

## RADICAL ISM BREEDS IN DEPRIVED CORNER OF SERBIA

**NOVI PAZAR:** In a country proud of its Orthodox Christianity, the Serbian city of Novi Pazar is a place apart: young bearded men in ankle-length trousers stroll the streets, the restaurants don't serve alcohol, and the call of the muezzin punctuates the daily routine. Faced with massive unemployment and a feeling of exclusion against the backdrop of the Syrian war, this Muslim majority area of southwest Serbia has become a breeding ground for Islamist extremists.

"Death in the way of Allah in Syria, 14 May 2013, aged 27" was a notice once posted on the concrete walls of Novi Pazar, which lies in the region of Sandzak. Killed in Aleppo, Eldar Kundakovic used to be one of the young men aimlessly strolling the town, where around half of the 100,000 residents are jobless and a third of the population is under the age of 19, according to the latest census.

Kundakovic, who belonged to the ultra-conservative Salafist movement, divided his time between prayer rooms and the tailor shop run by his father, who since the death of his son has spent time at mosques trying to dissuade youngsters from becoming violent radicals. Novi Pazar is a city without an airport or train station, served by bad roads and enclosed by mountains, where the poverty rate is

50 percent, according to Serbia's statistics institute, making the Sandzak region the most deprived area of the Balkan country. A centre of textiles and commerce, it did not withstand the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. A large number of the warehouses which employed thousands of workers fell into disuse.

### 'Silent radicalization'

Serbia estimates around 40 of its citizens have left to join the jihad in Syria and Iraq, some of whom have since returned or died there. They were mostly either youths from the Sandzak region or members of the ethnic Albanian community in the neighboring Presevo valley. Those who return are monitored by powerful intelligence services that date back to the Yugoslav era. Eastward departures have dropped off since the Islamic State group has begun to retreat.

But the presence of Salafist "humanitarian organizations", ostensibly helping the needy in Sandzak, have become a cause of concern. In an April 2015 report, DamaD, a local cultural centre, said these groups had "completely isolated themselves from the rest of society" and were "committed to very conservative views on religion which support jihadist fights". The region's official Islamic authorities have



**NOVI PAZAR:** Esad Kundakovic (3rd right) prays at the central mosque in Novi Pazar in southern Serbia. Esad, father of late Eldar Kundakovic, who died in 2013 while fighting in Aleppo on the side of the Islamic State (IS) group, says that he couldn't stop his son from going to war but now spends most of his time explaining to other Muslim youth how pointless was his son's death. —AFP

meanwhile become weaker after splitting into two rival structures.

According to Serbian media, youths who left for Syria frequented in particular an association called Furkan, whose followers are linked to a headline Wahhabi community in northeastern Bosnia. One of them fired shots at the US embassy in

Sarajevo in October 2011. In 2014, the association disappeared after the dismantling of a jihadist network whose members were also part of Furkan. "But where are the people who were part of it?" asked Fahrudin Kladnicanin of Forum10, an initiative dealing with integration issues. "A lot of young people

participated in their activities, their conferences. I think that... they are still working on silent radicalization of some youngsters."

### 'Double standards'

In his pizzeria close to the city's football stadium, 44-year-old Admir, who declined to give his last name, acknowledged that "penniless students" receive aid from his religious association "Put Sredine" (The Middle Way). He denied any foreign financing, claiming his association ran on money from its members. He also rejects violence, but expressed disgust towards Shiites, "a sect", and Israel, "the world's biggest terrorist".

