

Yemen rivals battle for 'coup-hit' Aden

Nine killed; 130 wounded

AT least nine people were killed and more than 130 wounded yesterday in heavy fighting between separatist forces and government troops as tanks battled in Yemen's interim capital of Aden, military sources said.

Five pro-separatist fighters were killed by snipers, while four soldiers died in clashes, the sources said, as both sides began using tanks and heavy artillery in a second day of fighting in the southern port city.

The flare-up comes following President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi's call for an immediate ceasefire on Sunday, when 15 people were killed and dozens wounded in clashes.

Forces from both sides were seen in most areas of the city, which remained totally paralysed for the second day running. Universities, schools and shops were closed yesterday, an AFP photographer said.

The hostilities erupted early Sunday when pro-government troops prevented supporters of the separatist Southern Transitional Council from entering Aden where a rally was planned.

Aden has served as the headquarters of Hadi's Saudi-backed government since it was forced out of the capital Sanaa by Shia rebels three years ago.

The separatists -- who want the return of the independent South Yemen that existed before 1990 -- supported Hadi's forces against the rebels but tensions between the two sides have risen in recent months.

On Sunday, security sources said pro-separatist units trained and backed by the United Arab Emirates had taken over the government headquarters in Aden after clashes.



Palestinian employees of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) hold a sign during a protest against a US decision to cut aid, in Gaza City yesterday. The UNRWA is funded mainly by voluntary contributions from UN member states, with the United States by far the largest donor.

FBI deputy director to step down

CNN, Washington

FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe has told FBI staff that he is stepping down -- a move that surprised even those expecting his March retirement, sources tell CNN.



McCabe was a central target of President Donald Trump's ire toward the FBI over its involvement in the investigation into potential collusion between his campaign and Russia during the 2016 election.

He was eligible to retire in March, but with his accumulated leave, he was able to step down earlier.

Trump learned about the departure Monday morning, a White House official told CNN. The President did not answer a reporter's question at the White House about McCabe's departure.

MALDIVES POLITICAL CRISIS

Opposition seeks court help to oust president

AFP, Colombo

Opposition leaders in the Maldives including two former heads of state have asked the Supreme Court to remove the president and investigate corruption allegations against him.

The opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) said yesterday that the leaders had signed the petition asking the top court to suspend President Abdulla Yameen.

It was filed on Sunday after attempts to topple Yameen through a vote in parliament failed when the president deployed the military, before unleashing a fresh crackdown against dissidents.

Almost all key opposition leaders and a number of ruling party dissidents have either been jailed or gone into exile in the Maldives, denting the atoll nation's popular image as an upmarket holiday paradise.

"The joint opposition petitioned the

Supreme Court as the parliament, which has the power to remove a president from office, has ceased to function since President Yameen ordered the military to storm the legislature (early last year)," the MDP said.

The signatories include the country's first democratically elected leader Mohamed Nasheed, who lives in exile since he was jailed on terrorism charges in a case widely seen as politically motivated.

Yameen's half brother and former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who has joined key opposition figures ahead of general elections due later this year, also signed.

They accuse Yameen of "unprecedented corruption, including unjust enrichment from appropriation of state properties and funds for personal benefit, for the benefit of his family and political associates," according to the MDP statement.

It was not immediately clear whether the highest court would take up the petition.



Yameen Nasheed

Troops won't leave Manbij

Says US despite warnings from Ankara to remove its forces

CNN, Afp

US troops will not withdraw from Manbij, a strategically important city in northern Syria, a leading US military figure told CNN Sunday.

This means that US troops risk being caught up in Turkey's military push into northern Syria should Ankara follow through with a pledge to advance into the area.

Gen Joseph Votel, commander of the United States Central Command, said that withdrawing US forces from Manbij is "not something we are looking into."

Manbij is a key flashpoint in northern Syria -- located northeast of Aleppo and around 40 kilometres south of Jarabulus, which sits on the Syrian-Turkish border.

Turkey launched a ground operation across the border into Syria a week ago in an attempt to drive US-allied Kurdish militia from the area. The military incursion has raised tensions between Turkey and the United States, which supports and openly arms Kurdish militias fighting IS.

