

Assad set for key victory

First rebels quit Ghouta under Russia-brokered deal; dozens more killed

AFP, Harasta

Syrian rebels and their families began leaving Syria's Eastern Ghouta yesterday under the first evacuation deal in the shrinking opposition enclave outside Damascus.

The agreement, announced on Wednesday and brokered by regime ally Russia, could empty one of three rebel-held pockets in the region and mark a major advance in government efforts to secure the nearby capital.

It could also increase pressure on rebels to follow suit in the two other opposition-held pockets of the besieged enclave, where tens of thousands of civilians remain trapped under relentless bombardment.

State television said around 1,130 people -- including more than 230 fighters -- had boarded buses from the Eastern Ghouta town of Harasta, until now held by the Ahrar al-Sham rebel group.



PHOTO: AFP

Smoke rises from buildings following air strikes on Zamalka, yesterday.

A military source told AFP the rebels and accompanying civilians had boarded buses and were in a buffer zone, waiting to cross into regime-controlled territory.

Another military source said around 2,000 people are expected to leave in total, including around 700

fighters on Thursday.

Ahrar al-Sham spokesman Munzer Fares said the evacuations could last several days.

They followed renewed air strikes in Ghouta early yesterday which killed 20 civilians, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory

for Human Rights.

Since February 18, a devastating Russian-backed offensive on Eastern Ghouta has sliced the shrinking enclave into three isolated pockets.

The evacuation from Harasta will further isolate the rebel groups that control the remaining two pockets of Eastern Ghouta and pile pressure on them to accept similar deals.

Opposition figures in Ghouta said talks were under way for a deal to evacuate rebels from the enclave's main town, Douma. Douma is controlled by the Jaish al-Islam group, while a pocket of territory around the town of Zamalka, closer to the capital, is held by Faylaq al-Rahman with a small jihadist presence.

Air strikes on Zamalka killed 16 civilians yesterday, the Observatory said.

An AFP reporter in Douma said hundreds of civilians were fleeing the town.

ROW OVER EX-RUSSIAN SPY POISONING

British PM May seeks EU backing

AFP, Brussels

British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday warned EU leaders that Russia posed a threat to the whole bloc as she sought united backing against Moscow after the poisoning of an ex-spy in England.

May told her colleagues at a Brussels summit the attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the English city of Salisbury using a deadly Soviet-developed nerve agent showed the Russian threat "doesn't respect borders".

While the US, France and Germany have swung behind London, saying they accept the UK assessment that the Russian state is the only plausible culprit, other EU countries keen to protect their Kremlin ties -- notably Greece and Italy -- want a softer line.

"It is clear that the Russian threat doesn't respect borders and indeed the incident in Salisbury was part of a pattern of Russian aggression against Europe and its near neighbours," May told reporters as she arrived in Brussels.

She is expected to tell them over dinner that the threat from the east will continue "for years to come", and long after Britain leaves the bloc in 2019.

The British leader will hold crisis talks on the poisoning with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel before briefing all the EU leaders on the investigation.

NEWSIN brief

US govt spending deal clinched

AFP, Washington

US congressional budget negotiators said Wednesday they had reached a deal on \$1.3 trillion federal spending for the remainder of fiscal 2018, two days before a deadline to fund the government or risk a shutdown. Government funding expires at midnight Friday night, and the House of Representatives and Senate will need to scramble if both chambers are to pass the bill and get it signed by Trump by the deadline.

Spring snow storm slams US Northeast

AFP, New York

A fourth snow storm in three weeks slammed the US Northeast on Wednesday, canceling flights, closing schools and shutting federal offices on the second day of spring. Winter Storm Toby dumped seven inches of snow on New York by 8pm. The National Weather Service warned against wind gusts of 40 miles per hour, with power outages and downed trees possible in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

Peru president quits facing impeachment

AFP, Lima

Peru's President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski announced his resignation Wednesday in an address to the nation, the day before he was to face an impeachment vote in Congress. The 79-year-old former Wall Street banker, under fire over his links to Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht, denied allegations of bribe-taking but said his resignation was "the best thing for the country."

Time, Sports Illustrated magazines up for sale

AFP, New York

US media and marketing group Meredith said Wednesday it was seeking a buyer for four magazines, including Time and Sports Illustrated, which it acquired less than four months ago. Following a strategic review, Meredith decided to sell off Time, Sports Illustrated, Fortune and Money. It said it has received some interest, without offering further details. Meredith will retain Time Inc.'s most popular title, People magazine.

Tamimi jailed eight months in plea deal

OFFER MILITARY COURT

A Palestinian teenager arrested after a viral video showed her hit two Israeli soldiers in the occupied West Bank reached a plea deal on Wednesday that will see her serve eight months in prison. Tamimi, 16 at the time of the incident in December, has been hailed as a hero by Palestinians.