But what Novi Pazar needs most is development, says Kladnicanin of Forum10. "In last 10 years there has been no investment in Sandzak, not a single factory was opened," he said. City Mayor Nihat Bisevac says it was more realistic to rely on financial support from Sandzak's diaspora, which remains deeply involved in Novi Pazar-as is clear from the large number of foreign car registration plates. Still, another hope for the future is a planned highway between the Montenegrin port of Bar and the Serbian capital Belgrade, which is likely to pass near Novi Pazar. — AFP

# SYRIAN ARMY CLOSES IN ON KEY ALEPPO DISTRICT

### MOSCOW AND WASHINGTON TRADE BARBS

**ALEPPO:** Syrian regime forces were on the verge yesterday of seizing a major rebel district of Aleppo as Moscow and Washington traded barbs over stalled efforts to end fighting in the battle-worn city. After retaking control of about two-thirds of east Aleppo in recent days, forces loyal to President Bashar Al-Assad were advancing Tuesday on the large residential district of Shaar. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a monitoring group, said if the district is retaken rebel forces will be reduced to a "war of attrition" with the army. "It is the most important neighborhood in the heart of east Aleppo, and is on the brink of falling," Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman said, adding that regime forces were already in control of about a third of the district. With the capture of Shaar, the army would hold 70 percent of east Aleppo, four years after rebels first seized it and divided the city.

The regime's rapid gains have left opposition fighters scrambling to defend the shrinking enclave they still control in Aleppo's southeastern districts. The international community has also struggled over how to respond, despite widespread concern over the fate of tens of thousands of civilians still in rebel-held areas. Russia, a key Assad ally, had announced talks with the United States in Geneva for Tuesday or Wednesday on organizing a full rebel withdrawal from Aleppo leading to a ceasefire.

### 'Attempt to buy time'

But on Tuesday Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused Washington, which has



**IDLIB:** A picture taken from a rebel-held area shows smoke billowing from buildings in the pro-regime Shiite town of Foua, in northwestern Idlib province yesterday following a reported rebel shelling. — AFP

backed rebel groups against Assad, of backtracking. "It looks like an attempt to buy time for the rebels to have a breather, take a pause and replenish their reserves," Lavrov told journalists, adding that Moscow had the impression that "a serious discussion with our American partners isn't working out." Washington for its part accused Moscow of stalling for time after Russia and China blocked a UN Security Council resolution on Monday calling for a seven-day ceasefire.

Russia said the resolution should have been postponed until after the Geneva talks, saying an agreement on organizing a withdrawal was close. The deputy US envoy

to the United Nations, Michele Sison, suggested there was no deal, accusing Moscow of using a "made-up alibi" to block the resolution. "We will not let Russia string along the Security Council," she said. "We will continue bilateral negotiations (with Russia) to relieve the suffering in Aleppo, but we have not reached a breakthrough because Russia wants to keep its military gains." The rebels have so far rejected any talk of leaving the city, with Yasser Al-Youssef of the leading Nureddin Al-Zinki faction describing the proposal as "unacceptable." "It is for the Russians to leave," he said. Rebels have been forced to evacuate several of their strongholds in Syria during

the conflict, most recently a string of areas near Damascus.

### Key battleground

In many cases, they have reached deals with the government after months of siege and fierce fighting, agreeing to lay down their arms in return for safe passage to rebel territory elsewhere. But the loss of Aleppo would be the biggest blow yet to opposition forces in Syria's civil war, which erupted in 2011 with popular protests calling for Assad's ouster. More than 300,000 people have since died and millions forced from their homes. Aleppo, once Syria's celebrated commercial and cultural hub, has been a key battleground of the war and suffered some of its worst violence. The most recent offensive has left more than 341 people dead in east Aleppo, including 44 children, the Observatory says.

Rebel fire into the government-held west of the city has killed 81 people, including 31 children, in the same period, the monitor says. Tens of thousands of east Aleppo residents have also fled to different parts of the city, including to government-held areas and other rebel neighborhoods. Escalating bombardment of the neighboring rebel-held province of Idlib has also left dozens dead in recent days. At least 85 civilians, including 18 children, have been killed in air strikes on Idlib city and surrounding towns since late Saturday, according to the Observatory. It said both Russian and Syrian government warplanes took part in the bombing raids. —AFP

## PHILIPPINES' POLICE MURDERED MAYOR

**MANILA:** Philippine police murdered a town mayor while he was helpless in a jail cell, justice department investigators said yesterday, contradicting claims by the accused and President Rodrigo Duterte that he was killed in a gun battle. The accusations by the National Bureau of Investigation deepened concerns that police were carrying out summary executions as part of Duterte's controversial war on crime, which has claimed more than 5,100 lives in just over five months.

