

International

French guns on Iraq border aim to pin down IS diehards

Howitzer-guns deployed in Euphrates Valley desert

AL-QAIM: French howitzer-guns deployed in the Euphrates Valley desert just inside Iraq stand ready to pour fury on Islamic State group diehards in their last holdout across the border in Syria. Warplanes flash through the sky, followed seconds later by explosions on the Syrian side that send up a mushroom cloud. "We're less than 10 kilometers (six miles) from the frontline here," points out Colonel Francois-Regis Legrier.

He is the commander of Task Force Wagram, a French artillery group within the US-led military coalition that backs up Iraqi soldiers and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) against the jihadists. Dozens of 155-mm shells are lined up ready to be loaded onto three green-and-black Caesar gun-howitzers with a range of 40 kilometers (25 miles).

The SDF, a coalition of Kurdish and Arab fighters, announced a final push to retake the jihadist pocket in and around the village of Baghouz near the Iraqi border late Saturday, after a pause of more than a week to allow civilians to flee. "The end is near," is the message from France's Defense Minister Florence Parly who visited the Task Force Wagram site in Al-Qaim from Baghdad aboard an American V-22 Osprey military aircraft. "The terrorists are leaderless, without communications, in disarray, on the verge of collapse. So let's finish off this

fight," the minister tells a group of some 40 French soldiers manning the outpost alongside 100 US troops. Legrier, whose 68th regiment took part in the 2016 recapture from IS of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, says

Troops pound IS fighters in Syria

there are "a few hundred fighters left in Baghouz, not more". "Mosul, that was a nine-month battle and 10,000 shells. On this front, it's been four months and we're at 3,500 rounds," he says. He points to challenges caused by frequent sandstorms and heavy rains. Weather conditions have often grounded warplanes but artillery has been largely unaffected. "At the end of last year, the pace was intense, we didn't

get much sleep," explains Valentin, a 27-year-old lieutenant on his maiden overseas deployment.

'Not completely over'

The lieutenant and his comrades are being rotated out next week, probably for the last time, as the mission winds down. "The territorial caliphate, which has not yet been wiped out, is being defeated," Parly had said in the Iraqi capital last week, referring to the swathes of territory straddling Syria and Iraq seized by a rampant IS in 2014.

"We must continue the fight against IS and terrorism in the region because IS is probably in the process of reorganizing underground and spreading out," she said on her visit. Since the launch of its Al-Qaim operations,



AL-QAIM: A picture taken near Al-Qaim, a few kilometers away from the last scrap of territory held by IS in eastern Syria, shows wheeled 155 mm gun-howitzer CAESAR system (trucks equipped with an artillery system) used by French soldiers engaged in the "Operation Chammal." — AFP

codenamed Chammal, French forces have fired off more than 18,000 shells and conducted 1,500 air strikes in support of anti-IS fighters on the ground. "Our forces have been playing their part in full," Parly says in the

desert. But "the fight is not completely over," she warns. "What we want to avoid at all costs is for Daesh (IS) to regroup in clandestine forms, threaten the region, disrupt its stabilization, and also menace our countries." — AFP

Caught in Syria, foreign jihadist suspects may face trial in Iraq

BAGHDAD: Their home countries don't want them and holding trials in Syria isn't an option: now suspected foreign jihadists could end up facing tough justice over the border in Iraq. Both countries have suffered for years at the hands of the Islamic State group and Iraqi courts have already meted out hefty sentences to hundreds of foreigners detained on its soil, often after lightning-quick trials.

As the final shred of the once-sprawling jihadist "caliphate" crumbles in eastern Syria, Kurdish-led forces backed by the US have captured hundreds more diehard foreign fighters. The American military—which spearheads an international coalition fighting IS—has in the past shown itself willing to hand those captured in Syria to the authorities in Iraq. In August AFP attended the Baghdad trial of 58-year-old French citizen Lahcene Gueboudj, who said he had been spirited from Syria to Iraq by US troops.

Bekis Wille of Human Rights Watch said the organization knows of at least five instances in which US forces handed foreign detainees over to Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service. They include Australian and Lebanese citizens transported out of Kurdish-controlled areas, at least one of whom was eventually sentenced to death in Iraq. Iraqi justice can be harsh and its courts have doled out death or life sentences to hundreds of foreigners accused of being IS members, including some 100 women. Others who come from Syria can expect similar treatment. "They are at risk of torture and unfair trials in Iraq," Wille warned.

