

International

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Weeding out jihadists from civilians on Syria front line

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Evangelicals gain ground in Panama despite pope visit



JOLO: Philippine soldiers walk past the damaged area of a catholic cathedral in Jolo town, sulu province, in southern island of Mindanao yesterday a day after two explosions tore through the cathedral. — AFP

Islamists suspects in Philippine bombing

‘Not all members of Ajang-Ajang group are pro-ISIS’

MANILA: Investigators probing the Catholic cathedral bombing that killed 21 people in the Philippines’ restive south said yesterday a group tied to notorious Islamists Abu Sayyaf is the prime suspect. Two explosions tore through the cathedral on the Muslim-majority island of Jolo, killing worshippers at Sunday mass and security forces in an attack claimed by the Islamic State group.

Authorities said the so-called Ajang-Ajang faction is a small band of several dozen that most likely carried out the bombing, the Philippines’ worst in years, in an act of revenge. “Last year their leader was killed. There have been persistent reports that they will retaliate,” regional military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Gerry Besana told AFP. “Yes, we saw them in the CCTV. It was the brother of the leader who was killed,” he said referring to footage from outside the cathedral. “He was seen with two other members of Ajang-Ajang.”

Security forces say the group is composed of relatives of Abu Sayyaf kidnap-for-ransom group members who have been killed in clashes with the government. Abu Sayyaf, which is based on the remote Jolo

island, has been blamed for the Philippines’ deadliest attack, a 2004 ferry bombing in Manila Bay that claimed 116 lives.

‘Revenge group’

“There are high-level law enforcement operations against them (Ajang-Ajang),” said Rommel Banlaoi, chair of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research. “It evolved into a revenge group.” While Abu Sayyaf have sworn allegiance to Islamic State, that is not necessarily true for the motley members of Ajang-Ajang.

“Not all members of Ajang-Ajang group are pro-ISIS, but all of them are Abu Sayyaf group,” said Banlaoi using another acronym for IS. “It’s not IS-affiliated.” The IS claim, in a formal communique, said two suicide bombers had detonated explosive belts, according to the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors jihadist activities. But a military report said a second bomb that went off at the cathedral was left in the utility box of a motorcycle in the parking area outside. Police said they believe the explosives were likely

detonated remotely, but did not elaborate. Despite the contradictions, authorities have not ruled out IS involvement. Regardless of who staged the bombing, concern was growing yesterday over the impact it will have on a decades-long push for peace that culminated last week in voters approving expanded Muslim self-rule in the south.

The vote was the result of negotiations started in the 1990s with the nation’s largest rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and will give it considerable power over the so-called Bangsamoro region. “This is a big challenge for the Bangsamoro government,” said Banlaoi. The former rebels need to show they will be able to pull the region toward peace in order to attract much-needed investment to alleviate poverty and counter extremism, he told AFP. “MILF needs to prove it can make a difference... the gravity of the problem faced by MILF is wow, so overwhelming,” he added.

‘Squandered opportunities’

The church attack came despite President Rodrigo

Duterte, who visited the cathedral yesterday, putting the southern Philippines under martial rule after pro-IS militants seized the southern city of Marawi in May 2017. Government officials have argued that martial rule, which gives authorities extra powers, has been effective in taming the perpetually restive region. But families of the dead, who began holding funerals yesterday, have become the latest in the Philippines’ south to mourn loved ones killed in a bomb attack.

“My 81-year-old mother does not deserve this kind of death,” Edward Non told AFP, with a row of victims’ coffins behind him. “This has to stop. It’s the innocent civilians who suffer.” Experts were also worried about how the bombing would impact the hopes for new development in the region, which were spurred by the self-rule vote victory. “It’s a terrible human tragedy, it’s also a development tragedy,” World Bank economist Andrew Mason told broadcaster ABS-CBN. “When we see conflict areas, when we see ups-and-downs and negative impacts due to violence and conflict, what we see is also these are development opportunities that are squandered.” —AFP

What next for Brexit?

