

# HEAVY POLLUTION SHUTS SCHOOLS IN TEHRAN

**TEHRAN:** Tehran officials shut schools yesterday as the first of the winter's heavy pollution hit the Iranian capital. A blanket of choking brown-white smog descended on the city on Sunday, blocking out the view of the mountains that line its northern edge and leading many of its 14 million residents to retreat indoors or don face masks in the street. The level of the deadliest PM2.5 particles hit 156 yesterday—more than three times the level considered safe by the World Health Organization. "Kindergartens and primary schools are closed yesterday in Tehran and most of the cities of the province," the Ministry of Education announced, according to official agency Irna.

Officials extended traffic restrictions that alternate cars with odd and even licence plates in two central parts of the city, and deployed ambulances to wait in the busiest and dirtiest areas. Tehran mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf rode the metro to work on Sunday in a bid to

encourage people to use public transport. Despite having around 100 stations, Ghalibaf says the metro is not sufficiently funded by the central government, and Tehran has some of the world's worst traffic congestion.

Pollution has become a political football in recent years, with conservatives and reformists blaming each other for the problem. Hardliners regularly accuse the reformist vice-president Massoumeh Ebtekar, who heads the environmental protection organization, of not doing enough. The ultra-conservative daily Vatane Emrooz said yesterday that 70 percent of deaths in Tehran were linked to pollution. The pollution has been building for six consecutive days and is expected to continue until Wednesday when forecasters hope winds will move the stagnant air, an official told state television.

Residents were advised to stay indoors unless absolutely necessary, with warnings that pollution is particu-



**TEHRAN:** A general view taken from Western Tehran shows a blanket of brown-white smog covering the city as the first of the winter's heavy pollution hit the Iranian capital yesterday. — AFP

larly dangerous for the elderly, pregnant, children and those with existing respiratory and heart conditions. Sand and cement factories around Tehran were also shuttered. Every year, Tehran suffers some of the worst pollution in the world when cold weather traps the vast levels of exhaust from the city's 10 million ageing cars and motorbikes.

Two permanent zones of traffic restrictions introduced in 1979 and 2005 have failed to rectify the sprawling city's poor air quality. Local carmakers have shown little interest in introducing cleaner engines, while foreign firms have been kept out by international sanctions. In 2014, almost 400 people were hospitalized with heart and respiratory problems caused by heavy pollution in Tehran, with nearly 1,500 others requiring treatment. The health ministry estimated that pollution contributed to the premature deaths of 4,500 people in Tehran in 2012 and about 80,000 across the country. — AFP

# JIHADISTS SAY TRUMP'S VICTORY A RALLYING CALL FOR NEW RECRUITS

## IS COMMANDER CALLS TRUMP A 'MANIAC'

**KABUL:** From Afghanistan to Algeria, jihadists plan to use Donald Trump's shock US presidential victory as a propaganda tool to bring new fighters to their battlefields. Taliban commanders and Islamic State supporters say Trump's campaign trail rhetoric against Muslims — at one point calling for a total shutdown of Muslims entering the United States — will play perfectly in their recruitment efforts, especially for disaffected youth in the West. "This guy is a complete maniac. His utter hate towards Muslims will make our job much easier because we can recruit thousands," Abu Omar Khorasani, a top IS commander in Afghanistan said.

Trump has talked tough against militant groups on the campaign trail, promising to defeat "radical Islamic terrorism just as we won the Cold War." The president-elect later toned down his call for a total ban on Muslim entry to say he would temporarily suspend immigration from countries that have "a history of exporting terrorism." But he has offered few details on his plans to combat various radical groups, including IS, the Taliban and al Qaeda, which represent a wide spectrum of political views.

