



Civilians fleeing the Islamic State's group embattled holdout of Baghouz rest in a field on Wednesday during an operation by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to expel the Islamic State group from the area, in the eastern Syrian province of Deir Ezzor.

DEADLY ATTACK ON REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS

Iran vows revenge on 'mercenaries'

AFP, Tehran

President Hassan Rouhani yesterday vowed revenge against the "mercenary group" behind a suicide bombing which killed 27 people in southeastern Iran and accused the US and Israel of supporting "terrorism".

"We will certainly make this mercenary group pay for the blood of our martyrs," the official IRNA news agency quoted the Iranian president as saying in response to Wednesday's attack.

"The main root of terrorism in the region is America and Zionists, and some oil-producing countries in the region also financially support the terrorists," he added.

Rouhani was speaking at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport before leaving for the Russian resort of Sochi for a summit with his Russian and Turkish counterparts Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the future of war-torn Syria.

Wednesday's attack, which targeted a busload of Revolutionary Guards in the volatile southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchistan, was one of the deadliest on Iranian security forces in years.

The bomber struck as the troops were returning from a patrol mission on the border with Pakistan, where Baluchi separatist and jihadist groups have rear bases, the Guards said.

The attack came on the same day as the United States gathered some 60 countries in Poland for a conference on the Middle East and Iran which they hoped would increase pressure on Tehran.

Wednesday's bombing was claimed by the jihadist Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice), which is blacklisted as a terrorist group by Iran, the SITE Intelligence Group reported.

PHOTO: AFP

IS cornered in a hole

Jihadists, trapped in last square kilometre, launch fierce fight back

AFP, Omar Oil Field

Islamic State group jihadists using tunnels and suicide bombers were mounting a desperate defence yesterday of their last square kilometre in eastern Syria.

Kurdish-led forces closed in on the small town of Baghouz where IS fighters and their relatives were hunkered down and met hundreds of famished and dishevelled people turning themselves in.

"The fighting is fierce," said Adnan Afrin, a spokesman for the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish-Arab outfit that has spearheaded the campaign against IS with backing from a US-led coalition.

The few hundred fighters of various nationalities holding out in their last bastion by the Iraqi border have launched bruising counter-attacks in recent days, Afrin said.

The jihadists are clinging to about one square kilometre in the town's built-up area, as well as to an adjacent camp, where a number of civilians are believed to be gathered.

Afrin said it was impossible to provide accurate figures but he estimated the total number of fighters, men and women, at around 1,000.

The US-led coalition is carrying out air strikes on the area while its forces are also present on the ground, sifting through the displaced for wanted jihadists.

IS's elusive Iraqi-born supremo, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is not believed to be among the last jihadist leaders holed up in Baghouz.

The "caliphate" Baghdadi proclaimed in mid-2014 once spanned territory the size of the United Kingdom and administered millions of people. It printed its own schoolbooks, produced oil, collected taxes and minted its own currency, in a brief but unprecedented experiment in jihadist statehood.

Successive offensives in Iraq and Syria have shattered the proto-state, which lost its key cities one after the other and has since late 2017 been confined to its traditional stronghold in the Euphrates River valley.

An official declaration of victory against IS is expected in the coming days, a move of mostly symbolic value that will go down as the death certificate of the "caliphate".

While surviving IS fighters on both sides of the border will no longer hold fixed positions, the jihadist organisation will remain a threat.

The United States is due to pull its troops out of Syria within weeks, creating a vacuum that risks allowing IS to rebuild and project new ambitions.

The Kurds are also afraid they will have to squander the autonomy they acquired and be left exposed to a military offensive by their archfoe Turkey.



'The caliphate is over'

Unrepentant UK schoolgirl who ran away to join IS wants to 'come home'

AFP, London

An unrepentant British teenager who joined the Islamic State group in Syria said in an interview yesterday that she wants to come home, highlighting the challenge for Western governments on how to deal with returning jihadist supporters.

Shamima Begum, who ran away from London with two school friends in 2015, spoke to The Times from a refugee camp where she had fled the collapse of the IS group's "caliphate" in eastern Syria.

Now 19, she expressed no regrets about joining the jihadists but said that two of her children were dead and she was now heavily pregnant.

"I just could not endure any more," she told the newspaper.

Begum made headlines around the world when, aged just 15, she left to join the jihadists with friends from Bethnal Green in east London. Another girl from the same school had run away the year before.