The NBI, equivalent to the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the United States, said police shot dead mayor Rolando Espinosa and his cellmate Raul Yap, as they were defenseless in a provincial jail cell last month. "After conducting an exhaustive investigation of the incidents surrounding the killing of Mayor Espinosa and Yap, the NBI concluded that the testimonies of several witnesses had disputed the claim of an alleged shootout between the (police) operatives and inmates Mayor Espinosa and Raul Yap but (was) a 'rub out,'" the NBI said in a statement.

"Rub out" is a local expression, referring to the police killing a suspect and then saying he died in a gun battle. "The pieces of evidence, both testimonial and the forensic evidence all agree. We believe we have a very strong case," NBI deputy director Ferdinand Lavin told reporters. Lavin said the NBI was recommending murder and perjury charges against 24 officers for their alleged role in the killing and subsequent lies.

The accused police had claimed they fired in self defense at the pair when they went into the jail cell before dawn to execute a search warrant. The police alleged Espinosa, who was in jail after being arrested in October on drug and gun possession charges, had a firearm and methamphetamines in the cell. Lawmakers, media groups and human rights advocates had ridiculed that version of events, asking why police had to execute a search warrant in a jail cell at night and why CCTV footage of the event had disappeared.

However Duterte, who has pledged never to let a policeman go to jail for prosecuting his war on crime, repeatedly defended the officers involved. Duterte's police chief stood down the police officer in charge pending an investigation, but the president immediately reinstated him.

Duterte had accused Espinosa, mayor of Albuera town in the eastern province of Leyte, of being a drug lord. In a speech late Monday, the president again defended the police in the Espinosa case. Duterte, 71, won May elections in a landslide on a promise to kill tens of thousands of criminals to prevent the Philippines from becoming a narco-state. — AFP

## ALEPPO 'TWITTER GIRL' SAFE AS FAMILY FLEES

**ALEPPO:** A seven-year-old Syrian girl whose Twitter account from Aleppo gained international attention has fled her home amid heavy fighting, but she and her family are safe for now, her father said yesterday. With her mother's help, Bana Al-Abed had been posting heart-rending tweets in English on life in the besieged eastern districts of Syria's Aleppo. But as Syrian government forces edged closer to their home in recent days, the Abed family fled and the Twitter updates slowed. "Our house was damaged in bombardment," her father Ghassan said by phone from east Aleppo, two-thirds of which has been seized by advancing government forces.

"The army got really close to our neighborhood. We fled to another part of east Aleppo and the family is doing well," he said, adding that "the internet connection is very weak here." Since late September, Bana and her mother Fatemah have garnered more than 211,000 followers by tweeting regular updates on battered Aleppo. Pictures of massive white columns of smoke, captioned "Aleppo right now. We (are) so scared," are interspersed with shots of Bana reading or scrawling in a notebook.

The account captured the attention of novelist JK Rowling, who responded to a picture of Bana poring over an electronic copy of the "Harry Potter" series. On November 29, Bana's account tweeted a photograph of a heavily damaged building, with the caption: "This is our house, My beloved dolls died in the bombing of our house. I am very sad but happy to be alive." Several days later, Bana wrote that she was sick: "I have no medicine, no home, no clean water.

This will make me die even before a bomb kill me." Many of the tweets have included cries for help, but the



**ALEPPO:** Syrian Bana Al-Abed, who with the help of her mother had been posting heart-rending tweets in English on life in the besieged eastern districts of Syria's Aleppo, uses a smart-phone to check her Twitter account in her home in east Aleppo. — AFP

messages grew increasingly desperate at the weekend. On Sunday night, Fatemah posted: "We are sure the army is capturing us now. We will see each other another day dear world. Bye." The account fell silent for 24 hours, prompting concerned followers to launch a #WhereisBana hashtag. An update followed on Monday night, reading: "Under attack. Nowhere to go, every minute feels like death. Pray for us. Goodbye - Fatemah."