The confirmation of US commitment

ANTI-KURDS OPS IN SYRIA

- Clashes, air strikes again hit border region of Afrin
- Ankara detains 300 for terror propaganda against Syria ops
- Regime air raids kill 33 civilians in Syria's Idlib: monitor

to Manbij comes as parties involved in the conflict prepare to meet in Russia-hosted peace talks in the Black Sea resort of Sochi.

The two-day Syrian National Dialogue Congress, set to begin today, will be attended by up to 1,500 delegates from across the Syrian political landscape, Russian state media says.

Meanwhile, clashes and air strikes again hit Syria's border region of Afrin yesterday, with new civilian casualties reported as Turkey pursued an offen-

sive against Kurdish forces.

In reaction to the offensive, the Kurds have said they will not attend Sochi peace talks.

"Fighting has intensified on several fronts," said Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the Britain-based Observatory, which uses a network of long-established sources to monitor Syria's war.

He said pro-Turkish forces had captured eight areas near the border since the start of the operation.

The Turkish army said in a statement that "597 terrorists have been neutralised" since the start of the operation, reported AFP.

Turkey's interior ministry said yesterday that authorities had detained 311 people suspected of disseminating "terror propaganda" over Ankara's offensive against Kurdish militia.

Erdogan's spokesman Ibrahim Kalin has urged the public and media to be careful of "lying, fake, distortive and provocative news, images and gossip".

Regime air strikes have killed 33 civilians in the past 24 hours in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib where government forces are fighting jihadists, a monitor said yesterday.

Russia accuses US of meddling in its elections

CNN ONLINE

Russia said a US Treasury report that could extend sanctions against Moscow for meddling in the 2016 US presidential elections is "a direct and obvious attempt" to interfere in its own upcoming presidential vote.

By the end yesterday, the Treasury must send Congress a list of rich Russian business figures and detail their ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

US President Donald Trump reluctantly signed the legislation last August that ordered the report, even though US investigators believe he was the main beneficiary of Russian meddling.

"We do think that this is a direct and obvious attempt to time some sort of action to coincide with our elections in order to influence them," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists on a telephone conference call yesterday.

North Korea cancels joint Olympic performance

Blames South media

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea has cancelled a joint cultural performance with South Korea scheduled for February 4 blaming South Korean media for encouraging "insulting" public sentiment regarding the North, South Korea's unification ministry said yesterday.

The North said it had no choice but to call off the performance, which was to be held in the North Korean territory of Mount Kumgang, as South Korean media continued to insult what Pyongyang called "sincere" measures regarding the Winter Olympics.

Seoul will host next month, the ministry said.

Early in January, North and South Korea launched rare talks to bring North Koreans to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics after the North's leader Kim Jong Un said he was willing to open up discussions with Seoul.

The two Koreas had been in discussions regarding final details over the joint performance. They were also talking about a different concert in South Korea by a North Korean orchestra and sending South Korean athletes to train at a North Korean ski resort.

The North added that the agreement on the Mount Kumgang joint performance had come despite conflict with its internal celebrations, the unification ministry said.

Seoul said North Korea's decision to cancel the joint performance was "very regrettable" and stressed Pyongyang should uphold all agreements made between North and South Korea.



Afghan President Ashraf Ghani (R) and Indonesian President Joko Widodo shake hands before the start of their official meeting at the President Palace in Kabul yesterday.

Australia aims to be top 10 arms exporter

REUTERS, Sydney

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said yesterday Australian military equipment manufacturers will be offered government-backed loans as part of a \$3.8 billion (\$3.1 billion) package to become one of the world's top 10 defence exporters.

Australia said in 2016 it would boost defence spending by A\$30 billion by 2021, purchasing frigates, armoured personnel carriers, strike fighter jets, drones and a fleet of new submarines - many of which would be built at home.

The defence industry has struggled to obtain finance from traditional lenders that have been unwilling to fund the arms industry, so Australia has created a A\$3.8 billion loan scheme for companies seeking finance to export military equipment.

