

## International

## Kurds eye decentralized Syria in talks with govt

## Rebels bargaining power reduced by loss of territory

**QAMISHLI, Syria:** A US-backed Kurdish-led alliance said yesterday that it is seeking a roadmap for a decentralized Syria in talks with the government which opened in Damascus this week. The Syrian Democratic Forces alliance, which controls a swathe of the north and northeast, said it had agreed with the government to form joint committees to discuss the major issues after a first round of talks on Thursday and Friday.

The SDF's political arm, the Syrian Democratic Council, said the aim was to "clear the way for a broader and more comprehensive dialogue" and forge a "roadmap leading to a democratic and decentralized Syria". Before civil war erupted in 2011, Syria had a highly centralized form of government which provided no constitutional recognition for the rights of the Kurds and other minorities. But after government forces pulled out of Kurdish-majority areas in 2012, the Kurds seized the opportunity to set up their own administrations and implement longstanding demands such as Kurdish-language education. The SDF formalized the new administrative arrangements in 2016 with

the creation of autonomous cantons in areas under its control that it regards as a model for a federal system nationwide. The Damascus government has opposed the scope of the self-rule sought by the Kurds but late last year Foreign Minister Walid Muallem said a "form of autonomy" was "negotiable". In late May, President Bashar al-Assad said the government was prepared to open talks with the SDF but stressed that it remained ready to use force if necessary to ensure the return of government troops and state institutions to SDF-held areas.

The SDF did not give a date for any new round of talks. Between them, Assad's Russian-backed government and the US-backed SDF control around 90 percent of Syrian territory following major defeats for the rebels as well as the Islamic State group over the past two years. An umbrella group representing most of the rebels has said it wants to hold talks with the government on reform demands of its own. But its bargaining power has been greatly reduced by its loss of territory in recent months. — AFP



DEIR EZZOR, Syria: Fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces, trained by the US-led coalition, take part in a graduation ceremony in the suburbs of the eastern city of Deir Ezzor. — AFP

“ Roadmap leading to democratic Syria ”

## Foreign populist parties observe controversial Cambodia poll

**PHNOM PENH:** A mishmash of populist and far-right party members from Europe and Asia are serving as election observers in Cambodia's controversial vote today while many western governments are keeping their distance after the main opposition was outlawed. With mainly obscure groups on the ballot the ruling Cambodian People's Party is all but assured of victory, extending prime minister Hun Sen's 33 years in power and solidifying the drift towards a virtual one-party state.

Hun Sen backed a crackdown on the his political opponents last year. Authorities charged one of its leaders with treason while the Supreme Court ordered the dissolution of the main opposition party. The US and EU have declined to send assistance or monitors. But officials have drawn on participation from observers with ties to the UK Independence Party, Italy's Fratelli d'Italia, a pro-government party in authoritarian Belarus and India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, among others.

"We're here for the people, to do this for the people," said Richard Wood, who stood for parliament in 2015 for UKIP. He dismissed questions about whether their presence might legitimize a poll tainted by the lack of choice for those who supported the opposition. "It's not my position to say who's who and what's what," he said. "I'm here for one reason only, to make sure that I observe."

The National Election Committee says

there are 538 international observers, adding to tens of thousands of domestic monitors, many with links to the ruling party. A group of 23 election monitoring groups denounced the lack of independent observers in a statement yesterday. They cited the withdrawal of two prominent local organizations and the participation of some foreign observers in other elections that lacked transparency including in Kazakhstan, Zimbabwe, and Venezuela.

Some observers interviewed by AFP painted a positive picture of the political situation in Cambodia, with little mention of the banned opposition. "All we see is people dancing on the streets of Cambodia," said Vijay Jolly, a member of India's ruling BJP, on Friday morning on the last day of campaigning. "I don't think that anyone has to cast aspersions on the decisions of the Cambodian people."

