

# GUNMEN KILL COP NEAR EGYPT MONASTERY

**CAIRO:** Gunmen attacked security forces near St. Catherine's Monastery in Egypt's south Sinai on Tuesday, killing at least one police officer and injuring four others, the Health Ministry said, just a week after two deadly church bombings killed 45. Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack on a police checkpoint about 800 meters from the entrance to the monastery, one of the world's most important Christian sites.

The attack comes just 10 days before Pope Francis is scheduled to visit Egypt and just over a week after two deadly suicide

bombings on Christian churches, also claimed by Islamic State, plunged the country into mourning and marked one of the bloodiest days for the country's Christian minority in decades. St Catherine's, founded in the 6th century and located at the foot of Mount Sinai, is one of the oldest Christian monasteries in the world and a UNESCO world heritage site. It is part of the Eastern Orthodox church.

Egypt's Christian minority, which makes up about 10 percent of the country's 92 million people, has increasingly been targeted

by Islamist militants, with three deadly church attacks in the span of four months. In February, scores of Christian families and students fled North Sinai province after a spate of targeted killings. A successful assault on St Catherine's would be the latest challenge to President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has pledged to protect the religious minority as part of his campaign against extremism.

Egypt has for years been battling an Islamist insurgency in the rugged and thinly populated northern Sinai, which gained pace after the military overthrew President

Mohamed Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 following mass protests against his rule. Attacks in Egypt's southern Sinai, a popular destination for tourists dotted with Red Sea resorts, are by contrast rare. Security sources told Reuters that security had been put on high alert at tourist facilities across southern Sinai after the attack.

The attack in southern Sinai comes as Russia is expected to make a long-awaited decision on whether to restore flights to the Sharm el-Sheikh resort after a Russian airliner was downed in 2015, dealing a serious blow

to the area's tourism industry, which relies heavily on Russian visitors. Egypt's tourism industry, a crucial source of hard currency, has suffered in the years of turmoil that followed the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, as well as from the suspected bombing of the Russian plane, which killed all 224 on board. Israel took the unusual step earlier this month of barring its citizens from crossing into the Sinai peninsula, saying the threat of attacks in the area inspired by Islamic State and other jihadist groups was high. —Reuters

# TURKEY DETAINS LEFTIST ACTIVISTS AFTER 'NO' PROTESTS, SAYS LAWYER

## DETAINING PEOPLE QUESTIONING LEGITIMACY OF VOTE

**ISTANBUL:** Istanbul police yesterday detained 16 leftist activists involved in demonstrations against the 'Yes' victory in the referendum on expanding President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's powers, a lawyer said. There have been daily street protests in anti-Erdogan neighborhoods in Istanbul since Sunday's referendum, which the opposition claims was marred by blatant vote rigging.

The Freedom and Solidarity Party (ODP), a left-wing movement not represented in parliament, said police had detained its Istanbul chairman Mesut Gecgel on accusations of "agitating the public" by claiming the 'Yes' vote was illegitimate. Gecgel had himself written on Twitter that he was being detained for protesting against the 'Yes' victory. Gecgel's lawyer Deniz Demirdoglu told AFP that anti-terror

police raided houses of the suspects before dawn, saying 16 people were detained so far but arrest warrants were issued for a total of 38 people.

### Stop asking questions

Describing the accusations as "strange", he added: "They are accused of provoking people to question the legitimacy of the 'Yes' in the referendum. "But there's no such crime defini-

tion in the penal code." Demirdoglu said those detained were being questioned at police headquarters in Istanbul and were awaiting a decision by prosecutors on the case. There was no immediate confirmation of the detentions by the police.

Speaking in Ankara earlier, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said the issue of the election result was closed and warned against street protests. "Turkey is a state of law... and there can be no talk of anarchy, activities in the street," he said. "I call on people not to give in to provocations or get caught up in incitement," he added. The 'Yes' camp won Sunday's poll with just 51.41 percent of the vote. But the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has formally requested that the Supreme Election Board (YSK) cancel the result over to alleged violations which the opposition says swung the result.

