

Russia, Turkey spar over Syria operation

Erdogan threatens to attack advancing Syrian troops; Kremlin warns against the 'worst scenario'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
ISTANBUL

Turkey and Russia exchanged warnings on Wednesday after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened an "imminent" operation in Syria to end the regime's brutal assault on the last rebel enclave.

Syrian aid workers called urgently for a ceasefire and international help for nearly a million people fleeing the regime onslaught in the country's northwestern Idlib province – the biggest wave of displaced civilians in the nine-year conflict.

Turkey, supporter of some rebel groups in Idlib, has been pushing for a renewed ceasefire in talks with Russia, which backs the Syrian regime. Ankara is eager to prevent another flood of refugees into its territory adding to the 3.7 million Syrians it already hosts.

The Syrian NGO Alliance said displaced people are "escaping in search of safety only to die from extreme weather conditions and lack of available resources".

"We have hundreds and thousands of people who are fleeing... not just from bom-



Flare-up: A family fleeing the town of Tarmanin in Syria's Idlib province towards the northern border with Turkey with their belongings on Wednesday. •AFP

bardments but from lack of insulation, from the weather, a lack of heating. It feels like doomsday," Razan Saffour, of the Syrian Expatriate Medical Association, said. The group said a total of \$336 million was needed for basic food, water and shelter.

'No desired result'

Mr. Erdogan said talks with Moscow over the past fortnight had so far failed to achieve "the desired result" and warned that Turkey would launch an offensive in-

to Syria unless Damascus pulled its forces back by the end of the month.

"An operation in Idlib is imminent... We are counting down, we are making our final warnings," Mr. Erdogan said in a televised speech.

He called for Syrian forces to retreat behind Turkey's military posts in Idlib, which were set up under a 2018 deal with Russia designed to hold off a regime advance.

The Kremlin quickly responded to Erdogan's threat, warning that any operation

against Syrian forces would be "the worst scenario".

With Turkey moving large numbers of reinforcements into Idlib in recent weeks, Defence Minister Hulusi Akar emphasised that it was "out of the question for us to withdraw from our observation posts".

Earlier this week the UN said the displaced were mainly women and children and warned that babies were dying of cold because aid camps are full.

The Syrian NGOs called

for the warring parties to allow safe access for humanitarian groups and for a "complete ceasefire and end to human rights violations".

Violence continues

The regime offensive has killed more than 400 civilians since it began in December, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

"The violence in north-west Syria is indiscriminate. Health facilities, schools, residential areas, mosques and markets have been hit," the UN head of humanitarian affairs and emergency relief, Mark Lowcock, said earlier this week.

Moscow has repeatedly vetoed Security Council resolutions. The head of the World Health Organization said Tuesday that out of nearly 550 health facilities in northwest Syria, only about half were operational.

Syrian troops have reconquered swathes of Idlib and retaken the key M5 highway connecting the country's four largest cities as well as the entire surroundings of Aleppo city for the first time since 2012.

Passengers disembark cruise ship after 2-week quarantine

China reported 1,749 new cases, the lowest since Jan. 29

REUTERS
TOKYO/BEIJING

Hundreds of people began disembarking a cruise ship in Japan on Wednesday after being held on board for more than two weeks under quarantine, as criticism mounted of Japan's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak outside China.

Even as patients trundled off the Diamond Princess cruise liner, Japanese authorities announced 79 new cases had been discovered on board, bringing the total above 620, well over half the known cases outside mainland China.

One more Indian aboard the ship was tested positive and shifted to hospital, taking the number of Indian nationals infected with the virus on the vessel to seven, according to the Indian Embassy on Wednesday.

In China itself, the death toll from the SARS-CoV-2 climbed above 2,000, but the tally of newly reported cases fell for a second day to the lowest since January, offering hope and helping



Free at last: A passenger surrounded by mediapersons after she disembarked from Diamond Princess on Wednesday. •AP

Asian shares and U.S. stock futures rise. Outside China, eight people have died from the disease. Two Iranians died in the holy Shi'ite city of Qom on Wednesday.

More will leave

From Wednesday, passengers who tested negative and showed no symptoms were free to leave. Around 500 were expected to disembark on Wednesday, with the rest of those eligible departing over the next two days.

Confirmed cases were to be sent to hospital, while those who shared cabins with infected passengers

may still be kept on board.

Meanwhile, China's National Health Commission reported 1,749 new confirmed cases, the lowest tally since January 29. Hubei – the epicentre of the outbreak – reported the lowest number of new infections since February 11, while outside of Hubei there were just 56 new cases, down from a peak of 890 on Feb. 3.

The latest figures bring the total number of cases in China to more than 74,000 and the death toll to 2,004, three-quarters of which have occurred in Wuhan.

(With PTI inputs)

Won't honour UN pledge on war probe: Mahinda

Sri Lanka to withdraw from co-sponsorship of resolution 30/1

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
COLOMBO

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa on Wednesday said that his government will withdraw from co-sponsoring a UN Human Rights Council resolution on accountability for war crimes.

His statement came days after the U.S. imposed travel

restrictions on Army chief Lt. Gen. Shavendra Silva and his immediate family members over alleged gross violations of human rights during the final phase of the island nation's Civil War in 2009.

"Our government has decided to withdraw from the process of co-sponsorship in relation to resolution 30-/1," Mr. Rajapaksa said in a state-

ment. The resolution 30/1 on promotion on reconciliation in Sri Lanka was co-sponsored in 2015 by the then Sri Lankan government.