Luca Romagnoli, a member of the populist right-wing Fratelli d'Italia and a former MP in the European Parliament, said he was observing in a "casual" way and not as a representative of his party. "We were in Azerbaijan a few months ago," he said, referring to an observer mission to that country's election in April, which was also criticized as unfair. Opposition leaders from the now-banned Cambodia National Rescue Party have called for a boycott of the Sunday vote but election authorities have said urging others to not show up is tantamount to a crime. — AFP

## Israel to build new settler homes

**KOBAR, Palestinian Territories:** Israel is to build hundreds of new homes in a settlement in the occupied West Bank where a Palestinian stabbed three Israelis, one fatally, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said Friday. The announcement came as two Palestinians including a child were shot in the head by Israeli soldiers in separate incidents in the southern Gaza Strip, the Hamas-run territory's health ministry said, the latest deaths in the long-running conflict.

"The best answer to terrorism is the expansion of settlements," Lieberman wrote on Twitter, announcing 400 new housing units in the Adam settlement north of Jerusalem a day after the deadly stabbing. Israel rejects the widely held view that settlement expansion is one of the greatest obstacles to peace with the Palestinians, while attacks against Israelis in the West Bank are supported by many Palestinians as pushing back against settlement growth.

The teenage assailant sneaked into Adam Thursday evening by climbing a fence, Israeli media reported. He stabbed three people seemingly at random before being shot dead, the army said, naming the dead Israeli as Yotam Ovadia, 31. Israeli media said he had two young children. The attacker was later identified by official Palestinian media as Mohammed Dar Youssef, 17, from the village of Kobar. The army said Friday it had raided

the village, questioned a number of his family members and suspended their work permits. During the raid Friday morning, clashes broke out between young Palestinians and soldiers firing tear gas. "The rioters hurled large rocks and firebombs and rolled burning tires at (Israeli) troops, who responded with riot dispersal means," an army statement said.

The clashes were over by mid-morning Friday, an AFP photographer said, though the army had established a checkpoint at the edge of the village. Official Palestinian news agency Wafa said three people were arrested. The army added it was "reinforcing the defense" of Adam and other settlements.

## US decries barbaric attack

US President Donald Trump's special envoy Jason Greenblatt called on Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, whose Fatah movement leads the government in the West Bank, to condemn the attack. "Yet another barbaric attack tonight. When will President Abbas and Palestinian leaders condemn the violence?" he wrote on Twitter. There was no response from Abbas' government, which has cut ties with the Trump administration over its stance on Israel.

"Terror must be condemned by all," the United Nations envoy for the Middle East peace process, Nikolay Mladenov, wrote on his Twitter account. "Such horrible acts serve only those who stand in the way of peace." All Israeli settlement construction in the occupied West Bank is considered illegal by the international community. Lone Palestinian attackers have carried out multiple deadly stabbings and car-rammings against Israelis in recent years in the West Bank, Jerusalem and elsewhere.

The West Bank attack came after a period of relative calm. The last such assault in a West Bank settlement was in April, when a Palestinian tried to stab an Israeli with a screwdriver near a petrol station in an industrial area connected to the Maale Adumim settlement east of Jerusalem. In Hamas-ruled Gaza, however, there has been recurrent violence between the Israeli army and Palestinian protesters in which at least 156 Palestinians have been killed in border protests since late March.

## Two Gazans shot dead

One of the Palestinians shot dead on Friday was 12-year-old Majde al Satari, hit during border confrontations east of Rafah, the Gaza health ministry reported, correcting a previous statement which gave his age as 14. Earlier the ministry also reported the killing of Ghazi Abu Mustafa, 43, and said he was shot near the frontier fence, east of Khan Yunis.

The Israeli military did not comment directly on the deaths but said about 7,000 Palestinian "rioters" threw rocks and rolled burning tyres at soldiers, and at the fence itself, at several locations along the border. "Troops are responding with riot dispersal means and firing in accordance with the rules of engagement," an English-language statement said, without elaborating.

