

ASSAD IS AN ARCH-TERRORIST: BRITISH FM

LONDON: Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad is an "arch-terrorist" and it is time Russia realized he is "literally and metaphorically toxic," British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said yesterday. Johnson said Assad's ally Moscow still had time to be on the "right side of the argument", in a Sunday Telegraph newspaper article. "Assad uses chemical weapons because they are not only horrible and indiscriminate. They are also terrifying," Johnson wrote. "In that sense he is himself an arch-terrorist, who has caused such an unquench-

able thirst for revenge that he can never hope to govern his population again.

"He is literally and metaphorically toxic, and it is time Russia awoke to that fact. They still have time to be on the right side of the argument." Johnson was widely criticised for failing to get the G7 to back his bid for new sanctions against senior Russian and Syrian figures following the chemical weapons attack in Syria's Idlib province that killed dozens and caused an international outcry.

But he said the chemical assault had changed

the West's stance on Syria. "The UK, the US and all our key allies are of one mind: We believe that this was highly likely to be an attack by Assad, on his own people, using poison gas weapons that were banned almost 100 years ago," he wrote. "Let us face the truth: Assad has been clinging on. With the help of Russians and Iranians, and by dint of unrelenting savagery, he has not only recaptured Aleppo. He has won back most of 'operational' Syria."

Before the April 4 chemical attack, the West was

"on the verge of a grim consensus", which had now changed, said Johnson. The consensus had been that it would be more sensible to concentrate on the fight against Islamic State jihadists and to accept reluctantly that removing Assad, "though ultimately essential-should await a drawn out political solution". A suicide car bomb attack on buses carrying Syrians evacuated from two besieged government-held towns killed 43 people on Saturday, as US-backed fighters advanced in their push towards the IS group's Raqa stronghold. —AFP

IRAQI FORCES MAKE MOSUL GAINS, BUT WAR WITH IS FAR FROM OVER

FINAL NEIGHBORHOODS WILL BE MOST DIFFICULT TO CAPTURE

BAGHDAD: Iraqi forces made major gains in the six months since launching the operation to retake Mosul, but the battle for Iraq's second city and the war against the Islamic State group are far from over. Tough close-quarters fighting in heavily-populated areas of Mosul is still ahead, and IS also holds territory in other parts of Iraq, as well as in neighboring Syria.

The jihadists will still be able to carry out attacks in Iraq even if they

But "the final neighborhoods will be the most difficult to recapture, especially the Old City and the remaining neighborhoods in north-western Mosul," Martin said. Progress in the Old City—a warren of closely-spaced buildings and narrow streets where hundreds of thousands of civilians are thought to reside—has been difficult and slow.

"You cannot get vehicles in there, so it's gotta be a dismantled operation," Brigadier General Rick

earlier this year. Two special forces units—the Counter-Terrorism Service and the Rapid Response Division—have spearheaded the fighting inside Mosul, while soldiers and police have also taken part.

Lasting IS threat

Iraqi Kurdish forces were involved in the initial days of the operation but stopped short of the city, while pro-government paramilitary forces were tasked with mov-

ties in Mosul, while residents have been caught up in fighting between Iraqi forces and IS, and the jihadists are intentionally attacking civilians in the city. Losing Mosul would be a major blow to IS, but would not mark the end of the war against the jihadists. "Just because we're done in Mosul doesn't mean that Daesh is done in Iraq," Uribe said, using an Arabic acronym for IS. "There's still another significant number of areas within Iraq that will... need to be cleared of Daesh, and... the Iraqi security forces are getting themselves ready for that eventually—they know that it's coming," he said. "We will not leave any area under the control of the terrorist organization," Brigadier General Yahya Rasool, the spokesman for Iraq's Joint Operations Command, said at a recent news conference.

Thousands displaced

IS holds territory in Iraq's Kirkuk province, as well as areas west of Mosul, and in western Anbar province, and also controls territory including the city of Raqa in Syria. Losing these areas would still not eliminate the threat of bombings and hit-and-run attacks by the jihadists. Iraqi "successes in Mosul obscure how (IS) has successfully been resurging in other provinces in Iraq," Martin said.

The jihadists have "reconstituted attack capabilities in Diyala and central Salaheddin," he said, referring to provinces where Iraqi forces had largely reasserted control after heavy fighting earlier in the war against IS. The end of the battle for Mosul will also leave Iraq struggling with thorny political issues including control of recaptured territory in the north that is claimed by both the country's autonomous Kurdish region and its federal government. And Iraq will still be contending with the effects of the war—citizens killed, wounded or missing, hundreds of thousands displaced, houses, shops and infrastructure wrecked, children years behind in school—for years to come. —AFP



MOSUL: A picture taken through broken glass on April 16, 2017 shows Iraqi forces preparing as they advance in the old city of Mosul during an offensive to recapture the city from Islamic State (IS) group fighters. —AFP

no longer control significant territory, while the impact of the war-widespread displacement of civilians, cities and towns devastated by the fighting, countless lives disrupted—will last long after the fighting ends. Iraqi forces and the US-led coalition supporting them "are nearing the end of the operation to recapture Mosul," said Patrick Martin, Iraq analyst at the Institute for the Study of War.

