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Islamic State's 'caliphate' defeated, yet threat persists

Syria force captures last IS bastion of Baghouz



BAGHOUZ, Syria: Kurdish-led forces pronounced the death of the Islamic State group's nearly five-year-old "caliphate" yesterday after flushing out diehard militants from their very last bastion in eastern Syria. Fighters of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces raised their yellow flag in Baghouz, the remote riverside village where militants of a variety of nationalities made a desperate, dramatic last stand. The SDF's victory capped a deadly six-month operation against the final remnants of the caliphate which once stretched across a vast swathe of Iraq and Syria, and held seven million people in its sway.

World leaders hailed the victory as a major landmark in the fight against IS and its ideology, but warned that the group that spurred a spate of global terror attacks was far from defeated. "Syrian Democratic Forces declare total elimination of so-called caliphate and 100 percent territorial defeat of ISIS," spokesman Mustafa Bali said in a statement, using another acronym for IS. In Al-Omar, an oilfield used by the SDF as a staging base, fighters in their best fatigues laid down their weapons and broke into song and dance. They joined top Kurdish and Arab tribal officials, as well as a leading US envoy, for a ceremony unveiling a monument to their fallen comrades and celebrating the landmark victory.

The state proclaimed in mid-2014 by fugitive IS supreme Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi started collapsing in 2017 when parallel offensives in Iraq and Syria wrested back its main hubs Mosul and Raqqa.

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(Left) An image grab released yesterday shows the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) raising their flag atop a building in the Islamic State group's last bastion in this eastern Syrian village of Baghouz. (Right) A female fighter of the US-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) flashes the victory gesture while celebrating near the Omar oilfield in the eastern Syrian Deir Ezzor province yesterday. — AFP

Washington on edge for Mueller's findings on Trump

WASHINGTON: US Attorney General Bill Barr was expected to hand Congress as early as yesterday the key findings of the Russian meddling probe with Washington anxious to learn if President Donald Trump is implicated in serious wrongdoing. Chronic tweeter Trump, who headed out from his Florida residence early for a round of golf, remained uncommonly silent after spending two years repeatedly labeling Special Counsel Robert Mueller's

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Mideast anger over Trump's Golan pledge

DAMASCUS: Syria, its allies, and fellow states in the region condemned US President Donald Trump's pledge to recognize Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights slamming the move as a violation of international law. Trump said Thursday it was time for Washington to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the strategic territory, which it seized from Syria in the Six-Day War of 1967 and annexed in a move never recognized

internationally.

His abrupt tweet triggered delight in Israel, but outrage from other countries in the region as well as powerhouses such as Russia and Turkey. Moscow warned the policy U-turn could spark new conflicts. "Such appeals can considerably destabilize an already tense situation in the Middle East," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. "Hopefully it will remain (just) a call."

Any such move would break with UN Security Council resolutions and with more than half a century of US foreign policy, which treated the Golan as occupied territory whose future would be negotiated in talks with Syria on a comprehensive peace.

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MAJDAL SHAMS: People stand on top of an old Israeli tank near the Israeli-Syrian border in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights yesterday facing the Syrian city of Quneitra. — AFP

'March for love' as New Zealand mosques reopen

CHRISTCHURCH: Muslims held emotional prayers inside Christchurch's main mosque yesterday for the first time since a white supremacist massacred worshippers there, as New Zealand sought to return to normality after the tragedy. The Al Noor mosque had been taken over by police for investigations and security reasons after alleged gunman Brenton Tarrant gunned down Muslims gathered

there and at a smaller mosque for Friday prayers on March 15, killing 50 people.

Al Noor was handed back to the local Muslim community yesterday and began allowing small groups onto its grounds around midday. "We are allowing 15 people at a time, just to get some normality," said Saiyad Hassen, a volunteer at Al Noor, adding that there were no plans yet to fully reopen. Among the first to enter was massacre survivor Vohra Mohammad Huzef, who said two of his roommates were killed and that he managed to live only by hiding under bodies. "I could feel the bullets hitting the people and I could feel the blood coming down on me from the people who were shot," said Huzef, a Christchurch civil

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CHRISTCHURCH: Members of the local Muslim community enter the Al Noor mosque after it was reopened yesterday. — AFP

T rex found in Canada is world's biggest

MONTREAL: The towering Tyrannosaurus rex discovered in western Canada in 1991 is the world's biggest, a team of paleontologists said Friday, following a decades-long process of reconstructing its skeleton. Nicknamed Scotty for a celebratory bottle of scotch consumed the night it was discovered, the T rex was 13 meters long and probably weighed more than 8,800 kilos, making it bigger than all other carnivorous dinosaurs, the team from the University of Alberta said.

"This is the rex of rexes," said Scott Persons, lead author of the study and post-

doctoral researcher in the Department of Biological Sciences. "There is considerable size variability among Tyrannosaurus. Some individuals were lankier than others and some were more robust. Scotty exemplifies the robust," Persons said.

While the giant carnivore's skeleton was discovered in 1991, paleontologists spent more than a decade just removing the hard sandstone that covered its bones. Only now have they been able to study it and realize its uniqueness, which is not limited to its size. "Scotty is the oldest T rex known," having lived into its 30s, Persons said. "By Tyrannosaurus standards, it had an unusually long life. And it was a violent one," Persons said. "Riddled across the skeleton are pathologies - spots where scarred bone records large injuries." An exhibit featuring the dinosaur's bones is to open in May at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum. — AFP



EASTEND, Canada: This undated handout photo shows Dr W Scott Persons looking at the skeleton of the Tyrannosaurus rex "Scotty" at the T-rex Discovery Centre. — AFP



DUBAI: A handout image obtained yesterday shows the Burj Khalifa lit the previous night with an image of New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. — AFP

Dubai projects NZ PM's image on iconic skyscraper

DUBAI: Dubai has projected the image of New Zealand premier Jacinda Ardern onto its iconic Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest skyscraper, in thanks for her response to last week's mosque shootings. Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum praised Ardern's "support to the Muslim community" after a white supremacist gunman attacked two mosques on March 15, killing 50 people.

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