

SDF combs last IS hideouts

AFP, Baghuz

Kurdish-led forces yesterday combed the banks of the Euphrates in eastern Syria to smoke out the last jihadists preventing the much-delayed announcement of the demise of the Islamic State's "caliphate".

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) launched an assault against the last IS bastion in the village of Baghuz on February 9.

On Tuesday, they cornered diehard fighters into a few acres of farmland by the Euphrates River, after forcing them out of the main encampment where they had been confined.

The six-month-old operation to wipe out the last vestige of IS's once-sprawling proto-state is close to reaching its inevitable outcome, but SDF spokesman Mustefa Bali yesterday said a victory announcement would be premature.

"Our force is still carrying out combing operations and searches" for hidden jihadists, he said.

"As soon as we are done, we will announce the liberation" of Baghuz, the spokesman added.

His comments came one day after US President Donald Trump said the jihadists' self-proclaimed "caliphate" would be "gone as of tonight".

It also came in response to reports earlier yesterday that the IS enclave had completely fallen.

The frontline was quiet yesterday, for the second-day in a row, as the SDF paused its push to allow for more surrenders.

The "caliphate" which IS supremo Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed in 2014 once covered territory larger than the United Kingdom, straddling Syria and Iraq. It has crumbled under years of military operations in which Syrian and Iraqi forces backed by their international allies clawed back the land but left cities in ruins and populations homeless.



A woman holds a fern, a symbol of peace, during a vigil for the victims of the mosque attacks during an ecumenical celebration in Christchurch, New Zealand, yesterday. Inset, A policewoman on duty is seen covering her head as a sign of respect to the Muslim community.

PHOTO: REUTERS



CHIEF OF STAFF TO GUAIDO ARRESTED

Venezuelan intelligence officers yesterday arrested the chief of staff of Juan Guaido, the opposition leader recognized by the US and other countries as interim leader, Guaido and the opposition-ruled congress said on Twitter. Roberto Marrero was grabbed by SEBIN officers when they staged a pre-dawn raid on his Caracas home, according to Guaido. The United States has repeatedly warned Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's government against arresting Guaido or his aides, and Washington's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo quickly called for Marrero's release. US President Donald Trump has said, as recently as Tuesday, that "all options" remain on the table in his drive to bring down Maduro, implying military action if he deemed it necessary.



SHANAHAN PROBED OVER BOEING BIAS

Acting US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan is being investigated by the Pentagon's inspector general for alleged bias in acquisitions toward his former employer, Boeing, the inspector general said Wednesday. Investigators are seeking to see if Shanahan, as deputy defense secretary, had violated ethics rules by disparaging Boeing rival Lockheed Martin in meetings at the Pentagon. Government watchdog Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) last week submitted a complaint to the inspector general, citing several media reports that alleged the 30-year Boeing veteran cast aspersions on Lockheed's F-35 fighter while pushing Boeing's F-15X. A Pentagon spokesman, Tom Crosson, said in a statement that Shanahan "welcomes" the probe.



DUTCH POPULIST SURGE STUNS PM RUTTE

Dutch anti-immigration populists stunned Prime Minister Mark Rutte to become the joint biggest party in the senate yesterday following elections that took place just days after a suspected terror attack. Thierry Baudet's Forum for Democracy party, which also backs a "Nexit" from the European Union, came from nowhere to win most votes in the provincial elections, with 93 percent of ballots counted, the NOS broadcaster said. The result will ring alarm bells across Europe where populists are expected to make big gains in European Parliament elections in May. FDP, which only launched two years ago, will now be the largest in the upper house of parliament along with Rutte's with 12 seats each, the Dutch news agency ANP said.

SOURCE: AFP

DUTCH TRAM ATTACK

Gunman to be charged with 'terrorist' killings

AFP, The Hague

Dutch prosecutors are to charge the suspect in a gun attack in a packed Utrecht tram with "terrorist" killings, saying he will appear for the first time before a judge today.

"The 37-year-old suspect will appear before a judge on Friday, charged with multiple murders with terrorist aims, as well as attempted murder and a terrorist threat," the public prosecution service said in a statement yesterday.

Prosecutors and police are still investigating whether the suspect, previously identified as Turkish-born Gokmen Tanis "acted out of a single terrorist motive or whether from personal problems in combination with radicalised ideas," it said.

Three people were killed and seven others wounded after the shooting rampage on a tram in the central Dutch city.

Tanis was arrested after an eight-hour manhunt that virtually shut down the Netherlands' fourth-largest city and saw security stepped up at airports and key sites across the country.

Police later arrested a second 40-year-old suspect in the case.

