

International

# Syrian army steps up attacks in southwest, Jordan concerned

## Both sides committed war crimes during Ghouta siege: UN

**AMMAN:** The Syrian army stepped up shelling of opposition-held parts of the southwest as it mobilizes for a campaign to regain the area bordering Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, opposition sources said. Violence erupted at the frontline town of Kafr Shams, near the Syrian-held Golan Heights, and further east in the town of Busra Al Harir, which was struck by dozens of mortars from nearby army positions, the sources said. Syrian state media said militants had escalated attacks on civilians in the area which is part of a "de-escalation" zone agreed by the United States and Russia last year with the aim of containing the conflict in the southwest.

An offensive in the southwest would risk a major escalation of the seven-year-old war. The area is of strategic importance to Israel, which is deeply alarmed by Iranian influence in Syria. Washington has warned it will take "firm and appropriate measures" in response to violations of the "de-escalation" deal. US-allied Jordan is increasingly worried about a spillover of violence and has been engaged in stepped up diplomatic efforts to preserve the de-escalation zone which it also helped to broker last year, a Jordanian source said.

Rebels say Iranian-backed fighters allied to President Bashar Al-Assad have boosted their numbers in the area, though a commander in the regional alliance fighting in support of Assad denied Tehran-aligned forces had a big presence there. Elite government troops known as the "Tiger" force, which have spearheaded a campaign that recaptured the Eastern Ghouta region near Damascus, have also been mobilized for the attack. The pro-Damascus newspaper al-Watan said there were "growing indications about preparations for the start of a wide military operation to liberate" the south.

**Hit and run attacks**  
Assad said earlier this month the government, at Russia's suggestion, was seeking to strike a deal in the southwest similar to agreements that have restored its control of other areas through withdrawals of rebel forces. But he also said there had been no results yet and blamed "Israeli and American interference". He said the territory would be recovered by force if necessary. One major objective for the government is recapturing the border crossing with Jordan that served before the conflict as a vital trade gateway for goods moving across the region. Its closure has hit both the Syrian and Jordanian economies hard.

**Army and rebels on war footing**  
Rebels say elite army troops backed by Iranian-backed local militias have been escalating hit and run attacks on their posts in a so-called "Triangle of Death", which connects southern Damascus countryside with Deraa and Quneitra provinces. A rebel commander said a bomb injured several fighters in Naba Al Sakr town, saying it was one of a growing number of such attacks blamed on Iranian-backed militias in the area. "They are moving more reinforcements and there have been several infiltration attempts which we have so far repelled," said Abu Ayham, a rebel commander in the Salah al Din brigades operating in Quneitra.

**Crime against humanity**  
Residents and opposition sources say that in the few days they saw larger movements of troops with armored vehicles and tanks along two main highways that cut through rebel areas. The last two days have seen wider skirmishes, an air strike and rebel ambushes along two main highways being used by the army to reinforce the



**IDLIB:** Eight year-old Maya Mohammad Ali Merhi walks using prosthetic legs made by her father from tin cans in a camp for displaced people, in the northern Syrian province of Idlib. Maya and her father were both born without lower limbs. Unable to afford real prosthetic limbs, her father made her a pair out of tin cans filled with cotton and scrap pieces of cloth. —AFP

city of Deraa, which is split into areas controlled separately by the government and rebels. The army and rebels have also been exchanging gun fire and shelling in a frontline in Deraa city. Employees and hospital staff in two government hospitals in Sweida and Deraa provinces have also been put on high alert, according to a resident contacted by phone from Deraa city.

UN investigators said yesterday that Syrian govern-

ment troops and affiliated forces committed war crimes and a crime against humanity in their long siege of eastern Ghouta through heavy bombardment and "deliberately starving" 265,000 people. About 20,000 rebel fighters entrenched in the besieged area, some belonging to "terrorist groups", shelled the nearby capital of Damascus in attacks that killed and maimed, amounting to war crimes, they said. —Agencies

## Leaving war behind, refugees embrace new life in Britain

**LONDON:** Four-year-old Syrian refugee Julie Al-Masri shrieked with laughter as she ran towards her father, clutching a unicorn-shaped handbag which her mother said symbolized the freedom of their new life in Britain, safe from the trauma of war. The family of four is one of eight Syrian refugee households who have been resettled in Kingston upon Thames in southwest London, as part of a government scheme supported by the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR). "The war destroyed everything. It was a hard life. There was no work, no food, no water," said 30-year-old Omar Al-Masri, who arrived in Britain in November, having spent five years waiting for resettlement in Lebanon after their Syrian home was bombed.

