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ALEPPO SIEGE SPELLS DOOM FOR WEST'S GOALS

By Eric Randolph and Michel Sallhan

The siege of Aleppo has taken the West even further from achieving its key goals in Syria of stemming the refugee flow, removing the Assad regime and tackling the Islamic State group, experts say. As the joint forces of Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and Syria encircle the divided northern Syrian city, the so-called "moderate" opposition faces a potentially devastating turning point in its five-year war against the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad. The collapse of the "moderate" opposition would have serious knock-on effects for the West.

"The civil war is feeding a horrific humanitarian crisis with obvious significance for the twin Western concerns of refugees and extremism," said Julien Barnes-Dacey of the European Council on Foreign Relations. The United Nations says more than 30,000 people have fled Aleppo in just a few days as the fighting intensifies, and officials are warning that Europe could see migrant numbers that eclipse even the record figures of the past year.

"The worst-case scenario that could happen in this region in the short term would be a new influx of 600,000 refugees at the Turkish frontier," Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus warned on Monday. Assad's main international backers - Russia and Iran - argue that the Syrian leader is the best hope for ending the war - a view that is gaining some currency in Western capitals despite them seeing Assad as responsible for most of the quarter million dead in the conflict. "There is not the same sense of urgency or moral

impulse to get rid of Assad," said Barnes-Dacey. "But Assad can't win this war outright. No one realistically believes he can stabilise the country and deal with both extremism and refugees," he said.

'Rampant Wishful Thinking'

The onslaught on Aleppo led to the collapse last week of the first peace talks between the regime and opposition in Geneva, but Washington sees little alternative but to keep the negotiation process going. The United States is unwilling to throw full military support behind the rebels - fearful of becoming mired in an indirect conflict with Russia. Instead, analysts say the White House is still hoping Moscow and Damascus will get tired of fighting and seek a settlement. "Wishful thinking has been rampant in Washington," said Hassan Hassan, of the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy in Washington. "The West is banking on the political process, on the idea that the regime campaign will get to a stalemate and will eventually accept concessions. They think the bombardment of Aleppo is just part of the negotiation. "But they are being played by the regime and Russia. The regime is seeking total victory and wants to get to a point where it doesn't need to negotiate. That's the only doctrine the regime believes in."

Boom or Bust for IS?

While it will generate still more humanitarian disasters and a fresh exodus of refugees, analysts say the fall of Aleppo will not directly impact the West's primary concern: the war against the Islamic State group (IS),

which has become practically a separate conflict in eastern Syria. "If Aleppo falls, it would be a big symbolic victory for the Syrian government over the Sunni insurgency," said Colum Strack, senior Middle East analyst for IHS in London. "But the Western strategy (against IS) shifted away from backing the Sunni insurgency in the middle of last year... It just wasn't working," Strack said.

In October, the US formally abandoned its \$500 million plan to train a moderate Sunni force to fight IS after a series of embarrassing setbacks that saw some of the first recruits simply hand over their weapons to extremists. Washington and its Western allies are now putting their hopes in Kurdish fighters, hoping they will act as ground forces against the brutal jihadist group.

Experts are divided on whether the current trends of the conflict will help or hinder the Islamic State. Some fear the decline of the moderate opposition will force many into the arms of IS. "The Russian plan is to get to a place where Assad is left alone against the Islamic State," said Agnes Levallois, a Middle East consultant in Paris. "But that will create a scenario where the Islamic State can present itself as the great and only defender of the Sunni community against the Syrian regime."

Other analysts agree that extremist groups will take advantage of losses by more moderate forces, but point out that IS is currently under considerable pressure in key areas. "Overall the current trends look bad for the Islamic State - you've got US-backed Kurdish forces and Russian-backed Syrian forces competing for the territory held by the Islamic State along the Turkish border," said Strack. —AFP

UN DRIVE TO LIFT FARMERS MUST FOCUS ON CLIMATE

By Magdalena Mis

A new push to give farmers in developing countries better access to markets, led by the United Nations' food aid agency, could fall short of its goals if it does not prioritize helping poor farmers adapt to climate change, experts have warned. Aimed at boosting incomes and improving food security, the project plans to help 1.5 million small-scale farmers across Africa, Asia and Latin America over the next three years with contracts to buy their crops, signed before they are planted, worth \$750 million.

