

AUSTRALIAN CONVICTED OF RECRUITING 7 MEN TO FIGHT IN SYRIA

SYDNEY: The first person charged in Australia with recruiting and sending fighters to Syria was convicted yesterday of recruiting seven foreign fighters.

Hamdi Alqudsi, 42, had pleaded not guilty in the New South Wales state Supreme Court in Sydney to seven counts of recruiting men from June until October in 2013 to travel from Australia to Syria to fight with Jabhat al-Nusra and other al-Qaida affiliates.

A jury yesterday found him guilty of six counts, and then continued deliberations before convicting

him on the charge relating to the seventh man. Each offense carries a potential maximum of 10 years in prison. The same offense committed since legislation was amended in 2014 carries a maximum sentence of 25 years. Alqudsi will be sentenced next month.

At least two of the recruits died in Syria. Alqudsi, a Sydney-based disability pensioner with two wives recognized under Islamic law, had booked flights to Turkey and organized the recruits' itineraries. He had also advised the recruits how to avoid drawing

attention to themselves as they left Australia.

The prosecution relied on a large cache of intercepted phone calls in Arabic and English, including some with Mohammad Ali Baryalei, who would become known as Australia's highest-ranking member of the Islamic State group before he died in Syria in 2014.

When he spoke, Baryalei was fighting for Jabhat al-Nusra, but discussed switching his allegiance to the Islamic State. Alqudsi's lawyer Scott Corish had told the court his client could have

thought the men were going to Syria for humanitarian reasons. But prosecutor David Staehli said the jury could not possibly find that the calls between Alqudsi and Baryalei were about humanitarian work.

After the verdicts, another of Alqudsi's lawyers, Zali Burrows, told reporters, "He accepts the verdicts but he'll always maintain his innocence." Security officials recently estimated that 110 Australians are fighting for the Islamic State group in the Middle East. — AP



JUBA: This handout image provided by the UNMISS (United Nations Mission in South Sudan) on Monday shows some of the at least 3000 displaced women, men and children taking shelter at the UN compound in Tamping area. — AFP

CEASEFIRE HOLDING IN S SUDAN CAPITAL

TOO EARLY TO TELL IF TRACE WILL LAST

JUBA, SUDAN: A fragile ceasefire appeared to be holding in South Sudan's capital Juba after four days of gun battles that have left hundreds of people dead and sent nearly 40,000 fleeing.

It was too early to tell on yesterday whether the ceasefire called by both President Salva Kiir, and his longtime opponent Vice President Riek Machar, would last, but the lull allowed civilians to leave their homes.

There were no helicopter gunships in the sky, no tanks on the streets, no artillery barrages and soldiers in their machine gun-mounted pick-up trucks appeared to have stayed in their barracks.

The calm was welcomed by Juba residents who have stayed mostly indoors for days as fighting intensified between Kiir's government forces and former rebels loyal to Machar. "The situation is quiet near the airport," said August Mayai, a local resident. "There are people in the streets."

Traders returning to once-busy markets found their shops and stalls looted. Volunteers and officials from South Sudan's Red Cross set about the grim task of collecting bodies of the dead.

There has been no estimate so far of civilian or military casualties from the heavy clashes Sunday and Monday but Adama Dieng, the United Nations' Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide, said some civilians, "were reportedly targeted based on their ethnicity."

Kiir is from the Dinka tribe and Machar a Nuer. South Sudan's civil war has been characterised by ethnic massacres between the two groups

including in Juba as well as rape, sexual slavery, murder and the use of child soldiers.

Fears of a return to war

The recent fighting began in earnest on Friday evening-killing over 300 soldiers that day alone according to government estimates-then paused on Saturday, the country's fifth anniversary of independence, before resuming with intense fighting on Sunday.

The violence has raised fears of a return to civil war that broke out in December 2013. An August 2015 peace deal was supposed to end the conflict but has so far failed to do so, despite the return of rebel leader Machar in April to join a government of national unity alongside his enemy Kiir.

On Monday evening Kiir and then Machar both ordered ceasefires after a chorus of condemnation from the United Nations, regional bloc IGAD, the United States and others. "The United States condemns in the strongest terms the return to violence in South Sudan. It must stop," National Security Advisor Susan Rice said in a statement hours after the ceasefire took effect.

'Anything can happen'

Despite the pause in fighting Juba remains on tenterhooks. "We are on the lookout because anything can happen," said one resident who did not want to be named. "We've had the same situation before: we thought it was going to be

fine, and it wasn't." Rashid Abdi, an analyst at the International Crisis Group think tank in Nairobi shared that scepticism. "Any cessation of fighting activities, even for a day, is welcome. But whether the ceasefire will hold is another discussion," he said.