"It's being investigated whether this suspect played a supporting role in the shooting," prosecutors said.

Tanis' first appearance will be behind closed doors today where he is expected to be remanded in custody for two weeks before a next appearance.

No deal Brexit beckons

Embattled May finds little common ground at Brussels

REUTERS, Brussels

French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday warned Prime Minister Theresa May that Britain would face a disorderly departure from the European Union if she fails to get parliamentary approval for her deal on the third attempt next week.

Just eight days before Britain is due to leave the EU, May was making a last-ditch plea to the bloc's 27 other leaders in Brussels to hand her a Brexit delay until June 30, a request she said was "a matter of personal regret" and one she firmly pinned on her country's deeply divided parliament.

EU leaders are expected to grant her two extra months to organise a smooth exit -- but only on the condition that the British leader can get her deal through parliament, something even members of her own government increasingly doubt.

"We must be clear, to ourselves, our British friends and our people," Macron said on arrival at the 24-hour summit.

"Firstly, we've been negotiating the withdrawal agreement for two years. It cannot be renegotiated. Secondly, in the

event of another no vote in Britain, we will be heading towards a no deal. Everyone knows it."

European leaders must not let the turmoil surrounding Brexit drag on, the French leader said.

EU diplomats said May's request for a delay to June 30 was likely to be met by an

Britain heads towards no-deal if parliament votes down deal: Macron

Support surges for petition seeking to revoke Brexit



EU preference for Britain to have completed formalities and begin a status-quo transition to departure before Europeans elect a new parliament from May 23.

May's chances hang in the balance, with positions hardening after a chaotic week when the parliament's speaker questioned whether she could even bring her deal to a third vote.

More rescued as death toll mounts

AFP, Beira, Mozambique

A cyclone that ravaged three southern African countries last week has killed at least 400 people, affected more than 1.7 million others and left 15,000 people still stranded by floods, according to estimates yesterday.

As the toll surged from the region's biggest storm in years, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced plans to tackle an emerging threat to survivors from malaria and cholera.

Cyclone Idai smashed into the coast of central Mozambique last Friday, unleashing hurricane-force winds and rains that flooded the hinterland and drenched eastern Zimbabwe.

Mozambican Land and Environmental Minister Celso Correia said 242 lives had been lost and 15,000 out of 18,000 stranded

CYCLONE IN MOZAMBIQUE, ZIMBABWE, MALAWI



Rebecca Albino (R), a mother of three children, mourns beside the coffin of her husband, Tomas Joaquim Chimukme during his funeral, following a strong cyclone that hit Beira, Mozambique.

PHOTO: AFP

people still needed to be saved.

"Yesterday we had counted 15,000 people that still need rescue today -- 15,000 people who are in bad shape. They are alive, we are communicating with them, delivering food, but we need to rescue them and take them out," he told reporters.

A total of 65,000 people are in transit centres, he said.

"Our priority now is to make sure

we take food, shelter and medicine to the people that are isolated in small islands or in big islands and villages," Correia said at Beira airport, the humanitarian relief coordination hub.

World Food Programme (WFP) spokesman Herve Verhoosel said the number of people affected in Mozambique was 600,000, but warned: "That number will definitely go up."

Ultimately, around 1.7 million people in Mozambique will need assistance, Verhoosel said in Geneva.

In Zimbabwe, state broadcaster ZBC said the death toll had risen to 139, up from 100 on Wednesday, while the WFP said its estimates of the number of people there affected by the cyclone had jumped from 15,000 to 200,000.

In Chimanimani, close to Zimbabwe's border with Mozambique, "some 90 percent of the district has been significantly damaged," Verhoosel said.

In Malawi, the WHO said on Wednesday, the storm had affected 922,000 others, of whom 82,000 had been displaced.

The WHO announced an emergency plan for 10,000 people.

"The displacement of large numbers of people and the flooding triggered by Cyclone Idai significantly increases the risk of malaria, typhoid and cholera," said Matshidiso Moeti, the agency's regional director for Africa.

The three countries are some of the poorest in the region and depend heavily on foreign aid.

'Stop the deaths at sea, I'll carry out a massacre'

51 children rescued unharmed in Italy after driver hijacks, sets ablaze school bus

REUTERS, Milan

A bus full of schoolchildren was hijacked and set on fire by its own driver on Wednesday in an apparent protest against migrant drownings in the Mediterranean, Italian authorities said.

All 51 children managed to escape unhurt before the bus was engulfed in flames on the outskirts of Milan, Italy's business capital. Police named the driver as Ousseynou Sy, a 47-year-old Italian citizen of Senegalese origin.

