

International

US takes custody of two notorious Islamic State 'Beatles' from Kurds

'They are the worst of the worst'

WASHINGTON: Two notorious Islamic State jihadists dubbed "The Beatles" who were held by Syrian Kurds are now in US custody and have been moved out of the country, President Donald Trump said yesterday. Turkey has launched an assault on the Syrian Kurdish forces - with which the US partnered to combat Islamic State militants - sparking fears that the offensive could lead to captured fighters they held escaping and reconstituting the group.

"In case the Kurds or Turkey lose control, the United States has already taken the 2 ISIS militants tied to beheadings in Syria, known as the Beatles, out of that country and into a secure location controlled by the US," Trump tweeted. "They are the worst of the worst!" The pair were part of an extremely violent all-British four-man cell that kidnapped and tortured foreigners, including journalists, at the height of the Islamic State group's power in Syria and Iraq.

A US defense official had earlier confirmed they had taken custody of two "high-value" IS individuals from the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that held the captured jihadists. "They have been moved out of Syria and are in a secure location," the official said, without identifying where. "They are being held in military custody pursuant to

the law of war." One other member of the four-man jihadist cell was killed in a drone strike and the fourth is imprisoned on terror charges in Turkey.

'Particularly bad'

Their cell is accused of abducting and decapitating around 20 hostages including American journalist James Foley, who was beheaded in 2014. Trump had earlier said the US was taking steps to prevent the potential escape of particularly dangerous Islamic State group fighters amid the Turkish offensive. "We are taking some of the most dangerous ISIS fighters out and we're putting them in different locations where it's secure," Trump said at the White House.

"We have taken a certain number of ISIS fighters who are particularly bad and we've wanted to make sure nothing happened to them with respect to getting out," he said. The move addressed one of the most worrisome issues of Trump's green light to Turkey to invade Syria, where the Kurds, a longtime US battlefield partner, are viewed as a terror threat by Ankara, a NATO ally of Washington.

The SDF have been holding prisoner some 10,000 captured Islamic State group fighters. The SDF-held fighters include around 2,000 of foreign nationality, many of

sault Kurdish militias previously allied with America. Earlier this week, Trump said he would "obliterate" Turkey's economy if it went too far. The US and the UK also expressed concern over the risk of a humanitarian catastrophe in the region.

'Think carefully'

Ahead of the launch of the offensive, Russian President Vladimir Putin urged his Turkish counterpart President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to "think carefully" before taking any action "so as not to harm overall efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis," the presidency said following a phone call between the two leaders. Erdogan for his part told Putin that the offensive "will contribute to Syria's peace and stability and ease the path to a political solution".

No funding for 'safe zone'

EU chief Jean-Claude Juncker demanded a halt to the operation, telling Ankara the bloc would not pay for any so-called "safe zone" that might be created. He told the European Parliament he recognized Turkey had "security concerns" along the border. But he warned that the military action would not lead to a "good result", saying a political solution was the only way to end the Syrian conflict.

'Risk of resurgent IS'

Turkey "is willingly risking further destabilizing the region and a resurgence of IS" (Islamic State) by attacking northeastern Syria, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said. "Syria needs stability and a political process... however, the Turkish offensive now threatens to cause a new humanitarian disaster," Maas said in a statement, adding that Berlin would "urge Turkey to end its offensive and to pursue its security interests peacefully". —AFP



RITSONA: Children hold photographs, as Syrian Kurd refugees protest at the Ritsona camp, yesterday after Turkey launched an assault on Kurdish forces in northern Syria with air strikes and explosions reported along the border. —AFP

them from European countries that have refused to take them back. Trump said the Kurds were still guarding many of the Islamic State group militants, but also said

Turkey would be responsible for them. "If the Kurds don't watch, Turkey will watch. They don't want those people out any more than we do," he said.—AFP

How the world is reacting to Turkey's assault in Syria

PARIS: World governments reacted with concern Wednesday after Turkey launched a military offensive on Kurdish forces in northern Syria, while the UN Security Council plans to hold an emergency meeting to discuss the assault. Here are some of the initial comments following the start of the attack, called "Operation Peace Spring".

'Act with restraint'

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg urged Turkey to show "restraint", while acknowledging that Ankara had "legitimate security concerns". "It's important to avoid actions that may further destabilize the region, escalate tensions, and cause more human suffering," Stoltenberg said at a news conference in Rome, in remarks released by his office. The UN Security Council's president, South African ambassador Jerry Matthews Matjila, also appealed to Turkey to "protect civilians" and exercise "maximum restraint".

'Bad idea'

US President Donald Trump on Wednesday called the incursion into northern Syria a "bad idea". He insisted Washington "does not endorse this attack", despite having withdrawn US troops from the area in what was interpreted as a green light for Turkey to as-

Erdogan threatens EU with 'refugee influx'

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned the EU yesterday that Ankara would allow millions of refugees to head to Europe if the bloc criticized Turkey's military offensive in Syria. "Hey EU, wake up. I say it again: if you try to frame our operation there as an invasion, our task is simple: we will open the doors and send 3.6 million migrants to you," Erdogan said in a speech to his party. Turkey launched an operation into Syrian territory on Wednesday, aimed at combating Kurdish militants tied to insurgents in its own territory.

Erdogan said 109 "terrorists" had been killed so far in the operation, which would soon cover ground from Manbij in northern Syria to the Iraqi border some 350 kilometers east. "God willing, we will crush these snakes' heads quickly," he said. "What we are trying to do is prevent the establish-

ment of a terrorist state on our southern border. This cannot happen," Turkey currently hosts 3.6 million refugees from the eight-year conflict in Syria - the highest number in the world.

Under a 2016 agreement with the EU, Turkey agreed to prevent refugees from leaving towards Europe in exchange for six billion euros and visa-free travel for its citizens, but has frequently criticized the lack of assistance from Brussels. "You have never been sincere," Erdogan said, addressing the EU. "Now they say they will withhold three billion euros from us. Have you ever kept any promise you gave us so far? No." One aim of the military operation is to establish a "safe zone" in which at least one million Syrian refugees can be repatriated, after the long-term presence of refugees became an increasingly political liability.

"For those who want to return to their country but don't have a home left anymore, we plan to build settlements for one million people, with international financing," Erdogan said. He also sought to assuage concerns regarding Islamic State prisoners currently held by Kurdish forces. "Those that need to be kept in jail we will keep in jail. We will return foreigners to their home countries if they accept them back," he said.—AFP