"Australia is around the 20th largest exporter. Given the size of our defence budget we should be higher up the scale than that," Turnbull told reporters in Sydney.

"The goal is to get into the top 10," he said.

Christopher Pyne, the minister for the defence industry, said Australia would target sales to the United States, Canada, Britain and New Zealand.

Australia's annual defence budget was worth A\$34.6 billion this year.

The scheme is also meant to arrest a slide in Australia's manufacturing sector and provide some support for its economy, which has been hampered by record-low wage growth.

NEWSIN brief

'I tweet from bed sometimes': Trump
REUTERS, London

US President Donald Trump, who has garnered a large following on social media with rambunctious postings, said he sometimes tweets from bed, though he occasionally allows others to post his words. Trump frequently uses Twitter to announce policy, assail his adversaries and to tangle with countries, including North Korea, over world affairs. The @realDonaldTrump account had 47.2 million users as of Sunday.

EU offers UK status quo transition
REUTERS, Brussels

The European Union yesterday agreed to offer Britain a 21-month transition period after Brexit next year during which it will keep the "status quo" of EU membership without getting a vote, officials said. Ministers took just two minutes to endorse a common statement drafted by officials, Sabine Weyand, the deputy to EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier, said on Twitter.

90,000 flee Philippine volcano eruption
AFP, Legazpi

The number of Filipinos fleeing from the erupting Mayon volcano to safe zones has swelled to nearly 90,000, officials said yesterday, worsening a sanitation crisis in the already stretched relief camps. President Duterte flew to the central city of Legazpi to assess the disaster zone, some two weeks after the country's most active volcano began belching ash columns, lava and rocks.

App shows data on secret bases

AFP, Washington

A map showing paths taken by users of an exercise tracking app reveals potentially sensitive information about American and allied military personnel in places including Iraq and Syria.

While some bases are well known to groups that might want to attack them, the map also shows what appear to be routes taken by forces moving outside of bases -- information that could be used in planning bombings or ambushes.

The map, made by Strava Labs, shows the movements of its app users around the world, indicating the intensity of travel along a given path -- a "direct visualization of Strava's global network of athletes," it says.

Routes are highlighted over large parts of some countries, but in others, specific locations stand out.

The map of Iraq is largely dark, indicating limited use of the Strava app, but a series of well-known military bases where American and allied forces have been deployed as part of their war against the Islamic State (IS) group are highlighted in detail.

These include Taji north of Baghdad, Qayyarah south of Mosul and Al-Asad in Anbar Province.

India has 21m 'unwanted' girls

AFP, New Delhi

The desire of Indian parents for sons has created an estimated 21 million "unwanted" girls because couples keep having children until they produce a boy, the government said yesterday.

Indian parents have historically wanted sons, who are seen as breadwinners and family heirs. Girls are often viewed as a financial burden in a country where the tradition of giving a marriage dowry persists.

Even though sex selection is against the law, illegal gender-based abortions have been blamed for a sex ratio of 940 females for every 1,000 males in the last census.

But many couples continued having children until they produced their desired number of sons, the government said in its annual economic survey report.

"Families where a son is born are more likely to stop having children than families where a girl is born. This is suggestive of parents employing 'stopping rules' -- having children till a son is born and stopping thereafter," it said.

Couples, particularly women, in India face immense pressure to produce male children and many rural families do not send girls to school, marrying them off young.

But the report said India's preference for sons appeared "inculcated to development", with even wealthier families not immune.

When the survey analysed indicator by state, Meghalaya stood out because the sex ratio at birth and the SRLC were both close to the benchmark. But the report also found that states that don't practice sex-selective abortions, such as Kerala, did demonstrate a son meta preference, recording a skewed SRLC.

And the northern states of Punjab and Haryana showed both extremely high son preferences and son meta preferences.

"In some sense, once born, the lives of women are improving," the survey says, "but society still appears to want fewer of them to be born."

Illegal sex selection and gender-based abortions remain rampant across social and economic groups in the country, according to several studies.

A 2011 study in the British medical journal The Lancet found that up to 12 million girls had been aborted in the last three decades in India.

