

ISRAEL SET FOR VOTE TO ADVANCE BILL LEGALIZING SETTLER HOMES

JERUSALEM: Israeli lawmakers could vote yesterday to advance a bill legalizing some 4,000 settler homes in the occupied West Bank despite international criticism and warnings over its implications. The bill was set for a first reading in the Knesset, or parliament, and if approved would require two more votes before becoming law.

A vote was expected yesterday, though last-minute negotiations could still cause it to be delayed. The bill was given preliminary approval in parliament on Monday, with some of its backers calling it a step towards eventual annexation of most of the West Bank. Some 400,000 Israeli settlers currently live in the West Bank, excluding annexed east Jerusalem, along with 2.6 million Palestinians.

The United States, UN officials and the European Union have warned that

continued settlement building is eating away at the possibility of a two-state solution to the conflict. All Israeli settlements are viewed as illegal under international law and major stumbling blocks to peace efforts as they are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state.

Israel differentiates between those it has authorized and those it has not. The bill would legalize nearly 4,000 settler homes built on private Palestinian land. Key figures in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition, considered the most right-wing in Israeli history, openly oppose a Palestinian state. Education Minister Naftali Bennett, the bill's main backer, has advocated annexing most of the West Bank, like other Israeli religious nationalists who point to the Jewish connection to the land from biblical times.

Netanyahu says he still supports a two-state solution to the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but is nonetheless supporting the bill.

It has advanced despite concerns from Israeli Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, who has said he will not be able to defend it before the courts and warned that it would violate both Israeli and international law.

'Profoundly damaging'

US State Department spokesman Mark Toner said Tuesday: "We hope that it does not become law. Enacting this law would be profoundly damaging to the prospects for a two-state solution. We've also been troubled by comments that we've heard by some political figures in Israel that this would be the first step in annexing parts of the West Bank."

Walid Assaf, the Palestinian minister responsible for monitoring Israeli settlements, has called the bill "the most dangerous law issued by Israel since 1967." Israeli occupied the West Bank in the Six-Day War of 1967 and subsequently annexed east Jerusalem in a move never recognized by the international community. But while comments by Bennett and others have sparked international condemnation, polls have shown that a significant percentage of Israelis support annexation.

A recent poll by the Israel Democracy Institute think tank says 44 percent of Jewish Israelis support annexing all of the West Bank, while 38 percent are opposed.

According to settlement watchdog Peace Now, the bill would legalize some 3,881 housing units. Most of the homes

are in Israeli-approved settlements but were built on Palestinian land. Around 750 are located in outposts which Israel has not yet approved, Peace Now says. US Secretary of State John Kerry has said there are currently around 100 wildcat outposts in the West Bank and the bill would give retrospective Israeli approval to 54 of them.

An agreement to remove one wildcat outpost from the bill has allowed the legislation to move forward. The outpost known as Amona, home to around 40 families, is under a court order to be evacuated by December 25 since it was built on Palestinian land. Some members of Netanyahu's coalition said they could not support the bill if Amona remained part of it because of the court ruling against it. A solution is still being sought for Amona settlers. —AFP

AS SYRIAN TROOPS GAIN GROUND, ALEPPO REBELS PROPOSE TRUCE

FATE OF THE CITY BE NEGOTIATED

BEIRUT: Staring a punishing and brutal defeat in the face, several Syrian rebel factions yesterday proposed a five-day cease-fire in the eastern part of the city of Aleppo so the wounded, sick and other civilians can be evacuated. The proposal came as Syrian government troops and allied militiamen declared they have seized control of three-quarters of the enclave that the opposition controlled since 2012.

The cease-fire proposal was signed by the Aleppo command center, apparently a reference to the collection of factions fighting inside the eastern enclave. A rebel

Sergey Lavrov were meeting for talks on Syria in Germany.

Widening control

Earlier yesterday, Syrian government troops and allied militiamen seized more ground in Aleppo's ancient quarters, further widening their control over an enclave in the divided city, Syria's state media and an opposition monitoring group said. With the latest gains, the endgame for Aleppo, which has been carved up between the government and the rebel side for the past four years, appears to draw even closer. If Aleppo - the country's

previously come under rebel fire. No injuries were reported.

