

International

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2016

Morocco's selfie king causes an online stir

9

4 dead as train derails in Spain

10

Trump's Mexico trip haunts president

13



DOUMA: A wounded Syrian boy comforts another young victim at a makeshift hospital following reported government air strikes on the rebel-held town. — AFP

US, RUSSIA TUSSLE OVER SYRIA

‘REBELS ARE NOW BACK TO SQUARE ONE’

GENEVA: The United States and Russia yesterday grappled over plans to halt the fighting in Syria, as resurgent Moscow-backed regime forces tightened the noose around the beleaguered city of Aleppo. In Geneva, Secretary of State John Kerry was once more locked in talks with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, but US officials warned that negotiations could not go on forever without a breakthrough.

Washington wants Moscow to help clinch a ceasefire, get humanitarian aid to civilians and eventually set the stage for political talks to end a five-year war that has killed more than 290,000. The two powers back opposite sides in the civil war, with Moscow supporting Bashar Al-Assad's Syrian regime and Washington behind a coalition of rebel groups it regards as moderate.

Senior officials travelling with Kerry said he would not have flown out once again to new face-to-face talks with Lavrov unless he thought there was a chance of progress. A US official described the talks as “crisp and businesslike”, focused on

specific technical details of how the ceasefire would be observed. In a break in proceedings, the US delegation was to update Washington on progress. But officials warned there was no guarantee of a final agreement before both men return home later yesterday, just four days after the pair met in China and failed to narrow their differences.

The ministers met in the familiar confines of a hotel on the shore of Lake Geneva and made brief remarks to reporters about North Korea's latest nuclear test before beginning closed-door talks on Syria. UN envoy on Syria Staffan de Mistura said a successful outcome from the talks could provide a major boost towards resolving the conflict. “(It) would have a major impact on humanitarian access, and in turn would have a positive impact on the way the political process would be relaunched,” de Mistura said in Geneva.

‘Back to square one’

Washington wants concrete steps from Russia to force Assad to stop bombing his own people,

respect a ceasefire and lift the siege of Aleppo. “We need to see a situation where it's clear within whatever is being agreed with the Russians that there won't be a siege of Aleppo,” a senior US official told reporters.

Pro-regime forces have taken back a strategically important district on Aleppo's southern outskirts, rolling back nearly every gain from a month-long rebel offensive there. The government advance further sealed off Aleppo's opposition-held eastern districts and regime troops backed by the Russian air force have completely encircled opposition-held neighborhoods. And in another major blow to the rebels, the military commander of the Army of Conquest, the largest rebel alliance, was killed in an air strike, Islamist sources said Thursday.

The former Al-Nusra Front, an Al-Qaeda affiliate recently renamed Fateh Al-Sham Front, announced “the martyrdom” of Abu Omar Sarakeb, the biggest setback to the group since it formed early last year. “Rebels are now back to

square one, under an even more ruthless siege,” Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the observatory, told AFP.

In the besieged city, desperate civilians described a hungry battle for survival. “This siege is much harder than the first one. During the first one, there were at least some products still in the market now there's nothing at all,” said one shopper, Omar Al-Beik. “No products, no vegetables, no sugar. Nothing. We came to buy a few things to cook and we couldn't find a thing,” he told AFP.

In the nearby Al-Sakhr district, Abu Omar said he was bracing himself for more shortages. He and his three children are surviving on rice, bulghur wheat and lentils, and have not had bread in three days. “There's a risk that we'll be starving in two weeks,” he said. The Syrian war began as a pro-democracy revolt in 2011 but morphed into a multi-front conflict after the regime unleashed a crackdown. It has killed more than 290,000 people and forced more than half the population to flee their homes. — AFP