

TURKEY DETAINS 600 OVER ALLEGED LINKS TO MILITANTS

GOVERNMENT ACCUSES HDP OF LINKS TO KURDISH MILITANTS

ISTANBUL: Turkish police have detained more than 600 people over alleged links to Kurdish militants in the past two days, state media said yesterday, a crackdown the pro-Kurdish parliamentary party said was aimed at sidelining it ahead of an April referendum. Turks will vote on April 16 on replacing the parliamentary system with the stronger presidency sought by President Tayyip Erdogan.

The referendum will be held under a state of emergency, imposed after an attempted coup last July. Tens of thousands of people have been arrested since the abortive coup over suspected ties to Fethullah Gulen, the US-based Muslim cleric accused by Ankara of organizing the putsch. Separately 5,000 members of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) have been held, the party says.

Counter-terror police yesterday

detained 86 people suspected of ties to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militant group in dawn raids across Turkey, in addition to 544 held a day earlier, state-run Anadolu agency reported. "The basic goal of these operations... is to hold the referendum without the HDP," a statement from the HDP's executive committee said. Its statement, released before yesterday's arrests, said more than 300 of its members and executives had been detained on Monday, bringing those held this year to around 1,200. A dozen of its lawmakers and tens of Kurdish mayors from a sister party have been jailed pending trial.

'We will never bow down'

The government accuses the HDP, parliament's second biggest opposition party, of being a political extension of the PKK. The HDP denies direct links with

the PKK and says it wants a peaceful settlement in Turkey's largely Kurdish southeast. The PKK, designated a terrorist group by Turkey, the European Union and the United States, launched an armed insurgency against the Turkish state in 1984 and more than 40,000 people have been killed in the conflict.

A ceasefire between the PKK and the state broke down in July 2015 and thousands have been killed in conflict since then. "We will never bow down faced with this persecution and pressure," the HDP said. "What they are trying to prevent with the detentions and arrests is a 'no' (vote in the referendum)." Ahead of the official launch of referendum campaigning this week, Erdogan has called for Turks to vote 'yes' to the reform by saying that the PKK oppose it and that a 'no' vote means taking sides with those behind last year's putsch. — Reuters



ADANA: Two men, identified by Turkey's state-run news agency as Mahamad Laban, 45 (left) - a Danish citizen of Lebanese origin and Mohammed Tefik Saleh, 38, a Swedish citizen of Iraqi origin sit at a police station in Adana, southern Turkey. The Anadolu agency said that the arrested men are suspected of receiving Islamic State group weapons and explosives training in Syria for the past three months and of planning attacks in Europe. — AP



RAQA: Smoke rises near the village of Bir Fawaz, 20 km away from Raqa, as members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), made up of US-backed Kurdish and Arab fighters, advance during their offensive towards the Islamic State (IS) group's Syrian stronghold as part of the third phase to retake the city and its surroundings. — AFP

IN THE RUBBLE, ALEPPO'S CITIZENS WORK TO SAVE BATTERED HERITAGE

'CATASTROPHIC DAMAGE' TO 30% OF OLD CITY

ALEPPO: In the rubble-strewn square outside Aleppo's ancient citadel and under the scorched vaults of its covered souk, workmen are starting to mend the destruction of a war that has shattered the Syrian city's priceless historical heritage. About 20 volunteers sorted through the debris in Khan Al-Gumruk, one of the souk's great medieval inns, piling up the stones from a fallen archway that can be used in its restoration. "I'm a son of this district. We're all from Aleppo and our priority is to work here. We've been at it for a month in this area since the fighters left," said Mohannad Hassari, a bearded 25-year-old. About 30 percent of the Old City suffered "catastrophic" damage in the fighting that ended there in December, said Maamoun Abdulkarim, Syria's director general of antiquities.

