

16 CIVILIANS DEAD IN RAIDS ON SYRIA'S RAQA

BEIRUT: At least 16 civilians, among them eight children, were killed yesterday in air strikes on the northern Syrian city of Raqa by unidentified planes, a monitoring group said. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said five women were also among the dead in Raqa, the main Syrian bastion of the Islamic State jihadist group. "The death toll could rise as there are around 40 wounded and missing people," the Observatory said.

The Britain-based Observatory typically identifies aircraft by flight patterns and munitions used. However, it said yesterday's strikes could have been carried out "by either the Syrian regime, the Russians, or the coalition led by Washington," referring to the US-led effort to strike IS in Syria and Iraq. But Aamaq, a self-styled news agency linked to IS, said strikes by Russian warplanes had left 17 people dead in Raqa yesterday. On Monday, Moscow announced it would withdraw the bulk of its air force from Syria after a nearly six-month air war in support of President Bashar al-Assad.

It warned that it would continue targeting "terrorist groups". Russia's military said yesterday it was still conducting about two dozen combat sorties per day to back a government offensive to retake the ancient city of Palmyra in central Syria from IS.

Meanwhile, Russian jets are flying some 25 bombing raids daily to back up a Syrian government offensive to recapture the ancient city of Palmyra from Islamic State jihadists, the armed forces said yesterday. Senior commander Sergei Rudskoi insisted that the "conditions have been created for the encirclement and definitive defeat of IS armed formations in Palmyra".

"Government troops and patriotic forces with the support of the Russian air force are carrying out a large-scale operation to liberate Palmyra," he told journalists. "On average Russian planes are flying 20 to 25 combat sorties each day," Rudskoi said. Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday spoke of "intense battles" going on around Palmyra as he decorated Russian officers who served in Syria and said he hoped the "pearl of world civilisation" would be returned to the Syrian people.

The ongoing strikes come despite some of Moscow's jets in Syria returning home after Putin-one of the main backers of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad on Monday ordered a surprise withdrawal of most of his forces from the war-torn country. Meanwhile, the IS jihadist group has claimed the killing of five Russian troops in fighting near Palmyra. — Agencies



MOSCOW: Lieutenant General Sergei Rudskoi of the Russian Military General Staff, background center, speaks to the media in Moscow yesterday while the screen shows an aerial image of an airstrike during the attack of Russian warplanes in Syria. — AP



BAGHDAD: Thousands of supporters of Iraqi cleric Moqtada Sadr defied a government ban to launch sit-ins at the main gates of Baghdad's Green Zone aimed at pushing for reforms. — AFP

CLERIC'S SUPPORTERS DEFY BAN FOR BAGHDAD SIT-IN

SADR AIDS TO REMAIN IN FRONT OF FORTIFIED 'GREEN ZONE'

BAGHDAD: Thousands of supporters of Iraqi cleric Moqtada Sadr defied a government ban yesterday to launch sit-ins at the main gates of Baghdad's Green Zone aimed at pushing for reforms. Many of the demonstrators carried Iraqi flags as they muscled past tight security and set up tents to begin what they said was an open-ended protest. "The sit-ins have started in front of the Green Zone gates as a message to the corrupt people who live there," Ibrahim Al-Jaberi, a local official from Sadr's movement, told AFP. The Najaf-based Sadr has called on his supporters to remain in front of the fortified "Green Zone" until his demands are met. The young Shiite cleric has demanded Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi reshuffle the cabinet to bring in technocrats and threatened a no-confidence vote if he failed to do so soon. "The sit-in is open-ended," said Jaberi, as Sadr followers started setting up camp on the streets and under trees. The vast restricted area in the heart of the city is home to most key institutions, including the prime minister's office, parliament and the US embassy, which is the world's largest.

Demonstrators chanting slogans such as "Yes, yes to reforms" moved to crossroads around the Green Zone and started setting up tents, rolling out mats and pulling blankets out of bags.

"We'll stay days, weeks or months if needed, until the government implements reform and sacks all the corrupt politicians," said one demonstrator, Muntadher Kadhem, a 25-year-old history student. Sadr promptly issued a statement claiming victory in his tussle with the authorities and thanking God "for letting the will of the people triumph".

