

ISRAEL TO RECEIVE ITS FIRST F-35 'SUPER-TECH' STEALTH FIGHTERS

JERUSALEM: Israel will tomorrow receive its first F-35 stealth fighter jets, hailed as technological marvels whose helmets alone cost more than most people's homes but criticized for their price and initial flaws. Built by US aerospace giant Lockheed Martin, the first two planes' arrival in Israel is being welcomed as a major event for the country's military as it seeks to maintain dominance in the turbulent Middle East.

US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter is to attend the arrival along with his Israeli counterpart Avigdor Lieberman at the Nevatim air base in the country's south. The delivery of the first two of 50 F-35s to be purchased by Israel comes as the years-long development of the most expensive plane in history reaches a critical stage. While a list of countries have ordered the planes, Israel, which receives more than \$3 billion a year in US defense aid, will be the first with an operational F-35 squadron outside the United States.

"I think we don't fully understand the big advantage of the F-35," an Israeli air force official said. "I think it's going to be learned in the next few

months, maybe years. I think it's a very super-tech airplane." Israel has given it the name "Adir"—which means "mighty" in Hebrew. Its first planes are expected to be operational within a year after delivery. It will be receiving the F-35A model for standard takeoff and landings. The B and C models are for short takeoffs and aircraft carriers.

Among their main features are advanced stealth capabilities to help pilots evade sophisticated missile systems. The single-pilot jets can carry an array of weapons and travel at a supersonic speed of Mach 1.6, or around 1,200 miles per hour. It is unclear if Israel's planes will be able to deliver nuclear bombs. Israel is believed to be the Middle East's sole nuclear-armed power, though it has never acknowledged it.

High-tech helmet

The ultra-high-tech helmet, at a cost of some \$400,000 each, sounds like something out of a science-fiction film. It includes its own operating system, with data that appears on the helmet visor and is also shared elsewhere. Thermal and night

vision as well as 360-degree views are possible with cameras mounted on the plane.

Israeli firm Elbit Systems has been involved in the helmet's production. In Israel, the planes, designed for multiple combat situations, will initially replace a group of ageing F-16s. They are seen as helping the country maintain its edge in the Middle East, particularly as its main enemy Iran seeks further influence in the region. "The F-35 has been designed to deal with the most advanced threat systems now being fielded in the Middle East," Lockheed Martin's Steve Over told AFP by email.

Israel is especially concerned over whether Iran will seek to develop nuclear weapons by violating the international accord it has signed with world powers aimed at preventing it. The country is also keeping an eye on Lebanon's powerful Shiite militant group Hezbollah, with which Israel fought a devastating war in 2006. Beyond that, in neighboring Syria, Russia has deployed the sophisticated S-300 and S-400 anti-aircraft systems as it conducts an air campaign in support of President Bashar Al-Assad.

'Only game in town'

Israel is buying its first 33 jets at an average price of about \$110 million. The government last month approved the purchase of the remaining 17. As a comparison, in 2001, Israel agreed to buy 52 additional F-16s from Lockheed Martin at a total cost of \$1.3 billion. While the technology can seem dazzling, there have been questions over whether the plane will be worth the cost.

A list of flaws have been uncovered, including one where pilots who weighed less than 136 pounds risked being killed by its eject system. There have also been software bugs and technical glitches, though Lockheed Martin assures such issues have been overcome. Some in Israel have also said the price of the planes will limit the number that can ultimately be purchased, while losing any in combat will be particularly costly. There have also been questions over whether upgrades to the air force's existing fleet could have sufficed. But the F-35 was "the only game in town" since Israel relies so heavily on US defense aid, said Yiftah Shapir of Israel's Institute for National Security Studies. — AFP



PARIS: US Secretary of State John Kerry (L) and France's Foreign Minister Jean Marc Ayrault (R) give a press conference after a meeting. — AFP

RAIDS POUND ALEPPO AS US DECRIES 'WAR CRIMES'

PARIS MEET CALLS FOR RESUMPTION OF PEACE TALKS

ALEPPO: Air strikes pummeled the shrinking rebel enclave in Aleppo yesterday as US Secretary of State John Kerry said the Syrian regime's "indiscriminate bombing" amounted to crimes against humanity. Western powers meeting in Paris called for the resumption of peace talks and for civilians to be allowed to leave Aleppo, where tens of thousands have already fled a fierce regime offensive.

