

'Heavy clashes' as US-backed forces in final push against IS

OMAR OIL FIELD, Syria: US-backed forces were locked in fierce fighting yesterday as they pressed the battle against the last shred of the Islamic State group's "caliphate" in eastern Syria. The militants overran large parts of the country and neighbouring Iraq in 2014, but various military offensives have since reduced that territory to a patch on the Iraqi border. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), supported by a US-led coalition, announced a final push to retake the militant pocket late Saturday, after a pause of more than a week to allow civilians to flee.

SDF spokesman Mustafa Bali yesterday afternoon said his fighters had battled their way forwards against the militants, capturing 41 positions from them. "Our forces are relying on direct combat with light weapons," he told AFP. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor group said the SDF had advanced across farming land, backed by coalition air strikes and artillery fire. Earlier, an SDF field commander reported "heavy clashes" as his fighters gained ground.

The SDF launched an offensive to expel IS from the oil-rich eastern province of Deir Ezzor in September. The Kurdish-led alliance has since whittled down militant-held territory to a scrap of just four square kilometres between the Euphrates and the Iraqi border. Up to 600 militants could still remain inside, most of them foreigners, Bali said. Hundreds of civilians are also believed to be inside, he said.

Baghdadi 'not in Syria'

But Bali added the extremist group's elusive leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was likely not in the last pocket. "We do not think he is in Syria," Bali said, without adding further details about the whereabouts of the man who declared a cross-border IS "caliphate" in 2014. On the Iraqi side of the border, French members of the coalition on Saturday stood ready to pour fury on any militants trying to escape. Dozens of 155-mm shells were lined up ready to be loaded onto three

green-and-black Caesar gun-howitzers with a range of 40 km.

Coalition deputy commander Christopher Ghika last week said Iraqi forces had sealed their border with Syria. Since September, more than 1,270 IS militants, more than 670 SDF fighters, and around 400 civilians have been killed in the fighting, the Observatory says. At the height of their rule, the militants imposed their brutal interpretation of Islamic law on a territory roughly the size of Britain. But military offensives in both countries, including by the SDF, have since retaken the vast bulk of that "caliphate".

On Saturday, Bali said he expected the battle for the last patch of IS territory to be over in days. The militants however retain a presence in Syria's vast Badia desert, and have claimed a series of deadly attacks in SDF-held areas. Since December, more than 37,000 people, mostly wives and children of militant fighters, have fled out into SDF-held areas, the Observatory says. That figure includes some 3,400 suspected militants detained by the SDF, according to the monitor, which relies on sources inside Syria for its information.

US withdrawal

The SDF holds hundreds of foreigners accused of belonging to the extremist group in its custody, as well as members of their families. They have urged Western governments to repatriate their nationals, but politicians abroad have been reluctant. Relatives at home fear alleged foreign militants may end up facing tough justice in Iraq, where Human Rights Watch warned they could face "torture and unfair trials".

Yesterday, a Russian diplomatic source says Russia was repatriating 27 children whose mothers are being held in Iraq for belonging to IS. The issue of militant repatriation from Syria has come into sharper focus since the United States in December announced its military withdrawal from Syria. That announcement has seen the



QAMISHLI, Syria: Fighters from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) attend the funeral of a fellow fighter from the Kurdish women's protection units (YPJ), who was killed while fighting against the Islamic State (IS), in this northeastern Syrian Kurdish-majority city on Saturday. — AFP

Kurds warn they may struggle to keep militants in jail, and pushed them to seek a new ally in the Damascus regime to prevent a long threatened Turkish offensive.

While the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) have been a key US ally in the

fight against IS, Ankara views them as "terrorists". Syria's Kurds have largely stayed out of the country's civil war, instead building semi-autonomous institutions in northern and northeastern regions they control. The conflict has killed more than 360,000

people and displaced millions since starting in 2011 with a brutal crackdown on anti-government protests. The regime has made a military comeback with Russian military support since 2015, and now holds almost two-thirds of Syria. — AFP

Palestinians walk pupils to school after monitors quit

HEBRON: Palestinians in the occupied West Bank city of Hebron walked children to school yesterday, saying protecting them from Israeli settlers was necessary following the withdrawal of international monitors. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced last month he would not renew the mandate of the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH), accusing it of bias. The mission left on Jan 31.