The quiet London neighborhood, where only the sounds are of passing cars, is starkly different from their hometown of Deraa, which has witnessed some of the fiercest fighting in Syria's seven-year civil war. "We were very, very happy when we arrived in the UK. I can't explain it. We were happy that we will start a

new life with our daughters," Al-Masri said. "The UK is our country now." The British government, one of the largest donors to the Syrian crisis, says it has resettled more than 7,000 Syrian refugees between 2014 and 2017, focusing on the most vulnerable, with half of them children.

Local councils, charities and communities have been at the forefront of efforts to help refugees adjust to their new lives, in the face of an arduous asylum process which can take years. In addition, limited job opportunities and a shortage of homes have pushed many into homelessness, which can spiral into labor abuses and sexual exploitation, aid groups say. The government has come under fire for denying basic rights to the so-called "Windrush generation" of Caribbean migrants invited to Britain after World War Two to plug labor shortages.

**Community spirit**  
Kingston is likely to receive another two or three families by early 2019 and aims to resettle 50 people by 2020, said Christine Murphy, local coordinator for the charity Refugee Action, which provides support during their first year. "We have a moral obligation to do our bit to help the most vulnerable in society, both on our doorstep and from further afield," said local councilor Jon Tolley. "We are determined to show that refugees are welcome here and not only to give to and help them, but to recognize the contribution they make to our society, making us more compassionate, open



**LONDON:** Syrian refugee Omar Al-Masri, who has been resettled to Britain with his family under a government scheme supported by the UN Refugee Agency, is pictured with his daughters in their new home in Kingston Upon Thames. —Reuters

and understanding." Close to 120,000 refugees live in Britain, according to UNHCR. They are among the lucky few as only about 1 percent of refugees globally are resettled abroad. A key challenge is securing affordable housing for refugees, which is paid for by the local council. Tight budgets mean that Kingston relies on community spirit, with locals

renting out their homes below market rates. "I've been following the developments in Syria and I'm absolutely heartbroken by the scale of the tragedy," said Tony Clemson, who has let out his two-bedroom apartment to a Syrian refugee family. "I wanted to get involved and help ... If the scheme is going to work, they need to have somewhere to live." —Reuters

## Stop exploiting Africa, Pope tells the Europeans

**VATICAN CITY:** Europe should stop exploiting Africa and invest in ways that benefit the continent more, including by sharing mineral wealth more equitably, Pope Francis said. "We must invest in Africa, but invest in an orderly way and create employment, not go there to exploit it," he told Reuters in a wide-ranging interview, while discussing the migration of Africans to Europe. "When a country grants independence to an African country it is from the ground up - but the subsoil is not independent. And then people (outside Africa) complain about hungry Africans coming here. There are injustices there!"

Touching on the reasons for hunger in Africa, the pope said that "in our collective unconscious there is something inside us that says Africa must be

exploited." His comments follow moves in some African countries to win more generous terms from international mining companies. In Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, the government has enacted a new mining code that is designed to earn extra money for the state from copper, cobalt and gold produced there.

Mining companies say the government should reconsider the law in order to respect exemptions that were granted by its predecessor. The pope said Europe needed to focus on education and investment in Africa if it wanted to stem the flow of migrants, which is also an increasingly divisive issue in Italy, where the new governing coalition is taking a hard line. "And there's a problem," he added. "We send people back to those who have sent them here. They end up in the jails of traffickers." The pope then showed Reuters graphic photographs that he said showed victims of human trafficking who had been tortured and killed in an unspecified location in Africa. —Reuters



**VATICAN CITY:** Pope Francis waves to faithful upon his arrival in St Peter's square at the Vatican for his weekly general audience yesterday. —AFP

## War-ravaged South Sudan at a glance

**JUBA:** South Sudan, the world's newest country, has been mired in a devastating civil war for more than four years, with tens of thousands of people killed, nearly four million displaced and its economy in ruins. War broke out when President Salva Kiir accused his former deputy Riek Machar of plotting a coup just two years after the country gained independence from Sudan in 2011. With the two men to meet yesterday in the latest international effort to stop the fighting, here is some background.

