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Snap decision to delay election disappoints voters in Nigeria

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A fighter with the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) holds his weapon during an operation to expel Islamic State group (IS) jihadists from the Baghouz area in the eastern Syrian province of Deir Ezzor. —AFP

End days for caliphate as IS trapped

In a very short time, we will officially announce the end of IS's existence

BAGHOUZ: Jihadist fighters defending the last dreg of the Islamic State group's "caliphate" yesterday were holed up in half a square kilometer in a village of eastern Syria. US President Donald Trump said the fall of the IS proto-state would be announced yesterday, but a top Syrian commander said his forces had slowed down their advance to protect civilians. The jihadists declared a "caliphate" in large parts of Syria and neighboring Iraq in 2014, but have since lost all of it but the tiny patch in eastern Syria near the border with Iraq.

"IS is besieged in a neighborhood that is estimated to be 700 meters long and 700 meters wide" in the village of Baghouz, said Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) commander Jia Furat. "Baghouz is within our firing range but we are moving cautiously considering there are civilians still trapped there as human shields," said Furat, the overall commander for the operation. "In a very short time, not longer than a few days, we will officially announce the end of IS's existence," he told reporters at the Al-Omar oil field turned SDF base.

Thousands of people have flooded out of Baghouz over the past week — mostly women and children related to IS fighters, but also suspected jihadists. But an SDF spokesman said there were "still civilians inside in large numbers." "We weren't expecting this number, otherwise we wouldn't have

resumed the campaign four days ago. This is why it's been delayed," SDF spokesman Adnan Afrin said. Trump at around 1600 GMT on Friday said announcements over "the eradication of the caliphate" would be made "over the next 24 hours".

'Lapses' in timetable

Yesterday, US-led coalition spokesman Colonel Sean Ryan acknowledged that the timeline had slipped because of the presence of civilians inside. "There has been lapses as we continue to see hundreds of civilians still attempting to flee to safety," he said. "The area of Baghouz has many tunnels, which slows operations," he added.

He said fighters of the Kurdish-led SDF were working to remove improvised explosive devices from the area, while keeping a lookout for possible IS suicide bombers. Human Rights Watch called on commanders not to try to accelerate the offensive to suit Trump's timetable. "The tempo of battle must not be dictated by political imperatives — it must first of all protect civilians and possible hostages," HRW's

director of counterterrorism, Nadim Houry said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said IS fighters were surrendering in large numbers to the advancing SDF fighters. The SDF have been closing in on holdout jihadists since September. The speck of terrain in Baghouz is all that's left of their self-proclaimed "caliphate" that in 2014 spanned an area the size of the United Kingdom and administered millions of people. Successive offensives in Iraq and Syria have shattered the proto-state, which has since late 2017 been confined to the Euphrates Valley.

'Hunt down' IS remnants

Trump's promise of a victory declaration came after he shocked allies and senior figures in his own administration with a December announcement that he had ordered a full troop withdrawal from Syria because IS had been "beaten". That plan, which prompted the resignation of then defense secretary Jim Mattis, is set to be accelerated following a declaration of victory. Beyond Baghouz, IS still has thousands of fighters and sleeper cells scattered

across several countries.

In Syria, it retains a presence in the vast Badia desert, and has recently claimed deadly attacks in SDF-held territory. The US Department of Defense has warned that without sustained counterterrorism pressure, IS could resurge within months. US Vice President Mike Pence vowed yesterday at a security conference in the German city of Munich that the United States would "hunt down" IS remnants even after a military pullout.

"The United States will continue to work with all our allies to hunt down the remnants of ISIS wherever and whenever they rear their ugly heads," Pence said, using an alternative acronym for IS, but providing no further details. A US withdrawal risks leaving Syria's Kurds exposed to a long threatened attack by neighboring Turkey, who views Kurdish fighters as "terrorists".

To prevent this, they have scrambled to seek a new ally in the Damascus government after spending most of Syria's civil war working towards self-rule. Eight years into a war that has killed more than 360,000 people, President Bashar Al-Assad's government controls nearly two-thirds of the country. German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned in Munich that a US pullout risks allowing regime allies Russia and Iran to boost their role in Syria. —AFP

“ Hundreds of civilians still attempting to flee ”

'Suspects' in 'Empire' actor assault case freed: Police

CHICAGO: Two men identified as "potential suspects" in the alleged attack on "Empire" TV actor Jussie Smollett have been released without charge, police in the US city of Chicago said late Friday. Smollett, 36, who is black and openly gay, reported to police on January 29 that two men beat him while he walked downtown in the third-largest American city.