The opposition is particularly incensed by a last-minute move by the YSK to accept ballot documents in envelopes without an official stamp. The YSK was considering the petition and was expected to make an announcement later in the day. CHP spokeswoman Selin Sayek Boke vowed that the party would use all means to challenge the result and could even consider withdrawing from parliament. "We will use all the legal paths, and all legitimate democratic rights for the millions (of voters), no one should doubt this," she told reporters in Ankara. "This can include withdrawing from parliament or continuing to work in parliament," she added, calling for the referendum to be re-run. —AFP



**ISTANBUL:** Supporters of the "No" march at Besiktas to submit their petition calling for the annulment of a referendum that approved sweeping constitutional changes boosting President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's powers, claiming blatant vote-rigging had swung the result. —AFP

# SOMBER MOOD AS IRAQ'S YAZIDIS MARK NEW YEAR

**LALISH:** Thousands of Yazidis flocked to a shrine in northern Iraq to mark the New Year yesterday, in the minority's biggest gathering since it was targeted for genocide by jihadists. Wearing traditional Yazidi clothes, holding candles and paraffin lamps, they started gathering in the holy town of Lalish on Tuesday for celebrations ahead of their New Year.

The event, known by the ethno-religious minority as "Carsama Sari Sali", is meant to commemorate the creation of the universe by the angels and celebrate nature and fertility. But the mood was sombre among the faithful gathered in Lalish, every one of whom was affected by the violence that erupted nearly three years ago when the Islamic State group took over their traditional homeland.

"I'm not happy, it's not like before, because there are those who are still in the hands of Daesh (IS)," said Zoan Msaid, a Yazidi woman from the Sinjar area who now lives in a camp for displaced people. "We cannot forget our customs and traditions but I just want those who are still held to come back, that's all. We ask for nothing more." Yazidis are neither Arab nor Muslim and when IS swept across northern Iraq in 2014, it carried out massacres against the minority which the United Nations said qualified as genocide. Most of the several hundred thousand members of the minority live in northern Iraq, mainly around Sinjar, a large town which anti-IS forces have now retaken but was extensively destroyed. IS jihadists captured Yazidi women and turned them into sex slaves to be sold and exchanged across their self-proclaimed "caliphate". Around 3,000 of them are believed to remain in captivity.

### 'We live in sorrow'

"Of course, after three years under the domination of the jihadists who killed Yazidis and imposed mass slavery, nothing is like before because we are all suffering," said Cheir Ibrahim Keshto, a professor and expert in Yazidi culture. "We live in sorrow now and the situation in the camps is catastrophic," he said.

Yazda, a charity supporting victims of the jihadists'

persecution of the Yazidis, issued a statement urging the community to continue defending its faith, a unique blend of beliefs. "Yazda calls on our people to continue to observe their religious events to preserve the ethno-religious identity and heritage of one of the most ancient peoples," its director Murad Ismael said.

Yazda voiced concern that even areas that were retaken from IS remained unsafe for Yazidis due to disputes between local forces for regional supremacy. Tensions have recently escalated between peshmerga forces form the main party in Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region and forces from Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). "This situation has resulted in creat-

ing the greatest danger facing the Yazidi community, which may ultimately be more dangerous than the ongoing genocide itself," the Yazda statement said.