"He does not differentiate between extremist and moderate Islamist trends and, at the same time, he overlooks (the fact) that his extremism will generate extremism in return," Iraq's powerful Shiite Muslim cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr said in a statement. Sadr's political reform movement, which commands thousands of followers, is a staunch opponent of the radical Sunni movements IS and al-Qaeda, and unlike them has not waged or promoted

attacks in the West. The United States has seen a handful of attacks inspired by Islamist militant groups, including the June massacre of 49 people at an Orlando nightclub by a gunman who called a TV station swearing allegiance to IS and the killing of 14 people at a San Bernardino, California, social services agency last December. US officials have warned the country will likely face a higher risk of similar attacks as IS urges supporters to launch attacks at home instead of joining its fight in the Middle East.

"Our leaders were closely following the US election but it was unexpected that the Americans will dig their own graves and they did so," said IS's Khorasani, who described President Barack Obama as a moderate infidel with at least a little brain in comparison to Trump. Al-Qaeda, which has proven resilient more than 15 years after launching the Sept 11 attacks on New York and the Pentagon, has yet to comment on Trump's victory.

The militant group will likely respond after Trump's first speeches as president, anticipating they will be able to exploit his comments to win support, said Hisham al Hashemi, who advises the Iraqi government on Sunni jihadist movements. "Al-Qaeda is known for its recruitment strategy that heavily quotes speeches of the White House and other Western officials," he told Reuters.

### Propaganda machine

Trump's office did not immediately respond to requests for comment on the statements from the militants. Even if Trump tones down his anti-Muslim comments when he

takes office in January, analysts say his statements during the campaign trail were enough to fuel the militants' propaganda machine. "Militants will still use those quotes," said Matthew Henman, head of IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre. "The key thing militant groups, particularly Islamic State and al Qaeda, depend on for recruitment purposes is convincing Muslims in the Western world that the West hates them and won't ever accept them as part of their society."

A senior Taliban commander in Afghanistan said the group, whose resurgence is undermining efforts to end America's longest war, had kept track of all of Trump's speeches and anti-Muslim comments. "If he does what he warned in his election campaign, I am sure it will provoke Muslim Ummah (community) across the world and jihadist organizations can exploit it," said the militant leader, who declined to be identified because of strict Taliban policy that only its official spokesman can make statements.

Shortly after Trump's victory, several jihadist sympathizers took to social media to declare this as an opportunity for their cause. "The dog Trump's victory in the US elections is a gold mine for Muslims not a setback if they know how to use it," tweeted @alhl200, who regularly posts statements in support of Islamic State. And in Algeria, @salil\_chohada, an Islamic State supporter whose name on the Twitter account is Mohamed Aljazairie, said: "Congratulations to the Muslim nation over the infidel Trump's victory. His stupid statements alone serve us." — Reuters



**MOSUL:** A front line drone operator from the Iraqi Special Forces 2nd division takes cover behind a rooftop wall as he eyes his aircraft while smoke billows from an Islamic State (IS) group position that was hit during fighting in Mosul's Karkukli neighborhood yesterday. — AFP

# HAND GRENADE DRONE ADDS TO ISLAMIC STATE'S ARSENAL

**ARBID:** The Islamic State group drone hovered in the sky over the advancing Iraqi forces before dropping a grenade, the jihadists' latest move to weaponise small off-the-shelf aircraft. Down below, the grenade exploded on the roof of a building where Iraqi police forces were sheltering as they advanced some 10 kilometers south of Mosul, the last IS-held Iraqi city. No one was injured, according to an Iraqi officer, but the incident nonetheless represents another escalation in the war of commercially available drones that is playing out as Iraqi forces battle the jihadists.

Masters of invention, IS jihadists have booby trapped household appliances and turned cars into armored suicide bombs as they try to stymie the Iraqi forces. Now they seem to have found another way to try to slow the progress: weaponising the \$1,000 drones that they normally use to spy on their foes. "We have recorded three incidents," police Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Moayyad said. The jihadists appear to have used an add-on-similar to those intended to help fishermen drop their hooks farther out at sea to release the drone's payload, Moayyad said.

