

At New York mosque, UN chief pledges to protect religious sites

NEW YORK: UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday pledged action to help protect religious sites worldwide, during a visit to a New York Islamic center one week after the New Zealand mosque shootings that shocked the world. "Mosques and all places of prayer and contemplation should be safe havens, not sites of terror," Guterres said. "Worshippers must feel safe to worship."

Guterres met with worshippers at the Islamic Cultural Center's mosque in Manhattan as they gathered ahead of Friday prayers and offered "solidarity with the Muslim community from New York to New Zealand and beyond". Speaking to reporters, the UN chief announced that he had tasked Spanish diplomat Miguel Moratinos with the drafting of an action plan for the United Nations to support efforts to protect religious sites. Moratinos heads the UN Alliance of Civilisations, a group led by Spain and Turkey that seeks to foster better understanding between cultures and societies.

The group will reach out to governments, religious leaders and organizations to explore actions to prevent such attacks as the Christchurch shooting that left 50 dead. Addressing a meeting in Istanbul of Muslim countries, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called on the world to fight Islamophobia in the same way it fought anti-Semitism after the World War II Holocaust. Guterres said the attack in New Zealand was "utterly appalling" but "perhaps not utterly surprising", citing the rise of anti-Muslim hatred, anti-Semitism and bigotry. "Hate speech is spreading like wildfire," he said.

Social media is being exploited to spread bigotry while many political movements either openly admit to being neo-Nazi or are "lip syncing their words," he added. The UN chief spoke of the victims of the Christchurch shooting, some of whom lost their lives saving others, and said he was "deeply moved by the extraordinary display of leadership, love and community from the people of New Zealand". — AFP



NEW YORK: United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres visits the Islamic Cultural Center on Friday to make remarks on the New Zealand attack and the need to address Islamophobia. — AFP

'March for love' as New Zealand...

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engineer originally from India. "Everyone wants to get back in again to give praise and to catch up. This is the central point of our community."

The attacks shocked a country of 4.5 million that is known for its tolerance and prompted global horror, heightened by Tarrant's cold-blooded livestreaming of the massacre. New Zealand came to a standstill on Friday to mark one week since the bloodshed, with the Muslim call to prayer broadcast across the country followed by two minutes of silence. The ceremonies saw poignant scenes of Maoris performing the traditional haka war dance, and non-Muslim New Zealand women donning makeshift Islamic headscarves in solidarity.

A day earlier, the country outlawed the military-style rifles used in the assault with immediate effect. But one of four concert sites at a music festival in the capital Wellington was evacuated yesterday night just before a planned minute of silence for Christchurch, underlining lingering apprehensions. Police cited unspecified "concerns about a person", but later called it an "innocent misunderstanding" and the concert was slated to proceed.

In Christchurch, police also handed back Linwood Mosque, the second killing zone several kilometres away from Al Noor, but no plans to allow visitors were announced. An armed police presence will remain at both mosques, as well as others around New Zealand. Workers have rushed to repair the mosques' bullet-pocked walls and clean blood-spattered floors.

At Al Noor, visitors knelt at a garden tap to wash their feet and faces in ritual pre-prayer ablutions. Some wept quietly inside the mosque, where bright sunlight streamed through windows and the air smelled of fresh paint. No bullet holes were seen. Men and women then knelt and prayed on a padded carpet underlay taped to the floor, still awaiting replacements

for the mosque's bloodstained rugs.

Several members of Christchurch semi-professional football club Western AFC arrived in team colors to honor three victims who were known to the team due to their interest in the sport. The players left a bouquet of flowers outside the entrance to the mosque's grounds. The victims included 14-year-old Sayyad Milne, who dreamed of playing in goal for Manchester United, according to his father. "We all love playing football and the best thing we can do is just to go out and enjoy it really, and obviously play for those guys that have been lost and think about them while we are doing it," said team member Aaron McDonald, 20.

The mosque's imam Gamal Fouda arrived draped in a New Zealand flag. The day before, Fouda delivered an impassioned memorial service at a park next to the mosque that was watched globally and in which he praised "unbreakable" New Zealand for uniting in the tragedy's wake. Around 2,000 people gathered yesterday at the same park to join a "March for Love" procession through Christchurch.

Officials and police said two relatives of victims had died, with New Zealand identifying one as 65-year-old Suad Adwan, who had arrived from Jordan for the burial of her son Kamel Darwish, 38. The grief-stricken mother was found yesterday morning having apparently died in her sleep, just hours after her son's burial, of what police called a "medical event". No other details on the deaths were given.

But normality slowly returned to Christchurch as children played cricket near Al Noor and a previously scheduled 100-km cycling race went ahead as planned. New Zealand, which has already charged two people for distributing the gruesome livestreamed video of the attack, has now also made it a crime to share the alleged killer's "manifesto", local media reported. In the document, Tarrant says the killings were in response to what he termed a Muslim "invasion" of Western countries. "Others have referred to this publication as a 'manifesto', but I consider it a crude booklet that promotes murder and terrorism," Chief Censor David Shanks was quoted as saying. — AFP

in. Most of the people evacuated from the smoldering ruins of Baghouz in recent days were relatives of IS members who now fill overcrowded camps further north in Syria's Kurdish-controlled region. The biggest of them, Al-Hol, is struggling to host 74,000 people, including at least 25,000 school-aged children.