Speaking to Reuters after his first visit to the city since the rebels were forced to surrender there, he said officials were working on a plan to save what they can. The Aga Khan Development Network's cultural arm, which was behind a multi-million dollar restoration and urban development project around the Citadel and nearby souks a decade ago, said it was also looking at possible rehabilitation of the area. Aleppo is one of the Middle East's great historic centers, its ancient Citadel and medieval mosques and souks among the region's finest buildings and a source of national pride - and tourist revenue - for Syria.

Today, the lingering smell of burning is everywhere in its Old City: under collapsed domes, in the soot-blackened souk and in the cracked masonry, broken glass and dis-

carded bullet casings that litter the famous Umayyad Mosque. A street vendor in gaudy folk costume accosted customers with paper cups of cardamom-spiced tea and coffee outside the Citadel. But the area's mood remained sombre compared with its bustling pre-war gaiety. Many of the cafes that lined the area, in old buildings with arched facades, have been wrecked but a group of soldiers sat in one, warming their hands around a stove that billowed black smoke and listening to mournful Arabic music.

However, people are returning, some to live where homes are still habitable and others to salvage possessions from their shops. Many more simply want to enjoy places that were too dangerous to visit during the fighting. In the Umayyad Mosque's courtyard a group of teenage boys huddled for a selfie in front of walls so peppered with bullets that it was hard to find a smooth patch of stone larger than the palm of one's hand. The 11th century minaret was destroyed by shelling in 2013. Under the arches inside the mosque, an old man in a bulky greatcoat, woollen scarf wrapped around his head, stood sobbing in the dark near a shrine, a barricade of oil drums and sandbags still looming behind it.

Frontline

When fighting erupted in Aleppo in 2012, a year after the rising against President Bashar Al-Assad had begun elsewhere in Syria, rebels took its eastern districts and much of the Old City. Intense clashes in 2012 and 2013 made the souks and the area around the Umayyad Mosque

one of the fiercest front lines in Syria, pounded by artillery and air strikes. Under the painted cupola of the Mamlouk throne hall in the Citadel, a heavy machine gun on a stand pointed towards a window and out across a wasteland of smashed buildings. The Citadel, a dramatic fortress on a hill, stands at the centre of Aleppo, overlooking the city. It was held by the government but surrounded by rebel territory. The area to its south and west, near the Umayyad Mosque, is where the Old City suffered most damage.

One stretch of the covered souk is now a dark tunnel, pierced by beams of daylight from roof shafts, its entrance a mass of stones and its shops clogged with rubble and weeds. Oil drums and sandbags, topped by a cushion in traditional fabric, gave fighters a firing position that commanded the souk corridor leading towards the Citadel. "The memory of Aleppo is very symbolic," said Abdulkarim, Syria's antiquities director general. Restoration would meet the requirements of international bodies, he added, and no modern buildings would be put up in the Old City. He said preservation of Syria's heritage should be treated separately from the political issues surrounding the war.

Restoration

Both sides in the continuing war have accused each other of targeting or damaging historical sites, which range from ancient cities, temples, mosques and castles to the more recent relics of Ottoman rule. "Everybody realizes we are working in difficult circumstances," said Ali Esmail, head of the Aga Khan Cultural Service in Syria, alluding to the fighting and other obstacles to saving Aleppo's heritage.

However, he said the charity was looking at a framework for the rehabilitation of the Old City and conservation of its historic monuments "as conditions and resources allow". The charity worked from 1999 to 2012 on restoring the area around the Citadel, transforming it into a popular haunt for Aleppians and tourists and the site of concerts and other cultural activities. But the fighting caused most to flee and its shops are now closed.

At the Bab Antakia souk, Heitham Ghanam, a middle-aged trader in women's fashion accessories, was clearing rubble from his shop with his wife and daughter. "We are waiting for the electricity to come back and for others to open their stores before we do," he said.