They rig the grenade so the pin is pulled free when the explosive device is dropped, arming it. While this attack was relatively primitive and-for now-pretty ineffective, IS drones have already proved more deadly in other ways. Last month a hobby plane rigged with explosives killed two Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga fighters and injured two French soldiers. According to a US defense official, the incident unfolded on October 2 when a small plane with a styrofoam body was either shot down or crashed in Arbil in northern Iraq. Two Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga fighters grabbed it and took it back to their camp to inspect and photograph it, when it blew up.

### Dueling drones

IS is flying drones to spy on Iraqi forces-so Iraqi forces are sending up their own devices to spot the enemy as well. Moayyad watched a screen inside a specially converted armored bank van he has turned into a mobile drone control centre. "Now I am entering the dangerous zone, this is where Daesh is," he said, using an Arabic acronym for IS as he maneuvered the drone's remote control to focus on jihadist positions some five kilometers away.

Like the IS operation, the Iraq police have also cobbled their drone program together with shop-bought equipment and ingenuity. Moayyad—who has a masters degree in computing-modified drones bought in Dubai and Turkey to give them greater range, longer battery life and the ability to film at night. When he spots enemy movement, he coordinates with the Iraqi artillery, air force or sometimes the US-led coalition bombarding IS from the sky. In eastern Mosul, Iraqi special forces soldiers are using drones for the same purpose.

"There were three car bombs coming out from Al-Bakr toward our positions that we spotted with our drone and hit with our tanks," Staff Lieutenant Colonel Muntadhar Salem recently said, referring to an area in the city. In total, Moayyad said, the Iraqi police force drones-superior to the ones IS use-end up costing somewhere around \$26,000. But despite having superiority over the jihadists, he said the Iraqi forces could do with equipment that can let you take control of unknown drones, especially now that IS is arming them.

"Maybe they could get bigger drones," Moayyad said. "And if they manage to use chemical weapons on them, then this is more scary, of course." — AFP

# KERRY IN OMAN FOR YEMEN PEACE TALKS

**MUSCAT:** US Secretary of State John Kerry held talks yesterday with officials in Oman on efforts to end Yemen's 19-month conflict, state media in Muscat said. Kerry and Oman's Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi discussed the "peaceful and humanitarian role played by the sultanate in Yemen," ONA state news agency reported. Kerry is also expected to meet ruler Sultan Qaboos, in one of his last trips as secretary of state before President Barack Obama's administration ends on January 20.

The US chief diplomat has been pushing for a settlement of Yemen's deadly conflict, which escalated with the military intervention of a Saudi-led coalition to support the government against Iran-backed Houthi rebels in March 2015. Oman, one of the few Arab states to have good relations with Iran, has used its links to mediate peace talks between the insurgents and Yemen's UN-recognized government of president Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi. It is also the only Arab nation in the Gulf not part of the Saudi-led coalition, although it maintains good relations with regional powerhouse Saudi Arabia.

More than 7,000 people have been killed and nearly 37,000 wounded in Yemen since March 2015, and the UN says millions are in need of food aid. Another 21 million people urgently need health services, according to the UN health agency. Yesterday, 12 civilians, including a child, were killed in an air raid that targeted a convoy of three lorries in the central Ibb province, while nine rebels were killed in an ambush in the same region, military and medical sources said. Five other rebels, three soldiers and one civilian were killed Sunday in renewed violence in the southwestern Taz province, military sources said. After Oman, Kerry will travel to Abu Dhabi for talks on regional conflicts, including Syria. — AFP



**MUSCAT:** US Secretary of State John Kerry (left) meets with Omani Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah in Muscat, Oman yesterday. — AFP

