cases where police recommend criminal charges, prosecutors decided not to indict, Netanyahu noted.

But the prime minister also called for the bill to be amended so it did not apply to the criminal investigations against him.

The final draft stipulated that the law would not be in effect regarding investigations that pre-date its ratification.

That has done little to mollify the opposition.

"This law came about only because of the investigations against Netanyahu," Avi Gabbay, head of the centre-left Zionist Union party, told Israel's Army Radio.

"We don't know what investigations might be conducted in the future (against him)."



Moore tries to block Alabama result

REUTERS, Denver

Alabama Republican Roy Moore filed a court challenge late on Wednesday to the outcome of a US Senate election he unexpectedly lost, hours before officials in the state were due to certify his opponent's victory.

Doug Jones became the first Democrat in a quarter century to win a Senate seat in the Republican stronghold state when he was declared the winner of the December 12 ballot.

When he takes office, the Republican majority in the upper chamber will narrow to 51 of the 100 seats.

Moore, a former chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court whose campaign was dogged by sexual harassment accusations that he denies, has not conceded defeat despite being urged by President Donald Trump to do so.

In Wednesday's filing in the Montgomery Circuit Court, Moore alleged that potential voter fraud had denied him the chance of victory, and sought to halt a state canvassing board meeting that was scheduled to ratify Jones' win yesterday.

The board consists of Alabama Governor Kay Ivey, Attorney General Steve Marshall and Secretary of State John Merrill.

MOST ADMIRED MAN IN AMERICA

Obama beats Trump: poll

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are the most admired man and woman in America, according to a Gallup poll.

The former President has made it to the top of the list for the past 10 years, while the former presidential candidate has won 16 years in a row.

The poll found 17 percent of Americans named Obama as the man they admired most, while 14 percent named Donald Trump, putting him in second place.

Clinton was named the most admired woman by 9 percent of respondents, compared to 7 percent who chose Michelle Obama, the former First Lady.

Obama and Trump were followed by Pope Francis, with 3 percent of votes. Others on the top 10 list for men included politicians, businessmen and religious figures.

A quarter of Americans were unable to

name a man or woman they admired the most.

Nine percent named a relative or friend as their most admired man, compared to 13 percent who did so for their most admired woman.

In an analysis of the results, Gallup pollsters wrote: "Trump's unpopularity is holding him back from winning the most admired distinction."

"The incumbent President is the usual winner, since he is arguably the most prominent figure in the country - but when the President is unpopular, other well-known and well-liked men have been able to finish first."

"Obama, like Hillary Clinton, may fade in prominence the longer he is out of office. Former Presidents commonly make the top 10 list but rarely win, with Obama only the second to do so, along with Eisenhower in 1967 and 1968."



Turkey resumes US visa services

AFP, Ankara

Turkish missions in the United States will resume full visa services for US citizens, Ankara's embassy in Washington said yesterday, matching an identical move by American consulates in Turkey.

"Within the framework of the principle of reciprocity, the restrictions placed from our side on the visa regime for US citizens are being lifted simultaneously," it said in a statement, following an announcement by the US embassy in Ankara that full visa services for Turkish citizens were being restored.

The US decision to stop handing out visas was implemented from October and was followed by a tit-for-tat move by Turkey to stop giving Turkish visas to Americans.

Turkey's embassy in Washington said it "welcomed the decision to restore the old system from today".

The US said it had won assurances from Ankara that no further legal proceedings would be launched against its staff, after the crisis was sparked by the arrest of a local consulate employee.

But the Turkish embassy statement took issue with this, saying that "Turkey is a state of law" and "no such assurances have been given regarding cases pending in the courts".

"We do not find it right to misinform the Turkish and American publics by saying that assurances have been given," it said.

Polish man rescued after 7 months drifting in ocean

AFP, Saint-denis De La Reunion

The French coast guard has rescued a Polish sailor in the Indian Ocean who says he spent seven months with only his cat for company in a broken-down boat.

Investigators are seeking to piece together the itinerary of the 54-year-old who says he took to the sea in his makeshift vessel from the Comoros Islands off the coast of Mozambique in May with the aim of reaching South Africa.

The journey of more than 2,000 kilometres (1,200 miles) would have seen him travel south down the Mozambique Channel, a busy shipping route with strong currents for his vessel, a modified lifeboat from a cruise ship.

Instead of reaching South Africa, he was plucked from the waves well off-course, near the French island of

Reunion, on Sunday after being spotted by the crew of a yacht.

Madagascar, the world's fourth largest island, lies between Reunion and Mozambique.

The sailor said he and his cat survived on half a packet of Chinese soup per day as well as what he caught by fishing.

The instruments on his boat had been smashed and the man had no means of communication, France's SNSM coast guard service told AFP.

According to his telling, his odyssey started in 2014 when he travelled to India from his home in the United States and bought his boat with the intention of sailing it back to Poland.

After spending time modifying it himself, he took to the water but the boat broke down after leaving port because of a problem with its mast.



A man removes snow from his vehicle after two days of record-breaking snowfall in Erie, Pennsylvania, US on Wednesday as an Arctic snap gripped most of Canada and the northern United States.

PHOTO: REUTERS

MOVE TO PREVENT PEOPLE-SMUGGLING

Italy to send 470 troops to Niger

AFP, Rome

Italy will be sending 470 soldiers to Niger to help the west African nation stem the flow of Europe-bound migrants, Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni said yesterday.

Agadez, the main city in central Niger, has become a revolving door for economic migrants seeking to reach Europe via Libya, winning notoriety as Africa's people-smuggling capital.

"We are going to Niger following a request by the government at the start of December to... reinforce the security measures in the territory and at the borders and to support the police force," he said.

He said Niger was "the main transit country" in Africa for Europe-bound migrants, adding that it was also "perhaps the most willing to cooperate in this matter as it is a transit country," and does not receive remittances from migrants settled abroad.

The soldiers being sent to Niger have mainly served in Iraq and Kuwait.

A first contingent of less than 200 is expected to leave early next year.

The troops will have two planes and 130 vehicles at their disposal, according to Italian media.