**World's youngest state**  
Before independence, the south of Sudan was ravaged by two civil wars (1956-1972 and 1983-2005) that pitted mainly Christian and animist insurgents in the south against Khartoum's Arab-dominated government. Millions died in the conflicts. A peace accord signed in 2005 by the government and southern rebels exempted the south from Islamic Sharia law and granted it six years of self-rule ahead of a referendum on independence. The 2011 referendum went nearly 99 percent in favor of secession from the north and on July 9 that year, South Sudan proclaimed its independence. Kiir was sworn in as the country's first president with Machar as his deputy. The international community-led by the United States, China, Russia and the European Union, as well as Sudan-quickly recognised the new African state.

**Former allies turn enemies**  
Kiir and Machar were on the same side in the push for independence from Khartoum, but were separated by ethnic and political rivalries. Tensions spiked when Machar from the country's second-largest ethnic group, the Nuer was fired as vice president in 2013. His sacking came after Kiir, from the majority Dinka people, accused him of a failed coup. Machar rejected the charge, in turn accusing the president of purging political rivals. By December 2013 the new country had descended into civil war, including fighting within the national army, undermined by differences fuelled by the rivalry between Kiir and Machar. The conflict spread to several states and was characterized by ethnic massacres, attacks on civilians, widespread rape, the recruitment of child soldiers and other forms of brutality and human rights violations. —AFP

## Scenarios for Turkey's polls

**ISTANBUL:** The outcome is far from certain in Turkey's elections Sunday, seen as the biggest test for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the ballot box in his one-and-a-half decades in power. Parliamentary and presidential polls are being held on the same day for the first time in Turkey's history, under a new constitution that also grants the incoming president greater powers. The key focus will be on whether Erdogan can win the presidency in the first round and if his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) keeps its majority in parliament. With a run-off scheduled for July 8 if no candidate wins over 50 percent of the vote, several scenarios are possible—each of which will have a profound impact on modern Turkey.

**Erdogan clean sweep**  
**SCENARIO:** Erdogan wins the elections in the first round, keeps parliament majority. This is the only win-win outcome for the leader and what he had in mind when he in April called the snap elections more than a year ahead of their scheduled date, to catch the opposition off guard. But while Erdogan appeared confident of a knockout victory, that probability has receded with the economy spluttering and the opposition finding momentum. "Erdogan called snap elections expecting to solidify his rule under new constitutional powers, (yet) does not have majority support from Turkish voters," said analysts at the Center for American Progress.

**Run-off battle**  
**SCENARIO:** The opposition forces a July 8 run-off. While Erdogan appears certain to reap the most votes on June 24, it is far from inevitable he will win the 50 percent plus one vote needed for a first-round victory. His main rival, Muharrem Ince of the Republican People's Party (CHP), has run a surprisingly strong campaign and with the help of other opposition candidates has a realistic chance of forcing the second round. Analysts say that Erdogan would still be the favorite in a run-off. But the outcome of the parliamentary elections could influence voting on July 8 and, even if he won, Erdogan could enter his new term weakened. If the AKP loses its parliamentary majority on June 24, Erdogan would face a presidential run-off "with his aura of invincibility and traditional mastery over Turkish politics severely weakened," said Kemal Kirisci of the Brookings Institution.

**Pyrrhic victory**  
**SCENARIO:** Erdogan wins presidency, AKP loses control of parliament. This scenario could throw Turkish politics into a period of profound uncertainty, rattle confidence in the economy and possibly prompt new elections. "The most likely outcome, as of today, is an Erdogan victory and a contested parliament," said Aaron Stein, resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council. Ironically, changes spearheaded by the AKP have allowed the CHP to make a broad alliance for the election with three other parties that could boost opposition presence in parliament.

Much will depend on the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) - which is not in an alliance but staunchly opposes Erdogan-making the 10-percent threshold needed to win seats. The AKP lost its overall majority once before, in June 2015 polls. Erdogan simply called repeat elections, making clear he had no time for coalitions. But in theory, he would have to stand for president again in order to re-run the legislative polls.

**End of Erdogan era**  
**SCENARIO:** Ince wins the presidency in run-off, opposition controls parliament. Ince is the clear favourite to come second in the first round, allowing his parliamentary allies to rally round him in a run-off and possibly the HDP as well. The opposition alliance winning parliamentary control could create an unstoppable momentum that would help Ince in round two of the presidential elections. "If this comes to pass, a massive political change is likely to occur on several fronts," said Marc Pierini, visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe. —AFP