

ALEPPO'S REBEL ZONES PREPARE FOR TOTAL SIEGE

GAZIANTEP, Turkey: A single road, like a fragile umbilical cord, connects rebel areas of Syria's second city Aleppo with international relief from Turkey. Those who remain are stockpiling arms and supplies - bracing for their redoubt to be completely blockaded by the Syrian regime. In the Turkish city of Gaziantep, charities are preparing to send aid south of the border to a Syrian city where 250,000 to 300,000 people are still living despite the relentless violence, too poor to escape or too invested in the fighting's outcome to run away.

"The siege by regime forces is not yet a done deal," said Assad Al-Ashi, head of the NGO Baytina Syria, adding that one road to Aleppo's west remains open. "But it is under fire from all sides so it is still dangerous. It can be cut off at any moment," he said. "Preparations are in full swing to get ready for a full siege," Ashi added. "Syrian humanitarian organizations - there are around a hundred on the ground - are stockpiling everything they can inside the city. The local council in Aleppo has formed an emergency body to prepare for the siege. In the event of a total siege, Aleppo could last for a year, probably

more," he estimated.

President Bashar Al-Assad's army began large-scale offensives against the Aleppo rebels in February, backed by an intense campaign of Russian air strikes. Bombardment by bombardment, strike by strike, fears that the city faces complete encirclement have taken hold, with thousands of civilians displaced by the fighting. Insurgent groups can still reach the other rebel stronghold of Idlib in the northwest. From there, the Aleppo fighters have stockpiled hundreds - perhaps even thousands - of tonnes of weapons and provisions like flour, oil, sugar and medical supplies.

'Not Watertight'

The siege of the southern city of Homs - where the rebels held out for three years before finally surrendering - provides a grim example of what Aleppo could face. "But Aleppo won't be like that," said Manhal Bareesh of the Syrian opposition. "The rebel zones are much larger and better defended. They are building trenches and tunnels so they can continue to move around. The siege will never be completely

watertight." Many hospitals and clinics, often targeted by air strikes to demoralize civilians and fighters, have been moved to basements, as have some schools. "Doctors who had to leave, left. Those who stayed know what's coming and are willing. It's their choice," he said.

One city keeps popping up in conversations: Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. The city was completely destroyed by Moscow in the 1990s during the Chechen wars. "Right now, everything depends on Moscow," Ashi said of Assad's key international ally. "Bashar is ready to destroy everything if necessary to secure a victory in Aleppo. But he doesn't have the means, nor the soldiers to do it. You'd have to obliterate it, like Grozny. Will the Russians agree to that?" Ashi said he expects the front to remain open for "20, or 30 years", adding that the rebels are ready to do whatever is necessary to keep it open, and that the Turks are ready to help.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said Friday that it was "deeply alarmed" by the situation in Aleppo. And after a massive exodus of refugees now stuck at the Turkish border, Amnesty



ALEPPO: This photo taken on Feb 16, 2016 shows new recruits taking part in a shooting training session at a camp in a rebel-held area of this northern city before fighting along with opposition fighters. — AFP

International criticised Turkey for refusing entry to some injured Syrian civilians fleeing the fighting, describing its policy as "appalling". Bareesh said he believes Russia

will continue its strikes, even to the point of Grozny-level destruction. "If the UN, the US and the rest of the world look away, there is no hope," he added. — AFP

US AIR STRIKE ON LIBYA KILLED ABDUCTED SERBS

BELGRADE TO SEND PROTEST NOTE TO WASHINGTON

BELGRADE: A US air strike believed to have killed an Islamic State group operative behind the mass murder of tourists on a Tunisian beach also killed two kidnapped Serbian embassy employees, Belgrade said yesterday. The attack on Friday targeted a jihadist training camp near the Libyan coastal city of Sabratha, killing dozens of people. But Belgrade said the victims of the strike also included two employees from its embassy in Libya, who were taken hostage on November 8 in Sabratha from a convoy of cars heading to the Tunisian border.

