

## BOKO HARAM SUSPECTED AFTER 14 KILLED IN NIGERIA BLASTS

**LAGOS:** At least 14 people were killed in three separate suicide bomb attacks in northeast Nigeria yesterday, with suspicion falling on radical Islamist group Boko Haram after a string of similar strikes in recent months. The triple blasts in the Yobe state capital, Damaturu, came after the militants this week claimed to have carried out three suicide attacks near Abuja last Friday that left 18 dead.

Damaturu has been repeatedly attacked during the insurgency. Last month, a girl thought to be aged 12 killed six when the explosives she was carrying went off outside a bus station. Bashir Idris Garga, Yobe state coordinator at the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), said the first blast yesterday happened at a small food store on a housing estate, killing four.

Another near a mosque killed one, while nine, including a family, lost their lives when another bomber struck a Fulani settlement on the outskirts of the city. Ten other people were injured, three of them critically, Garga said. Yobe governor Ibrahim Gaidam called the attacks "cowardly and barbaric" and urged improvements in surveillance.

State police spokesman Toyin Gbadegesin told AFP "gun-wielding bombers" carried out the attacks between 5:30 and 6:00 am (0400 to 0500 GMT) before the night-time curfew was lifted. "All the areas affected have been cordoned off and the police have held meetings with community leaders... for them to be more vigilant and suspicious of strange faces and movements," he added.

### 'Attack repelled'

Boko Haram has reverted to attacking "soft" civilian targets after last year's land grab that saw it seize towns and villages across Yobe and neighboring Borno and Adamawa states. Nigeria's military has claimed a series of successes against the insurgents and yesterday said scores of rebel fighters were killed during clashes with troops south of Damaturu.

Army spokesman Sani Usman said fighters attempted to attack a battalion of soldiers in Goniri, some 60 kilometers by road southeast of Damaturu, in the early hours yesterday. "During the encounter our gallant troops successfully repelled the attack and inflicted heavy casualties on the invading terrorists as all of them were killed," he said in a statement.

"On the last count over 100 terrorist bodies were seen," he added. There was no independent verification and the army has previously claimed high losses on the part of the militants. Usman said seven soldiers were killed and nine others injured in the fighting, which also saw troops recover arms and ammunition, including primed improvised explosive devices.

### New video

Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari has set his military commanders a three-month deadline to early November to end the violence, which has left at least 17,000 dead since 2009. But he has conceded that bomb and suicide attacks in urban areas could continue. More than 1,260 people have been killed since he took office on

May 29, according to an AFP tally.

Boko Haram yesterday published a new propaganda video via social media, in which an unidentified fighter read a statement in Hausa and Arabic, flanked by more than a dozen armed fighters. The rebel said military claims that some 200 fighters had surrendered in the border town of Banki last month, and that hundreds of women and children were released, were a "complete lie".

The 17-minute video was posted under the name "Islamic State in West Africa Province", which Boko Haram has used since its pledge of allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in March. Boko Haram has continued to attack neighboring Chad, Niger and Cameroon, underlining its threat to regional security. —AFP

## ERDOGAN IRATE AS PUTIN TEARS UP TURKEY'S SYRIA BLUEPRINT

### 'IT SEEMS THE RUSSIANS ARE IN IT NOT TO FIGHT IS'

**ISTANBUL:** The Russian air campaign in Syria has thrown an immense obstacle in the way of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's vision for the future of the country, enraging the Turkish leader and leaving Ankara increasingly sidelined. Russia's air strikes are aimed at propping up the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad, the very ruler who Turkey has for years insisted must be ousted if there is to be any solution to the Syrian crisis.

Further increasing the tensions,

would help Turkey regain something of its Ottoman-era dominance of the region. But Russia's air campaign is explicitly aimed at helping Assad stay in power, with the West and NATO ally Turkey accusing Moscow of focusing its fire on moderate rebels rather than Islamic State (IS) jihadists.

"It seems the Russians are in it not to fight Islamic State but to fundamentally alter the equation in such a way that Assad gets a new lease of life," Ilter Turan, Professor of Political Science at Istanbul Bilgi

zone. But all three plans are impeded by the Russian air campaign, although Erdogan insists that the safe zone idea is still on the agenda.

