



EU opens its door for Balkan states

US imposes more N Korea sanctions, warns of 'phase two'

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GHOUTA: A civil Defense volunteer, known as the White Helmets, checks the site of a regime air strike in the rebel-held town of Saqba, in the besieged Eastern Ghouta region on the outskirts of the capital Damascus yesterday. —AFP

Death toll in Syria enclave tops 500

New strikes hit Eastern Ghouta

DOUMA: New air strikes on the Syrian rebel enclave of Eastern Ghouta yesterday took the civilian death toll from seven days of devastating bombardment to more than 500 after the United Nations again delayed a vote on a ceasefire. More than 120 children have been among the dead in the bombing campaign that the regime launched last Sunday on the enclave just outside Damascus, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. The Britain-based monitor of the war said at least 29 civilians were killed in yesterday's strikes, including 17 in the main town of Douma. It has said the strikes are being carried out by Syrian and Russian forces.

Moscow, which intervened militarily in support of its Damascus ally in 2015, has denied any direct involvement in the Eastern Ghouta bombardment. US President Donald Trump on Friday said Russia's recent actions in Syria were a "disgrace". The UN Security Council had been due to hold a vote on Friday on a resolution calling for a month-long ceasefire to allow aid deliveries and the evacuation of seriously wounded civilians. But the vote was postponed until 1700 GMT as Western powers bickered with Russia over the wording.

Rebel fire on Damascus

Control of Eastern Ghouta is shared between two Islamist factions and Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, and Russia insists there can be no ceasefire with the jihadists or their allies. Russia has been pressing for a negotiated withdrawal of rebel fighters and their families like the one that saw the government retake full control of second city Aleppo in December 2016. But all three rebel groups have refused.

World leaders have expressed outrage at the plight of civilians in Eastern Ghouta, which UN chief Antonio Guterres called "hell on earth", but have so far been powerless to halt the bloodshed. The enclave is completely surrounded by government-controlled territory and its 400,000 residents are unwilling or unable to flee the deadly siege. The rebels

have been firing back into Damascus, where a hospital was hit on Friday, state news agency SANA reported. At least 16 civilians have been killed in eastern districts of the capital since Sunday, according to state media, and many residents have sought temporary accommodation elsewhere for fear of a further intensification of the fighting.

'Unbelievable'

At the United Nations, US ambassador Nikki Haley expressed dismay as negotiations dragged on to secure Russian approval for a ceasefire resolution. "Unbelievable that Russia is stalling a vote on a ceasefire allowing humanitarian access in Syria," Haley posted on Twitter. "How many more people will die before the Security Council agrees to take up this vote? Let's do this tonight. The Syrian people can't wait." Russia has vetoed 11 draft resolutions on Syria to

block action that targeted its ally. In November, it used its veto to end a UN-led investigation of chemical weapons attacks in Syria.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron wrote to Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin on Friday to ask him to back the ceasefire. Negotiations have stumbled over a key provision of the draft resolution that specifies when the ceasefire will begin. Following hours of tough negotiations, an amended draft was circulated that demands a 30-day ceasefire "without delay," while stopping short of specifying the timing.

A previous draft had said the ceasefire would go into force 72 hours after the adoption, but that was dropped from the text in a bid to reach compromise with Russia. In another concession to Russia, the draft also specifies that the ceasefire will not apply to operations against the Islamic State group or Al-Qaeda, along with "individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated" with the blacklisted terror groups. The text would demand the immediate lifting of all sieges, including that on Eastern Ghouta, and order all sides to "cease depriving civilians of food and medicine indispensable to their survival". —AFP



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Gun glut: Industry's woes go beyond the politics

NEW YORK: Just two days before the school shooting in Florida revived the US gun control debate, debt-plagued gunmaker Remington Outdoor announced it will file for bankruptcy. The financial woes of the more than 200-year-old company illustrate a paradox of the Trump era: weapon manufacturers miscalculated, ramping up production in anticipation of a Hillary Clinton presidency that would drive sales of those fearing increased gun control. Instead, they got a period of political dominance for the powerful gun lobby accompanied by financial fragility for the gunmakers.

Since Donald Trump was elected president in November 2016, gun manufacturers have struggled to deal with excess supply, forcing them to rein back manufacturing, cut jobs and slash prices, as well as prompting some executives to be replaced.

"Because Republicans are in control of both the White House and the Congress, the threat of increased gun regulation went way down and so the stocking behavior of consumers went way down," said Emile Courtney, an analyst at S&P Global Ratings.

