



Train crash claims at least 23 lives

MUGABE RETURNS HOME DESPITE ASSAULT CLAIM

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Fighters from the Hashed Al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization) paramilitaries advance towards the city of Tal Afar, the main remaining stronghold of the Islamic State group, after the government announced the beginning of an operation to retake it from the militants yesterday. — AFP

IRAQ LAUNCHES BATTLE FOR TAL AFAR

IS BASTION NEAR MOSUL IS A KEY SUPPLY HUB

TAL AFAR AIRBASE: Iraqi forces yesterday pounded the Islamic State group in Tal Afar, one of its last bastions in the country, in a new assault just weeks after ousting IS from second city Mosul. Once a key IS supply hub between Mosul-around 70 kilometres (45 miles) further east-and the Syrian border, Tal Afar is the last major population centre in northern Iraq under jihadist control. Weeks after recapturing Mosul in a major blow to the jihadists, convoys of Iraqi forces around Tal Afar began pounding IS positions from three sides at dawn Sunday.

An AFP correspondent reported mortar fire in the mostly desert area dotted by some farmland, with columns of smoke billowing skywards. Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi announced the offensive in a pre-dawn televised speech. Wearing black military fatigues and standing in front of an Iraqi flag and map, he announced "the start of an operation to free Tal Afar". "I am saying to Daesh that there's no choice other than to leave or be killed," he

said, using an alternative acronym for IS. "We have won all our battles, and Daesh have always lost," he said, telling his troops: "The entire world is with you."

Several hours after the battle began, the federal police said it had retaken the village of Al-Abra Al-Sghira west of Tal Afar. The US-led coalition fighting IS in Iraq and Syria welcomed the start of the offensive and pledged support to Iraqi forces involved. The "operation to liberate Tal Afar is another important fight that must be won to ensure the country and its citizens are finally free of ISIS", the head of the anti-IS coalition Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend said in a statement, using another acronym for IS.

Coalition support

"The coalition is strong, and fully committed to supporting our Iraqi partners until ISIS is defeated and the Iraqi people are free," he said. The coalition would continue to support

Iraqi forces with "equipment, training, intelligence, precision fires and combat advice". IS in June 2014 overran Tal Afar, a Shiite enclave in the predominantly Sunni province of Nineveh, on the road between Mosul and Syria. At the time, its population of around 200,000 was overwhelmingly Turkmen, one of Iraq's largest ethnic minorities.

Tal Afar's Shiites were directly targeted by IS, while some members of its Sunni minority joined the jihadists and went on to form a contingent with a particularly brutal reputation. According to the coalition, between 10,000 and 50,000 civilians remain in and around the city. Un Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq Lisa Grande said Sunday that "more than 30,000 people have already fled" the Tal Afar region and that thousands more were expected to seek to flee. "Families are trekking for 10 to 20 hours in extreme heat to reach mustering points. They are arriving exhausted and dehydrated," Grande said in a statement. "We don't

know how many civilians are still in the areas where fighting is occurring, but we are preparing for thousands more to flee in coming days and weeks." Authorities have accused the approximately 1,000 jihadists in the city of using civilians as human shields during Iraqi and coalition air strikes earlier this week in preparation for the ground assault. Abadi said that Iraq's Hashed Al-Shaabi paramilitary forces would help army, police and counter-terrorism units to retake Tal Afar.

'Victory is near'

The umbrella organization, which is dominated by Iran-backed Shiite militias, has already been fighting to retake other Iraqi cities from IS. "In the early hours, the guns and flags turned towards their targets," said Hashed spokesman Ahmed Al-Assadi. "Victory is near" in Tal Afar, an "Iraqi city taken hostage and humiliated for years by attacks from these barbarians", he said. Even before Abadi's announcement, Iraqi

planes had dropped leaflets to residents in Tal Afar and its surroundings, the Hashed said in a statement. The authorities said they had set up a radio station to keep residents briefed. IS overran large areas north and west of Baghdad in 2014, but Iraqi forces have since regained much of the territory. Once Tal Afar is retaken, Iraqi authorities intend to turn their sights south to jihadist-held Hawijah in the province of Kirkuk, 300 kilometers northwest of Baghdad. Jihadists also still hold areas of Anbar, a western province that borders Syria and faces major security challenges.