## News

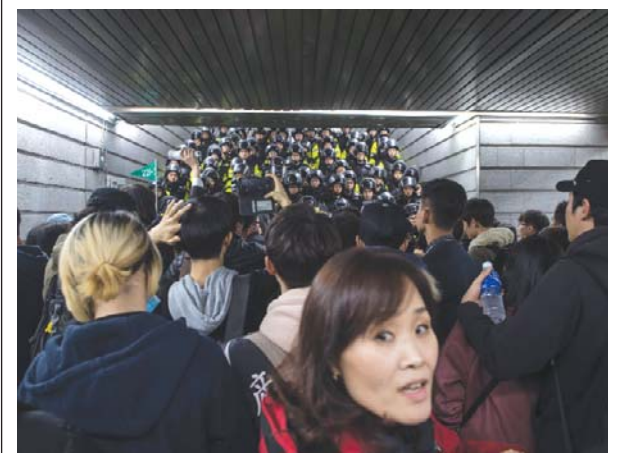
in brief

### BBC cancels a debate on Islam and politics

**RABAT:** The BBC has been forced to move a debate on Islam and politics from Morocco to another country because of problems over filming permissions, the broadcaster has said. "Global Questions, our highly respected and internationally renowned current affairs program, had planned to travel to Casablanca in Morocco for a debate about Islam's place in politics," the BBC said on Sunday. "Unfortunately, for unforeseen reasons related to permissions, we will no longer be filming this debate in Morocco but plan to take it to an alternative country," a spokesperson said. French-language Moroccan newspaper l'Economiste said the episode would instead be filmed in Tunisia. A flagship BBC debate program, Global Questions is presented by Sudanese-British journalist Zeinab Badawi and broadcast on both television and radio. The broadcaster said the episode was to be an "informed and balanced discussion" of the role of Islam in politics in Morocco and the region. It was to feature a "high-profile panel of political, civil society and religious figures," it said.

### Bahraini opposition figure accused of inciting hatred

**DUBAI:** Bahraini authorities have accused a prominent opposition figure of "inciting hatred and contempt against the regime" in a statement to foreign media, a local newspaper reported Monday. The prosecution said on Sunday it had summoned Ibrahim Sharif after he made a statement that "harms the kingdom's constitutional system" to a foreign press outlet. Sharif denied parts of the statement attributed to him, it said, adding that he was released after being charged and pending further investigations. The Al-Wasat daily confirmed the release with Sharif's lawyer. Sharif, the former secretary general of the Waed secular association, spoke to foreign press last week during a visit by Britain's Prince Charles to the Gulf kingdom. Authorities in July freed Sharif after he served a one-year jail term for anti-regime incitement. He had already served four years of a five-year sentence over the 2011 protests before being released under a royal amnesty in June last year.



**SEOUL:** Police block a subway exit during an anti-government protest in central Seoul. — AFP

# S KOREAN PROSECUTORS TO QUESTION PRESIDENT

**SEOUL:** South Korean prosecutors want to question President Park Geun-hye this week over suspicion that she let a shadowy longtime confidante manipulate power from behind the scenes, an official said Sunday. It would be the first time that a sitting South Korean president has been questioned by prosecutors. The explosive scandal is the most serious challenge for Park, whose public apologies have done little to calm public anger. Prosecutors are seeking to question Park face-to-face on either Tuesday or Wednesday at the latest, a prosecution official said. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the investigation was underway, said prosecutors conveyed their position to Park's office and were awaiting a response. The president's office said earlier Sunday that it can work out its position on a Park investigation as early as today. It said it needs time to review when and how Park should be investigated.

### 'War has just begun,' Boko Haram warns

**KANO:** The leader of the jihadist group Boko Haram has reacted to the election of Donald Trump to the White House with a warning that "the war has just begun" against the West. "Do not be overwhelmed by people like Donald Trump and the global coalition fighting our brethren in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and everywhere," Abubakar Shekau said in an audio message posted on YouTube late Sunday. "We remain steadfast on our faith and we will not stop," he said in the hour-long message. "To us, the war has just begun." Boko Haram is waging a seven-year-old uprising against the Nigerian state that has claimed more than 20,000 lives, with the insurgency spilling over the West African nation's borders into neighboring states. Boko Haram, which last year pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group, has been in the grip of a power struggle since late last year. The IS high command said in August that Shekau had been replaced as leader by Abu Musab Al-Barnawi, the 22-year-old son of Boko Haram's founder Mohammed Yusuf.