



UK PM in Turkey to seek stronger ties after Brexit

FEARS AS ROGUE PHILIPPINE POLICE GO ON RAMPAGE



CELLE: Policemen secure an entrance to the Higher Regional Court in Celle near Hanover, northern Germany, where a verdict was expected against suspected jihadist girl Safia S. Safia S accused of stabbing a police officer, an assault allegedly ordered by the Islamic State group but which it did not claim. — AFP

FEARS GROW OVER JIHADIST CYBER THREAT

POWER GRID, TRANSPORT NETWORK, BANKING SYSTEM TARGETED

LILLE: Jihadists have yet to shut down a power grid, paralyse a transport network or banking system or take over a key industrial site from afar, but experts say the threat of such a cyber attack should be taken seriously. Analysts fear that while extremist groups may not have the necessary skills themselves, they could hire someone else to wreak havoc.

"Digital attacks with major impacts are unlikely in the short term," said Guillaume Poupard, head of France's digital security service ANSSI, speaking to AFP at an international cyber security conference in Lille, France. "However, that could change very fast. Our real fear, and we may already be there, is that

they will use mercenaries, people who will do anything for money," Poupard said. The Islamic State group, Al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups are so far using the internet mainly for propaganda and recruitment purposes.

"The skills are complex, though not at the level of a nuclear weapon," Poupard said. "With a few dozen people, a little money, but not that much, you can be effective." Earlier this month, Europol director Rob Wainwright also warned of the use of digital mercenaries by jihadist groups at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. "Even if they don't have access to the capabilities, they can simply buy it on the darknet (a hidden internet

realm of encrypted websites), where there is an enormous trade in cyber criminal technology," Wainwright said at a panel discussion on "Terrorism in the Digital Age". "That said, attacking the critical national infrastructures at least of most countries is... not easily done, and it's something that is not as immediate and showy as firing automatic weapons in a theatre or in public," he added. Data pirates and cyber criminals from several countries, often linked to organized crime, offer their services on the darknet. Given the anonymity of the sites, some may help jihadists without realizing it. "In fact, that's our fear," Poupard said. "It's no so much that IS can quickly devel-

op cyberattacks but that they will be able to go through intermediaries."

Speaking in Davos, retired Pakistani general Raheel Sharif said cyber terrorism is "a real threat". "As technology improves, the possibility exists that someone can hack into a very sophisticated system and control that resource in such a way as to do maximum damage somewhere." Most developed countries are steadily boosting their defenses against the cyber threat, be it terrorism, crime or espionage. "Terrorist groups that currently use the internet for planning, propaganda and recruitment purposes could become full players in the cyber arena," French Defense Minister Jean-

Yves Le Drian said last month as he unveiled his country's policy on military cyber security.

"Since asymmetrical operations are naturally etched into their DNA, cyber space gives them an obvious field of action, where major damage can be inflicted with limited means," he said. Disturbing precursors of more insidious actions ahead are internet interlopers that do not steal or destroy data but appear to map websites, preparing offensive weapons for later use. "This kind of attack has even begun in some countries," Poupard said. "We are closely following what's happening in Ukraine where strange breakdowns are becoming frequent that are caused by extremely sophisticated actions." — AFP

SYRIAN SOLDIERS SEIZE DAMASCUS WATER SOURCE; REBELS PULL OUT

BEIRUT: Syrian government forces took back control of an area near Damascus that provides most of the capital's water supplies after reaching a deal for rebel fighters to withdraw, pro-government media and a monitoring group said. The Syrian army and its allies launched an offensive last month to drive insurgents from the Wadi Barada valley, which they have controlled since 2012, and to recapture a major spring and pumping station.

Syria's mainstream rebel factions are under intense pressure after losing areas they held in the northern city of Aleppo to government forces at the end of last year, and now face a fierce assault by Islamist militants elsewhere. Wadi Barada, which lies northwest of Damascus, has become one of the fiercest battlefronts in Syria's civil war. Disruption to water supplies, including infrastructure damage, has caused acute shortages in the capital this month.