ALLEGED GADDAFI FUND FOR 2007 ELECTION CAMPAIGN

'I am living in hell'

Sarkozy denies wrongdoing citing 'lack of evidence'

AFP, Paris

French ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy blasted what he said was a lack of evidence for corruption charges against him over claims the late Libyan dictator Moamer Gaddafi funded his 2007 election campaign, in his court statement published yesterday.

The day after he was charged in France's most explosive political scandals in decades, the 63-year-old rightwinger said in the statement published by the Figaro newspaper that he had been in "living hell" since the allegations emerged in 2011.

Demanding he be treated as a witness rather than a suspect, he urged magistrates to consider "the violence of the injustice" if it was proven, as he claims, that the accusations are a "manipulation by the dictator Gaddafi or his gang". "In the 24 hours of my detention I have tried with all my might to show that the serious corroborating evidence required to

charge someone did not exist," Sarkozy said.

"I stand accused without any tangible evidence through comments made by Mr Gaddafi, his son, his nephew, his cousin, his spokesman, his former prime minister," he added, ahead of a television interview last night.

The allegations that Sarkozy took money from Gaddafi -- whom he helped to topple in 2011 -- are the most serious out of myriad investigations dogging him since he left office in 2012.

Judges decided they had enough evidence to charge the combative one-term president Wednesday after five years of investigation and two days of questioning in police custody in the Paris suburb of Nanterre.

Sarkozy, who served as president from 2007 to 2012, was charged with corruption, illegal campaign financing and concealment of Libyan public money, a judiciary source told AFP.



Protesters attend a demonstration during a national day of strike against reforms in Paris, France, yesterday. Seven trade unions have called on public sector workers to strike, including school and hospital staff, civil servants and air traffic controllers. More than 140 protests were planned across France yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

US likely to leave Iran deal

CNN ONLINE

US officials are taking a two-track approach to the Iran nuclear deal, negotiating with allies to make changes demanded by President Donald Trump even as they prepare to walk away from the international agreement.

Trump set a May 12 deadline -- the next date by which he has to waive sanctions against Iran or leave the deal -- for the US and its European allies to agree on changes to address what he sees as its flaws.

The president's thinking, officials say, is that if the US and Europe are united on amending the deal, the other signatories -- Russia and China -- will come along, and Iran will have no choice but to comply.

Critics argue that leaving the deal would damage relations with European allies, harm US national security interests -- in part by reducing the US' ability to monitor Iran's nuclear activities -- and send a clear message to North Korea

that the US can't be trusted to honor nuclear agreements.

European allies say they will not consider changes to the agreement but the gulf between the allies and the US is vast. With the president himself dismissing the deal as "terrible," and the impending move of



CIA Director Mike Pompeo, an Iran hawk, to the State Department, many officials in the US and Europe are bracing for Washington to abandon the agreement.

Against that backdrop, US officials leading the negotiations with European

allies say that at the same time, they are readying contingency plans should Trump decide to pull the US out.

Brian Hook, the State Department's director of policy planning, met with European allies in Berlin last week to continue discussions before going to Vienna, Austria, on Friday for a regular meeting with all parties to the agreement.

Asked whether he was confident about reaching an agreement with the Europeans, Hook said Wednesday that, "we have had constructive talks with the Europeans ... but I can't predict if we will reach a deal or not."

Lawmakers say they think Trump will walk away. "I think the President likely will move away from it, unless my, our European counterparts really come together on a framework," Sen Bob Corker, the Tennessee Republican who heads the Foreign Relations Committee, said March 18 on CBS' "Face The Nation." "And it doesn't feel to me that they are."

Raging conflicts worsen food insecurity globally

Says UN, EU; 124 million people direct victims

AFP, Paris

The food security of around 124 million people worldwide was under acute threat at the end of last year, mostly because of worsening conflicts and drought, the UN and EU said yesterday.

The worst food crises in 2017 were in northeastern Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen and South Sudan, "where nearly 32 million people were food-insecure and in need of urgent assistance", the two organisations said in an annual report on food crises.

"Conflicts and climate-related shocks have recently sent levels of world hunger marching back up, following decades of steady decline."

The figure of 124 million is 15 percent higher than the number in 2016.

"No world region has been untouched. Throughout Africa, the Middle East and in

parts of South Asia, conflict and insecurity have undermined food security," the report said.

"Likewise, persistent drought in the Horn of Africa, floods in Asia, and hurricanes in Latin America and the Caribbean have all contributed to the spread and intensification of hunger."

Looking ahead, the report said that conflict and insecurity were likely to "remain major drivers of food security crises in 2018, affecting Afghanistan, Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, north-east Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen as well as Libya and the central Sahel (Mali and Niger)".

Yemen will continue to be the largest food crisis by far, the report said.

On a more optimistic note, the report predicted that southern Africa was headed for a better year thanks to bumper cereal production in 2017 and falling food prices.



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