Online supporters of President

Bashar Al-Assad have bashed the account and sent Bana and her mother death threats. And in an October interview with Danish broadcaster TV2, Assad alleged that footage posted by Bana was "promoted by the terrorists or their supporters." "It's a game now, a game of propaganda, it's a game of media. You can see anything, and you can be sympathetic with every picture and every video you see. But our mission as a government is to deal with the reality," he said. — AFP

## News

in brief



**PATTANI:** Rescue workers search for two missing boys who went missing during a flash flood in the southern Thai province of Pattani yesterday. — AFP

### Severe flooding kills 14 in south Thailand

**BANGKOK:** Severe flooding due to heavy rain in southern Thailand has killed 14 people, including five students, the interior ministry said yesterday. Six days of floods have affected 582,345 people in 11 of Thailand's 76 provinces, the ministry said in a statement. One person is reportedly missing, while three others suffered injuries. Trains have also been halted in one province off the Gulf of Thailand as the rails there were submerged under rising floodwaters. Southern Thailand is a popular destination for visitors due to its scenic islands and beaches, and the floods are expected to put a dent in the area's tourist industry, with the high season running from November to February. However, the waters are receding, with three of the 11 provinces now off the list of flooded provinces. A fourth province is expected to be declared clear as well, an official at the interior ministry said. But Thailand's Meteorological Department forecasts more heavy rains next week for southern Thailand.

### Indonesian authorities burn massive drug haul

**JAKARTA:** Police began torching about a ton of illegal drugs in Jakarta yesterday, as Indonesian President Joko Widodo defended his tough war on narcotics. Authorities wheeled out giant furnaces to incinerate some of the massive haul on display, including nearly half a ton of methamphetamine, 190,000 ecstasy tablets and 420 kilograms of marijuana. Widodo and other top officials, wearing protective gloves and masks, inspected the drugs before tossing bags of pills into the incinerator. Indonesia has tough drugs laws but Widodo has made combating narcotics a top priority since taking office in late 2014, resuming the execution of traffickers after an unofficial hiatus. Eighteen convicted drug smugglers-including 15 foreigners-have been sent to the firing squad in Indonesia under his administration. Widodo has defended his hardline stance, claiming Indonesia faces a "drugs emergency" and must act to protect the next generation. "Every year 15,000 Indonesian youth die because of drugs. How many drug dealers and traffickers die every year?" he said.

### Cambodia upholds drug sentences for foreigners

**PHNOM PENH:** A Cambodian appeals court yesterday upheld the prison terms of a Frenchwoman, an Australian woman and a Nigerian man for trying to smuggle heroin to Australia. Judge Pol Sam Ouen said the sentences given by the Phnom Penh Municipal Court in May 2014 to then-19-year-old Frenchwoman Charlene Savarino, 41-year-old Ann Yoshe Taylor of Australia and 23-year-old Precious Chneme Nwoko of Nigeria were correct and accorded with the law. The lower court had sentenced Savarino to 25 years in prison, Taylor to 23 years and Nwoko to 27 years. Savarino and Taylor were arrested in September 2013 at Phnom Penh International Airport after police found 2.2 kilograms (4.8 pounds) of heroin in Taylor's luggage as they prepared to fly together to Australia. Nwoko, Savarino's boyfriend, was believed to have masterminded the smuggling and asked Savarino to make the arrangements. Cambodia is not a major producer of illegal drugs but has increasingly become a smuggling transit route.

### Hair today, gone tomorrow: Serial sniper strikes Japan

**TOKYO:** A suspected serial hair-sniper has been arrested in Japan after being accused of stealing tresses from unsuspecting women on rush-hour trains. Police charged the 23-year-old graduate student with assault on Monday after he admitted cutting the hair of a woman on a packed morning train in Nagoya, a city west of Tokyo. Akiya Yoshida is also being investigated for possible involvement in about 30 other cases over the past several years. Yoshida said he had planned on selling his ill-gotten merchandise online, according to the top-selling Yomiuri newspaper.