Hamas pledged revenge after Israeli air and artillery strikes on the coastal enclave killed a number of its members in recent weeks. In a statement late Thursday, it praised the "courageous operation" in the Adam settlement without claiming responsibility for it. "The West Bank is ready and able to avenge the blood of the martyrs." — AFP

## Gaza teen dies of wounds from Israeli border fire

**GAZA CITY:** A Gaza teenager died of his wounds yesterday after being shot by Israeli troops during protests along the border, the health ministry in the Hamas-run Palestinian territory said. A ministry statement identified him as Mohmen al-Hams, 17, and said he was shot in the chest during protests near the southern Gaza town of Rafah on Friday. There has been persistent violence between the Israeli army and Palestinian protesters along the Gaza-Israel border since late March in which at least 157 Palestinians have been killed.

Troops shot dead two Palestinians during Friday's protests. The Gaza health ministry said that one of them was a 12-year-old boy, shot east of Rafah. It also reported the killing of Ghazi Abu Mustafa 43, and said he was shot in head by Israeli soldiers east of the southern city of Khan Yunis. The Israeli military did not comment directly on the deaths but said about 7,000 Palestinian "rioters" threw rocks and rolled burning tires at soldiers, and at the fence itself, at several locations along the border.

"Troops are responding with riot dispersal means and firing in accordance with the rules of engagement," an English-language statement said Friday evening, without elaborating. Hamas has pledged revenge after Israeli air and artillery



GAZA CITY: Relatives of 17-year-old Palestinian Momen al-Hams mourn over his body during his funeral in the Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip. — AFP

strikes on the coastal enclave killed a number of its members in recent weeks. Israel and Hamas have fought three wars since 2008.

A week ago a Palestinian gunman shot and killed an Israeli soldier at the border, sparking a fierce wave of Israeli bombing that ratcheted up fears of a new conflict. A degree of calm was restored until Wednesday when Israel said its

troops came under fire again, with one soldier wounded. It hit back with artillery fire which killed three Palestinians at a Hamas military base, east of Gaza City. In response, the Hamas military wing warned that "the enemy shall pay a high price in blood for the crime which it commits daily against the rights of our people and our fighters". — AFP

## Fraud risk looms over Zimbabwe's post-Mugabe election

**HARARE:** Zimbabwe goes to the polls tomorrow in its first election since authoritarian leader Robert Mugabe was ousted last year, with allegations mounting of voter fraud and predictions of a disputed result. President Emmerson Mnangagwa, Mugabe's former ally in the ruling ZANU-PF party, faces opposition leader Nelson Chamisa of the MDC (Movement for Democratic Change) in a landmark vote for the southern African nation.

The two rivals held large final rallies in Harare yesterday in a last push to attract voters, with both predicting certain victory. Zimbabwe's military generals shocked the world in November when they seized control and ushered Mnangagwa to power, ending Mugabe's 37-year reign in a few short days. Mnangagwa, 75, who promises a fresh start for the country, is the front-runner with the advantage of covert mili-

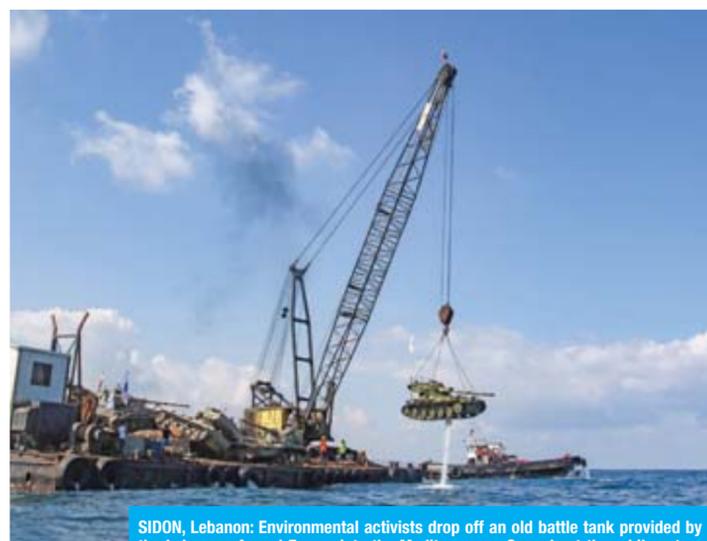
election offices in Turkey and Jordan were also dismissed. "The decision to sack the officials was approved by the prime minister after they committed violations, manipulation and financial corruption," said Judge Laith Jabr.