The impact of the days of violence on an already weak and scarcely implemented peace deal remains to be seen. At least 36,000 have fled their homes in Juba since Friday, according to UN figures, with many heading for the presumed refuge of United Nations' bases. But even there they were not safe with the UN saying eight people were killed and 67 injured at so-called "Protection of Civilian" sites since Sunday.

Two Chinese peacekeepers were also killed and others wounded. International flights to Juba's international airport were still suspended yesterday morning although some private charter flights were able to evacuate foreigners and aid workers.

South Sudan has seen more fighting than peace since independence in July 2011, with clashes continuing even after the August 2015 peace deal. Tens of thousands have died in the violence, with close to three million forced from their homes and nearly five million surviving on emergency food rations.

The humanitarian crisis has unfolded alongside an economic one with the currency collapsing and inflation spiraling out of control. The country's mainstay oil industry is in tatters and regional towns have been razed. — AFP

UN LIBYA ENVOY URGES UNITY TO DEFEAT 'TERRORISM'

CAIRO: The UN Secretary-General Special Representative for Libya Martin Kobler yesterday urged all military groups in the country to get united under one general command and the umbrella of the Presidency Council and the national unity government to counter "terrorism".

Following talks with the Arab League Secretary General Ahmad Abul-Gheit in Cairo yesterday, Kobler stressed the importance of lifting the ban on arming

the Libyan army, to improve security conditions in the North African country.

The envoy said that the situation in Libya was utterly unsatisfactory.

Kobler noted that the Sukhriat Accord signed by the Libyan stakeholders in December provided that the army must be unified. He noted that they would continue coordination with the Arab League for realizing security and stability in Libya, saying his talks with the Abul-Gheit were "constructive." — KUNA

TERRORISTS, TRAFFICKERS USE US SHELL COMPANIES

WASHINGTON: Terrorist groups and drug traffickers are using anonymously owned US shell companies to hide and move their money, a senior Treasury official warned yesterday, calling on Congress to crack down.

"With every threat that we track, be it foreign terrorists, narcotics cartels, sanctioned regimes or cyber hackers, our investigators encounter American shell companies used to hide and move money," wrote Adam Szubin, the acting under secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, in an opinion article. "A loophole in our financial system allowed for this secrecy, and it took years to uncover the full money trail," he wrote in The Hill, a specialized publication on congressional affairs.

The Treasury proposed to Congress last month legislation that would require the beneficial owner of a company to be identified whenever a US company is formed. Currently a number of states officially permit companies to be formed and registered with their beneficial owners remaining anonymous.

"This gives US shell companies the dubious distinction of being the only money laundering method where secrecy is provided by a government entity," Szubin wrote. He recalled that stopping terror financing and money laundering have been broadly supported by Congress, but over the years "interested stakeholders" have systematically defeated legislation similar to the Treasury's recent proposal. — AFP

ISRAELI ARAB MISSING AFTER CROSSING INTO GAZA

JERUSALEM: An Israeli Arab is missing after crossing into Gaza yesterday, the army said, with Israel barring its citizens from entering the Palestinian enclave run by the Islamist movement Hamas.

Media reports in Israel said the man had scaled the border fence around the Palestinian territory, but the army confirmed only that he had entered. "Earlier today an Israeli man was identified crossing from Israel into the Gaza Strip. The incident is being reviewed," a spokeswoman said.

She said the man was a member of the Bedouin Israeli-Arab Muslim minority, but refused to provide further details about his identity or where he entered. A Hamas official contacted by AFP declined to comment.

Israel does not allow its citizens to enter Gaza, partly over concerns they may be used

as leverage to demand concessions, including the release of prisoners. Hamas claims to be holding four Israelis currently, though two of them-soldiers captured during the 2014 war in Gaza-are believed to be dead.

One of the other two is Hisham al-Sayed, a Bedouin man who disappeared last year and whose family says he has schizophrenia and has repeatedly gone to Jordan and Egypt before being returned.

The fourth is Avraham Mengistu, an Israeli Jew of Ethiopian descent who went missing in 2014 and whose family also say has mental health problems.

Officials in Israel have been seeking the return of all four. Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was captured by Hamas in 2006 and released in 2011 in exchange for over 1,000 Palestinian prisoners. — AFP

LOW-CASTE INDIANS THRASHED FOR SKINNING DEAD COW

AHMEDABAD, INDIA: Members of a cow vigilante gang who stripped and beat low-caste villagers over alleged cow slaughter have been arrested in India after video footage of them went viral, an official said Tuesday.

The four villagers from the lowest Dalit caste were assaulted in western Gujarat state by 'gau rakshaks' (cow protectors) who were protesting against the skinning of a cow, an animal considered sacred by India's large Hindu population.