The diplomatic flurry came as a US-backed alliance announced it would launch the second phase of its battle for the Islamic State group's de facto Syrian capital Raqa further east. The regime's more than three-week-old assault aimed at retaking all of Aleppo has triggered mounting international outrage.

"The indiscriminate bombing by the regime violates rules of law, or in many cases, crimes against humanity, and war crimes," Kerry said after the talks in Paris, urging Russia to do its "utmost to bring it to a close." US and Russian officials meanwhile were to gather in Geneva for what Kerry described as a bid to stop the city from "being absolutely, completely, destroyed".

Once the beating heart of Syria's industrial and commercial industries, Aleppo has witnessed some of the most brutal violence of the country's nearly six-year war. In less than a month, forces loyal to President Bashar Al-Assad have overrun around 85 percent of east Aleppo, a rebel stronghold since 2012.

The UN's Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura said the world is watching "the last steps" in the Aleppo battle and evacuating civilians must be a priority. Air strikes and regime rocket fire battered the last remaining rebel districts yesterday, according to the Syrian Observatory for

Human Rights. An AFP correspondent in west Aleppo could hear the hum of airplanes circling above, coupled with bombardment and machine gunfire on the city's east. The strikes were so intense that windows in the west riddled and plumes of smoke could be seen rising from several points across the city's skyline.

'Bombing is unreal'

"The bombing is unreal," said Ibrahim Abu Al-Leith, spokesman for the White Helmets rescue force inside Aleppo. Abu Al-Leith spoke to AFP from one of the last rebel-controlled zones in Aleppo's southeast, saying he had been forced to move homes because of the intensity of the raids. "The streets are full of people under the rubble. They are dying because we can't get them out," he added.

According to the Observatory, nine civilians were killed yesterday in a barrage of rebel rocket fire on government-controlled neighborhoods. The fresh attacks brought to 129 people, including 39 children, the number of people killed by rebel fire on regime-held west Aleppo since November 15.

Another 413 civilians, among them 45 children, have been killed in east Aleppo in the same period. With the fighting intensifying after a brief respite, the UN General Assembly demanded an immediate ceasefire and urgent aid deliveries, in a resolution adopted by a strong majority. But both Moscow and Damascus have rejected talk of a ceasefire without a rebel withdrawal from the city—a demand that opposition groups have refused.

After meeting with opposition representatives yesterday, French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault said the opposition was willing to

resume peace talks "without pre-conditions." Kerry was not upbeat about the chances of success ahead of the meetings in Paris and Geneva. "I know people are tired of these meetings, I'm tired of these meetings," he said. "But what am I supposed to do? Go home and have a nice weekend... while people are dying? Sit there in Washington and do nothing?"

2,000 more flee

Tens of thousands have fled east Aleppo in recent weeks, with another 2,000 civilians pouring out of the remaining rebel-held districts yesterday, according to the Observatory. State news agency SANA also reported the displacement, but gave a number of 3,000 people and said they had been taken to the temporary shelter in Jibrin, about 10 kilometers east of Aleppo.

The UN said Friday it had received reports of rebels blocking some from leaving and of reprisals against residents who asked armed groups to leave. It has also expressed concern about reports that hundreds of men had gone missing after fleeing to government-held territory. The fall of east Aleppo would be the biggest blow for the rebels since Syria's conflict broke out in 2011.

It began as a widespread protest movement against Assad's regime but has since evolved into an all-out war that has seen jihadists like the Islamic State group rise to prominence. Yesterday, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces announced "phase two" of the campaign for the Islamic State group's bastion of Raqa. US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter announced Washington was sending an additional 200 troops to join the 300 it has already deployed in support of the offensive. — AFP

SUICIDE BOMB KILLS 35 YEMEN SOLDIERS

ADEN: A suicide bomber killed 35 soldiers and wounded around 50 more yesterday at a military camp in Yemen's southern city of Aden, where jihadists are active, a military source said. The attacker detonated his explosives belt as hundreds of troops gathered to receive their monthly pay at the barracks in Al-Sawlaban near the city's international airport, the source said.

Security sources said earlier that a bomb planted by unknown individuals had been behind the deadly explosion. There was no immediate claim of responsibility. Yemeni authorities have for months pressed a campaign against jihadists who remain active in the south and east of the war-torn country. The Islamic State group and its jihadist rival Al-Qaeda have taken advantage of a conflict

between the government and the Houthi rebels, who control the capital Sanaa, to bolster their presence across much of the south.