"Putin's main concern is to keep the Assad regime in power and thus protect Russia's interests in Syria and increase its regional and international influence," wrote Verda Ozer in the *Hurriyet* daily. The bombing of targets in Syria by Russian war planes is also further polarizing international alliances in the region, with Russia and Assad's other key ally Iran forming an ever

and introducing new dimensions into the equation."

"Turkey and its friends are being marginalized in Syria," Turan said. Changing this would require a "fundamental shift in policy" on the part of the Turkish government, notably by stepping up support for the Kurds, he said.

In a sign of the disquiet caused by Iran and Russia's intervention among Turkish conservative-nationalist circles, columnist Ibrahim Karagul in the pro-government *Yeni Safak* daily said the only way to stop the two countries is "by proxy war". "The intervention of the two countries (Iran and Russia) is the invasion of Syria. This is no different to the US invasion of Iraq" in 2003, he wrote.

### 'Highly personal'

Relations between Russia and Turkey—which warmed in recent years with the two sides working on a new undersea gas pipeline and targeting \$100 billion of trade by 2023 — are set to also take a body blow. It remains unclear if Putin gave Erdogan the slightest inkling of his plan for the Syrian intervention when the Turkish strongman visited Moscow on September 23 for the opening of a new mosque.

Deep-seated enmity and regional rivalry between Turkey and Russia are nothing new, with the Ottoman and Russian Empires fighting a dozen wars from the 16th century to World War I over control of the Black Sea and the Caucasus region. Known for his fiery temper and capacity for taking deep personal offence, Erdogan was reportedly personally offended when Putin in April described the killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire from 1915 as "genocide".

Turan said Erdogan "tends to view foreign policy—especially with authoritarian leaders—in highly personalistic terms." "He finds it very disturbing that his friend Putin is doing things he finds are detrimental to Turkey's interests in the region." —AFP



**BRUSSELS:** Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan waits for the arrival of European Council President Donald Tusk prior to a meeting at the EU Council building. —AP

Russian warplanes have twice violated the air space of NATO member Turkey over the Syrian border in the last days. Erdogan has responded furiously, saying Putin was making a "grave mistake" that will further isolate Russia and even warning the friendship between the two countries was at risk.

Turkey's key strategic aim for the conflict in Syria has been the overthrow of Assad and installation of new pro-Ankara authorities who

University, told AFP. "This introduced a new and big thorn in Turkish-Russian relations."

### 'Turkey marginalized'

Speaking at EU headquarters in Brussels, Erdogan said dealing with three issues would help ease the Syrian conflict and the resulting refugee crisis—equipping and training moderate Syrian rebels, establishing a safe zone in northern Syria for refugees and enforcing a no-fly

closer partnership and Turkey tightening ties with Saudi Arabia.

Erdogan has said Iran and Russia had teamed up in a two-pronged strategy, with Moscow acting from the air and Tehran, which reportedly has personnel on Syrian soil, from the ground. "That the Turkish visions for Syria were not going to be realized had become apparent long before the Russian intervention," said Turan, adding Putin's action was "complicating things



**TEHRAN:** Iranian Transportation Minister Abbas Akhondi, (center) and Vice-Presidents Eshagh Jahangiri, (center right) and Majid Ansari, confer in an open session of the parliament to impeach Akhondi. —AP

## AFTER NUKE DEAL, IRAN TAKES NEW ROLE TO END SYRIA WAR

**TEHRAN:** Iran's nuclear deal with world powers has bolstered its central role in efforts to end the spiraling Syrian civil war, bringing Tehran back to the world stage, analysts say. Though the conflict seems trapped in a military mire—Russia's air campaign on behalf of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad being the latest intervention—Iran is seen as a crucial diplomatic channel.

Along with Russia, the Islamic republic shares a strategic interest in preserving Assad's rule—contrary to Western demands that he give up power—as Syria is a gateway to its Lebanese ally Hezbollah. Iran has given military and financial support to Assad, including sending generals from its Revolutionary Guards as military advisers, several of whom have been killed.