Cow slaughter and the consumption of

beef are banned in Gujarat and several other states in officially secular India. "We have arrested three of the six accused on charges of attempt to murder," N.U. Zala, a local police officer, said.

The video shows the four half-naked men tied to a car as the activists take turns to thrash them with belts and batons at a crowded marketplace. Two more Dalits were beaten up after they tried to save the other four. Police said the low-caste workers brought the cow for skinning after it had died naturally. — AFP

FOR CHINA, TRUMP PERHAPS BETTER THE DEVIL THEY DON'T KNOW

BEIJING WATCHING US PRESIDENTIAL RUN WITH TREPIDATION

BEIJING: In 2010, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton provoked outrage in Beijing when she pushed the South China Sea to the top of the regional and US security agendas. Now as an international court handed down a ruling that threatened China's sweeping claims in the vital waterway, Beijing is watching Clinton's presidential run with trepidation.

Combined with her tough line on human rights and role in leading President Barack Obama's Asia "rebalancing", Clinton is well-known in China - but not well liked.

While presidential rival Donald Trump has irritated Beijing with comments such as comparing the US trade deficit with China to rape, he is largely an unknown quantity, a person who even privately officials shrug their shoulders over. "Clinton will be a difficult partner," one senior Chinese diplomatic source told Reuters, having just admitted to not knowing much about Trump or what he stands for.

China remembers clearly a 2010 Southeast Asian security summit in Hanoi, when Clinton waded into the South China Sea dispute, saying open access and legal solutions were a US "national interest" and "pivotal to regional security".

In a strongly worded response, China stressed the South China Sea as one of its "core interests", putting the issue up there with Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang in terms of its importance to Beijing.

China warned its rival claimants and neighbors not to be emboldened by US support - a line it has repeated ever since. An arbitration court hearing

the dispute between China and the Philippines over the South China Sea is set to hand down its ruling on in the Dutch city of The Hague yesterday. Legal experts expect at least some substantive findings to go against China, which has vowed to ignore the ruling.

Strength, respect

China's military, which is ramping up its presence in the South China Sea as part of a major modernization program, is also watching the election closely. "Hillary is very fierce when it comes to China," a Chinese official close to the military establishment told Reuters.

While the Chinese government has been largely quiet about the US election, state media has not been so restrained, with one paper even equating Trump to Hitler. In May, China's official Xinhua news agency noted Trump's more isolationist campaign compared to Clinton's, who it described as an "old foreign policy hand" and important backer of the Asia-Pacific "pivot" that China considers a threat.

"As far as she's concerned, being tough on foreign policy is perhaps the best way to show America's so called 'leadership'," it said in a commentary.

Laura Rosenberger, a Clinton campaign foreign policy adviser who worked with her in the State Department, told Reuters Clinton would remain tough on the South China Sea issue. "She believes that we need to be very strong in terms of standing up to many of the actions the Chinese have taken," Rosenberger said.

"She believes in the principles of freedom of navigation in international waters, that commerce on the high seas is incredibly important to the United States, and that these are really very direct interests that we need to continue to stand up for," Trump adviser Peter Navarro, an economist at University of California Irvine and the author of the book, "Crouching Tiger:

What China's Militarism Means for the World," said a Trump presidency would lead to respect. "The central difference between a Trump administration and the current administration or a Clinton administration is respect. The leaders of Russia, the leaders of China will respect Mr. Trump, will respect America because we will be strong economically, militarily and politically."

Unknown quantity

Trump may actually find some sympathy in China, even if he is seen as an unknown quantity. "Who is Trump? We don't really know. We do know he hates Muslims though - and that will be well received in some circles here," said the Chinese official with ties to the military, pointing to what China views as its war on terror in its Muslim-populated far western region of Xinjiang.

China also views Trump as a businessman with whom they can probably negotiate. "It would be very transactional for the Chinese," said a senior Western diplomat in Beijing. "He's a businessman they think they'll be able to strike a deal with."

Trump may also be less tough on China over human rights than Clinton, who has frequently clashed with Beijing on the issue.

In 2011, Clinton said China was on a "fool's errand" to try to halt the march of freedom, while in 2012 she was deeply involved in efforts to get blind dissident Chen Guangcheng out of China after he fled to the US embassy in Beijing.

Trump adviser Navarro said Clinton's record on

human rights abuse was "sketchy at best and abysmal at worst", highlighting her first trip to Asia as Secretary of State in 2009, where other issues were given priority. "So it's difficult to see how she would have someone would view her as credible on that issue." — Reuters



BAGHDAD: An Iraqi man walks past military vehicles paraded in the streets yesterday, during a rehearsal by pro-government forces for a military show to be held later this week in the Iraqi capital by the Joint Operations Command to celebrate the recapture of Fallujah from the Islamic State group jihadists. — AFP