'Secret deal'

The fate of foreign fighters in Syria has come into sharper focus since President Donald Trump's announcement in December that the US will withdraw

its troops from the war-torn country. Washington has stepped up pressure on its reluctant allies to bring home hundreds of jihadists, but the issue is politically sensitive in countries like Britain and France. Governments have been grappling for weeks with the question of foreign fighters detained by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, who have warned that they may not be able to guard their jails once US troops leave. France, hit by repeated deadly IS attacks, has so far opposed returning jihadists. But since Trump's announcement, Paris has said it is studying "all options".

On a visit to Iraq this week, French Defense Minister Florence Parly warned of the need "to avoid some jihadists ending up in the wild and dispersing". Hisham al-Hashimi, a researcher on jihadist movements, told AFP that a deal appears to have been struck with Iraq "at the very highest level and in secret" to tackle the issue. Such a pact allows foreign fighters' countries of origin to avoid politically fraught repatriations; in exchange, Iraq will receive "ultra modern arms and crucial military equipment", Hashimi said. "Iraq can put anyone on trial who passed through its territory, even if they didn't fight there and just headed to Syria," he said.

'Not settling problem'

But while such a deal might solve a headache for politicians, it has raised serious concerns among relatives and representatives of those detained. French lawyer Vincent Brengarth, who is handling the cases of some of those detained, questioned "how it could be justified that Iraqi courts would have jurisdiction" over crimes committed in Syria. French officials say Kurdish forces in Syria are currently detaining some 60 adult French citizens. Veronique Roy, a member of a group of around 70 French families with relatives who went to IS territory, said it would be "tragic" if captives were handed over to Baghdad.

Iraqi law means that anyone found guilty of joining a "terrorist group" can face the death penalty and its justice system has been accused of providing scant chance for a fair trial. A number of foreign fighters have already been sentenced to death in Iraq, although three



AL-QAIM: A gunner mans a machine gun at the back of a US Marine Corps V-22 Osprey flying near a French artillery base near Al-Qaim in Iraq's western Anbar province opposite Syria's Deir Ezzor region. — AFP

French jihadists tried so far have been handed life terms that equate to 20 years in prison. The families of those in Syria insist that their home countries

should take responsibility. "We are pushing the problem back but not settling it," said Roy. "France should not subcontract this out." — AFP

Afghanistan president offers Taliban office

KABUL: Afghan President Ashraf Ghani yesterday offered the Taliban the possibility of opening an office in Afghanistan but the proposal was swiftly spurned by the group that is determined to keep his government out of accelerating peace talks. Ghani has expressed alarm at the Taliban shutting his administration out of negotiations with the United States as well as recent Moscow talks with Afghan opposition politicians, and repeated earlier offers to give the group a secure official address to aid any future diplomacy between the two sides.

"If the Taliban want an office, I will give it to them in Kabul, Nangarhar or Kandahar by tomorrow," Ghani said while visiting the province of Nangarhar, a hotbed of insurgent violence on the border with Pakistan. "We will bring a lasting and honorable peace to the country," he said. Nangarhar is a stronghold of the Taliban, the hardline Islamist movement that now controls or contests districts across nearly half the country, more than 17 years since they were toppled from power.

Taliban officials in Moscow last week stressed the importance of a formal office among a string of demands that included the removal of Western sanctions and travel bans on Taliban members, prisoner releases and an end to "propaganda" against the group. Taliban spokesman Sohail Shahin later told Reuters that the focus was international recognition of their existing site in Doha, Qatar. Yesterday he said Ghani was trying to harm the peace efforts with his latest offer.