In Baron's Hotel, where Agatha Christie and TE Lawrence stayed, the elegant tiles of the grand lobby, smoking room and bar are hard to see in the unlit interior. The only guests are three families of refugees from eastern Aleppo districts damaged in the fighting, one living in a room once occupied by Iraq's King Faisal. At the top of the sloping causeway leading up to the Citadel's entrance, wide enough for horses to ride abreast, four soldiers scrolled through their phones under posters of Assad. But many residents look forward to a time when the soldiers manning gun positions in the Citadel's museum and stringing laundry between the pillars of its Ayubid Mosque can be replaced by tourists. — Reuters

JIHADIST INFIGHTING KILLS NEARLY 70 IN SYRIA

BEIRUT: Nearly 70 fighters from two formerly allied jihadist groups have been killed during infighting over the past 24 hours in northern Syria, a monitor said yesterday. The clashes between former Al-Qaeda affiliate Fateh al-Sham and the hardline jihadist Jund Al-Aqsa faction erupted on Monday morning, after tensions over influence in the northwestern province of Idlib. The fighting reflects the growing strained relations between different factions in Idlib province that once fought alongside either other against President Bashar Al-Assad's forces.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the clashes erupted after Jund Al-Aqsa carried out a suicide bomb attack against a Fateh Al-Sham headquarters in Idlib, killing nine people. The toll has now risen to 69 dead from both sides in heavy clashes as well as executions, with the fighting spreading to the neighboring province of Hama. "There are battles between warlords, it's a war for influence," said Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman. Jund al-Aqsa is reviled by most rebels in the region, and is designed a "terrorist group" by Washington.

Despite that, in October Fateh Al-Sham announced it had taken Jund Al-Aqsa under its wing, although clashes between the two groups erupted shortly afterwards. In January, Fateh Al-Sham also battled other rebel groups in Idlib during 10 days of clashes that killed dozens of fighters. Idlib province is held almost entirely by opposition factions, and was captured by an alliance of fighters dubbed the Army of Conquest, led by Fateh Al-Sham. More than 310,000 people have been killed in Syria since the conflict began in March 2011 with anti-government protests. The war has become a complex multi-front conflict, drawing in jihadist groups and international armies.

Al-Bab under control

Meanwhile, Turkey said yesterday that the one time jihadist bastion of Al-Bab in northern Syria was "largely" under the control of Ankara-backed Syrian rebels after

months of clashes with jihadists. "Al-Bab has largely been taken under control finally," Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim told his ruling Justice and Development Party lawmakers in Ankara, without giving further details. Since December, Turkish forces supporting opposition fighters have fought jihadists from the Islamic State group (IS) to take control of Al-Bab.

Turkey launched an ambitious operation dubbed "Euphrates Shield" in Syria last August to rid its border of IS elements and halt the advance of the Kurdish militia. Yildirim said Ankara's aim was to "prevent terrorist organizations opening corridors" where they could reach Turkey. "From the start, our efforts have not been for nothing, we have reached our aim." After a lightning advance retaking several towns close to its border, the operation faced the

biggest challenge in the campaign so far with dozens of Turkish soldiers killed in the space of a few weeks.

But at the weekend, Ankara-backed fighters entered the town centre and the official news agency said by Monday, they had recaptured 40 percent of the town. Hurriyet daily reported that rebels and President Bashar Al-Assad's forces created a security corridor to avoid clashes in the battle to capture the flashpoint town. Assad's forces have pushed towards the town from the south, leaving IS fighters completely encircled. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Monday the targets after Al-Bab would be Manbij-a former bastion of IS that is now under the control of US-backed, Kurdish-led militia-and the de-facto jihadist capital of Raqa, if "we take a joint step with (US-led) coalition forces". — Agencies



QAMISHLI: A Syrian man smokes water pipe outside a shop selling Valentine's day gifts in Syria's northeastern city of Qamishli. — AFP

News

in brief

Congolese soldiers kill at least 101 in clashes

GENEVA: Soldiers targeting the Kamwina Nsapu militia group in central Democratic Republic of Congo killed at least 101 people between Feb 9 and Feb 13, including 39 women, the UN said yesterday. The soldiers fired indiscriminately with machine guns when they saw the militia fighters, who were armed mainly with machetes and spears, human rights spokeswoman Liz Throssell said, citing sources in the country. "We are deeply concerned at the reported high number of deaths, which if confirmed would suggest excessive and disproportionate use of force by the soldiers," she said. Hundreds have died and tens of thousands have been uprooted in central Congo in recent months in battles between security forces and the militia, who are seeking to avenge the death of their leader Kamwina Nsapu. He was killed by the Congolese armed forces last August, after vowing to rid Congo's Kasai-Central province of all state security forces, accusing them of abusing the local population.