Peaceful protest

The move was in defiance of a cabinet decision denying the

rally the necessary permits and an interior ministry warning not to provoke the security services.

Sadr had issued a statement on Thursday saying his movement would ignore the ban but also calling on his supporters to refrain from violence. Sadr heads a militia called Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades) that had caused strong concern when it deployed armed men during a previous protest in Baghdad.

Amid fears the stand-off could escalate, Iraqi security forces have locked down Baghdad, the Arab world's second most populous capital with an estimated eight million residents.

"All entrances to Baghdad have been blocked and some main streets and bridges are also closed, especially those leading to the Green Zone," a police colonel said. A group of Sadrist demonstrators clipped the barbed wire on one of the bridges over the Tigris river to reach an entrance to the sprawling Green Zone but no violence ensued. In his statement, Sadr praised the behaviour of the riot police and army forces deployed en masse to protect the Green Zone.

He said "the cooperation of the security forces exceeded all the expectations of some corrupt people who had bet against it". Moqtada Sadr, 42, the scion of an influential clerical family, rose to prominence when he launched a Shiite rebellion against US troops following their 2003 invasion of Iraq. He had lost some of his political influence in recent years but has brought himself back into relevance with a series of rallies against corruption.

Senior politicians from his own Ahrar bloc are perceived as some of the most corrupt in Iraq but the mercurial leader has recently distanced himself from them. He is seen as a nationalist with fewer ties to neighboring Iran than many of the country's other leading Shiite politicians. — AFP

THREE IRAQIS JAILED IN SWITZERLAND FOR AIDING IS

ZURICH: A Swiss court sentenced three Iraqis for terrorism offences yesterday, a verdict that the senior prosecutor said should send a message to jihadists not to see the country as an easy target. In Switzerland's first convictions of foreign Islamist militants, the three were jailed for between 42 and 56 months for belonging to or supporting a terrorist organisation, at a trial conducted under tight security in the city of Bellinzona. A fourth man was acquitted. The three main defendants, who had denied wrongdoing, were arrested in early 2014 on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks and helping Islamic State militants enter the country. Authorities said they had used code words such as "watermelons" for bombs when communicating via social media. One of the men was convicted of

being in Switzerland illegally. Swiss TV said the man identified as the ringleader had been granted asylum status which had since been revoked.

The verdicts are not final. The defendants, aged between 29 and 35, and the prosecutors all have the right to appeal. The prosecutors had asked for sentences of up to 7-1/2 years.

"The verdict says very clearly that Switzerland will not tolerate abuse of its liberal and open values via terrorist activity," Attorney General Michael Lauber, Switzerland's most senior prosecutor, told reporters. Lauber's office said in December, when Geneva temporarily raised its security alert level amid a hunt for terrorist suspects, that it was conducting 33 criminal proceedings linked to Islamist militancy. — Reuters

SOMALIA'S PUNTLAND SAYS GAINS GROUND IN FIGHT WITH ISLAMISTS

BOSASSO, Somalia: Security forces in Somalia's semi-autonomous region of Puntland killed more than 60 Islamist militants and regained some territory in a counter-offensive against Al Shabaab, regional officials said. The militant group has become more active in Puntland, a large part of northern Somalia, since moving more forces there after being pushed out of strongholds farther south by an African Union force and the Somali National Army, experts and officials say.

Al Shabaab, which wants to overthrow the Western-backed government, controlled Mogadishu for several years until 2011 when African Union forces drove it out. Omar Abdullahi, a regional governor, told Reuters that Puntland forces had killed 19 militants on Thursday and lost two of their own troops in

fighting for an area called Baadqab, 90 km (55 miles) southwest of Puntland's capital Garowe

He said his forces were still pursuing Al-Shabaab fighters. Puntland police officer Major Mohamed Abdullahi said 22 Al-Shabaab fighters had been killed in three days of fighting that was still going on in the Zuuj hills region, and that four soldiers were killed.

"We have besieged them but fighting is not over," he said. There was no immediate comment from Al-Shabaab, which usually gives far lower numbers of casualties on its side and much higher death tolls for the security forces.

Yesterday, the government in Mogadishu sent extra military supplies by plane to help the Puntland forces, Information Minister Mohamed Abdi Hayir said on state radio. — Reuters