It was the second such Israeli strike into Syria recently, according to the Syrian government, following two missiles fired from Lebanese airspace toward the outskirts of Damascus last week. But yesterday's attack is believed to be the first from Israel into the vicinity of Damascus in years. Israel is widely believed to have carried out a number of airstrikes in Syria in the past few years that have targeted advanced weapons systems, including Russian-made anti-aircraft missiles and Iranian-made missiles.

The offensive was preceded by an intensive bombing campaign that knocked out medical facilities and left the civilian population reeling from the violence. According to the Observatory, 369 civilians, including 45 children, were killed in eastern Aleppo since Nov. 15. The Observatory said 92 civilians, including 34 children, were killed in the government-controlled western Aleppo that came under rebel fire.

Gaining ground

SANA said Syrian forces yesterday established control over two districts north of the Aleppo Citadel in the heart of the city - the Aghour and Bab Al-Hadid neighborhoods - after rebels abandoned positions and retreated further south. The new gains have choked the rebels, forcing them to pull back to other parts of the Old City, said the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

A map provided by the Syria army showed a quickly shrinking opposition enclave - a pointed leaf-shaped territory in the center, abutting already government-controlled Aleppo districts. In a statement, the Observatory said dozens of bodies littered streets stretching from al-Shaar to the southern part of eastern Aleppo, including the Old City, as a result of ongoing intense government bombardment.

Capt Abdel-Salam Abdel-Razek of the rebel Nour el-Din el-Zinki faction - one of the largest operating inside Aleppo - said the cease-fire proposal was driven by humanitarian concerns because of the rising death toll and intensive destruction. He said currently there was no talk of rebels leaving the city.

The proposal calls for the immediate evacuation of 500 seriously wounded and for allowing civilians wishing to leave to head to northern rural Aleppo, where there is almost no government presence. It also calls for negotiations over the future of the city of Aleppo once the humanitarian crisis eases. Abdel-Razek said this humanitarian pause is to be monitored by the United Nations. Wissam Zarqa, an English teacher in eastern Aleppo and an outspoken government opponent, said the rebel retreat from large parts of Old Aleppo was "concerning." "We are exhausted. There is a lot of death and unprecedented destruction," he said. —AP



ALEPPO: Syrian residents fleeing the violence in the eastern rebel-held parts of Aleppo evacuate from their neighborhoods through the Bab Al-Hadid district after it was seized by the government forces. —AFP

spokesman said Al-Qaeda-linked group Fatah Al-Sham Front, which has a limited presence in the enclave, will abide by the proposal. The offer made no mention of a rebel pullout from Aleppo, though the proposal said the fate of the city is to be negotiated after the humanitarian crisis eases.

The Syrian government and its ally Russia had previously rejected a cease-fire for the war-torn city, keeping up the military offensive that has forced rebel retreats and massive displacement of Aleppo civilians. Yesterday, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister

former commercial hub - is captured by government troops, it would be a turning point in the conflict, putting the four largest cities in Syria and the coastal region back under state control.

Also yesterday, the state SANA news agency said that Israel launched several surface-to-surface missiles that hit near a military airport west of Damascus, triggering a fire. Israel had no immediate comment. SANA said the missiles fell within the perimeter of the Mezzeh military airport, the main air base in the Damascus area. It lies on the western edge of the capital and had

The arms are believed to be destined for the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah militant group, a close ally of the Syrian government and a fierce enemy of Israel. Rebel defenses in eastern Aleppo have collapsed rapidly in the face of a massive government assault backed by Russia and thousands of Iranian-backed Shiite fighters.