US officials said the raid likely killed Nouredine Chouchane, also known as "Sabir", who along with other jihadists had been planning attacks against American and other Western interests. Chouchane is suspected of being behind both the beach attack in July 2015 near the Tunisian city of Sousse that killed 38 tourists, including 30 Britons and an attack on the National Bardo Museum in Tunis that killed 21 tourists and a policeman in March 2015. Both attacks were claimed by the Islamic State group.

"It has just been officially confirmed that two Serbian citizens who were foreign ministry employees, Sladjana Stankovic and Jovica Stepic, were killed," Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic told reporters. "They were killed by explosions, obviously we are talking about American bombs," he said, expressing "deepest condolences" to the families. "This is the first big hostage crisis that our state has been faced with. Our people would have been released had they not been killed," insisted Vucic.

Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic said Serbian authorities had been negotiating the release of the two staff and "the kidnappers had a financial interest". But he said the demands had been "impossible" to meet by either the families or the government. He said Serbia would send a protest note to Washington not for informing Serbian authorities of the raid.

A Pentagon spokeswoman said they were still assessing the results of the strike and would "make further statements if and when appropriate". "We are aware of the reports, but, at this time, have no indications that confirm this reporting," she said, referring to Belgrade's announcement. Vucic said the bodies of Stankovic, the embassy's communications chief, and her driver Stepic were expected to be repatriated tomorrow. Sabratha, which lies 70 km west of Tripoli, is considered a stronghold of extremism in lawless



BELGRADE: Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic addresses a press conference yesterday after a US strike on an Islamic State jihadist camp in Libya killed two Serbian embassy employees, who were kidnapped in the area in November. — AFP

Libya, where militants are trained in jihadist camps before launching deadly attacks in other countries.

The country spiralled into chaos after longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi was ousted and killed in Oct 2011, with two governments vying for power and armed groups battling to control vast energy resources. Belgrade maintains an embassy in Tripoli, and Serbian citizens - mostly doctors, other medical staff and construction workers - have been working in Libya for decades due to close bilateral relations during Gaddafi's regime.

IS Training in Libya

The Pentagon estimates that around 5,000 IS fighters are in Libya, and Friday's strike was the second US air raid in the past three months targeting the fast-expanding group in the North African country. A statement from the Tripoli-based general prosecutor

said that one of those wounded in the US strike had confirmed that he and the others killed in the raid were IS members. The wounded man said they "came to Libya to train and then carry out terrorist attacks in Tunisia," the prosecutor's statement said.

The Sabratha Municipal Council confirmed the deaths of the Serbian hostages and called on Tunisian and Libyan authorities to "take responsibility and help in fighting these terrorist organizations". Vucic said Washington was probably unaware that the Serbian hostages were held at the bombed location, "but it will remain unknown". He said relations with the United States were "historically not easy", referring to the 11-week bombing campaign by NATO against Serbia in 1999 during the Kosovo war. "I am not ready... to strain and worsen relations with the United States because we need them as a friend and partner, not as an enemy," he added. — AFP

IRAQI TRIBES BATTLE IS INSIDE FALLUJAH

BAGHDAD: Iraqi tribesmen battled Islamic State group militants inside their Fallujah stronghold for a second day yesterday, a significant challenge to longstanding jihadist control that may be undermined by a lack of supplies. Fallujah is one of two Iraqi cities still controlled by IS, and residents said to number in the tens of thousands - vastly outnumber the estimated 300 to 400 jihadists inside it. But IS has had plenty of time to assert its control over the civilian population through arrests and public executions - its usual means of discouraging dissent.

"Armed confrontations between the sons of the Fallujah tribes and the Daesh organization are continuing," an army brigadier general said, using an Arabic acronym for IS. The clashes are taking place in Al-Jolan in northwest Fallujah and Nazal in the centre, the officer said, adding that the army was shelling IS positions on the city's outskirts. There have been casualties among both the tribesmen and the jihadists, the officer said. Tribal leader Sheikh Majeed Al-Juraisi said that fighting was continuing in both the centre and north of Fallujah. The tribesmen "are beginning to run out of supplies and need the support of the government", Juraisi said.