One girl, Kadiza Sultana, has been reported killed. Begum said the other two, Sharmeen Begum -- no relation -- and Amira Abase stayed on in Baghouz,

where IS fighters are making their last stand to hold on to the proto-state they declared in 2014.

"They were strong. I respect their decision," Begum said of her friends.

She added: "I'm not the same silly little 15-year-old schoolgirl who ran away from Bethnal Green four years ago. And I don't regret coming here."

The British authorities estimate around 900 Britons travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the conflict, of whom around 300-400 have since returned -- and 40 have been prosecuted. As of last month, around 200 were believed to still be alive and in the region.

Speaking to Sky News, Security Minister Ben Wallace said it was "worrying" that Begum had not expressed regret about going to Syria.

Begum married a Dutch fighter soon after arriving in Syria. Begum fled with her husband, but he surrendered to a group of Syrian fighters allied to the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces.

"The caliphate is over," she said, adding that "there was so much oppression and corruption that I don't think they deserved victory".



PHOTO: AFP

IRANIAN ASSET FREEZE IN US

UN court rules in Tehran's favour

AFP, The Hague

An international court Wednesday ruled Iran can proceed with a bid to unfreeze assets in the United States, rejecting Washington's claims the case must be halted because of Tehran's alleged support for international terrorism.

Washington had argued that Iran's "unclean hands" -- a reference to Tehran's suspected backing of terror groups -- should disqualify its lawsuit to recover \$2 billion in assets frozen by the US Supreme Court in 2016.

The International Court of Justice in The Hague threw out some of the US challenges, and said it had the right to hold full hearings at a later date as to whether Tehran will get the money back.

Chief judge Abdulqawi Ahmed Yusuf said the UN's top court "unanimously rejects the preliminary objections to admissibility raised by the United States of America".

Washington, however, called the court's ruling a "significant victory" for America because it threw out a key issue pertaining to Iran's claims of sovereign immunity.

Iran said the freezing of the funds breached the 1955 Treaty of Amity with the United States, an agreement signed before Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution severed relations between the countries.

Tehran said the United States had illegally seized Iranian financial assets and those of Iranian companies -- and with Iran's clerical regime facing economic difficulties after sanctions and a fall in its currency, resolving the case remains crucial.



Security personnel react as Albanian opposition member of parliament Edi Paloka throws ink at Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama during a parliamentary session in Tirana yesterday. Following the incident, the National Guard removed MP Edi Paloka from the session.

PHOTO: AFP



Paul Manafort broke plea deal: judge

AFP, Washington

Former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort could face a much longer prison sentence than expected after a Washington judge ruled Wednesday that he had broken his plea deal with Special Counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation.

Federal district judge Amy Berman Jackson agreed with prosecutors that Manafort had "intentionally" lied to investigators about his contacts with a suspected Russian operative, Konstantin Kilimnik in 2016 and 2017, despite having pledged to cooperate as part of his September plea agreement.

Jackson also ruled that Manafort had lied about a secretive payment he made to a law firm, and lied on another occasion when investigators queried him about a separate, still secret investigation related to the Mueller probe.

The ruling meant that Mueller no longer has to abide by the deal, in which Manafort agreed to plead guilty to two reduced conspiracy charges, carrying a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison.

Theoretically that could mean Manafort is also vulnerable to new charges, though prosecutors have indicated they want to move quickly to sentencing and not spend more time on the case.

It could also elevate whatever punishment arises from the 69-year-old's guilty verdict in a separate jury trial last year in Virginia. The breakdown of the deal set back what had been seen as a major success of the 21-month-old Mueller probe in turning Manafort into a possible key witness against President Donald Trump, his family and other top aides.

Manafort is one of seven former Trump campaign associates who have been charged by Mueller's team.

He was convicted in August in a Virginia court on eight charges of banking and tax fraud related to his work for Russia-backed political parties in Ukraine between 2004 and 2014.

UK PM faces another defeat

AFP, London

Prime Minister Theresa May risks another humiliating Brexit defeat at the hands of her own eurosceptic MPs yesterday, with just weeks to go until Britain officially leaves the EU.

Parliament will hold a symbolic vote endorsing May's Brexit strategy but Conservative Party hardliners could abstain, threatening defeat for May.