Among them are thousands of foreigners from France, Russia, Belgium and 40-plus countries that are in most cases unwilling to take them back. "The needs are huge and the camp is overwhelmed," Peter Maurer, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross said Friday upon returning from a five-day visit to Syria.

Speaking at the ceremony in Al Omar, top SDF commander Mazloum Kobane warned that a new phase had begun in anti-IS operations. The US has vowed to draw down its forces in Syria, but Kobane appealed for sustained coalition assistance to help smash sleeper cells "which are a great threat to our region and the whole world". US coalition envoy William Roebuck agreed and said "we still have much more to do to achieve an enduring defeat" of IS.

French President Emmanuel Macron hailed the fall of Baghouz saying "a significant threat to our country" has been "eliminated". British Prime Minister Theresa May chimed in, calling yesterday's victory "a historic milestone". The militants retain a presence in eastern Syria's vast Badiya desert and various other hideouts from which they could wage the kind of deadly guerrilla insurgency that accompanied the rise of the Islamic State group.

John Spencer, a scholar at the Modern War Institute at West Point, warned that while the geographic caliphate had been dismantled, IS was far from defeated. IS "is a terrorist organization, all they have to do is put down their weapons and try to blend in with the population and just escape," he told AFP. "They're not gone, and they're not going to be gone." After almost five years of fighting and heavy losses, the Kurds are now exposed to threats from both Damascus and Turkey. Kobane appealed for dialogue with both as another page of the deadly eight-year-old Syrian conflict is being turned. — AFP

Dubai projects NZ PM's image on...

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"Thank you PM @jacindaardern and New Zealand for your sincere empathy and support that has won the

Washington on edge for Mueller's...

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investigation an illegal witch hunt - suggesting the White House has still not seen the report.

Meanwhile Democrats in Congress, many of who are hoping for evidence to support a presidential impeachment, were preparing to meet as they pressed hard to ensure the report's full contents are made public, and not just a summary prepared by the Trump-appointed Barr. "It is imperative for Mr Barr to make the full report public and provide its underlying documentation and findings to Congress," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said late Friday in a statement, adding that Barr should not give Trump any "sneak preview."

Barr was reportedly in his Justice Department office early yesterday to review Mueller's conclusions and decide what to do next. The secret report, the result of a 22-month investigation by Mueller into possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia and obstruction of justice, was handed to Barr Friday with the announcement that no new indictments were forthcoming. That produced sighs of relief from the White House, where members of Trump's family - Don Jr and son-in-law Jared Kushner in particular - had been feared possible targets of the probe.

With Mueller prevented by longstanding Justice Department policy from indicting the president himself, there were no hints on whether the report damns or clears Trump of criminal behavior. In a brief letter to Congress late Friday, Barr announced that the long-awaited report had been submitted to him and that he would send its "principal conclusions" for Congress as early as this weekend.

Mueller, a 74-year-old veteran criminal prosecutor and former FBI chief, was required to produce a confidential

Mideast anger over Trump's...

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The territory's return has always been a key Syrian national demand, championed by government and rebels alike throughout the bloody civil war that has ripped the country apart since 2011.

In an angry retort, the Syrian government said Trump's comments disregarded international law. "The American position towards Syria's occupied Golan Heights clearly reflects the United States' contempt for international legitimacy and its flagrant violation of international law," a foreign ministry source told the official SANA news agency. Trump's comments showed the extent of his administration's "blind bias" towards Israel. "The Golan was and will remain Arab and Syrian," the source said. The foreign ministry sent a letter to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, urging him to reiterate the UN's rejection of Israeli claims over the Golan, SANA said.

Turkey, which hosted the last indirect peace talks between Israel and the Syrian government in 2008 but has backed Syrian rebels, said the change risked plunging the region into a "new crisis". "We will never allow the occupation of Golan Heights to be made legitimate," President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted he was "shocked by @realDonaldTrump continuing to try to give what is not his to racist Israel." And France added its voice to the chorus of outrage, saying the Golan had been "occupied by Israel since 1967" and it did not recognize Israel's annexation.

In his tweet, Trump said the Golan was "of critical strategic and security importance to the State of Israel and Regional Stability!" "After 52 years it is time for the United

respect of 1.5 billion Muslims after the terrorist attack that shook the Muslim community around the world," he wrote on Twitter.

