



Civilians run for cover from explosions in the city of Afrin in northern Syria yesterday, after Turkish forces and their rebel allies took control of the Kurdish-majority city. PHOTO: AFP

Kurds ousted from Afrin

Turkey-led forces take the northern Syrian city 'unopposed'

AFP, Afrin

Turkey's flag was flying in Afrin yesterday after its troops and Ankara-backed rebels chased out Kurdish militia forces to seize control of the Syrian city. In a major victory for Ankara's two-month operation against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in northern Syria, Turkish-led forces pushed into Afrin apparently unopposed, taking up positions across the city.

The advance came as Syria's civil war entered its eighth year this week with heavy fighting on two fronts -- around Afrin and in the rebel enclave of Eastern Ghouta near Damascus.

Hundreds have been killed and thousands forced from their homes by the ferocious assault in Ghouta, where President Bashar al-Assad yesterday visited troops battling to retake the last rebel enclave close to the capital.

In Afrin, AFP correspondents saw Turkish forces and their Syrian allies in all neighbourhoods of the city after they made a lightning advance inside yesterday.

The flags of Turkey and Syrian rebel groups were raised in the city and a statue of Kurdish hero Kawa, a symbol of resis-

tance against oppressors, was torn down. Civilians were seen fleeing the city and plumes of smoke rose into the sky as mines exploded.

Around 250,000 civilians had left the city in recent days. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, says more than 280 civilians have been killed since the campaign began on January 20.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan

Kurdish forces vow to fight until Afrin is 'liberated'

Rebels in eastern Ghouta discussing ceasefire with UN

announced that Turkish-backed fighters had taken control of the city centre and said a "large number" of Kurdish fighters had "fled with their tails between their legs".

The Turkish leader has said the operation could move on to other Kurdish-controlled areas of northern Syria.

Residents said it appeared that YPG units had withdrawn from the city without a fight. But Kurdish authori-

ties vowed to retake Afrin, one of three semi-autonomous Kurdish "cantons" in northern Syria.

On another front near Damascus, thousands of civilians continued to stream out of Eastern Ghouta for a fourth day as the regime's Russian-backed air and ground assault appeared to have eased up.

Regime fighters have retaken more than 80 percent of the former rebel bastion since the offensive was launched on February 18, the Observatory says, slicing what remains into three pockets each held by different rebel groups.

The main rebel group in Ghouta yesterday said it was negotiating with a United Nations delegation about a ceasefire, aid and the evacuation of urgent medical cases.

More than 1,400 civilians have been killed in the offensive and at least 65,000 civilians are reported to have fled the area in recent days.

Syria's conflict broke out in 2011 with protests against Assad.

He has maintained his grip on power despite global calls to step down and outrage at the brutal offensives he has waged to retake towns and cities from rebel fighters.

Israel destroys Hamas tunnel network in Gaza

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli forces yesterday knocked out a tunnel in the Gaza Strip dug by Hamas militants to mount cross-border attacks, the military said.

The tunnel had been cut off during the 2014 Gaza war and Hamas had tried to put it back into operation, a military spokesman said.

Israel withdrew its troops and settlers from Gaza in 2005 but still maintains tight control of its land and sea borders.

During the 2014 war, Hamas fighters used dozens of tunnels to blindside Israel's superior forces. Since then, Israel has been working on advanced counter-measures including a sensor-equipped underground wall along the 60-km (36-mile) Gaza border, a \$1.1 billion project it aims to complete by mid-2019.

No news from Sweden on Trump-Kim summit

North Korean officials wrap up 3-day talks

AGENCIES

North Korean officials wrapped up three days of talks with Swedish counterparts with no indication their efforts cleared the way for a mooted nuclear summit between US President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, as a senior Pyongyang diplomat headed to Finland yesterday for further meetings.

The North's state KCNA news agency said yesterday the Stockholm talks had discussed "bilateral relations and other issues of mutual concern", without providing further detail.

The meetings in Sweden came a week after Trump agreed to a summit proposal relayed by South Korean envoys who met Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang.

His response triggered a race to set a credible agenda for what would be historic talks between the two leaders. But no specific time or venue has been set and North Korea has yet to confirm it even made the offer to meet.

Choe Kang Il, deputy director for North American affairs at Pyongyang's foreign ministry, was seen at Beijing airport yesterday departing for Finland, where he is expected to hold talks with former US ambassador to Seoul Kathleen Stephens, multiple media reports said.