He alleged they yelled racial and homophobic slurs, poured bleach on him and tied a rope around his neck, prompting police to initially describe the case as a possible hate crime. Earlier on Friday police spokesman Anthony Guglielmi said detectives had "probable cause" that two men arrested may have been involved in an alleged offense. But late the same day, Tom Ahern, the police Deputy Director of News Affairs and Communications, said on Twitter that "the individuals questioned by police in the #Empire case have now been released without charging and detectives have additional investigative work to complete."

He said the step followed "new evidence as a result of today's interrogations." Police initially announced the arrest of the



US actor Jussie Smollett

two men after US media reported that investigators were probing the possibility that the attack was staged. Guglielmi, however, told AFP "there is no evidence" to say it was a hoax. Multiple US media outlets reported the two men are brothers who were arrested at Chicago's O'Hare airport upon return from a trip to Nigeria. At least one of the men reportedly worked on "Empire," a series about the fortunes of an ailing hip-hop mogul and his family battling over control of a multi-million dollar music company. Smollett has expressed anger over rumors and speculation reported in the media doubting his account. Initial reports of the attack shocked the entertainment industry and brought waves of support from advocacy groups. —AFP

India, Pakistan in UN court for 'spy' case

THE HAGUE: India will ask the UN's top court tomorrow to order Pakistan to take an alleged Indian spy off death row, in a case that could stoke fresh tensions after a deadly attack in Kashmir. Kulbhushan Sudhir Jadhav was arrested in the restive southwestern Pakistani province of Baluchistan in March 2016 on charges of espionage and sentenced to death by a military court. The International Court of Justice urgently ordered Pakistan in 2017 to stay the execution of Jadhav, pending hearings on the broader Indian case that take place this week in The Hague.

The rare foray into the international courts for the nuclear-armed rivals could be another flashpoint after Thursday's suicide bombing in Indian-administered Kashmir that killed 41 troops. New Delhi's lawyers will present their arguments on Monday to the court, which was set up after World War II to resolve international disputes, followed by Pakistan's on Tuesday. Jadhav, a former Indian navy

officer, was accused of working for the Indian intelligence services in the province bordering Afghanistan, where Islamabad has long accused India of backing separatist rebels. After a closed trial he was sentenced to death by a Pakistani military court on April 10, 2017, on charges of "espionage, sabotage and terrorism". India insists Jadhav was not a spy, and that he was kidnapped in Pakistan. New Delhi in court documents is asking that the ICJ order Islamabad to annul the sentence. It accused Islamabad of violating the Vienna Convention by failing to provide him with consular access, as well as breaking human rights law. If Pakistan is unable to quash Jadhav's death sentence, Islamabad should be found in violation of international law and treaties, and be told to "release the convicted Indian national forthwith", India said.

'Release the convicted Indian'

India accused Pakistan in 2017 of harassing Jadhav's family during a visit, saying their meeting was held in an "atmosphere of coercion". Islamabad reacted coolly to the ICJ's urgent order to stay Jadhav's execution at the time, saying it "has not changed the status of commander Jadhav's case in any manner". The ICJ's decision will likely come months after this week's

hearings. The death row spy case comes as the troubled ties between India and Pakistan risked taking a dangerous new turn following the bombing near Srinagar. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi warned that Pakistan would pay a "heavy price" after local media reported that the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed Islamist group claimed responsibility.

At least 41 paramilitary troops were killed as explosives packed in a van ripped through a convoy bringing 2,500 troopers back from leave not far from the main city Srinagar. Kashmir has been split between India and Pakistan since independence from Britain in 1947 with both nuclear-armed countries, which have fought three wars, claiming it as their own. India and Pakistan also routinely accuse each other of sending spies into their countries, and it is not uncommon for either nation to expel diplomats accused of espionage, particularly at times of high tension.

Death sentences however have been rarely issued in recent years. The last time India and Pakistan took a dispute to the ICJ was in 1999 when Islamabad protested at the downing of a Pakistani navy plane that killed 16 people. The tribunal decided that it was not competent to rule in the dispute and closed the case. —AFP