The World Food Programme (WFP) and its partners - including agribusiness giants Bayer and Syngenta, the World Bank's International Finance Corporation, Rabobank and Norwegian fertiliser producer Yara International - will also offer farmers access to agricultural inputs, loans and insurance. "The platform will enable some of the most marginalized farmers to access reliable markets for the first time," WFP Executive Director Ertharin Cousin said in a statement as the programme was launched in Davos, Switzerland, late last month.

Half of the world's 795 million hungry people are farmers, according to the WFP, and in some African countries up to 90 percent of the population are small-holder farmers. The UN agency said the pre-agreed purchase contracts with local, regional and international buyers, together with financing and other resources, would enable more than 1 million of the world's poorest farmers in 25 countries to shift from subsistence farming to market-oriented agriculture. Experts said that, for the program to succeed, climate change should be a key factor in deciding which crops to plant. "Current climate risks which are affecting countries are a big player in the low level of agro-productivity in sub-Saharan Africa," said John Recha, a specialist with the CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS). "But I'm not seeing mention of (this) programme being tied to the risks which come aboard because of the changing climate," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation from Kenya.

Global warming has led to shifts in rainfall, Recha said, meaning farmers should have the opportunity to grow a range of crops, such as sorghum, cassava or sweet potato, which are more drought-tolerant than the staple maize. In Rwanda and Tanzania, where the "Patient Procurement Platform" - so-called due to the long-term commitment required from producers and buyers - began in December, maize was the main crop covered by the contracts. "If you promote more of the maize at the expense of the drought-tolerant crops like finger millet or cassava, then you are not helping these farmers adapt to climate (change)," Recha said. Mack Ramachandran, who leads procurement for the WFP, said participating farmers would have access to climate-related training, including water management and conservation. "There will be a significant component of climate-smart agriculture," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation from Rome.

'Hooked' on Fertiliser

CCAFS' Recha said it made sense to bring the private sector on board to support small-scale farmers and raise their yields by providing them with access to fertilizers, which are underused in Africa. But Teresa Anderson, a researcher with development charity ActionAid, warned of the risk that farmers could end up reliant on chemical inputs. "Once you start adding fertilizer, it actually kills off the natural fertility (of the soil), so then you become dependent on it," Anderson told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "Unless you use fertilizers, your yields will go down, so you can't just use fertilizers and then stop; you get hooked."

She said the hybrid seeds farmers may be encouraged to buy from the WFP partners needed a lot of fertilizer, as well as reliable rainfall. That could leave farmers facing a disaster when rains - and their crops - fail, she added. "It's not an appropriate response to make farmers more vulnerable by getting them hooked on these chemicals and seeds," she said. While insurance may enable them to survive extreme weather, it will not help them adapt their practices to shifting climate risks, she said. Many farmers are now going back to traditional methods, she noted. According to Ramachandran, farmers in the WFP program will be able to buy seeds from whichever supplier they prefer, but they will receive recommendations on which seeds are best for their soil and water conditions. "The farmer choice can never be taken away - they don't have to buy from Syngenta," he said. —Reuters

TRUMP PROVES ESTABLISHMENT CAN'T STOP HIM

By Steve Peoples

The current and former chiefs of the state Republican Party condemned him. New Hampshire's only two Republican members of Congress refused to endorse him. The conservative owner of the state's largest newspaper called him "a conman" on the front page. Donald Trump won anyway - big time. So, too, did Bernie Sanders, who will leave New Hampshire with the commanding victory one might expect of a frontrunner blessed with the near universal favor of his party. Except all that establishment support belongs to Hillary Clinton.