But since the February 14 Parkland shooting, which left 14 students and three teachers dead, survivors from the Florida school have emerged as powerful advocates for gun control, urging Trump and others to take action. On Friday, a stampede of major companies, including insurers Chubb and MetLife, security company Symantec and rental car giants Avis Budget Group, Enterprise Holdings and Hertz joined others in ending discount programs for National Rifle Association members. The move came amid heightened pressure from some consumers as the "#BoycottNRA" hashtag trended on Twitter.

Demand fell 'off the cliff'

If past trends hold, the revived talk of gun

restrictions in the wake of the mass shooting will boost gun sales as more consumers stockpile weapons amid worries they could be banned. But it is unclear how that will affect the companies' bottom line amid a rising tide of antagonism toward the gun lobby. Sturm Ruger & Company this week became the latest industry player to detail the hit from slackening sales, reporting a 40 percent drop in 2017 profits to \$52.1 million, a sharp pullback from the assessment of "stronger-than-normal demand during most of 2016."

The company cut manufacturing of its firearms and has eliminated 700 jobs over the last year, 28 percent of its workforce, executives said on a conference call this week. Sturm Ruger chief executive Christopher Killoy said the company had made progress in working down inventory amid the tough climate. Christopher Metz, who was hired as chief executive of Vista Outdoor in October, said pricing is now "much more rational" compared with a significant part of last year. "There were competitors that were trying to catch up with the kind of falling off the cliff demand," Metz said early this month.

New era?

In the wake of the Parkland shooting, Trump has opened the door to some changes, such as endorsing a ban on "bump stocks," an accessory that can turn a semi-automatic weapon into an automatic one, and urging stronger background checks. But the president, who praised the National Rifle Association as "very, very great people," also favors arming teachers, a stance ridiculed by educators. Jeff Pistole, a gun dealer in Arkansas, expects the headlines to boost gun sales in the short run, especially for the AR-15, the gun used in Florida and many other mass shootings. —AFP

Military takeover of Rio police stirs dictatorship ghosts

RIO DE JANEIRO: The ghosts of Brazil's dictatorship are stirring in the wake of President Michel Temer's order for the army to take over policing in Rio de Janeiro. There's no direct comparison between the Rio operation and the 1964 coup that brought two decades of military rule to Latin America's biggest country. In this case, the military isn't overthrowing a president—it's just taking charge of Rio state's security situation after months of escalating crime. But the echoes have been loud enough to force the government into extraordinary denials. "I'm going to tell you how many marks I give the idea of a military coup: zero," Temer told Radio Bandeirantes on Friday. The center-right president went on to say that there was "no mood" in the military or population for a coup. Earlier, the defense minister, Raul Jungmann, stated "there is no risk to democracy... On the contrary, we are strengthening democracy."

First since democracy's return

Over the last decade, Rio residents have grown used to seeing camouflaged soldiers support the police in their battle against powerfully armed drug gangs. Some 8,500 troops arrived last July in an ongoing deployment to help with operations in favelas, the latest of which took place Friday in western Rio. During the 2016 Olympics, troops focused on securing tourist areas, patrolling with rifles among the bathing-suit clad crowds of Copacabana and Ipanema. But the "intervencao," as it's called in Portuguese, is different this time. Now the army isn't helping out—it's taking full charge, with generals replacing the entire civilian leadership of the police. This hasn't happened anywhere in Brazil since democracy returned in 1985.

Mass arrests

Facing an understandably nervous public,



RIO DE JANEIRO: A woman carries her child as she walks past military police on patrol near the Vila Kennedy favela in Rio de Janeiro yesterday. —AFP

the government made what looked like an immediate PR blunder by suggesting that mass arrests and mass searches might become the norm. That would mean, for example, that an entire street, rather than a single house, could be subjected to an intense raid. There was strong backlash, including from Brazil's highest-profile anti-corruption prosecutor, Deltan Dallagnol.

The government has softened its message on the collective searches. But there are still widespread fears that military intervention will become a blunt instrument endangering poor and defenseless people in the favelas, while doing little to eradicate narco gangs. A short video made by three young black men about surviving encounters with police—including advising against carrying a long umbrella that could be mistaken for a gun—went immediately viral on social media. "The intervention in Rio is

an inadequate and extreme measure that causes concern because it puts the population's human rights at risk," said Amnesty International's director in Brazil, Jurema Werneck.

Who watches the watchmen?

Temer made it clear Friday that the army will use deadly force when justified. But rights activists, weary after years of botched police operations and stray bullets, ask who will hold the soldiers to account. The army wants troops to be subject only to military courts, while the police it is working alongside have to face regular courts. Adding a politically explosive twist to that already complex issue, the army's top commander, General Eduardo Villas Boas, said this week he wants "a guarantee of being able to act without risking a new truth commission." —AFP