Hezbollah has done much of the fighting to prop up the Syrian military, though the commander of Iran's Quds Force, the Guards' foreign wing, is said to be heavily involved in guiding the military strategy. However, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has said there can be no military solution. He has drafted a four-point peace plan for Syria that calls for a national unity government, a ceasefire, an anti-terrorism effort and constitutional reform.

In a meeting Monday in New York, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon urged Zarif to pressure Assad toward a peaceful resolution to end the war. Such dialogue with Iran is a stark change from the UN-sponsored Geneva 1 and Geneva 2 international conferences in 2012 and 2014 aimed at finding peace in Syria, when Tehran was not invited.

Francois Nicoullaud, France's former ambassador to Tehran, told AFP that Iran's role in a diplomatic solution for Syria was no longer disputed. "The Russians are bombing, but we now need now to occupy the land and the Iranians will play a valuable role," he said, indicating the nuclear deal had been a catalyst. "Iran as a key player in resolving the Syrian crisis is clear in the minds of everyone. The Syrian army is out of breath."

### 'Something must move in Syria'

A chasm remains, however, between the thinking of Russia and Iran and that of the United States and powers such as Britain, who have said Assad must agree to an exit from power, even if takes years. The West says Assad's barrel-bombing of his own civilians means he has lost any legitimate claim to long-term rule.

Iran and Russia, however, say their military cooperation with Assad is about ridding Syria of the Islamic State jihadist group, rather than regime change. Nicoullaud, who was posted in Tehran between 2001 and 2005, agrees that Iranian and Russia's actions in Syria are an "anti-terrorist" strategy. "It is a way for them to say something must move in Syria," he added.

The Russian bombing, however, has been widely criticized, including by US President Barack Obama, as adding to the morass in Syria, where America and Arab states have backed rebels fighting Assad's forces. The rebels have said Russia is targeting them rather than the Islamic State, though Moscow said late Monday it had struck 10 IS targets in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Idlib provinces.

Professor Farhang Jahanpour of Oxford University believes the six world powers which struck the July 14 nuclear accord with Iran could now turn their attention to Syria, despite their "geopolitical differences." "This is by far the wisest course to follow," he told the *Tehran Times* in an interview, alluding to the links between Assad's Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam, and the risks posed by going it alone.

"If Iran were seen as the only major power supporting the Russians in Syria, it would paint the situation as a Shia-Sunni conflict with Russia taking the side of the Shias, and the West taking the side of the Sunnis. That scenario would be extremely dangerous for Iran and would split the region further along sectarian lines." —AFP

## NEW UNREST HITS ISRAEL, WEST BANK DESPITE CALLS FOR CALM

**JERUSALEM:** New violence rocked Israel and the West Bank yesterday, including a stabbing in annexed east Jerusalem, even as Israel and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas took steps to ease tensions. The knife attack in Jerusalem's Old City, in which a Palestinian woman stabbed a Jewish man before being shot and seriously wounded, was the second in the walled heart of the city in days.

An Arab man also allegedly stabbed a soldier in central Israel and stole his weapon before being shot dead by police, while in the West Bank settlers shot and seriously wounded a Palestinian after a stone throwing incident. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu postponed a visit to Germany set for Thursday to tackle the violence that has raged for three weeks despite appeals for calm.

Security officials from the two sides had met on Tuesday evening after the Palestinian leader said he did not want a violent escalation. Israel lifted age restrictions from yesterday on Muslims praying at

the sensitive Al-Aqsa mosque compound in an apparent bid, swiftly welcomed by Washington, to ease tensions.

Yesterday's Old City attack not far from the mosque compound, police said that an 18-year-old Palestinian woman stabbed a 35-year-old Jewish man in the back and lightly wounded him. The man, who was armed, managed to draw his gun and shoot and seriously wound his attacker, police said. Separately, in Kiryat Gat in central Israel, police shot dead an Arab man after he allegedly wounded a soldier with a knife and took his weapon, authorities said.