On Tuesday, Syrian government forces captured Aleppo's centrally located al-Shaar neighborhood, securing about 45 square kilometers (17 square miles) of the besieged enclave less than two weeks after launching their ground



MOSUL: Yousuf Odey, 10, who was wounded in the eye by Islamic State militants, is treated by doctors at a clinic in Zahra district. —AFP

IRAQI FORCES BATTLE DEEP INSIDE MOSUL

BARTALLA: Iraqi forces battled jihadists deep inside Mosul yesterday, edging closer to the River Tigris that divides the city and looking for a breakthrough in the seven-week-old offensive. The fighting to retake the Islamic State (IS) group's last major stronghold in Iraq has prompted a steady trickle of people to leave their homes, many taking refuge in camps where nighttime temperatures have dipped below freezing. The 9th Armoured Division said it had retaken Al-Salam hospital in a push on Tuesday, the farthest the army has penetrated into east Mosul since the start of a broad offensive launched on October 17.

"We advanced in Al-Salam district but the situation is difficult, there is heavy fighting," Brigadier General Shaker Kadhem told AFP. "We took control of Al-Salam hospital, which was a command centre for Daesh," he said, using an Arabic acronym for IS. The five-storey building towers above the neighborhood and the jihadists had been using the upper floors and roof as sniper positions for some time, Mosul residents said.

The elite Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) has spearheaded the drive into Mosul in the past month, retaking several neighborhoods in the east of the city. The army also punched into Mosul in November but its progress has been slower and Iraqi forces barely control half of the eastern side of the city.

Hospital standoff

Kadhem said the goal of the latest push was to meet up with CTS forces on the banks of the Tigris in the southeast of the city. A senior CTS officer said the fighting in Al-Salam was fierce and the army had asked for backup. "The 9th Division's situation is difficult and they have called for support. We are sending a regiment there," the officer told AFP on condition of anonymity. "They are surrounded now in Al-Salam hospital... we are on the way so we can open a passage for them."

The IS-affiliated Amaq news agency said the jihadists had carried out five suicide car bomb attacks in the area during the past 24 hours. It said the army was holed up in the hospital compound and had suffered heavy losses. Iraqi officers did not

provide any casualty toll for the latest fighting. The Joint Operations Command supervising the fight against IS said CTS forces had retaken the eastern Mosul neighborhood of Ilam yesterday. Officers and analysts had expected the eastern side of Mosul to offer less resistance but the going has been tough and Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi's promise to retake Mosul by year's end has looked increasingly in question.

Hashed Al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization) paramilitary forces have retaken significant ground in recent weeks on a western front targeting the town of Tal Afar, which lies on the road linking Mosul to Syria.

Water crisis

Forces on the southern and northern fronts made quick early gains when Iraq launched its largest military operation in years but progress has been slow in recent days. One of the main factors hampering Iraqi forces in Mosul is the continued presence of hundreds of thousands of civilians, who either want to stay in their homes or are prevented from leaving by IS.

The United Nations yesterday put the overall number of people displaced by the offensive at more than 82,000. That is still less than half the figure the UN expected before the operation was launched. Its latest situation report, the UN spoke of spiraling civilian casualties as Iraqi forces went house to house in east Mosul, attempting to battle jihadists and protect civilians at the same time. "Partners are rushing to bring trauma care closer to the front lines to give injured civilians the best chance of survival," the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said. It said work was also under way to repair water and electricity infrastructure in east Mosul, where it described the current water shortage as "critical".

Hundreds of thousands of people in Mosul have gone days without drinking water and have had to boil water from boreholes to survive. The conditions for those massing in the camps on the city's outskirts were hardly better, with the onset of winter bringing freezing temperatures at night. —AFP

GHANA VOTES IN ELECTION AMID ECONOMIC SLUMP

ACCRA: Ghanaians voted yesterday in tight presidential and parliamentary polls that are seen as a litmus test of stability for Africa's most secure democracy as it wrestles with a stumbling economy and corruption scandals. Once praised by US President Barack Obama for its peaceful transfers of power, Ghana has come under fire amid reports of voter intimidation and questions over the independence of its election agency.

Charismatic President John Mahama is running for reelection against veteran politician Nana Akufo-Addo, who has chipped away at the popularity of the ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) party by criticizing the country's sluggish growth and high-profile corruption scandals. There are some 15 million registered voters in this West African country, and polling stations opened at 0700 GMT.