Uribe, a senior coalition commander, said of the Old City. That "makes it very difficult for any offensive manoeuvre in there, but it makes it very easy to defend," Uribe said. "Sometimes, 50 metres (yards) is a great day," he said of the Iraqi advance. Iraqi forces launched the Mosul operation in October, moving toward the city from the south, west and north before assaulting its eastern side, which was recaptured

ing on the IS-held town of Tal Afar, west of Mosul. After retaking east Mosul, Iraqi forces set their sights on the far side of the Tigris River, which divides the city. The battle for west Mosul—which was launched in mid-February—has taken a heavy toll on civilians, with hundreds killed or wounded in the fighting, and more than 200,000 displaced.

The coalition has said it "probably" played a role in civilian casual-

BORDER WALL COULD LEAVE FEW AMERICANS ON 'MEXICAN SIDE'

BROWNSVILLE: The last time US officials built a barrier along the border with Mexico, they left an opening at the small road leading south to Pamela Taylor's home on the banks of the Rio Grande. Taylor hadn't been told where the fence would be built, and she doesn't know now whether officials are coming back to complete it. "How would we get out?" asked Taylor, 88, sitting in the living room of the home she built with her husband half a century ago. "Do they realize that they're penalizing people that live along this river on the American side?"

Taylor's experience illustrates some of the effects that the border wall President Donald Trump has imagined could have on residents in the Rio Grande Valley, the sunny expanse of bilingual towns and farmland that form the southernmost point of the US-Mexico border. The wall could seal some Americans on the "Mexican side"—technically on US soil, but outside of a barrier built north of the river separating the two countries. Landowners could lose property, and those that already lost some for the existing fence are already preparing for a new battle.

'Ready to fight'

Even if they don't win, lawyers hope to tie up the wall in court long enough that politics could effectively stop it, either in Congress or after another election. "That's a fight that we've been ready to fight," said Efen Olivares, a lawyer with the Texas Civil Rights Project. The US government will select finalists to build pieces of wall in San Diego, then choose a company to complete the rest.

Ron Vitiello, chief of the US Border Patrol, told The Associated Press on Wednesday that a new barrier will eventually be built in the Rio Grande Valley, where sections of rust-colored poles 18 feet (5.5 meters) high already run through neighborhoods in Brownsville and nearby towns. Vitiello told an audience in San Antonio that the government plans to complete a wall or fence in towns that have long been under consideration.

"There will likely be (barriers) there if all of the plans come together, but I can't tell you where," he said. Trump said he would build the wall to stop migrants entering illegally and what he described as a flow of drugs and crime. The Border Patrol makes more apprehensions along the more than 300 miles (483 kilometers) of border in the Rio Grande Valley than anywhere else. In and around Brownsville, people

have lived next to the river for generations, and residents of both sides cross bridges to work or shop daily. Taylor and others who live closest to the river routinely see border crossers walking up to their homes.

Many people living in the valley say the fence doesn't work, and there's widespread opposition there to a bigger wall. While the region is one of the Texas Democratic Party's few strongholds in a deeply conservative state, many people here resent outsiders and politicians of both parties for using the border as a talking point. The 2006 law authorizing a fence passed with support from many Democrats, including then-Sen Hillary Clinton, who lost to Trump in November.

When the US government built the fence, it had to take hundreds of landowners to court to use its power of eminent domain. That's because unlike in other southern border states, most Texas border land is privately owned, and tough terrain and water use agreements with Mexico meant some fence was built a mile or more north of the river.



In this March 22, 2017, file photo, Antonio Reyes of Brownsville, Texas, stands by the US-Mexico border fence near his home. —AP

'Just compensation'

With court fights also expected over Trump's wall, the Texas Civil Rights Project has begun signing up landowners and identifying people who might be affected. Under the US Constitution, the government must prove it wants to seize land for public use and must offer a landowner "just compensation." While challenging the wall's "public use" would be difficult, those who believe they're not getting the full value of their land could take the case to court, setting up trials that could take years. Antonio Reyes said he's seen people scale the border fence that bisects his backyard and jump down in seconds. Sometimes they carry bales of what appear to be drugs. A higher wall is "still not going to stop them," he said. "They'll shoot up or whatever they have to do." In Roma, a town of 10,000 people, a visitor standing on the bluffs overlooking the Rio Grande can see traffic moving across a tiny bridge and hear chickens clucking on the Mexican side. The Border Patrol occasionally uses blimps to monitor traffic, with agents stationed nearby. —AP



CAIRO: Aya Hijazi, center, a dual US-Egyptian citizen, is acquitted by an Egyptian court after nearly three years of detention over accusations related to running a foundation dedicated to helping street children. —AP

EGYPT ACQUITS AMERICAN DETAINED FOR THREE YEARS

CAIRO: An Egyptian court yesterday acquitted Aya Hijazi, a dual US-Egyptian citizen who has been held in detention for nearly three years over accusations related to a non-governmental organization she founded to aid street children. Authorities arrested Hijazi, her husband and six others in May 2014 on charges of abusing children that were widely dismissed as bogus by human rights groups and senior US officials, who called for her release.