It was established after a massacre of Palestinians in 1994 and Palestinian officials warned the withdrawal of the international monitors could increase abuses by settlers in the city. Palestinians from the Youth Against Settlements organization accompanied children to schools in vests with the word "observer" written in English, Arabic and Hebrew, an AFP photographer said. "Today we started a local campaign to document

violations that children going to school are subject to in this area where there are always settlers and the occupation army," Issa Amro from the organization told AFP. "We will not replace the international observers, but we try as much as we can to make sure that the children go to school."

Small scuffles broke out between Israeli settlers, the Palestinians and Israeli soldiers during the walk, the AFP journalist said. TIPH was created after 29 Palestinian worshippers in a mosque were gunned down by an American-born Israeli settler. Observers carried out daily patrols and document rights abuses they witness, although they were not allowed to intervene.

The mission reported its findings to its member countries - Italy, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey - as well as the Israeli and Palestinian authorities. Hebron is holy to both Muslims and Jews and has been a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At least 600 Jewish settlers live under heavy military guard in the city, which is home to around 200,000 Palestinians. Israeli settlements are seen as illegal under international law and a major obstacle to peace, as they are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state. — AFP

Muslim lawmakers' criticism of Israel...

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"When I see Israeli institute laws that recognize it as a Jewish state and does not recognize the other religions that are living in it, and we still hold it as a democracy in the Middle East, I almost chuckle," she told Yahoo News. "Because I know that if we see that in another society we would criticize it - we do that to Iran, any other place that sort of upholds its religion."

Omar and Tlaib sparked the BDS controversy during a period when Donald Trump's administration has strengthened relations with Israel and slashed aid to the Palestinians. But Republicans saw their support for BDS as both a threat to Jews and an exploitable rift among Democrats. "Democrats have made it clear that hateful, bigoted rhetoric toward Israel is not confined to a few freshman members. This is the mainstream position of today's Democratic Party and their leadership is enabling it," Republicans said in a statement on Jan 29. Republican Congressman Lee Zeldin urged his colleagues "to reject the anti-Israel and anti-Semitic hatred that we are starting to see infiltrating American politics

and even the halls of Congress".

The worry about the still small but growing support for BDS in the United States predates Tlaib's and Omar's political rise. A number of states have passed or proposed constitutionally questionable legislation and policies that would penalize supporters of the boycott movement. But the arrival of Tlaib and Omar in Congress was greeted with the first proposed federal law to fight to that end, in the Senate.

Senator Marco Rubio argues that BDS aims to eliminate the state of Israel, and said his legislation would protect states' rights to exclude from public contracts any supporters of BDS. Republicans, the majority in the Senate, along with more than half of the Democrats approved the legislation. But a significant number of Democrats opposed it, because, they said, it violates constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression.

That has left Democrats vulnerable to charges of anti-Semitism. To fight that, in January prominent party members formed the Democratic Majority for Israel, touting themselves as "The Voice of Pro-Israel Democrats," which for some came across as a rebuke of Omar and Tlaib. After Omar joined the influential House Foreign Affairs Committee, according to The New York Times, Jewish committee Chairman Eliot Engel privately made it clear that he would not ignore any "particularly hurtful" remarks she might make. "You hope that when people are elected to Congress, they continue to grow," he reportedly told her. — AFP

expresses loyalty and love for our country, and I hope they enjoyed the celebration," he noted. The ceremony concluded with the national anthem by the military musical band, followed by a salute by two Apache helicopters.

Kuwait previously set a record for the world's longest flag in Feb 2016, after a remote-controlled plane pulled the flag during a show held in Mina Abdullah. Kuwait has recently set other flag-related world records. In December last year, three Kuwaiti army officers broke a Guinness skydiving world record after leaping 13,000 feet while carrying a 63-sq-m Kuwaiti flag. In the same month, Chevrolet achieved a Guinness World Records title for the largest flag flown by a vehicle after a pickup pulled a Kuwaiti flag measuring 433 sq m for more than 100 m without any part of it touching the ground.

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fire department. Elementary students presented folk dances and other students addressed poems.

Mansour Al-Dihani, Director General of the Mubarak Al-Kabeer educational area, said the record is another addition to many previous records registered by Kuwaitis in various fields. "We worked on this project for a long time and it took lots of efforts. I thank all those who participated in this great achievement. The huge participation and attendance of the public

Indian politician's murder sets stage for poll bloodshed

KOLKATA: Several thousand activists paraded through a West Bengal town yesterday with the body of a politician whose killing opened a campaign of violence ahead of India's general election. Satyajit Biswas, a lawmaker from the eastern state's ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC), was shot dead at point blank range by unidentified gunmen as he attended a ceremony for a Hindu goddess late Saturday.