An incident in the occupied West Bank saw Jewish settlers shoot and seriously wound an 18-year-old Palestinian near Bethlehem, the Red Crescent and witnesses said. In the same area, where both Israeli settlements and Palestinian villages are located, a group of Palestinians had sought to take an Israeli woman from her car and possibly kidnap her, said Israeli military spokesman

Arye Shalimar. According to Shalimar, settlers fired in the air and she was able to escape.

### Moves to avoid escalation

In moves to calm the situation, Israeli and Palestinian security officials reportedly met at an undisclosed location in the West Bank on Tuesday evening for talks. The talks followed Abbas's call for restraint. His intentions had previously been unclear, particularly after a speech he gave to the UN General Assembly last week in which he declared he was no longer bound by accords with Israel.

Netanyahu has spoken of "no limits" for the security forces in responding to the unrest, and the military in a show of force on Tuesday demolished the homes of two Palestinians who carried out attacks last year.

On Tuesday, Netanyahu seemed to ease his rhetoric while at the same time visiting the site of a drive-by shooting in the West Bank in which a settler couple were murdered in front of their young children in their car last week. The spike in violence has brought international calls for calm, with concerns the unrest could spin out of control and escalate into a new intifada like those of the early 2000s and 1987-93.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon criticized the home demolitions and urged Israel to fully investigate deadly clashes in Jerusalem and the West Bank. He said a "prompt and transparent" probe into the killing of a Bethlehem teenager by the Israeli army during rioting on Monday would serve to determine "whether the use of force was proportional".

Troops shot dead 13-year-old Abdel Rahman Abdullah on Monday—the second killing of a Palestinian in 24 hours—as dozens were wounded in clashes. After Abdullah's funeral on Tuesday, about 100 masked youths stoned soldiers who responded with tear gas and rubber bullets. Palestinian medics said two protesters in the usually quiet oasis town of Jericho were moderately wounded by shots to the legs. —AFP



**RAMALLAH:** Undercover Israeli police officers and Israeli soldiers detain a wounded Palestinian demonstrator, being pulled up, during clashes. —AP

## YEMEN REBEL-ALLIED PARTY SAYS READY FOR UN-BROKERED PEACE

**SANAA:** Ousted Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh's party, allied with Shiite Houthi rebels, announced yesterday it has accepted a UN plan to end the country's seven-month-old conflict. The announcement on the General People's Congress party website, *almotamar.net*, comes as UN envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed holds secret talks with GPC and Houthi representatives in neutral Oman.

The party's secretary general, Aref Zouka, has sent a letter to UN chief Ban Ki-moon stating the GPC is "committed to implementing the seven points set in coordination with the UN envoy" to end the conflict, it said. Under the plan, the GPC would accept UN Security Council Resolution 2216 under an "implementation mechanism that would be agreed on by all parties" in Yemen, the party said.

Resolution 2216 calls for the withdrawal of rebel forces from territories they have captured and for them to lay down their arms. The Iran-backed Houthis overran the capital Sanaa unopposed in September 2014 and went on to battle for control of several regions, aided by renegade troops loyal to Saleh.

In July, loyalist forces backed by a Saudi-led Arab coalition evicted the rebels from five southern provinces, and they have since set their sights on Sanaa. Zouka called in his letter for "ending the

war and urged all parties to start negotiations to set in place an implementation mechanism for Resolution 2216 that would organize withdrawal from cities and disarmament of all parties."

This must take place under UN supervision to prepare for a re-launch of the political process. AFP could not immediately confirm from the Houthis if they had also agreed to the UN plan. A first attempt to hold peace talks in Geneva in June between the pro-government forces and Houthi rebels collapsed without the warring parties even sitting down in the same room. Last month, President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi's government backed away from UN-sponsored talks that were to be held in Oman, insisting the rebels first withdraw from territory they have seized.

Oman is the only member of the Gulf Cooperation Council, led by Riyadh, not taking part in the Saudi-led coalition's air war launched in March against the rebels, and Muscat also has good ties with Tehran. Hadi's internationally-recognized government has insisted on the unconditional implementation of Resolution 2216.

The GPC said the resolution's implementation must be accompanied by a halt to military operations and lifting of the blockade imposed by the coalition on Yemen. —AFP