

## International

# US, Russian military leaders meet in Switzerland on Syria

## UN calls for 'de-escalation' in Syria's northwest

**WASHINGTON:** The top US and Russian military chiefs met Wednesday in Switzerland for talks on Syria, where both countries are militarily engaged and maintain regular contact to avoid accidental confrontations. General Mark Milley, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, and his Russian counterpart, General Valery Gerasimov, met in Bern, a spokeswoman for Milley said.

They discussed "Syria, strategic stability and a variety of other operational and strategic issues to enhance deconfliction, improve understanding and reduce risk," Colonel DeDe Halfhill said. "Both leaders recognize the importance of maintaining regular communication to avoid miscalculation and to promote transparency," she said.

The Russian defense ministry issued a virtually identical statement, adding: "The meeting was constructive." It was Gerasimov's first meeting with Milley, who became chairman in September. The two men have spoken by phone but never before in person. Milley's predecessor, General Joe Dunford, met several times with Gerasimov, who is chief of the Russian general staff, most recently in March in Vienna. Despite the conflict in Syria and tensions between their two countries, the US and Russian military have kept open a permanent channel of communication between their leaders.

The United Nations on Wednesday con-

demned a deadly uptick in violence in Syria's last opposition bastion. Najat Rochdi, senior humanitarian adviser to the UN's Syria envoy, called for "immediate de-escalation" a day after a war monitor reported that regime air strikes and artillery fire had killed 23 civilians.

Rochdi condemned "the recent intensification of hostilities in northwest Syria, in particular aerial bombardments and the reported use of barrel bombs, killing tens of civilians including women and children," her office said in a statement. The jihadist-dominated region of Idlib is supposed to be protected by a months-old ceasefire deal to prevent a broad regime offensive, but bombardment has continued. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Tuesday about 30 were wounded, including some seriously.

An AFP correspondent said strikes continued in the area on Wednesday, and the Observatory reported that four civilians had been killed by bombardment on the area by the regime and its Russian ally.

"Despite repeated assurances that warring parties only strike legitimate military targets, attacks on health and education facilities continue," Rochdi's statement said. The Idlib region, which is home to some three million people including many displaced by Syria's civil war, is controlled by the country's former Al-Qaeda affiliate. The Damascus regime has repeatedly vowed to take back control of it.



Members of the Syrian Civil Defence, also known as the White Helmets, rescue an injured girl from the rubble of a building following a reported Russian air strike in the village of Tal Mardikh in Syria's northwestern Idlib province yesterday. — AFP

Pro-government forces launched a blistering offensive against the region in April, killing about 1,000 civilians and displacing more than 400,000 people from their homes.

Moscow announced a ceasefire in late Au-

gust, but strikes and skirmishes have persisted.

Syria's war has killed over 370,000 people and displaced millions from their homes since beginning in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-government protests. — AFP

## Christians seek seasonal solace in war-torn Libya

**TRIPOLI:** In the Libyan capital Tripoli, where war casts a long shadow over everyday life, a church offers something of a sanctuary for Christian migrants like Nigerian engineer Jonathan Joshua. "I find life very difficult but here at the church... I forget I am in Libya, if only for a few hours", he told AFP in the run-up to Christmas at Saint Francis Catholic Church in Tripoli. Arriving in the country four years ago, the 30-year-old lives and works in the capital's eastern suburbs.

"If the situation allows", he makes the trip to the church in the city centre to attend mass, making himself useful as an usher. During Advent, the church is a place of comfort and hope—this year, more than ever.

In early April, strongman Khalifa Haftar—who has long held sway in eastern Libya—launched a military offensive against the capital, seat of the UN recognized Government of National Accord. Deadly fighting in Tripoli's southern reaches has hit civilians, and left migrants more vulnerable than ever. A July 3 air strike killed 53 people at a detention center for migrants in the eastern suburb of Tajoura.

### Laughter and tears

On Friday afternoons—a weekend in Libya—the calm pervading outside the church doors contrasts against incessant comings and goings inside. Christians, all foreigners, take the opportunity to flock to their place of worship. Sporting a white jacket and black trousers, Jonathan confers with fellow ushers for a candlelight mass as Christmas approaches.

Various languages mingle in the festive air, along with the laughter and tears of children impatient for the start of the ceremony. Six young girls flap the wings of their costumes while slipping between



TRIPOLI: Catholic Christians attend Christmas celebrations at the Saint Francis Catholic Church in the Dahra district of the Libyan capital Tripoli. — AFP

the church pews, but are quickly brought back in line by Jonathan, anxious to ensure a degree of order. "Attendance is in line with normal, at least so far", said Bishop George Bugeja, 57.

"We have kept the celebrations the same as usual," he said. The biggest Christian communities in Tripoli by nationality are from the Philippines, India and Pakistan, working in the health and construction sectors in particular. Many others are from sub-Saharan Africa and particularly vulnerable due to a lack of immigration paperwork. There has been a steady stream of Filipinos going home because of the deteriorating security situation, along with Nigerians, said Bugeja. There was once a very large Filipino community "but now we are far fewer", said 62-year-old Erlinda, a nurse who has lived in Libya for 37 years. She arrived at the age of 25, married a Libyan and bore four children, all of whom are now themselves married. "Our life is here. My husband, my children and their families live and work in Libya". — AFP

## Erdogan says 50,000 Syrians fleeing Idlib to Turkey

**ANKARA:** Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said yesterday that 50,000 people were fleeing Syria's northwestern region of Idlib to Turkey, and slammed Muslim nations for not supporting his plans to resettle refugees in other parts of north Syria. Turkey currently hosts some 3.7 million Syrian refugees, the largest refugee population in the world, and fears another influx from the Idlib region, where up to 3 million Syrians live in the last significant insurgent-held swathe of territory. Syrian and Russian forces carry out regular air strikes against targets in Idlib, which President Bashar al-Assad has vowed to recapture, pushing more people towards the Turkish border.

"Look, 50,000 people are once again coming from Idlib to our lands," Erdogan told a meeting of Muslim leaders in Malaysia. "We already have 4 million people, and now another 50,000 are coming and this may increase." He gave no details and did not say whether the Syrians had actually crossed into Turkey, which has built a wall along its 911 km (570 mile) southern border since the outbreak of Syria's eight-year conflict. Erdogan is seeking international support for plans to settle 1 million Syrians in part of northeast Syria which Turkish forces and their Syrian rebel allies seized from the Kurdish YPG militia in a cross-border incursion in October. Ankara has received little public backing for its plans and Erdogan said that world powers, including Muslim nations, were more concerned about sending arms to Syria than supporting a Turkish "safe zone". — Reuters