LONDON: Despite the humiliating rejection of Prime Minister Theresa May’s Brexit deal, Britain is no closer to knowing the end result of its vote to leave the European Union. A raft of amendments to be voted on by MPs on Tuesday threaten to further muddy the waters as the clock ticks down to Britain’s scheduled departure from the EU on March 29. Three ultimate scenarios remain — leaving without an official deal, leaving with a very similar deal or no Brexit at all. But each path is fraught with uncertainty, political volatility, constitutional logjams and an increasingly embittered electorate. Here are the potential next steps:

No deal

Britain is legally on track to leave the EU with or without a deal on March 29, unless it delays or stops the process. A no-deal scenario threatens to trigger a recession in Britain and markedly slow the EU’s economic growth, as well as causing significant legal disruption. The world’s fifth-biggest economy could lose preferential access to its largest export market overnight, affecting every sector, leading to rising costs and disruption at British ports. As D-Day looms, the government has conducted visible displays of its ramped-up no-deal preparations over the past few weeks. But speculation is growing that the

government, under pressure from parliament, could seek to delay the process and take no-deal off the table.

Delay

Some amendments introduced in parliament are seeking to delay Britain’s departure date, although all the other 27 EU countries would have to agree. A potential complication is that elections to the European Parliament are due in late May and the new chamber is set to sit on July 2. Some of Britain’s 73 seats have already been reallocated. A delay to give May time to pass legislation enshrining her Brexit deal would likely command widespread support, said leading pollster John Curtice. But Brexit supporters would be deeply opposed to a delay motivated by a desire “to go away and have a referendum or a general election or softer Brexit”, he added. Brussels also may not be so keen if the delay would simply translate into more months of political gridlock.

Second referendum

Growing numbers of MPs are seeking a new referendum to reverse the 2016 result, when the Leave campaign won by 52 percent to 48 percent. But supporters admit they do not currently have the numbers in parliament to make it happen. No law prevents Britain from doing it all over again, but many question whether a revote would be democratic — or resolve anything. May has warned that another vote “would do irreparable damage to the integrity of our politics”. It also threatens to be just as divisive as the last one, with opinion polls showing the country is still split over the issue.

Try to get another deal

After MPs overwhelmingly rejected the deal agreed between May and Brussels, May held talks with lawmakers across parliament as well as business figures and trade unions to try to find a way through. The key sticking point is the deal’s “backstop” solution to keep the Irish border open, which has the potential to leave Britain indefinitely tied to some form of EU customs union. Influential Brexit supporters say that with changes to the backstop, they could support the agreement. EU leaders have said they are willing to talk further, including on plans for the future trading relationship, but have repeatedly said they do not want to reopen the deal itself.

General election

Opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn sought to oust May’s government by calling a confidence vote after her Brexit deal was defeated, but she won. There is a risk that her Conservative party and their Northern Irish allies, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), could turn against her if she pursues either a “softer” or a no-deal Brexit. But if not, the only other way to force an election is for the prime minister herself to gamble and call a snap vote to break the impasse.

No Brexit

Some lawmakers favor the nuclear option of cancelling Brexit altogether, despite the threat of widespread public rage. Finance minister Philip Hammond even told business leaders last week that Article 50 could be rescinded. —AFP

UN judicial expert in Turkey to probe Khashoggi murder

ANKARA: Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu yesterday met with a UN judicial expert who is looking into the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi as Ankara calls for an international inquiry. The UN special rapporteur on extra-judicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Agnes Callamard, will be in Turkey until Saturday for a series of meetings with authorities including the Istanbul chief prosecutor.

Khashoggi, a Washington Post contributor and Saudi regime critic, was murdered on October 2 in Turkey in what Riyadh called a “rogue” operation, tipping the kingdom into one of its worst diplomatic crises. Turkish authorities have called for an international probe into the killing which took place at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, complaining of Saudi Arabia’s failure to cooperate. “Met with @AgnesCallamard, #UN Special Rapporteur on Extra-Judicial Executions, who is in #Turkey to investigate the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.” Cavusoglu wrote on Twitter, sharing a picture from his meeting in Ankara.

In an interview with Turkish media last week, Cavusoglu said the Khashoggi case was “not a part of bilateral ties” with Riyadh. “We believe this case should be brought to the international arena,” he said. “It is time for an international probe.” Nearly four months later, the whereabouts of Khashoggi’s body remains unknown and Turkish officials accuse Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of orchestrating the killing — an allegation Saudi authorities categorically refute. Earlier this month a trial of 11 accused in the murder opened in Saudi Arabia with the attorney general seeking the death penalty for five defendants. —AFP