The resolution also called for an independent investigation with foreign judges and prosecutors to probe war crimes allegation.

Mr. Rajapaksa accused his predecessor of betraying the island's security forces by co-sponsoring the resolution.

"It is because of the histor-

ic betrayal that other countries are able to name members of our armed forces as violators of human rights," said Mr. Rajapaksa, who was president and commander-in-chief when Sri Lanka launched the offensive to crush the LTTE in 2009.

The 2015 resolution was based on the UNHRC report, which had accused the Lankan troops of violating human rights, Mr. Rajapaksa's statement said.

Sri Lanka's ruling and op-

position parties have strongly opposed the U.S. move to impose the travel ban on Lt. Gen. Silva, saying America's decision was based on independently unverified information.

Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena last week said that Lt. Gen. Silva was only conducting a war against a designated terrorist group which was the LTTE.

Lt. Gen. Silva was appointed as the Sri Lankan Army Commander last year.

WSJ reporters expelled from China over 'racist' headline

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

China on Wednesday ordered three reporters from American newspaper the *Wall Street Journal* to leave the country over what Beijing deemed a racist headline, in one of the harshest moves against foreign media in years.

The expulsion came as Beijing also slammed Wash-

ington's decision to tighten rules on Chinese state media organisations in the U.S..

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said the *Journal* op-ed – titled 'China is the Real Sick Man of Asia' – had a "racially discriminatory" and "sensational" headline.

The *Journal* reported that deputy bureau chief Josh Chin and reporter Chao

Deng, both U.S. nationals, as well as reporter Philip Wen, an Australian, had been ordered to leave the country in five days.

The three journalists are in the *WSJ*'s news section.

The op-ed, written by Bard College professor Walter Russell Mead, criticised the Chinese government's

initial response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

ELSEWHERE



Erdogan slams rights activist after acquittal

ISTANBUL
Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan renewed criticism of leading civil society figure Osman Kavala on Wednesday, a day after he was acquitted in court and then swiftly detained again in a separate case. AFP

MH370 downed in murder-suicide: Abbott

SYDNEY
Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott has claimed "very top" level Malaysian officials believed vanished Flight MH370 was deliberately downed by the pilot in a mass murder-suicide. AFP

Sanders surges to double digit lead: poll

He got 32% support against Biden's 16%

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

Bernie Sanders has surged to a double-digit lead over his rivals in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination, a new poll published on Wednesday has found.

As the self-described democratic socialist rose, moderate former Vice-President Joe Biden slumped by a whopping 16 point since January's last take of the *Washington Post*-ABC-News poll.

The *Post* said Mr. Sanders – at 32% support, up from 23 last month – is climbing on the strength of strong performances in the Iowa caucuses and the New

Hampshire primary. Mr. Biden stood at 16% support in this survey of voter preference.

Third place in the poll went to former New York mayor Mike Bloomberg at 14%, followed by progressive Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren at 12%.

Pete Buttigieg is in single digits nationally despite narrowly winning in Iowa and finishing a close second in New Hampshire.

The poll was released on the same day of a Democratic debate, in which Mr. Bloomberg, a New York billionaire accused of buying prominence with staggering ad spends, will face off his rivals for the first time.

'Trump offered to pardon Assange if he denied Russia link to e-mail leak'

WikiLeaks published emails that hurt Hillary's campaign in 2016

REUTERS
LONDON

U.S. President Donald Trump offered to pardon WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange if he said that Russia had nothing to do with WikiLeaks' publication of Democratic Party emails in 2016, a London court heard on Wednesday.

Mr. Assange appeared by videolink from prison as lawyers discussed the management of his hearing next week to decide whether he should be extradited to the U.S.

At Westminster Magistrates' Court, Mr. Assange's barrister, Edward Fitzgerald, referred to a witness



Julian Assange

statement by former U.S. Republican congressman Dana Rohrabacher, who had visited Mr. Assange in 2017, saying that he had been sent by the President to offer a pardon. The pardon would come on the condition that

Mr. Assange complied with the U.S. by saying that the Russians were not involved in the email leak, which hurt Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign in 2016, Mr. Rohrabacher's statement said.

Mr. Assange, 48, who spent seven years holed up in Ecuador's embassy before he was dragged out last April, is wanted in the U.S. to face 18 counts, including conspiring to hack government computers and violating an espionage law. He could spend decades behind bars if convicted there.

At Wednesday's hearing, Mr. Assange spoke only to confirm his name and date of birth.

Pak. court nullifies minor Hindu girl's marriage

She claimed the wedding was not forced

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
KARACHI

In probably the first of its kind judgment, a Pakistani court has nullified the marriage of a minor Hindu girl, who was converted to Islam and married off to a Muslim man in the country's Sindh province.

Mehak Kumari, a Class IX student, was allegedly abducted from Jacobabad district on January 15 by Ali Raza Solangi, who later married her. Her father filed an FIR, claiming that Solangi had abducted and forcibly married her. He also said that her daughter was 15-year-old when she was abducted.

The girl, however,

claimed that she embraced Islam at a shrine after which she married Solangi out of her own free will.

The judge, citing evidence and documents, ruled that the girl was underage and was not fit for marriage under section 3 and 4 of the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act.

He directed Larkana's police officials to take action against all those involved in conducting, facilitating and abetting the child marriage.

Heavy security was witnessed in and around the court for the hearing to quell any unrest.

Hindus form the biggest minority community in Pakistan.