Government forces entered the village of Ain Al-Fija, where the spring and pumping station are located, early yesterday, a military media unit run by Lebanese group Hezbollah, an ally of Damascus, reported. "The Syrian army has entered Ain Al-Fija ... and raised the Syrian flag over the spring installation," a statement by the unit said, adding that the development was due to a deal reached with insurgents by which the rebels would leave the area. Teams were preparing to enter Ain Al-Fija to fix the pumping station and the army had secured control of the village, it added.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based war monitoring

group, said government forces had begun moving into the spring area as rebel fighters withdrew. Under the deal reached between the government side and local representatives, rebels hailing from outside the Wadi Barada area would leave for the northwest-ern province of Idlib, an insurgent stronghold, carrying light weapons, the Observatory said.

Rebels from Wadi Barada would be allowed to leave too, but could also opt to stay and serve with pro-government forces, it added. The Syrian government has struck similar local ceasefire deals with the opposition in several western parts of the country, usually involving the transfer of rebel fighters and their families to Idlib. The opposition has said the process amounts to forced population transfer.

Intense fighting raged for weeks in Wadi Barada, and knocked the water spring out of service in late December.

The United Nations has said "infrastructure was deliberately targeted", without saying who was responsible, leaving four million people in Damascus without safe drinking water. It warned the shortages could lead to outbreaks of waterborne disease. Rebels and activists have said government bombardment damaged the spring. The government said insurgent groups polluted it with diesel, forcing the state to cut supplies. Rebels in Wadi Barada had been allowing government engineers to maintain and operate the valley's pumping station. Fighters have, however, cut water supplies several times in the past to put pressure on the army not to overrun the area. — Reuters

FEAR AND RAGE ON US-MEXICO BORDER

SAN YSIDRO: At this busy border crossing between the United States and Mexico, it's hard to find anyone with positive words about President Donald Trump's vow to build a wall between the two countries. Holding true to his campaign promise, the Republican billionaire ordered US officials this week to begin constructing a barrier along the 2,000-mile US-Mexico border to keep out illegal immigrants. He also announced other plans he said would strengthen security, including deporting criminal undocumented migrants.

Here at the border crossing that connects the US city of San Ysidro with the Mexican city of Tijuana—the world's busiest border crossing—an imposing physical barrier already stands tall. The authorities raised two giant parallel fences topped by razor wire between the late 1990s and early 2000s. "I think this wall thing is foolish because if they already have all this, why do they want more?" asked Esperanza Preciado, 19.

Preciado—who was entering the United States carrying an infant to visit her father—has a legal permit to work cleaning homes in San Ysidro. "But I have a lot of relatives who do not have papers and I fear for them," she said. Thousands of people stream over pedestrian bridges in both directions around the clock at the San Ysidro Port of Entry as long lines of cars in multiple lanes queue for inspection to enter the United States. More than 65 million people cross between Tijuana and San Ysidro each year, close to the 75 million passengers who transit through the Los Angeles International Airport annually.

Trump 'crazy'

On the US side of the border, more Spanish than English can be heard on the streets and in local stores. Even US border agents speak Spanish as they eat tacos and drink horchata—a milky



A truck drives near the Mexico-US border fence, on the Mexican side, separating the towns of Anapra, Mexico and Sunland Park, New Mexico. — AP

Mexican drink made from rice or nuts—at a local eatery. The prospect of Trump's wall "hurts me because on that side are my people," said Hector, 52, a carpet cleaner who declined to give his last name. "Those people, like me, come to work out of necessity." Now a US citizen, Hector said he entered the United States illegally 12 years ago. Marci Ponce was reading the Mexican daily Frontera newspaper, which he bought in Tijuana, on the US side at the exit of the western pedestrian bridge. "They will start the wall in months," blared the front-page headline, along with a picture of a smiling Trump. "He's crazy!" said a 42-year-old woman returning from visiting her mother in Mexico. Laurie and Scott Meadows, US citizens who live near San Ysidro in San Diego,

agree. They travel to Mexico two or three times a year, and are appalled at the idea of a wall. "It's unnecessary, it makes no sense, it's idiocy," Laurie said. "I hope Mexicans know we want good relations and this is just unfortunate." Scott called Trump an "idiot." "He's going to spend millions of dollars trying to do this and we know Mexico is not going to pay," the man added.

Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan has estimated the wall's cost at between \$12 and \$15 billion. The issue prompted the Trump administration's first major diplomatic standoff this week. Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, who insists his country would not pay for any wall, was scheduled to visit Trump in Washington next week. — AFP