Eurosceptics in the Party's European Research Group are worried that a vote in favour could be seen as ruling out leaving the European Union without a deal.

"Conservative MPs really ought not to be associated with anything, express or implied, which seems to take no deal off the table," said leading ERG member Steve Baker.

"Compromising no deal would be the daftest negotiating strategy and not in the national interest."

A senior source within the ERG said the group would abstain, according to the Daily Telegraph, which would spell almost certain defeat for May given Labour's opposition to the motion.

But Brexit Secretary Stephen Barclay, who opened Thursday's debate, sought to reassure leave-supporting MPs, saying that it was still government policy to leave next month, deal or no deal.

"The House has passed legislation by a big majority... to say we're leaving on March 29 and the legislation takes precedence" over a non-binding vote to take no-deal off the table, he told parliament.

Leading Brexiteer Liam Fox warned colleagues that defeat for the government would raise doubts about whether a renegotiated deal could get through parliament, making the EU less likely to make an offer.

May's initial deal was roundly rejected by British MPs last month, but later parliamentary votes suggested a slim majority for her deal if she could get rid of the backstop clause.

The provision is intended to keep the border with Ireland free-flowing but some fear it could leave Britain trapped in EU trade rules indefinitely with no withdrawal mechanism.

British officials have since held a series of meeting with EU counterparts, who have ruled out reopening negotiations.



BREXIT IMPASSE

Dozens feared dead in Niger boat tragedy

AFP, Niamey

Forty-three people, most of them from Benin, are missing after an overloaded boat sank in the Niger River, a local official said yesterday.

The accident happened early Wednesday in Sambera, southwestern Niger, near the border with Benin, Sambera Mayor Oumarou Hassane told AFP.

"Sixty-two people were saved and 43 others are missing, judging from the number of shoes that have been recovered," he said.

They were aboard a canoe travelling from Gori-Beri in Benin to Ouna in Niger, he said.

The vessel was carrying a large consignment of cereals and about a hundred Beninois and Nigerien traders heading to the market in Ouna, Hassane said.

The overloaded vessel sank in the early morning hours, buffeted by powerful winds, he added.

In Benin, Moussa Mouhamadou, prefect of the northern district of Alibori, gave a similar toll.

"Sixty-four people were saved," he told Radio Benin.

"We discovered about 40 pairs of shoes at the site (of the accident), and linked them to the people who are missing."

Benin has sent naval and police units to join local fishermen in searching for survivors, and a diving team was expected to arrive from Cotonou, the capital, later Thursday.

EU agrees to fix online copyright law

AFP, Strasbourg

The European Union reached a provisional deal Wednesday to overhaul the bloc's online copyright law, a top official said, after a tense battle that has pitted media firms against internet giants like Google.

The European Parliament and the European Council, which represents the 28 member states, struck the agreement after three days of intense negotiations led by the European Commission, the EU's executive arm.

"Agreement reached on #copyright! Europeans will finally have modern copyright rules fit for digital age with real benefits for everyone: guaranteed rights for users, fair remuneration for creators, clarity of rules for platforms," European Commission Vice President Andrus Ansip tweeted.

He said the rules would give people "more possibilities to use and access copyrighted material with full legal certainty. Freedom of expression is guaranteed, and users will have the power to swiftly contest any unjustified removal of their content by platform."

EU Parliament president Antonio Tajani added on Twitter that "the agreement just reached on the #copyright directive protects European creativity."

"Musicians, actors, writers, journalists, audiovisual, will be entitled to fair remuneration from web giants too."

The deal must still be formally approved by the European Council and European lawmakers ahead of European parliamentary elections in May.

The commission proposed reforms in September 2016 designed to modernise copyright for the digital age, sparking a major debate between member states.

Under the deal, online platforms will be required to pay "neighbouring rights" fees to media for links to, and short excerpts of, news stories.

News organisations, including AFP, have pushed for the move, arguing that giants like Facebook and Google make billions in revenue from advertising tied to news stories, while publishers suffer.

This sparked a fight between media and creators seeking payment for online content on the one hand, and lobbyists defending the business model of the Silicon Valley giants backed by internet freedom activists on the other.

Another part of the agreement intends to ensure that platforms such as YouTube pay more to those who provide its content.

The European Parliament backed a draft law of the copyright reform in September last year, but it was held up in negotiations with EU member states, notably because of a disagreement between France and Germany in the text.