The winner will serve a four-year term in a formerly booming country that has seen its economy slow, currency deteriorate and inflation soar. An exporter of gold, cocoa and oil, Ghana was once hailed as a regional growth model but has now taken on too much debt, and in 2015 had to go to the International Monetary Fund for a bailout.

Mahama 'has done well for us'

"We are facing a lot of problems economically, everything is messy," Julie Amofah, 26, who voted in Kibi, a town 80 kilometers from the capital, Accra. "I voted for change so we can move for-

ward." Shadrack Opoku, an 18-year-old high school student, said Akufo-Addo of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) is the "right person for our country" who can secure future growth.

"When we complete university, we want better jobs," Opoku said. "Right now it's not good." There are seven candidates battling for the top job and if the smaller parties perform well and deny either man a majority, a run-off will be held later this month. Mahama, 58, is seeking a second term, with Akufo-Addo, 72, making his third and likely final bid for the highest office.

In the final days of the campaign, Mahama flexed his significant resources to reach as many battleground regions as possible where he inaugurated blockbuster infrastructure projects, including railways and airports. "Mahama has done well for us," said Abudula Alhassan, a 40-year-old driver in the northern town of Bole, a government stronghold. In contrast, Akufo-Addo has blasted Ghana's poor economic growth which stood at 3.3 percent in 2016 — the slowest rate in two decades — and has outlined detailed plans to get the economy back on track.

He has also lambasted Mahama's government over a series of corruption scandals in which scores of judges have been implicated. Critics say he squandered the country's commodity wealth and turned a blind eye to graft within his inner circle. During his tenure, the Bank of Ghana controversially bought half a million dollars worth of

gold Swiss watches for some of its staff. Akufo-Addo has also alleged that the ruling party is fomenting violence, a claim Mahama denies.

Tight race

But ahead of the vote, tensions were building. Police said an NPP supporter was beaten to death and six others were critically wounded during clashes on Monday between supporters of the two main parties following a rally in the north. Elections in Ghana are famously close fought, with Mahama narrowly winning in 2012 with 50.7 percent. But polls in Africa this year have been a mixed bag of surprising triumphs and sobering failures for democracy.

In Gambia, a dictator of 22 years conceded defeat, while in oil-rich Gabon the Bongo family continued its 50-year reign after a disputed election. But Ghana is still seen as an example of peace and stability in West Africa. Pollsters are divided in a country whose democratic credentials have come under scrutiny after criticism of its electoral commission following the 2012 elections. Following the last elections in 2012, Akufo-Addo who polled 47.7 percent of the vote — contested the results in Ghana's constitutional court, although he was ultimately unsuccessful. Akufo-Addo, who said previously that he would accept the results even if he loses, added recently: "Those are hurdles we have to jump once we get there." —AFP

MORE THAN 30 MISSING IN YEMEN SHIPWRECK

ADEN: More than 30 people were missing off the Yemeni island of Socotra yesterday after a cargo vessel carrying islanders home from the mainland sank in the Indian Ocean, authorities said. At least 26 passengers were rescued from the water after a major search operation in the early hours, President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi said in a statement on the official sabanew.net website.

The ship sank northwest of Socotra around 350 kilometers from Yemen's south coast which has been hit by rare tropical cyclones in recent months. Hadi called for "doubling efforts to broaden rescue operations to reduce the scope of the catastrophe that has struck the inhabitants of Socotra." Officials declined to say if inclement weather was behind the disaster but Yemeni Fisheries Minister Fahd Kaviien earlier told reporters that the vessel had "an accident."

"Sixty people, including women and children, were aboard the vessel, which was also carrying small fishing boats," he said. The government said United Arab Emirates jets were assisting search and rescue operations alongside Yemeni coastguards as well as two ships from Australia and Austria. It did not specify whether those vessels were merchant ships or part of an international flotilla that has been fighting piracy off the nearby Somali coast.

Although long ruled from Yemen, Socotra lies closer to the coast of Africa than it does to the Arabian Peninsula. It sits at the exit of a busy shipping lane from the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean. For years it was prey to piracy from the lawless Somali coast and it is in one of the most heavily patrolled maritime areas on Earth. —AFP