

THOUSANDS MARCH AGAINST TERROR IN TURKEY CAPITAL

ANKARA: Thousands of people waving national flags took part in an anti-terrorism rally in Turkey's capital Ankara yesterday, as the army presses a major offensive against Kurdish militants, who have killed dozens of security force members in weeks of attacks. The rally was organized by a coalition of NGOs, trade unions and business groups, who warned that demonstrators displaying or voicing political emblems or slogans would be excluded.

It comes three days before a more politically charged anti-terrorism rally in Istanbul, to be addressed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan's two-month-old offensive against the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), with whom he had been in peace talks for three years, has divided Turkey.

His critics accuse him of using a suicide bombing in a town on the Syrian border in late July that was blamed on Islamic State jihadists to reignite a three-decade conflict with the PKK, ending a two-year ceasefire. The PKK has hit back hard, killing scores of soldiers and police in a string of attacks in the mainly Kurdish southeast, triggering reprisal attacks by nationalist mobs on Kurdish parties and businesses in other regions. The organizers of yesterday's rally, who included the Tusiad business federation, TESK trade union and the Turkish Bar Association, called for national unity.

"This rally is seeking to demonstrate unity and brotherhood of 78 million people under the Turkish flag," TESK chairman Bendevi Palandoken told AFP. A giant red Turkish flag

held aloft by the demonstrators carpeted the crowd, covering a distance of over a kilometer. Among the demonstrators at Ankara's Sihhiye square was 81-year-old Fatma Kurthasan, whose son, an army colonel, is stationed in the mainly Kurdish city of Diyarbakir. "I am worried about the escalation of terrorist attacks on soldiers and police," she said. "I am here for peace." Metin Fezzioglu, head of the Bar Association, said that while the PKK was "a terrorist organization... the fight against terror must remain on legitimate ground within the rule of law." "Turkey's strongest instruments in the fight against terrorism is not its warplanes or tanks but its legitimacy as a state governed by the rule of law," Fezzioglu said.

At least 120 police and soldiers have been

killed in attacks claimed by or blamed on the PKK since July, according to state-run media. The army, for its part, claims to have killed more than a thousand rebels in strikes against the PKK's bases in northern Iraq and southeast Turkey—figures that have been treated with skepticism in independent media. Some 40,000 people have died since the PKK took up arms in 1984 seeking an independent state for Turkey's Kurdish minority. The rebels have since refocused their demands on winning greater autonomy and cultural rights. The resurgence in violence comes ahead of parliamentary elections on November 1, in which Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is seeking an outright majority after falling short of the mark in June polls. — AFP

MOROCCO JOURNALIST ON HUNGER STRIKE

RABAT: A Moroccan historian and journalist said yesterday he has gone on hunger strike after being banned from leaving the country because he is under investigation for harming the country's image. Despite having a reputation as a moderate and open country, Morocco is often accused of harassing those critical of it, especially journalists.

Maati Monjib, who ran an institute for investigative journalism and was a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, began his hunger strike Wednesday night after he was stopped from attending a conference in Barcelona on political change in the region.

"My hunger strike is in protest of the pressure I've been under (by the state) for quite a while and so that they will respect my freedom of movement and my academic freedom," he told The Associated Press. Monjib discovered he was under investigation on Aug. 31 when he was detained briefly at the airport when returning from France.

On Monday, he was summoned by a prosecutor and questioned on accusations of tarnishing the country's image abroad, using foreign funds to promote a foreign agenda and destabilizing citizens' allegiance to their institutions. Formal charges have not yet been issued but associates have also been questioned.

Monjib's Ibn Rushd Institute for Investigative Journalism trained hundreds of Moroccan journalists in investigative techniques and civic journalism. He shut the institute down in December after repeated interference from the state. Hicham Mansouri, an associate of Monjib's and also an investigative journalist, was convicted of adultery and imprisoned in March, many believe for his work as well.