Thai drug cops make 'cocaine lotion' bust

BANGKOK: An Ecuadorian and a Russian have been arrested for attempting to smuggle 2.3 kilograms of cocaine into Thailand mixed into bottles of skin lotion, police said yesterday. Acting after a tip-off from Interpol, Thai drug police held the Ecuadorian woman after she arrived on a flight from Peru at Bangkok's main airport on Monday. A search of her luggage uncovered six containers of body lotion laced with cocaine, said Wuttipong Phetkammerd, the narcotics officer leading the case. "It was mixed in with the skin moisturizing lotion-a new smuggling tactic to avoid arrest," he told reporters, without detailing how the would-be traffickers intended to extract the cocaine from the lotion. After her arrest the woman led police to a Russian man who was waiting for her at a hotel. Both have been detained while officers investigate the case-the latest drug bust in a country that serves as a key transit stop for contraband. Thailand is a major drug market as well as transit route, with a particular penchant for "yaba"-meth pills produced in the notorious Golden Triangle region bordering Laos and Myanmar.

Bangladesh's police shoot dead Islamist commander

DHAKA: Bangladesh police yesterday shot dead an alleged commander of a banned Islamist outfit blamed for last year's deadly cafe attack in the capital, an official said. Police said Abu Jar was a close associate of Jahangir Alam, who was arrested last month after he allegedly led a campaign of targeted killings of religious minorities in the northern region. Acting on a tip-off police raided a town outside the northern city of Bogra where Jar was killed in a gunfight, Bogra police chief Asaduz Zaman said. "We fired back after they opened fire at our officers," Zaman said, adding Jar was wanted in connection with several murder cases. "Jar was the northwestern commander of the new Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and a close associate of the group's top extremist Jahangir Alam," he added. Police said Alam was one of the masterminds of the siege of Dhaka's Holy Artisan Bakery cafe where 22 hostages, mostly foreigners, were killed by suspected gunmen of a "new-JMB".

Hong Kong's police guilty of assaulting a protester

HONG KONG: Seven Hong Kong police officers were found guilty yesterday of assaulting a protester during pro-democracy rallies in 2014, in an attack that was captured on film and beamed around the world. All seven were convicted of assault causing actual bodily harm to Civic Party activist Ken Tsang, but were acquitted of a more serious charge of grievous bodily harm with intent. Video footage of the attack, filmed by a local network near the city's government headquarters, shocked residents and dented their faith in the usually trusted police force. It showed a group of men hauling a handcuffed Tsang to a dark corner in a public park, where he was beaten. One man stood over him inflicting blows while others were seen repeatedly kicking him. Police have been criticized for their sometimes heavy-handed treatment of protesters during the 79 days of rallies and street blockades that brought parts of the city to a standstill. The demonstrators were seeking fully free elections for Hong Kong's future leaders.

Israel withdraws its Egypt ambassador over security

JERUSALEM: Israel has temporarily withdrawn its ambassador to Egypt amid ongoing security concerns, the country's intelligence service confirmed yesterday. "Due to security considerations the return of the foreign ministry embassy staff to Cairo has been restricted," the Shin Bet security agency said. The statement did not say when the withdrawal took place but Britain's Daily Telegraph said ambassador David Govrin was pulled out at the end of last year. It reported that Govrin was due to return when security conditions improved. Egypt, one of only two Arab states to have signed a peace treaty with the Jewish state, has been rocked by ongoing violence in recent months. In December 26 people were killed when a bomb exploded in a prominent church in central Cairo. Govrin presented his credentials to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in August 2016. The Israeli embassy in Cairo only fully reopened in September 2015, four years after violent demonstrations.