Fear of 'Massacre'

There is "fear that they will completely run out and afterwards the Daesh organisation will arrest and massacre them." In 2014 and 2015, IS executed dozens of members of the Albu Nimr tribe, which opposed the jihadists as they overran swathes of Anbar province, where Fallujah is located. Saadun Obaid al-Shaalani, who was elected by a local council to administer the Fallujah area, confirmed that fighting was continuing, saying that tribesmen had posted snipers on rooftops in the Al-Askari area of east Fallujah. He said that the tribesmen needed assistance and "we are trying to obtain that support" from the

government.

Officials said the clashes began on Friday as a fight between tribesmen and Al-Hisba, IS members charged with enforcing religious strictures in the city. Members of the Al-Juraisat, Al-Mahamda and Al-Halabsa tribes have taken part in the fighting, officials said. Fallujah, which lies about 50 km west of Baghdad, is the only Iraqi city apart from IS's main northern hub Mosul still under jihadist control. But IS also controls some large towns, including Tal Afar and Hawjah.

Dire Humanitarian Situation

Anti-government fighters took control of Fallujah in early 2014 during unrest that broke out after security forces demolished a protest camp farther west, and it later became an IS stronghold. The tens of thousands of civilians in Fallujah are facing increasingly dire living conditions, and officials say IS is preventing civilians from leaving the city, which has largely been cut off by security forces.

Anbar Governor Sohaib Al-Rawi has said that the situation in Fallujah "has reached a state of famine". Lise Grande, the UN's humanitarian coordinator for Iraq, said: "We are receiving reports of hunger and shortages of medicines and essential supplies. 'We know that people are trying to leave the city but are prevented from doing so. We fear that the situation is becoming desperate.'"

IS launched a sweeping offensive that overran swathes of Iraq in June 2014, but security forces and allied fighters have pushed the jihadists back with support from US-led air strikes. Tribesmen have played a key role in holding the jihadists back in several areas, including Haditha in Anbar, Amerli in Salaheddin province and Dhuluiyah in Diyala. Sunni Arab tribesmen from Anbar helped drive back IS's predecessor organization Al-Qaeda in Iraq after joining forces with US troops from 2006. — AFP

OBAMA SHARES SYRIA CONCERNS WITH ERDOGAN, AFFIRMS SUPPORT

ISTANBUL: Turkey's presidency said US President Barack Obama had shared his concerns over the Syrian conflict and promised his support on Friday, hours after a tense exchange between the two NATO allies over the role of Kurdish militants. In a phone conversation that lasted one hour and 20 minutes, Ankara said Obama had told his counterpart President Tayyip Erdogan that Turkey had a right to self-defence, and expressed worries over advances by Syrian Kurdish militias near Turkey's border.

Obama stressed to Erdogan that Syrian Kurdish YPG forces should not seek to exploit recent gains by the Syrian government to seize additional territory, the White House said in a statement. He also called for Turkey to "show reciprocal restraint" by stopping artillery strikes in the area, the statement said. Earlier on Friday, Erdogan had said US-supplied weapons had been used against civilians by a Syrian Kurdish militia group that Ankara blames for the deadly suicide bombing this week. The State Department, which sees the Syrian Kurdish YPG fighters as useful allies against Islamic State, said the United States had "not provided any weapons of any kind" to the group.

The issue risks driving a wedge between the NATO allies at a critical point in Syria's civil war, as the United States pursues intensive talks with Syria's ally Russia to bring about a "cessation of hostilities." Turkey has blamed the YPG for the suicide car bomb attack on Wednesday that killed 28 people, most of them soldiers. But a Turkey-based Kurdish splinter group has claimed responsibility for the bombing and threatened more attacks.

Obama expressed his condolences to Erdogan over the bombing in the Turkish capital, the White House said. Before the call with Obama, Erdogan said he was saddened by the West's refusal to call the Syrian Kurdish

militia terrorists, and would explain to the US president how weapons provided by the United States had aided them. "I will tell him, 'Look at how and where those weapons you provided were fired,'" Erdogan told reporters in Istanbul.

