

## AIR RAID KILLS 8 WOMEN, A CHILD AT YEMENI FUNERAL

**SANAA:** An air strike killed eight women and a child at a funeral reception near the Yemeni capital, witnesses said yesterday, adding to the conflict's mounting civilian death toll. At least 10 other women were wounded in the overnight raid on the district of Arhab, 40 kilometers north of Sanaa, medics sent to the site said. The Iran-backed Houthi Shiite rebels, who seized large parts of the country including the capital in 2014, accused the Saudi-backed Arab coalition supporting the Yemeni government of carrying out the strike.

A coalition statement sent to AFP said the group was "investigating the reports" that civilians were

killed in the raid near Sanaa. Mohammed Al Nakii, whose home medics said was hit, told an AFP correspondent at the site that at the time of the bombing he had been receiving condolences for his brother who died on Sunday. He said his own wife was among those killed. Nakii said he saw four women die immediately at the scene, describing the attack as "barbaric". It was not immediately clear if the house was deliberately targeted. An AFP photographer said the stone building had been totally demolished except for three remaining arches. Bloodstains, clothing and shoes were seen among the rubble. The home had been built on a plot of land with no other

buildings visible in the immediate vicinity.

Yemen's war pits the internationally recognized government of President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi against Houthi insurgents allied with forces loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Saudi-led Arab coalition that intervened in Yemen in March 2015 on the side of Hadi says that it does not target civilians. But it has faced repeated allegations of deliberately striking weddings, funerals, schools and hospitals. In October the coalition admitted to killing 140 people in an air strike on a funeral in Sanaa, blaming the deaths on "incorrect information". It had initially denied involvement. — AFP

## SAUDI ARABIA BUSTS ISLAMIC STATE CELLS

**DUBAI:** Saudi Arabia has broken up four Islamic State cells suspected of providing shelter to wanted militants and recruiting fighters, the Interior Ministry said yesterday, according to Saudi state television. Automatic weapons were seized from the four cells, which comprised 15 Saudis, two Yemenis and a Sudanese man, the ministry's statement said. Security forces also seized more than 2 million riyals (\$530,000) in cash.

Among those helped to hide by the cells, which operated in the capital Riyadh and in eastern and northern regions, was Taye' al-Sayari, one of two suspected Islamist militants killed in a security operation in Riyadh last month. Cell members were (also) active in ... choosing and conducting surveillance of targets and passing information to the organization abroad, promoting the deviant group and recruiting members for the organization and inciting them to fight in areas of struggle, the statement said. Local Saudi affiliates of Islamic State, which is based in Iraq and Syria, have carried out several deadly shootings and bombings in the conservative kingdom, the world's top oil exporter. Many have targeted security personnel and Shiite Muslim mosques. Saudi Arabia says it has arrested hundreds of IS members. The Sunni Muslim Islamist group is bitterly hostile to the Gulf Arab monarchies, which suspect it of trying to stoke Sunni-Shiite sectarian confrontation to destabilize and ultimately topple their governments. —Reuters

## SAUDI FM VOICES OPTIMISM ABOUT RELATIONS WITH US UNDER TRUMP

**BONN:** Saudi Arabia's foreign minister says his country expects to have a productive relationship with the Trump administration and is optimistic that US-Saudi cooperation can overcome challenges in the Middle East. "We look forward to working with the Trump administration on all issues," Jubeir said. "We are very very optimistic about our ability to resolve issues in the region." Jubeir made the comments on Thursday at the top of a meeting with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who is on his first overseas trip as America's top diplomat.

Jubeir did not elaborate but Saudi Arabia has deep concerns about Iran's increasing assertiveness in the region and he and Tillerson were to attend larger meetings on the crises in Yemen and Syria on the sidelines of a gathering of foreign ministers from the Group of 20 world powers in nearby Bonn. In a meeting on Yemen with Jubeir and the foreign ministers of Britain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, Tillerson did not respond to a reporter's question about the Trump administration's proposed travel ban for citizens of seven mainly Muslim nations. Indeed, he made no substantive remarks in the presence of reporters, limiting his comments with to polite chatter about his past business travel experience as CEO of Exxon Mobil.

He will face a blizzard of questions about the US administration's foreign policy from nervous Asian and European allies. And there will be penetrating inquiries from America's watchful rivals like Russia and China, who will be eager to seize on any miscues or gaffes for their own advantage. Tillerson also will be playing defense amid the chaos and turmoil caused by the firing of national security adviser Michael Flynn for misleading officials about his contacts with Russia. — AP



**AL-BAB:** Turkey backed Syrian opposition fighters walk with their weapons in the northeastern outskirts of the Syrian town of Al-Bab, as fighters advance towards the town which is the last stronghold of the Islamic State (IS) group in Syria's Aleppo's province. — AFP

## 24 KILLED IN BOMBING

### SYRIAN REGIME, REBELS ATTEND RUSSIAN-BACKED TALKS

**BEIRUT:** Turkish bombardment of an Islamic State group-held town in Syria has killed 24 civilians, a monitor said yesterday, but Turkey's army said only "terrorists" died in the operation. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the dead in air strikes and shelling on the town of Al-Bab in the last 24 hours included 11 children. Turkey's army, quoted by the state-run Anadolu news agency said it had killed 15 "terrorists" in air strikes, artillery fire and clashes.

Al-Bab is IS's final stronghold in the northern Syrian province of Aleppo and has come under fierce attack by Turkish forces and allied Syrian rebels in recent months. The joint force entered Al-Bab over the weekend, and Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said Tuesday that the town had "largely been taken under control." The Observatory however said Turkish forces had made little progress since entering the town from the west. Turkey began military operations in Syria in August, targeting both IS and Kurdish fighters. Initially its forces advanced quickly, but they stalled around Al-Bab in December.

The town is also a key target for

Syrian government forces, who had been advancing towards from the south. But they have yet to enter Al-Bab, instead focused on clearing IS-held territory in the surrounding countryside in recent days. More than 310,000 people have been killed in Syria since the conflict began in March 2011 with anti-government protests. The war has displaced over half the country's population and drawn in jihadists and international militaries.

#### Russian-backed talks

Meanwhile, representatives from the Syrian government and rebel groups held fresh talks yesterday with key powerbrokers Russia, Turkey and Iran aimed at shoring up a fragile ceasefire. The meeting is the second time key players Moscow, Ankara and Tehran have brought the warring sides together, and comes ahead of a new round of UN-led talks on Syria in Geneva on February 23. The latest round of discussions is expected to focus mostly on bolstering a faltering six-week truce and has been billed as a prelude to broader negotiations in Geneva.

The regional brokers met separately

for talks with regime and rebel delegates on Thursday in the Kazakh capital Astana. It appeared unlikely that the two sides would meet one-on-one, but a plenary session involving all parties was scheduled. A first set of talks on Syria that took place in Astana in January saw the rebels refuse to talk directly to the regime and did not result in any significant breakthrough. Rebel spokesman Yehya Al-Aridi said the opposition was sending a "smaller" delegation than the one it sent for the talks last month.

The rebels, who initially cast doubt over their participation in the latest meeting, will be led by Mohammad Alloush, a leading figure of the Army of Islam (Jaish Al-Islam), he confirmed. The Syrian regime is represented in Astana by its ambassador to the UN, Bashar Al-Jaafari. Moscow has increasingly taken the lead on pushing talks over Syria after its military intervention on the side of leader Bashar al-Assad helped turn the tables in the protracted conflict. While Russia and Iran back the regime with military might, Turkey has supported rebels fighting to oust Assad. — Agencies