Nadia Murad, a prominent Yazidi human rights activists who has been campaigning worldwide to draw attention to her people's plight, stressed in a New Year message delivered during a visit to Stanford University in California that the jihadists had not yet been held accountable. "Our hearts have been broken as we still seek justice, and we haven't found it yet," said Murad, who last year was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and awarded the prestigious Sakharov Prize jointly with Lamiya Aji Bashar, another Yazidi woman. —AFP



**DOHUK:** Iraqi Yazidis light candles and paraffin torches outside Lalish temple situated in a valley near Dohuk, 430 km northwest of Baghdad, during a ceremony to celebrate the Yazidi New Year. —AFP

# IRAQ SAYS 'FRIENDLY' NATIONS CONTACTED OVER CAPTIVES

**BAGHDAD:** Iraq's prime minister says "friendly" neighboring countries have been contacted over the fate of Qatari ruling family members and others kidnapped in late 2015, adding that a Qatari official is in the country "to help in their release." Haider Al-Abadi's comments late Tuesday came as suspicion over the December 2015 kidnappings has fallen on Shiite militias, suggesting Iraq may have reached out to Iran

to secure their release. "We asked all friendly countries to Iraq and neighboring countries to Iraq to cooperate with us to find these kidnapped individuals," Al-Abadi told journalists. Al-Abadi also said Qatar's non-resident ambassador had come to Iraq to help in securing the captives' freedom. A Qatari aircraft used by the small, energy-rich country's ruling family has been in Baghdad since Saturday.

Qatari officials did not immediately

respond to a request for comment. Iranian state media did not immediately report on Al-Abadi's comments. The abduction took place at dawn on Dec 16, 2015, at a desert camp near the Saudi border in the southern Muthanna province, some 370 kilometers southeast of the capital, Baghdad. Gunmen kidnapped some two dozen Qataris and support staff who taking part in a falconry hunt. In April 2016, the Qatari Foreign Ministry

said one of the hunters and "his Asian companion" were freed, but no word of the hostages has been made public since. Muthanna is a predominantly Shiite province and is not a region where the Sunni extremists of the Islamic State group are known to operate. The Associated Press reported last week that a Qatari ruling family member paid \$2 million in an effort involving hackers to secure the hostages' release. —AFP



**MOSUL:** A man with a bullet wound from a sniper cries out in pain as he is transferred by Iraqi Special Operations Forces medics at their field hospital. —AP

# IN MOSUL, SNIPERS TRACKING JIHADISTS AROUND THE CLOCK

**MOSUL:** A few hundred meters from an iconic mosque in west Mosul, Iraqi sniper Salah Al-Zuheiri has his eye glued to his scope as he searches for Islamic State group jihadists. Iraqi forces are battling to retake Mosul from IS, after the group overran the city in 2014 and its leader proclaimed a "caliphate" from the mosque in its Old City. IS "fighters are within range. We're tracking them day and night," says Zuheiri, a sniper with the Iraqi federal police who has taken up position some 300 meters from the Al-Nuri Mosque.

Inside a darkened room in a four-storey building retaken from the jihadists, Zuheiri tries to steady his rifle on sandbags. A map of the surrounding neighborhood, hand-drawn in red, hangs on the wall in front of him. Zuheiri and his colleagues stay in the same positions for up to 12 hours a day, he says, for two weeks straight. They "get food three times a day", he adds, and leave their positions "only when it's really necessary, like to go to the bathroom". "We kill between three and five jihadists a day," he says.

Nearby, Murtada Al-Lami lies on his stomach, the end of his barrel jutting out through a tiny hole in the wall in the direction of the Al-Nuri Mosque and the adjacent "Hadba", a leaning minaret that has long been Mosul's most recognizable landmark. IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi made his only public appearance at the mosque in July 2014 to declare a self-styled "caliphate" in parts of Iraq and neighboring Syria.

### 'Human shields'

To help the snipers find their targets, in a nearby room Iraqi soldiers take turns tracking IS fighters through binoculars. And on a screen, members of a special unit survey thermal footage sent in from aircraft above the city. "We're the ones who decide to shoot or not. We also have thermal binoculars, but we check the data with our colleagues to avoid an error," says Lami. An officer in the group, who asks to remain anonymous, says snipers recently killed an IS emir, or leader, in west Mosul. "Our snipers killed an IS emir on the west bank, creating great confusion in the Old City," he says, referring to the west bank of the River Tigris, which divides the city.