"He shouted, 'Stop the deaths at sea, I'll carry out a massacre'," police spokesman Marco Palmieri quoted Sy as telling police after his arrest.

A video posted on Italian news sites showed the driver ramming the bus into cars on a provincial highway before the fire took hold. Children can be seen running away from the vehicle screaming and shouting "escape".

One of the children told reporters that

the driver had threatened to pour petrol over them and set them alight. One of group managed to call the police, who rushed to the scene and broke the bus windows to get everyone to safety.

Palmieri said some children were taken to hospital as a precautionary measure because they had bruises or were in a state of shock, but none suffered serious injuries.

A teacher who was with the middle school children was quoted by Ansa news agency as saying that the driver had said he wanted to get to the runway at Milan's Linate airport.

An unnamed girl was also quoted as saying that Sy blamed deputy prime ministers Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio for the deaths of African migrants at sea.

The United Nations estimates that some 2,297 migrants drowned or went missing in the Mediterranean in 2018 as they tried to reach Europe.



Inna Lillahi Wa Inna Ilaihi Raji'un!

A great mother just left this world and started her journey towards her eternal life. We belong to Allah and to Him we shall all return!

Fazilatun Nessa, wife of Mr. Sirajul Islam (Retired Second Secretary, National Board of Revenue), and daughter of Late Khondakar AJM Sayedur Rahman of Wazipur, Barisal, passed away at BIRDEM Hospital on March 17, 2019, only 16 days after her 81st birthday.

She left behind her husband, six children, sons-in-law, a daughter-in-law, 11 amazing grandchildren, two brothers, two sisters, a large number of nieces and nephews, and cousins who loved and respected her dearly. Also left behind a host of relatives from her husband's side where she was equally respected and loved. She was like a second mother and a sister to many of her close relatives from both sides. She had a heart of gold, kind and generous with sincere affection for others. She will be missed dearly, but we will cherish the memories forever.

She was surrounded by her husband, all of her children, one son in law, one granddaughter, brothers and sisters, and nieces and nephews during her last days and when she took her final breath. She is now resting peacefully alongside some of her dearest family members in a very beautiful portion of Azimpur (New) Graveyard. We profoundly appreciate the tremendous support that we are receiving from our loving relatives, friends, caregivers, and neighbors during this difficult time.

Shaheen Khaleel (Mila)
Jesmin Rabbani (Ellie)
NSM Faruque (Babu)
Shermin Islam (Moni)
Irine Hoque (Rima)
Shaila Islam (Shaila)



Fazilatun Nessa
(1st March 1938 - 17th March 2019)

Drinking very hot tea almost doubles risk of cancer: study

CNN ONLINE

Many people start their day with a cup of tea. But those who drink it piping hot could be increasing their risk of esophageal cancer, according to a new study.

Researchers found that tea drinkers who liked their beverage to be warmer than 60 degrees Celsius (140 degrees Fahrenheit) and consumed more than 700 ml of tea per day -- about two large cups -- had a 90% higher risk of esophageal cancer, when compared to those who drank less tea and at cooler temperatures.

The study looked at more than 50,000 people in Golestan, a province in northeastern Iran.

"Many people enjoy drinking tea, coffee, or other hot beverages. However,

according to our report, drinking very hot tea can increase the risk of esophageal cancer, and it is therefore advisable to wait until hot beverages cool down before drinking," said Dr Farhad Islami, of the American Cancer Society and the study's lead author.

Previous research has found a link between hot tea drinking and esophageal cancer. This study, published Wednesday in the International Journal of Cancer, was the first to pinpoint a specific temperature, according to the authors.

Esophageal cancer is the eighth most common cancer in the world and is often fatal, killing approximately 400,000 people every year, according to the International Agency for Research on Cancer.



SPY CAMERA SCAM AT MOTELS

S Korea arrests two

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korean police have arrested two men for using illegal spy cameras at motels to film and livestream videos of about 1,600 guests, raking in about 7 million won (\$6,200) over the past three months, police said on Wednesday.

Illicit filming has surged in South Korea with growing use of mobile devices. Its pop music industry is reeling from a scandal over a celebrity's sharing of videos he took secretly while having sex.

Police said the two men they had arrested, and two other people, had posed as motel guests to secretly install the cameras, obtained online from overseas, in 42 rooms at 30 establishments around the country since August.

The footage from the cameras, hidden in television boxes, sockets and hair dryer holders, was broadcast live on a website, police said.

"It was the first case we caught where videos were broadcast live online," police said in a statement.

Last year, tens of thousands of women took to the streets of Seoul, the capital, to protest against illicit videos and other forms of sexual abuse and violence, and to demand stricter punishment.