A photo from Dubai's Public Diplomacy Office showed Burj Khalifa lit up with a picture of Ardern in a hijab, warmly embracing a Muslim affected by the tragedy, under the word "peace" in Arabic and English. Ardern has been widely praised for her handling of the tragedy, meeting victims' families and moving quickly to tighten gun laws while calling for global efforts against extremism online. — AFP

report that explained why he decided to indict or not indict subjects of the probe. Barr decides himself how much of the report he releases to Congress and the public, though he said in his letter Friday that he is "committed to as much transparency as possible". The special counsel regulations "give Barr lots of discretion about what to disclose to Congress and the public," said Andrew Coan, a University of Arizona law professor. "The selective release of exculpatory material is a possibility worth watching for."

Mueller investigated whether members of Trump's 2016 election campaign colluded with Russians to skew the election. In addition, he studied whether actions by Trump, including the May 2017 firing of FBI director James Comey, amounted to criminal obstruction of justice. But what he has concluded remained a mystery yesterday. "We don't, at this stage, know anything about what information the Mueller Report contains. We don't know what form the document takes. We don't even know how many pages comprise it," Benjamin Wittes, a prominent Washington legal analyst, wrote on the Lawfare website. "The president should wait before popping the champagne corks over this and tweeting in triumph."

Mueller indicted 34 individuals during the probe, among them six Trump associates, including his former national security advisor Mike Flynn, his former personal lawyer Michael Cohen, and campaign chairman Paul Manafort. Five of the six have pleaded guilty to the charges against them. Court filings in those cases painted a broad picture of a cohesive Russian effort via hacking and social media manipulation to swing the election in Trump's favor against Democrat Hillary Clinton.

The investigation has revealed scores of contacts between the campaign and Russians, with members of the team readily talking to the Russians about obtaining dirt on Clinton. Hours before Barr's announcement, Trump repeated his accusation that the entire investigation was a hoax and questioned Mueller's credentials for investigating him. But Mueller, who was director of the FBI for 12 years, has the respect and support of Democrats and Republicans alike as a straight-shooting, disciplined and fair investigator. — AFP

States to fully recognise Israel's Sovereignty over the Golan Heights," he said. The Arab League said Trump's comments were "completely outside international law". The Gulf Cooperation Council said Trump's statement would not change the internationally recognized fact that the "Golan heights are Syrian lands forcefully occupied by Israel".

Jordan's Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said lasting peace in the region requires Israel to withdraw from all Arab territories it occupies, including the Golan. Egypt urged "respect (for) legitimate international resolutions and the United Nations Charter on the unacceptability of land appropriation by force". Following decades of calm along the Golan armistice line after the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1973, tensions flared with the eruption of civil war in Syria in 2011. Israel provided medical assistance to wounded rebel fighters and repeatedly struck government positions in response to stray fire across the frontier. It has also targeted suspected positions of Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah, which have intervened militarily to back President Bashar al-Assad.

Since the Syrian government decisively defeated rebel fighters near the armistice line last year with Iranian and Hezbollah support, Israel has repeatedly vowed to prevent its arch enemies from establishing a long-term military presence. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is seeking re-election next month, swiftly thanked Trump for his announcement. "At a time when Iran seeks to use Syria as a platform to destroy Israel, President Trump boldly recognizes Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights," the right-wing prime minister wrote on Twitter.

Leon Panetta, a veteran Democrat who served as CIA director and defence secretary among other roles, blasted Trump for "tweeting out another policy that obviously has not been worked out with our international partners". The Golan move is Trump's latest diplomatic bombshell as he seeks to redraw the fraught Middle East in Israel's favor. In 2017, Trump went against decades of practice in recognizing the disputed city of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, rather than the previously accepted Tel Aviv. — AFP

Islamic State's 'caliphate' defeated...

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The nearly five years of fighting against the most brutal militant group in modern history left major cities in ruins and populations homeless.

The territory administered by the remnants of IS continued to shrink month after month and in September 2018 the SDF launched a final offensive on the last dregs of the "caliphate" in its Euphrates Valley strongholds. SDF fighters last week expelled IS fighters who refused to surrender from an encampment on the edge of Baghouz and have since been hunting down a few survivors hiding on the reedy banks of the Euphrates. "Those who lasted the longest were mostly foreigners... Tunisians, Moroccans, Egyptians," Kurdish fighter Hisham Harun, 21, told AFP.

Around him, the former militant encampment was littered with bullet-riddled truck carcasses, discarded suicide belts and torn tents where the caliphate's last families sheltered for weeks. Some bodies of suspected IS fighters could also be seen. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the offensive has left 630 civilians, 750 SDF fighters and around 1,600 militants dead.

Kurdish officers and aid groups were flummoxed by the number of people who poured out of Baghouz, a small village even few Syrians knew of until this year. As SDF forces pummeled IS positions and US warplanes dropped huge payloads on the riverside village, tens of thousands of people fled over a rocky hill. For weeks, the ghostly figures of the caliphate's last denizens hobbled out of the besieged village, famished, often wounded but sometimes still defiantly proclaiming their support for IS.

The Kurdish-led force and foreign intelligence have screened more than 60,000 people since January, around 10 percent of them militants turning themselves