Earlier reports had listed Choe among the North's delegation to Sweden, reported AFP.

Choe, experienced in negotiations with the US, is expected to meet the retired US diplomat as well as other retired South Korean diplomats.

"But no current US or South Korean officials will be there," Yonhap quoted the source in Seoul as saying.

Meanwhile, Southeast Asian countries and Australia said yesterday they held "grave concerns" about escalating tension caused by North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes and urged "irreversible" denuclearisation, reported Reuters.

Top diplomat heads to Finland for further talks

S-E Asia, Australia hold concerns about North's nuke programmes

Duterte calls for mass withdrawal from ICC

REUTERS, Manila

Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte yesterday called for other signatories of the Rome Statute that established the International Criminal Court (ICC) to join his country in withdrawing from the treaty.

Duterte's comments during a speech to graduating cadets at the Philippine Military Academy in northern Philippines comes after ICC prosecutors last month opened a preliminary examination into the president's "war on drugs", which has led to the death of thousands since it began in July 2016.

The Southeast Asian nation last week notified the United Nations secretary-general of its decision to withdraw from the ICC because of what the outspoken Philippine leader called "outrageous" attacks by UN officials and violations of due process.

"I will convince everybody now under the treaty to get out, get out," Duterte said. "It is not a document that was prepared by anybody, it's EU-sponsored."

About 4,000 Filipinos have been killed by police in the past 19 months in a brutal crackdown that has alarmed the international community. Activists believe the death toll is far higher.

Police say those thousands of deaths were during legitimate anti-drugs operations in which the suspects had violently resisted arrest.

The ICC, which opened in 2002, is the world's only permanent war crimes court and aims to prosecute the worst abuses when national courts are unable or unwilling.



Presidential candidate President Vladimir Putin walks out of a voting booth after casting his vote at a polling station in Moscow yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

World is at crossroads

Biodiversity summit kicks off in Colombia with warning

AFP, Medellin

A comprehensive, global appraisal of mass species extinction -- and what can be done to reverse it -- kicked off in Colombia's second-largest city Saturday, with more than 750 experts in attendance.

President Juan Manuel Santos opened the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) meeting in Medellin by stating that protecting biodiversity is "as important as fighting climate change."

Hundreds of scientists and government envoys are gathering at the event, which runs through March 26, to finalise details on five monumental reports designed to inform global policymaking into the future.

"Today the world is at a crossroads," added IPBES president Sir Robert Watson. "The historic and current degradation and destruction of nature undermine human well being for current and countless future generations."

Compiled over the last three years, the

reports will provide the most up-to-date picture of the health of the world's plants, animals and soil.

The diagnosis will be unveiled in two parts.

First, on March 23, the IPBES will release separate assessments for the four regions into which it has divided the world -- the Americas, Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Europe and Central Asia.

Then on March 26 a report will be released focusing on the global condition of soil, which is fast being degraded through pollution, forest-destruction, mining, and unsustainable farming methods that deplete its nutrients.

The evaluations took 600 volunteer scientists three years to complete, and includes summaries of data taken from about 10,000 scientific publications.

The end product covers the entire Earth apart from Antarctica and the open oceans -- those waters beyond national jurisdiction.

INAPPROPRIATE USE OF FB USERS' DATA IN TRUMP CAMPAIGN

Call for probe grows

REUTERS, San Francisco

Facebook Inc faced new calls for regulation from within US Congress and was hit with questions about personal data safeguards on Saturday after reports a political consultant gained inappropriate access to 50 million users' data starting in 2014.

Facebook disclosed the issue in a blog post on Friday, hours before media reports that conservative-leaning Cambridge Analytica, a data company known for its work on Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, was given access to the data and may not have deleted it.

The scrutiny presented a new threat to Facebook's reputation, which was already under attack over Russians' alleged use of Facebook tools to sway American voters before and after the 2016 US elections.

"It's clear these platforms can't police themselves," Democratic US Senator Amy Klobuchar tweeted.

"They say 'trust us,' Mark Zuckerberg

needs to testify before Senate Judiciary," she added, referring to Facebook's CEO and a committee she sits on.

Facebook said the root of the problem was that researchers and Cambridge Analytica lied to it and abused its policies, but critics on Saturday threw blame at Facebook as well, demanding answers on behalf of users and calling for new regulation.

Facebook insisted the data was misused but not stolen, because users gave permission, sparking a debate about what constitutes a hack that must be disclosed to customers.