"Our demand about having an official political office is clear, we want that our office in Doha is recognized by the international community and the United Nations," Shahin said. "By this, Ghani is try-

ing to change the topic and harm the on-going peace efforts." Taliban negotiators are due to meet US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad for another round of talks in Qatar on Feb 25. The talks are expected to centre around a ceasefire to end America's longest war and the withdrawal of foreign troops. Some 14,000 US troops are based in Afghanistan as part of a US-led NATO mission to train, assist and advise Afghan forces. Some US forces also carry out counter-terrorism operations. — Reuters



NANGARHAR: An Afghan balloon vendor rides his bicycle as he looks for customers on the outskirts of Jalalabad. — AFP

Journalist critical of Pakistan's govt beaten and seized

LAHORE: A Pakistani journalist under scrutiny for anti-government social media posts was beaten and seized outside his home on Saturday, his son said, in the latest sign of pressure on media. Rizwan Razi, who worked for private Din TV in the city of Lahore, was being investigated for "defamatory and obnoxious" comments about the judiciary, government and intelligence services, according to Pakistan's law enforcement agency. However, there was no official confirmation he had been arrested. "My father went out of home to see off friends," his son Osama told Reuters of the incident on Saturday morning.

"When the friends left, unknown persons, riding a black Honda Civic car, thrashed and dragged him in the car and fled away ... I ran after the car but could not do anything." Pakistani journalists say they face an increasingly hostile climate since the vote last year that saw Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) take power. A report from the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), dated Saturday and seen by Reuters, said Razi had previously been questioned about his Twitter comments. It said authorization had been granted to register a case against him.

His account @RaziDada appeared to be offline on Saturday. FIA officials in Lahore referred questions to the main office in Islamabad, where officials could not be reached. Khan's government replaced the party of ousted former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was at odds with the powerful military and is currently serving a seven-year prison sentence for corruption. The increased official pressure has come at a difficult time for the media in general as advertising revenues have plunged and newsroom budgets been slashed. Government officials say Pakistan has an independent media and the military denies pressuring journalists.

In a separate case, Ammar Ali Jan, an academic also based in Lahore, was arrested over his involvement in a protest at the death of Arman Loni, a regional leader of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement. He was later released on bail. A message on Ammar's Facebook page on Saturday said he was taken at 4 a.m. "I am a law-abiding citizen and will not be deterred in the fight for justice," it said. Police official Azhar Naveed confirmed the brief detention and bail, which followed other arrests over the protests earlier this week. He said Ammar was charged with taking part in a rally, blocking a road and making "anti-state" speeches. — Reuters

Malaysia, Singapore tensions flare

KUALA LUMPUR: A Malaysian government vessel has collided with a ship in waters disputed by Singapore and Malaysia, sparking a fresh flare-up of maritime tensions yesterday between the neighbors. Malaysian authorities impounded the Greek-flagged bulk carrier, the Pireas, and detained its crew after the collision Saturday with the Malaysian boat Polarix.

The neighbors have had testy relations since Malaysia evicted the island from the Malaysian Federation in 1965, ending a brief and stormy union of the former British colonies. Ties have gone up and down over the years but have been shaky since Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad—who has long had a prickly relationship with Singapore—returned to the premiership with a shock election victory last year.

Maritime tensions began rising late last year when Singapore accused Malaysia of extending its claims in the strait that separates the neighbors into what had long been accepted as the city-state's territorial waters. The city-state, one of the world's busiest cargo ports, said Malaysian vessels were repeatedly encroaching into its waters—an accusation

denied by Malaysia. Both sides claimed that Saturday's collision off Tuas, in western Singapore, had happened in their own waters. The accident did not cause any injuries or lead to an oil spill.

"The collision between MV Pireas and Malaysian government vessel Polarix took place in Singapore territorial waters," a Singapore foreign ministry statement said. "Singapore reiterates its call for Malaysia to withdraw its vessels from the area, as the persistent presence of its vessels clearly poses a threat to safety of navigation in the area," the statement said, adding Malaysia would be responsible for any "unlawful situations" that arise. In a statement released earlier, Malaysia's foreign ministry said: "Malaysia is committed to take appropriate measures to safeguard its territorial integrity, interests and safe navigation of vessels".

Singapore maritime authorities said the incident happened as the Greek vessel was headed to a port in southern Malaysia, and it was allowed to continue its journey as the accident was not serious. According to Malaysia's foreign ministry, the boats communicated before the accident, and the Greek carrier had said it would steer clear of the Malaysian boat. Tensions eased briefly last month when foreign ministers from both countries agreed during a meeting in Singapore to take steps to calm the maritime row, and a separate dispute over airspace. — AFP