

News

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Istanbul helicopter crash leaves 5 dead

ISTANBUL: Five people were killed including a number of Russians when a privately-owned helicopter crashed in Istanbul yesterday, the provincial governor said. Turkish media speculated that foggy weather may have caused the crash. Two pilots and five passengers were on board the Sikorsky S-76 helicopter owned by Turkish conglomerate Eczacıbası, the private Dogan news agency said. "According to initial information, five died," Istanbul Governor Vasip Sahin told reporters. Bulent Eczacıbası, head of the conglomerate, confirmed in televised comments that "four Russian guests" were on board the aircraft as well as a company executive. State media and other reports said the helicopter hit a television tower but Sahin said he could not confirm that, adding investigations were taking place. Turkish media images showed the helicopter in pieces and thick black smoke as rescue teams continued their search in Buyukcekmece, a western district of Istanbul.

2 security officers die, four injured in Sinai

EL-ARISH: Islamic militants detonated a roadside bomb in Egypt's northern Sinai, killing two officers and wounding four in the latest attack in the restive peninsula, the Interior Ministry and security officials said yesterday. The explosion took place when a security patrol came upon a militant planting the device by a road in the town of el-Arish on Thursday evening. Security forces fired and killed the militant while his accomplices fled, setting off the device, according to the statement. The two slain officers were a lieutenant-colonel and a captain, the officials said. A discarded explosives-laden suicide vest was found at the site of the blast, they added, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media. The bombing came a day after suspected militants killed Col Yasser Mohammed El-Hadidi, a senior officer in El-Arish, also using a remote-controlled device.

Catholic Church guard hacked in Bangladesh

DHAKA: A Bangladeshi Christian was severely injured yesterday after being hacked with knives by a group of youths while he was guarding a Catholic church, police said. Gilbert Costa, 65, was guarding the Church at Mathurapur in the northwestern Pabna district, some 175 kilometers from Dhaka, when he was suddenly attacked by young men. "He was hacked randomly by sharp knives and was left severely injured. He was shifted to a hospital where his condition is now stable," local police chief Ahsan Habib said. Habib said police had arrested three young men from the same village where Costa lives in connection with the attack. He said they were investigating the attack but ruled out any Islamist extremist link, saying it appeared to be the result of "personal enmity".

Anger and shock as Guatemala mourns

GUATEMALA CITY: Guatemala recoiled in anger and shock yesterday at the deaths of 35 teenage girls in a fire at a government-run shelter where staff have been accused of sexual abuse and other mistreatment. The toll had climbed steadily from 19 killed in the Wednesday blaze itself, as 16 more girls succumbed in hospital overnight and Thursday to their horrific burns. Nineteen survivors remained hospitalized, most of them in critical condition, according to hospital officials. All the victims were aged between 14 and 17. They were all residents at the Virgin of the Assumption Safe Home for children just to the east of Guatemala City.



MOSUL: A general view shows the leaning minaret of the Great Mosque of Al-Nuri in Mosul yesterday, as Iraqi forces shell enemy positions during an offensive to retake the western parts of the city from the jihadists. — AFP

RESISTANCE WEAKENING AS IRAQ BATTLES ISLAMIC STATE

JIHADISTS FACING SIMULTANEOUS OFFENSIVES

MOSUL: Iraqi Special Forces battled the Islamic State group yesterday in west Mosul, where a commander said jihadist resistance is showing signs of weakening under repeated assaults. The jihadists are also facing simultaneous offensives in Syria by government forces, Turkish-backed rebels and a US-supported alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters, piling more pressure on IS. But the battle for Mosul's Old City—which could see some of the toughest fighting of the operation—has not yet begun, nor has fighting inside the city of Raqa, IS's main bastion in Syria.

Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Service assaulted the Al-Amil Al-Oula neighborhood of west Mosul yesterday, and were battling the jihadists inside it, said Staff Major General Maan Al-Saadi, a CTS commander. Saadi said that following a string of losses since the launch of the government's assault on west Mosul on February 19, IS resistance had diminished. "After we broke the defensive line, they lost many fighters," he said.

"The enemy has begun to collapse. They have lost many of their combat capabilities. Today, the enemy sent (car bombs), but not in the numbers that they sent at the beginning of the battle." In another sign that the jihadists are feeling the squeeze, their chief Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was reported to have abandoned Mosul, leaving local commanders behind to oversee defense of the city. Iraqi forces launched their operation to retake Mosul in October, and recaptured the whole east bank of the Tigris River that runs through it in January.

215,000 displaced

They then set their sights on the smaller but more densely populated west side of the city. More than 215,000 people are currently displaced as a result of the battle for Mosul, according to the International Organization for Migration. Others fled their homes but later returned. Almost a quarter of the displaced—more than 50,000 people—have fled west Mosul since February 25, the IOM said.

But that is only a small fraction of the 750,000 civilians estimated to have stayed on in west Mosul under IS rule. In neighboring Syria, the jihadists lost more ground to a Russian-backed offensive by government forces east of second city Aleppo. Russian warplanes and regime aircraft and artillery

pounded IS positions around Jarrah airbase, held by the jihadists since January 2014. The Russian general staff said yesterday that it had carried out more than 450 air strikes in support of the offensive over the past week, killing more than 600 IS fighters, and destroying 16 infantry fighting vehicles and 41 machinegun-mounted pickups.

Washington too has turned up the heat on IS in Syria, more than doubling its troops numbers in the country with the deployment of 400 reinforcements to back the offensive on Raqa. Some 500 US military advisers were already deployed alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces, an alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters that Washington regards as the force best equipped to drive IS from its stronghold.

Feuding US allies

But the operation is complicated by the implacable opposition to the SDF of US NATO ally Turkey, which is leading a rival offensive against IS in northern Syria. Ankara regards the dominant force within the SDF, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), as a terrorist organization, because of its links to a Kurdish rebel group that has waged a deadly 33-year insurgency in southeastern Turkey. Ankara has said its intervention is aimed as much against the YPG IS, and there have been repeated clashes between Turkish forces and the Kurdish militia. Asked about the standoff at a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday, the top US commander for the region, General Joseph Votel, acknowledged that tensions between Ankara and the Kurds were near breaking point.

Efforts have been made to address the issue at a military level, "and there has to be an effort at the political level to address this," Votel said. Some of the US troop reinforcements being sent to Syria are to be deployed to SDF-held areas near the front line to deter further clashes between Turkish forces and Washington's Kurdish-Arab allies. Relations between Ankara and Moscow, however, are much improved even though they have supported opposite sides in the conflict between the rebels and the regime. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was in Moscow yesterday for a new round of consultations with President Vladimir Putin. — AFP