"The lid is being opened on the black box of Facebook's data practices, and the picture is not pretty," said Frank Pasquale, a University of Maryland law professor who has written about Silicon Valley's use of data.

Pasquale said Facebook's response that data had not technically been stolen seemed to obfuscate the central issue that data was apparently used in a way contrary to the expectations of users.

Russia stockpiling deadly nerve agent

Claims British foreign secretary

REUTERS, London

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said yesterday that Russia has been stockpiling the deadly nerve agent used to poison a Russian former double agent in England and has been investigating how such weapons can be used in assassinations.

Britain has said Russia used the Soviet-era nerve agent called Novichok to attack Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the first known offensive use of such a weapon on European soil since World War Two. Russia has denied any involvement.

"We actually have evidence within the last 10 years that Russia has not only been investigating the delivery of nerve agents for the purposes of assassination, but has also been creating and stockpiling Novichok," Johnson told the BBC.

Britain and Russia have each expelled 23 diplomats over the attack as relations between the two countries crash to a post-Cold War low.

Skripal, a former colonel in Russian military intelligence who betrayed dozens of Russian agents to Britain, and his daughter are fighting for their lives after they were found collapsed on a bench in the city of Salisbury two weeks ago.

Officials from the world's chemical weapons watchdog will arrive in Britain today to investigate the samples used in the attack and the results should be known in about two weeks, Britain's foreign ministry said.

Russia's ambassador to the EU told the same programme that his country has destroyed its reserves of such substances and a British research laboratory could be the source of the nerve agent used in the attack. Johnson dismissed those claims.

SORRY STATE OF EARTH'S SPECIES

As the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) prepares to unveil a thorough diagnosis of the health of Earth's plant and animal species, this is what we already know:

— 2 species of vertebrate, animals with a backbone, have gone extinct every year, on average, for the past century. The global populations of 3,706 monitored vertebrate species -- fish, birds, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles -- declined by nearly 60 percent from 1970 to 2012.

— About 41 percent of amphibian species and more than a quarter of mammals are threatened with extinction.

— About half of coral reefs have been lost in the last 30 years.

— 25,821 species of 91,523 assessed for the 2017 "Red List" update were classified as "threatened". Of these, 5,583 were "critically" endangered, 8,455 "endangered", and 11,783 "vulnerable".

— African elephant numbers dropped to 415,000 in 2016, down about 111,000 over 10 years.

— 1,204 mammal, 1,469 bird, 1,215 reptile, 2,100 amphibian, and 2,386 fish species are considered threatened.

— Also threatened are 1,414 insect, 2,187 mollusc, 732 crustacean, 237 coral, 12,505 plant, 33 mushroom, and six brown algae species.

— Annual economic losses as a result of deforestation and forest degradation alone may be as high as \$4.5 trillion (3.6 trillion euros).

— Scientists say Earth is undergoing a "mass extinction event," the first since the dinosaurs disappeared some 65 million years ago, and only the sixth in the last half-a-billion years.

— There are an estimated 8.7 million plant and animal species on our planet. This means about 86 percent of land species and 91 percent of sea species remain undiscovered. SOURCE: AFP

Let Mueller do his job

Republicans tell Trump

REUTERS, Washington

Republican senators yesterday warned President Donald Trump not to fire Special Counsel Robert Mueller, and said the president must let federal investigators looking into Russian meddling in the US election do their jobs.

The Republican president has renewed his Twitter attacks on both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Mueller's probe since the firing of the bureau's former deputy director, Andrew McCabe, on Friday, two days before he was eligible to retire with a full pension.

Republican Senator Jeff Flake, who has criticised Trump harshly, said the president's latest comments appeared to be aimed at the firing of Mueller. Senator Lindsey Graham, another Republican, said if Trump were to dismiss Mueller it would mark "the beginning of the end of his presidency."

AshLee Strong, a spokeswoman for Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan, said: "As the speaker has always said, Mr Mueller and his team should be able to do their job."

The comments underscored the risks for Trump if he goes too far to thwart the federal probe.

"I don't know what the designs are on Mueller, but it seems to be building toward that [firing him], and I just hope it doesn't go there, because it can't. We can't in Congress accept that," Flake told CNN's "State of the Union."

"So I would expect to see considerable pushback in the next couple of days urging the president not to go there."

In a series of tweets over the weekend, Trump accused the FBI leadership of lies, corruption and leaking information. He called the Russia probe a politically motivated witch hunt.