His party blamed the arch rival Bharatiya Janata Party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi but its leaders denied any involvement. "We suspect a political link to the killing," said West Bengal deputy police chief Anuj Sharma. He added that two people had been arrested but would not say if they were from a party. Followers marched with the 38-year-old legislator's body from a hospital in Nadia district, about 120 km from Kolkata, to his home village.

Nadia, which borders Bangladesh, was a battleground between the TMC and BJP during civic polls last year. There were dozens of deaths during the campaign. Modi must soon announce a national

election expected to start in April and which will almost certainly see new bloodshed. Biswas "had been actively trying to prevent the BJP's foray into the community," said TMC general secretary Partha Chatterjee as he blamed the rival party for the "shocking killing".

West Bengal BJP chief Dilip Ghosh blamed the murder on splits in the TMC. "When there is a political killing, they accuse my party. Let there be a Central Bureau of Investigation inquiry, everything will become clear," he told AFP. West Bengal witnessed gruesome political murders around past elections with victims hacked to pieces and some burned alive along with entire slums.

There is a close link between criminal networks and political groups in the state, according to Sabyasachi Basu Roy Chowdhury, vice-chancellor of Rabindra Bharati University in West Bengal. "This has complicated the problem," he said. According to the Indian Express newspaper, in 2013 the Communist Party accused the TMC of killing 142 political opponents ahead of the last national election.

Political killings are rife across India. While National Crime Bureau data said there were more than 100 political murders in 2016, political experts said the figure is much higher. Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states in the north are the worst for political murders, the government data shows. — AFP

Kagame steps down as Sisi...

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peaceful elections in DR Congo, Mali and Madagascar, peace deals in South Sudan and Central African Republic and the truce between Ethiopia and Eritrea, were however signs of a "wind of hope" on the continent.

Guterres also hailed the solidarity shown in Africa, where countries house nearly a third of refugees and displaced people in the world. "Despite the continent's own social, economic and security challenges, Africa's governments and people have kept borders, doors and hearts open to millions in need," he said. "Unfortunately, this example has not been followed everywhere."

The chairmanship of the AU rotates between the five regions of the continent, and South Africa will take over from Egypt next year. While multiple crises on the continent will be on the agenda of heads of state from the 55 member nations, the summit will also focus on institutional reforms, and the establishment of a continent-wide free trade zone. While the Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) was agreed by 44 nations in March 2018, only 19 countries have so far ratified the agreement. It requires 22 to ratify it for it to come into effect.

The single market is a flagship of the AU's "Agenda 2063" program, conceived as key to transforming the continent's economies. Cairo is backing the initiative, but analysts say it will be less likely to focus on the financial and administrative reforms pushed by Kagame. Kagame, who has been leading institutional reforms since 2016, pushed for a continent-wide import tax to fund the AU and reduce its dependence on

external donors, who still pay for more than half the institution's annual budget.

But member states have resisted both this and moves to strengthen the powers of the AU Commission, its executive organ. In November 2018, most states rejected a proposal to give the head of the AU Commission the power to name deputies and commissioners. Egypt, like fellow regional heavyweights Nigeria and South Africa, is not keen on a powerful AU, one African diplomat told AFP. Cairo has "never forgotten" its suspension in 2013 after Egypt's army deposed Islamist president Mohamed Morsi, who had in 2012 become the country's first democratically elected president, the diplomat said.

"Traditionally, leaders of big powers have not really helped the position of AU chairperson, as they don't want an AU which is too strong or too intrusive," said Elissa Jobson of the International Crisis Group. Kagame suffered a setback after expressing "serious doubts" on behalf of the AU about the results of the Democratic Republic of Congo's recent presidential election, which was officially won by Felix Tshisekedi. The country's Catholic church had also questioned the result.

But the DRC's constitutional court validated the results anyway and continental heavyweights South Africa, Kenya and Egypt acknowledged Tshisekedi's victory. "This whole thing was an embarrassment for the AU, it showed the limitations of what the AU chairperson can do," said Jobson.

Amnesty International expressed fears that Egypt's chairmanship could undermine human rights in the AU. "During his time in power President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi has demonstrated a shocking contempt for human rights," said Najia Bounaim, Amnesty's North Africa Campaigns Director. "Under his leadership the country has undergone a catastrophic decline in rights and freedoms," she added. — AFP