In the Reporters Without Borders 2015 Index of Press Freedom, Morocco ranks 130 out of 180 countries. Monjib said the state feels threatened by journalists and activists, fearing that they could become the nucleus of a future protest movement. "They think Morocco is a powder keg and accuse us of lighting matches," he said. — AP

US GENERAL: ONLY HANDFUL OF REBEL FIGHTERS STILL IN BATTLE

'WE HAVE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THIS IS A TOTAL FAILURE'

WASHINGTON: Republicans and Democrats lambasted the Obama administration's strategy to combat the Islamic State group after a top US general admitted that just a handful of US-trained Syrian rebels are still on the battlefield fighting the militants.

The four or five fighters still engaged in the campaign is astonishingly short of the US goal to train and equip 5,400 rebels a year at a cost of \$500 million. "That's a joke," said Sen Kelly Ayotte, R-NH. Sen Jeff Sessions, R-Ala, said: "We have to acknowledge this is a total failure. I wish it weren't so, but that's the fact."

After the first 54 were sent in to fight in July, a Syrian affiliate of al-Qaida attacked the group, killing several and taking others hostage while many fled. Asked how many remain, Gen. Lloyd Austin, commander of US Centcom, which oversees the war effort, told the Senate Armed Services Committee: "It's a small number. ... We're talking four or five."

Christine Wormuth, undersecretary of defense for policy, said the US currently was training more than 100 fighters, then later in her testimony said more specifically the number was between 100 and 120. "If we get to the end of the year with us bragging about the difference between a 100 and a 120, it's time for a new plan," said Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo.

One of the problems has been that many Syrian fighters want training and equipment to fight the government forces of Syria President Bashar Assad, but the U.S. program is limited to rebels who agree to only battle the militants. The stunning admission from Austin came as defense officials scrambled separately to respond to allegations that they skewed intelligence assessments to give a rosier picture of conditions on the battlefield.

'Appropriate actions'

Austin said he would take "appropriate actions" if an investigation by the Defense Department's inspector general finds that senior defense officials altered intelligence to exaggerate progress being made against the Islamic State group and other militants in Syria. McCaskill pointedly asked Austin to make sure the analysts who came forward do not face punitive actions.

"I will assure you that we will do every-



WASHINGTON: US Central Command Commander Gen Lloyd Austin III, (center) seated, looks back to his military aide while testifying on Capitol Hill. — AP

thing that is in our power to ensure that the whistleblowers remain protected and there is no retaliation," Austin said. The Obama administration was already struggling to defend its military strategy to "destroy and degrade" the terrorist group with an air campaign and programs to train, assist and equip local forces. Lawmakers and Republican presidential candidates have assailed the administration, contending that it has had limited or no success in fighting the militants.

Austin told committee members that the U.S. was looking at better ways to deploy the Syrian forces and predicted that it would take years to defeat IS and to restore stability in Iraq and Syria. Austin maintained the operation was making progress and said the military had always insisted the campaign would take time. "Our partners, not us, are in the lead. It is taking a bit longer to get things done, but it must be this way if we are to achieve lasting and positive effects," Austin said.

No training

The Pentagon also made it clear that US military troops have done no training in Syria. Instead, US special operations forces

work with Syrian troops outside the country, including across the border in Iraq. Sen John McCain, R-Ariz, chairman of the committee, called the program a failure, outlined his vision of a US strategy to fight IS and suggested that more American servicemen and women might eventually be needed.

"We need to help establish safe zones inside Syria where refugees and displaced people can be secure," McCain said. "We need forward air controllers to add precision and lethality to our air campaign. ... While no one believes that we need to invade Iraq or Syria, the fact is that we will likely need additional US special forces and military advisers to be successful."

Austin said he would not recommend a buffer zone at this time. He said it would take a ground force to protect refugees in such a zone. "I don't see the force available to be able to protect them currently," he told McCain.

Other senators, including Sens. Tim Kaine, D-Va., and Angus King, I-Maine, said they agreed with McCain and urged the administration to consider a humanitarian zone to help protect Syrian refugees in their homeland and ease current exodus of Syrians to Europe and nations in the region. — AP