IS and Al-Qaeda have carried out a spate of attacks in Aden, headquarters of Yemen's internationally recognized government since allied fighters retook the port city from the rebels last year. An IS militant rammed his explosives-laden car into an army recruiting centre in Aden in August, killing 71 people in the deadliest jihadist attack on the city in over a year. On Monday, Yemeni authorities arrested eight suspected IS jihadists implicated in a spate of attacks targeting security personnel in the city this year. A Saudi-led coalition has since March 2015 supported loyalist forces fighting the rebels. — AFP

TURKEY TO SUBMIT ERDOGAN POWERS BILL TO PARLIAMENT

ISTANBUL: Turkey's ruling party is to submit a bill to parliament yesterday expanding the powers of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a move supporters believe will streamline the political system but opponents fear will lead to one-man rule. The constitutional change, which has been sought by Erdogan since he became president in 2014, would see Turkey switch to an executive presidency along the lines of the United States or France.

But it has become the latest polarizing issue surrounding the Turkish strongman, who has been accused by opponents of increasingly authoritarian rule especially after the attempted coup in July. The drive for the change comes at a critical time for Erdogan, with the relentless crackdown after the coup straining ties with the West and the Turkish lira under severe pressure.

"Our proposal to change the constitution will be submitted to the Turkish parliament tomorrow," Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said on Friday. The announcement followed months of talks between the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Yildirim and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The MHP is the fourth largest party in parliament but the AKP needs its support for the 330 votes required to call a referendum on the issue.

'Instability removed'

Yildirim said the bill would "save our country" from coups after Erdogan saw off a putsch aimed at ousting him from power on July 15. Turkey had on three previous occasions since 1960 seen governments directly ousted by the military, which considers itself the guardian of secular Turkey. "We continue to work on changing the system to ensure instability is removed from Turkey's political history absolutely," Yildirim said.

The AKP has only 316 seats (excluding the speaker of the parliament) and needs at least 14 votes from the MHP to secure a three-fifths majority required to call the referendum. Deputy Prime Minister Nurettin Canikli told broadcaster A Haber that "consensus had been secured" between the MHP and AKP and a referendum could take place in March, April or May. The main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) vehemently oppose changing the parliamentary system. HDP co-leader Selahattin Demirtas, who made it a political crusade to oppose the new system, is currently under arrest on charges of terror group links along with nine fellow HDP MPs. — AFP



ANKARA: Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan addresses local administrators. — AP



ALEPPO: Syrian civilians arrive at a checkpoint, manned by pro-government forces, at the Al-Hawoz street roundabout, after leaving Aleppo's eastern neighborhoods. — AFP

FOCUS TURNS TO US FORCES' ROLE AS IS FIGHT CONTINUES

WASHINGTON: As President Barack Obama prepares to leave office and step down as commander-in-chief of America's military, a flap has erupted over the secretive commandos who have become his go-to counterterrorist force across the globe. Obama's foreign military policy has centered on the targeted killings of terror suspects—usually by drone strikes—and he has ordered such actions in countries including Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Yemen and Libya.

But when it comes to ground action, the president has steered away from large-scale troop deployments and favored the light footprint offered by America's hush-hush Special Operations Command (SOCOM). The current kerfuffle stems from a Washington Post story that said SOCOM, specifically its super-secret wing called the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), is being granted new powers to track and potentially attack terror cells around the world.

The Post said JSOC could in some cases even operate unilaterally, without having to go through the regular US military command structure responsible for operations across particular parts of the world. The reported move ruffled feathers in other military units and among government agencies such as the CIA that also track foreign jihadists. They worried JSOC was being granted too much authority.

It "has caused for some friction in (the) government," a senior military official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. So this week, senior Pentagon officials moved to tamp down the story, saying SOCOM was not getting new powers, and that it would continue to operate within the long-established command structures.

Though secretive by trade, SOCOM has gained wide celebrity in America thanks to the countless books and movies depicting raids by its various teams. This has long been a source of

resentment for other military units, which sometimes feel overlooked when it comes to getting credit for America's counterterrorism efforts. Perhaps the most famous raid involving SOCOM fighters was the May 2011 assault by Navy SEALs that killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan.

New intel-sharing center

Though the Pentagon disputed parts of the Post story, the brouhaha did highlight the increased reliance America has placed on commandos fighting IS. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter in October said he had put JSOC "in the lead" of countering IS efforts to carry out external attacks. "We have already achieved very significant results both in reducing the flow of foreign fighters and removing ISIL leaders from the battlefield," he told reporters, using an IS acronym. — AFP