As well as in Iraq, IS has suffered major setbacks in Syria, where US-backed fighters have retaken more than half of its de facto Syrian capital Raqa. Russia-supported Syrian troops have almost entirely encircled IS in Syria's central desert region, and the jihadists are also facing twin assaults from the Lebanese army and Shiite movement Hezbollah on the Lebanon-Syrian border. — AFP

FOR TRUMP, COMPLICATED RETURN TO WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump returns to the Oval Office today after a two-week vacation rife with chaos-and the dark clouds plaguing his fledgling presidency show no signs of clearing up. Seven months after taking office the real estate magnate's approval rating has plunged to a record low. And far from striking a more unifying tone, Trump's words and actions continue to feed the sense of a rudderless presidency, lurching from one self-generated crisis to the next.

In perhaps the worst to date, he dealt a crushing blow to his own embattled administration by saying "both sides" were to blame for the bloodshed in Charlottesville, Virginia following a rally by neo-Nazis and white supremacists. Al Gore, a former Democratic vice president, advised Trump to "resign." Mitt Romney, a recent Republican presidential nominee, urged the president to "acknowledge that he was wrong" and "apologize."

Parts of the business world are now openly voicing exasperation with Trump, as members of his own Republican party-long "off the record"-grow more audible and assertive. "The president has not yet been able to demonstrate the stability nor some of the competence that he needs to demonstrate in order to be successful," Republican Senator Bob Corker uttered in one chiseled phrase, capturing the growing senti-



WASHINGTON: This file photo taken on July 12, 2017 shows US President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump departing the White House. — AFP

ment that Trump's unpredictability cannot sustain his four-year presidential term.

With his return to Washington, number one on the president's to-do list is tax reform. Delivering on that campaign promise would mark Trump's first significant legislative achievement since his January swearing-in.

His verbal attacks on top members of Congress have cooled relations between the White House and Capitol Hill, but lawmakers with next year's midterm elections on the mind also fear an open clash. Top Republican law-

makers Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell "recognize Trump for what he is, and there's no love lost," said Larry Sabato, a politics professor at the University of Virginia. "But they have to protect their members on the ballot in November 2018," he told AFP. "They have no choice but to work with Trump, and Trump knows that and enjoys playing with them as a cat would a cornered mouse."

A nation on edge

Friday's ouster of Steve Bannon, Trump's controversial former chief strategist and key campaign ally, from the White House could be seen as a turning point for an administration in turmoil. But the timing was disastrous, capping one of Trump's most catastrophic weeks yet after his series of ambiguous remarks on the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, which ended with the death of a counter-protestor at the hands of a suspected Nazi sympathizer.

Bannon's departure does offer a semblance of clarity concerning the balance of power in the White House, where John Kelly, a retired Marine general, now reigns as the president's chief of staff. But the president's true agenda remains unclear, and Bannon's status change from White House power player to outsider has policy experts asking what will remain in the administration of his extreme anti-establishment views. — AFP

IRAN TO PROTECT NUCLEAR DEAL FROM US: ROUHANI

TEHRAN: Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said yesterday the top foreign policy priority for his new government was to protect the nuclear deal from being torn up by the United States. "The most important job of our foreign minister is first to stand behind the JCPOA, and not to allow the US and other enemies to succeed," Rouhani told parliament, using the technical name for the 2015 deal that eased sanctions in exchange for curbs to Iran's nuclear program.

"Standing up for the JCPOA means standing up to Iran's enemies," he said on the last day of debates over his cabinet selections. Rouhani indicated a week ago that Iran was ready to walk out on the nuclear deal if the United States continued to apply fresh sanctions. US President Donald Trump repeatedly threatened to tear up the deal during his campaign, and it has come under mounting pressure after Tehran carried out missile tests and Washington imposed new sanctions-with each accusing the other of violating the spirit of the agreement. But Rouhani has insisted it remains Iran's preferred way forward, not least to help rebuild the struggling economy and create jobs. "The second responsibility of the foreign ministry... is to get involved in economic activities. It should help attract foreign

investment and technology," Rouhani said, adding that Iran needed \$200 billion in investments for the oil and gas sector alone. Parliament approved 16 of his 17 cabinet picks, rejecting his suggested minister of energy, a reformist named Habibollah Bitaraf. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who was the charismatic face of Iran's nuclear negotiations, retained his position.

So did Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh, who recently struck a billion-dollar deal with French giant Total. Rouhani, a political moderate, worked hard behind the scenes to secure support for his choices, including from the supreme leader and the military. He began his second term earlier this month after winning a resounding victory over a hardline challenger in May, vowing to continue his outreach to the world and improve civil liberties at home.

But he has angered reformists by again failing to appoint a single woman minister, and looks no closer to securing the release of jailed opposition leaders-one of whom, Mehdi Karroubi, briefly went on hunger strike this week to demand a trial after six years under house arrest. Rouhani has yet to appoint a minister of science, research and technology, which conservatives consider to be a sensitive post. — AFP