The announcement comes the day after Iraq's top Shi'ite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani urged for government action to fight corruption amid further protests sweeping the southern provinces - Iraq's Shi'ite heartland - over the lack of proper government services and jobs.

tary support, a loyal state media and a ruling party that controls government resources.

But Chamisa, 40, who has performed strongly on the campaign trail, hopes to tap into a young population that could vote for change as ZANU-PF has ruled since the country's independence from British colonial rule in 1980. Elections under Mugabe were marred by fraud and violence, and this year's campaign has been dominated by accusations that the vote will be rigged.

The MDC has raised allegations of a flawed electoral roll, ballot paper malpractice, voter intimidation, bias in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and free food handed out by the ruling party. — AFP



SIDON, Lebanon: Environmental activists drop off an old battle tank provided by the Lebanese Armed Forces into the Mediterranean Sea, about three kilometers off the coast of the southern Lebanese port city of Sidon. — AFP

## Lebanon sinks old tanks to create dive park

**SIDON, Lebanon:** Lebanese environmentalists yesterday sank 10 old tanks and armored vehicles to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea in a novel attempt to attract divers and create new habitats for marine life. Three kilometers off the coast of the city of Sidon, a huge crane on the back of a ship maneuvered the military hardware into place over the water before dropping them down to the seabed one after the other.

The initiative to create an "underwater

park" is spearheaded by a local group, Friends of the coast of Sidon, which got the Lebanese army to hand over some of its old vehicles for the project. "This will be a paradise for divers and a place where we can develop underwater life," said NGO representative Kamel Kozbar, who hopes seaweed will soon cover the vehicles. Lebanon boasts some 200 kilometers of Mediterranean coast but beaches have not been spared from a waste and garbage crisis that has plagued Lebanon for years. In Sidon, a mountain of smelly trash has scarred the shoreline, despite the presence of a new waste management facility. In a region fraught with tensions the latest project also has some political undertones. The tanks have been placed with their turrets facing towards Lebanon's southern foe Israel "out of solidarity for the Palestinian people", Kozbar said. — AFP

## Iraq sacks five local election officials

**BAGHDAD:** Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi sacked five local election officials yesterday on charges of corruption during the May 12 parliamentary election, a spokesman

for the Independent High Elections Commission (IHEC) said. The move comes as Iraq conducts a manual recount of the ballots - a move likely to speed up the ratification of the final result and the formation of a new government. Abadi had appointed a special committee to investigate claims of vote-rigging in several regions, and on Saturday he approved its recommendation to dismiss local election chiefs in Kirkuk, Anbar and Salahuddin, Judge Laith Jabr Hamza said in a statement. Those in charge of overseas

election offices in Turkey and Jordan were also dismissed. "The decision to sack the officials was approved by the prime minister after they committed violations, manipulation and financial corruption," said Judge Laith Jabr.

The announcement comes the day after Iraq's top Shi'ite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani urged for government action to fight corruption amid further protests sweeping the southern provinces - Iraq's Shi'ite heartland - over the lack of proper government services and jobs.

Vote-rigging allegations centered on the city of Kirkuk, although there have been reports of irregularities in multiple provinces. Opposition politicians have claimed that the tabulation system in electronic voting machines that were used for the first time during the election were not secure enough from tampering. In response to the claims, the outgoing parliament in June ordered a nationwide manual recount of the votes. The law also called for IHEC's leadership to be replaced by a panel of judges. — Reuters