"Months ago in my meeting with him I told him the US was supplying weapons. Three plane loads arrived, half of them ended up in the hands of Daesh (Islamic State), and half of them in the hands of the PYD," he said. "Against whom were these weapons used? They were used against civilians there and caused their deaths." The White House statement did not say whether Erdogan brought up the subject of US weapons with Obama.

Air Drop

Erdogan appeared to be referring to a US air drop of 28 bundles of military supplies in late 2014 meant for Iraqi Kurdish fighters near the Syrian city of Kobane. Pentagon officials said at the time one had fallen into the hands of Islamic State. The Pentagon later said it had targeted the missing bundle in an air strike and destroyed it. The United States has said it does not consider the YPG a terrorist group. A spokesman for the State Department said on Thursday that Washington was not in a position to confirm or deny Turkey's charge that the YPG was behind the Ankara bombing.

The spokesman also called on Turkey to stop its recent shelling of the YPG. The YPG's political arm has denied the group was behind the Ankara attack and said Turkey was using it to justify an escalation in fighting in northern Syria. The Turkish government has said the Ankara attack, in which a car laden with explosives was detonated next to military buses as they waited at traffic lights, was carried out by a YPG member from northern Syria working with Kurdish militants inside Turkey. — Reuters

POLICE GUNS AND CAMERAS AT JERUSALEM DAMASCUS GATE

JERUSALEM: The sniper barrel juts out of the ancient wall above Jerusalem's Damascus Gate, pointing down towards a young Palestinian being searched by Israeli policemen. A key tourist site and one of the entrances to the Old City, the massive white stone gate has become a backdrop for the violence between Israel and Palestinians that erupted almost five months ago. Israeli policemen line the courtyard beneath the gate, which is flanked by two towers and was built in the 16th century by Suleiman the Magnificent.

Snipers have positioned themselves on nearby roofs and new surveillance cameras have been set

beside dozens of others already installed. Trees that once cast shade over green areas nearby have been cut back or even uprooted to give the cameras a clear view. Damascus Gate, one of seven historic gates in the city, leads into Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem. A web of alleyways where Palestinians, Israelis and tourists cross path lie beyond the gate, which also leads toward Al-Aqsa mosque compound, the Western Wall and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. But the gate's history has been overshadowed by deadly violence in recent months. On Friday, a 20-year-old Palestinian stabbed and wounded two policemen outside Damascus Gate

before they shot him dead. And on Feb 3, three young Palestinians from the nearby occupied West Bank killed an 19-year-old Israeli policewoman before they were shot dead. Since Oct 1, Palestinian knife, gun and car-ramping attacks have taken the lives of 27 Israelis, an American and an Eritrean, according to an AFP count.

'No Security Justification'

Most of the assailants have been teenagers or young men and women, and recent security checks have focused on that age group. Near Damascus Gate, three policemen conduct a body search on a young man, who stands legs and arms apart against the wall. One policeman points his gun to his head while his two colleagues keep an eye on their surroundings. The young man is patted down thoroughly from head to toe and asked to remove his shoes. His backpack is emptied of all its items, one by one. His identity papers are checked. Only then is he allowed on his way.

"I live in the Old City so I have to go through this every single day," says the young man who asked to remain anonymous. "It's really annoying," he adds, his face visibly tense. A little further on, Bassem Zidan, 29, says: "Sometimes they check us ten times every two metres (yards)." "Sometimes, the searches have no security justification. It's just provocation. It depends on the soldiers' mood. Before, I used to refuse that they search me in public and they'd take me aside to a police station," he adds. But "now I don't dare anymore, I'm too scared they'll kill me in cold blood, now they have a readymade accusation to kill us."

Around him, women and school students open up their handbags and school bags to have them checked with the security forces' guns pointed at them. Earlier this month, the Israeli parliament passed a law authorizing the police to stop and search "any person appearing to be reasonably suspicious" as long as they agree to the search. But at Damascus Gate, journalists did not hear policemen ask for the consent of the young people they were searching. — AFP



JERUSALEM: Israeli forces check a Palestinian boy after Friday prayers at the entrance of Damascus Gate outside Jerusalem's Old City on Friday. — AFP