The arrests came as part of a wider clampdown on civil society especially following the military overthrow of an elected Islamist president in 2013. Prosecutors provided little if any evidence to support the allegations. Several US congressmen have called on Egypt to release Hijazi, and Hillary Clinton reiterated the demand in a meeting with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi last September, when she was the Democratic presidential candidate.

US President Donald Trump did not publicly mention the case when he welcomed el-Sissi to the White House earlier this month, but a senior White House official had said ahead of the meeting that the case would be addressed. The court's decision to acquit surprised Hijazi's mother, Naglaa Hosny, who told The Associated Press "we were expecting the worst and hoping for the best."

Hijazi's lawyer, Taher Abol Nasr, said she would likely remain in detention another two to three days while her acquittal is processed. He expects all the defendants to walk free by the end of the week. It was not immediately clear if Hijazi would remain in Egypt.

Hijazi, 30, grew up in Falls Church, Virginia. She received a degree in conflict resolution from George Mason University in 2009, and then returned to her native Egypt.

Along with her husband, Hijazi established a foundation by the name Belady, Arabic for "our nation," in 2013 with the aim of providing shelter for street children. A few months later, authorities raided the foundation's office after a man alleged that his son was missing and blamed it on Belady. Egyptian authorities have clamped down on civil society, particularly human rights groups and other organizations that receive foreign funding. Such groups played a central role in the 2011 uprising that toppled longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak, and pro-government media often present them as part of a conspiracy to undermine the state. The authorities also arrested thousands of people in the months following the 2013 overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi, mainly his Islamist supporters but also a number of secular and liberal activists. —AP

SERIAL EXECUTIONS TAKE TOLL ON EXECUTIONERS TOO, CRITICS SAY

MIAMI: Putting a prisoner to death "stays with you for a long time," says Ron McAndrew. The former warden of Florida State Prison says his own mental health had begun to deteriorate by the time he left his position in 1998 after taking part in eight executions. Now, McAndrew is fighting against the death penalty.

He is particularly concerned about the psychological well-being of the handful of officials who would be involved if Arkansas were to proceed with the rapid-fire executions of several condemned men, originally set for April 17 to 27. Courts in that southern state have blocked those executions for now, as legal appeals continue.

"We wanted the governor (of Arkansas) to understand that he's sitting in his office very comfortable. And these men are going to be partaking in a killing of another human being," McAndrew told AFP. He doesn't use the word "execution," which he considers a euphemism. "These officers, they get to know these inmates," he explained. "Twenty-four hours a day they work with these inmates. They feed them. They take them to get their showers, they take them for exercise. They stand in front of their cells and they talk to them when they feel lonely," McAndrew said. "The only persons that the inmates know are the officers. Suddenly it's the same officer who's taking them to another room to kill them." "The experience is something that will stay with you for a long time; I don't think it ever goes away."

Five-person execution team

McAndrew, who took part in the deaths of eight convicts—three in Florida, and five in Texas as training—says that the executions in Arkansas will undoubtedly be carried out by the same five people. "You can't change the team," he said. "The officers that will carry out the executions, they have practiced the executions several hundred times. They do it over and over and over again," he said. An officer volunteers to play the part of an inmate, he said.

"They take him from the cell, they put them on the gurney, they strap him down, they put them on the IVs, or intravenous lines. Arkansas prison authorities have refused to divulge the makeup of their exe-

cuting team, fiercely protecting the identities of those involved. "I can say that they are well-trained and qualified to carry out their respective responsibilities," said Solomon Graves, a spokesman for the Arkansas Department of Correction. In the view of anti-death penalty activists, everyone involved pays a price.

"We are concerned for the welfare of the prisoners, we are concerned for the victims' families, we are concerned for the welfare of the prison workers that have to do this," said Abraham Bonowitz, director of the New York-based Death Penalty Action group. "There's a broader range of collateral damage than simply the prisoner and the victim."

Risk of error

Arkansas's original packed schedule would place added pressure on the execution team, increasing the risk of error, critics say. And no one wants to see a repeat of the agony Clayton Lockett suffered during his botched execution in Oklahoma in 2014.

"The rapid schedule will put an extraordinary burden on the men and women required by the state to carry out this most solemn act, and it will increase the risk of mistakes in the execution chamber—which could haunt them for the rest of their lives," said Allen Ault, Georgia's former commissioner of corrections who has overseen five executions, writing in Time magazine's March 28 edition.

A group of former officials from all over the United States, including McAndrew and Ault, have written to Governor Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas urging him not to impose such a burden on prison staff. "Even under less demanding circumstances, carrying out an execution can take a severe toll on corrections officers' well-being," the letter said. "We are gravely concerned that by rushing to complete these executions in April, the state of Arkansas is needlessly exacerbating the strain and stress placed on these officers," increasing the chance of error. Arkansas's original plan to execute eight men in 10 days this month would have set a rate never seen since the United States resumed the death penalty in 1977, the nonprofit Death Penalty Information Center has reported. —AFP