Trump's 18-point victory and the self-described democratic socialist's 21-point win are reminders of the limits of party power in an age of anger toward Washington and frustration with politics. Many Republican Party leaders may be terrified by Trump's ascendance, but have yet to divine a way to stop the billionaire real estate mogul. Clinton may have all the endorsements of her party's bold-faced names, but it is Sanders who is winning over the young people and independents who helped push Barack Obama to the White House.

On Tuesday, establishment-minded Republicans from New Hampshire expressed a mix of frustration and shame that it was their state that delivered Trump's first victory. "I refuse to support him under any circumstance," said Fergus Cullen, a former New Hampshire Republican Party chairman. "Trump would be a disaster." Cullen likened Trump to Pat Buchanan in 1996, the divisive former Nixon aide and conservative commentator who also won the New Hampshire primary. GOP leaders quickly coalesced behind mainstream alternative Bob Dole, the former Republican Senate leader who went on to win the nomination.

It wasn't because they loved Dole, Cullen said, but because they feared Buchanan would embarrass the Republican Party. "The party was able to stop Buchanan 20 years ago," Cullen said. "Today, they're incapable of doing it." For those like Cullen who oppose Trump, it only gets worse. Marco Rubio's underwhelming performance in New Hampshire eliminates the prospect the

Florida senator might emerge as the Republican establishment's favored alternative as the race heads into South Carolina and the Super Tuesday states.

Insiders

Competing for the support of the same group of Republicans, Ohio Gov John Kasich, former Florida Gov Jeb Bush and New Jersey Gov Chris Christie and Rubio won enough votes combined to handily beat Trump. But as they fought among themselves - four political insiders against the lone outsider - Trump won with ease. John Jordan, a California winery owner who runs an outside group backing Rubio, said that "candidate logjam is all going to break in one night", and suggested that night will be March 15, when Florida is among the states to hold their presidential primaries.

"One of them will do better than the other, and it will be impossible for the relative loser to make the case to donors that he should continue," he said, referring to the state's native sons, Bush and Rubio. "Donors will simply move to whoever wins that state, and it will happen nearly instantly." But between now and March 15 is South Carolina, Nevada and the more than a dozen states that vote on March 1 - time that Trump, and Sen Ted Cruz, can use to further their edge. Despite questions about the strength of his ground game, Trump con-

tinues to hold a commanding lead in many preference polls in the South's first primary - and he could get a bump from his New Hampshire success.

Sanders may, too, but he has much further to climb as Democratic race moves ahead. South Carolina and Nevada are more racially diverse states than Iowa and New Hampshire, which should play to Clinton's longstanding strength with minority voters. And unlike Republicans, Democrats give hundreds of party insiders a vote at the national convention to cast as they choose. Among those so-called superdelegates, Clinton already has a commanding 352 delegate edge in the race for the 2,382 needed to win the nomination.

"This is not a two-round boxing match, it's a 12-round boxing match," said Bob Mulholland, a longtime California Democratic strategist. "And I want to remind everybody the last three presidents came second in New Hampshire - Clinton, Bush and Obama." When Trump gets to South Carolina yesterday, he isn't likely to find any GOP leaders in the Palmetto State who are eager to embrace his campaign. The state's senior Republican senator, Lindsey Graham, has said that choosing between Trump and Cruz is like choosing between being "shot or poisoned". South Carolina GOP Chairman Matt Moore lashed out at Trump's plan to temporarily ban Muslims from the US as un-American and unconstitutional.

And South Carolina Gov Nikki Haley called on Republicans to resist the temptation to follow "the siren call of the angriest voices," referring to Trump. Yet even before New Hampshire results were final, Moore declined to condemn Trump when given the opportunity - a clear attempt not to alienate his supporters. "Trump is holding rallies and drawing crowds like we've never seen, which is really impressive," Moore told AP. "Clearly he's brought a lot of new people into the fold. We'll need those people to defeat Hillary Clinton." —AP



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