Fearing air strikes, jihadists went to the leader's funeral unarmed, the officer says, "but forced civilians to attend to act as human shields". The presence of civilians in the Old City is a major obstacle for Iraqi forces fighting to retake west Mosul after seizing the east in January. The United Nations says some 600,000 civilians remain in IS-held sectors, which include two thirds of the Old City, a warren of narrow streets. As military vehicles cannot advance in the historic city centre, last month, General Raed Shakir Jawdat said dozens of snipers had been deployed on its roofs to cover advancing troops. But IS also has snipers of its own. "A few days ago a jihadist fired at me, but he hit the wall behind me," says Zuheiri. "I located his position and shot him down quickly." —AFP

# EVACUATIONS RESUME AFTER DEADLY BOMBING

**RASHIDIN:** Evacuations of thousands of besieged Syrians resumed yesterday with tight security in place after a weekend bombing against those leaving government-held areas killed dozens, including nearly 70 children. A large convoy of buses set out from the government-held towns of Fuaa and Kafraya in Idlib province, carrying 3,000 people to the rebel-held transit point of Rashidin near Aleppo, an AFP correspondent said.

At the same time, 11 buses carrying around 300 people left rebel-held Zabadani, Serghaya and Jabal Sharqi in Damascus province, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said. In Rashidin, security was tight after a devastating bomb attack on evacuees at the site on Saturday that according to the Observatory killed 126 people, including 68 children. Most of the dead were from the two Shiite-majority towns, with a handful of aid workers and rebels guarding the convoy also killed. Dozens of wounded were taken to hospitals in nearby rebel-held territory, while others were taken to Aleppo, which government forces regained full control of late last year.

### 'I left for my children'

Armed rebels were standing guard at Rashidin yesterday and carefully inspecting vehicles arriving in the area. "We chose a different location as the gathering point for fighters from Fuaa and Kafraya with their families, because we are obliged to protect them until they leave here," said rebel fighter Abu Obeida Al-Shami.

Buses were parked in a semi-circle, forming a makeshift barrier around an area in the centre of a lot where evacuees including dozens of children milled. "Where do I even start? It would have been easier if we had just died. Death is so much easier than this humiliation," said elderly evacuee Abu Ahmad. He told AFP he was

preparing himself never to see his hometown of Fuaa again. "Someone like me, who is already 85 years old—I'm going to die tomorrow or the day after."

Pro-government militiamen among those being evacuated from Fuaa and Kafraya squatted next to one bus, smoking cigarettes. Standing nearby, 55-year-old Um Joud from Fuaa said it was difficult to describe how she felt. "I'm not afraid, because everything is in God's hands," she told AFP. "Of course I would have preferred to stay in my home, but I left for the sake of my children and their lives and futures."

The evacuations are part of a deal between government and opposition representatives that is also seeing residents and rebels transported out from several areas under regime siege near Damascus, primarily Madaya and Zabadani. It was brokered late last month by Qatar, a long-time opposition supporter, and Iran, a key regime ally, but its implementation had been repeatedly delayed.

When yesterday's evacuations are complete, a total of 8,000 people should have left Fuaa and Kafraya in exchange for 2,500 civilians and rebels from opposition areas. Zabadani and Madaya "are now empty of any rebel presence," said Mayyada Al-Aswad, a member of the coordinating committee for the operation on the government side.

Yesterday's evacuations mark the end of the first stage of the deal, with a second phase due to begin in June. Fuaa and Kafraya will be emptied entirely, with residents and fighters heading to Aleppo and then on to government-held Latakia or Damascus. All rebels are expected to leave Madaya, Zabadani, and other nearby opposition-held areas, but civilians who want to remain may do so. Those leaving rebel-held areas will head to Idlib province, which is held by an opposition alliance. —AFP