



Ukrainian rivals exchange 200 prisoners in controversial swap

## Tourists stay away from Taj Mahal, other attractions as protests flare



A Syrian child reacts upon her arrival in the back of a truck at a camp for displaced people near the village of Harbounah in the Idlib province after fleeing government forces' advance on Maaret Al-Numan in the south of the province on Saturday.—AFP

# Turkey not to pull out from Idlib army posts

## Syria regime must halt 'escalation of violence': EU

**ISTANBUL:** Turkey will not withdraw from its observation posts in the Syrian rebel bastion province of Idlib which has seen an increase in violence carried out by regime forces supported by Russian airstrikes, the defense minister said.

The posts were established under a September 2018 deal between Syrian regime ally Moscow and Ankara, which backs the rebels, to avert an all-out Syrian government onslaught in Idlib. President Bashar Al-Assad's forces surrounded one of 12 Turkish observation posts in Idlib province on Monday after overrunning nearby areas in a push to take the last opposition holdout, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

"We respect the agreement reached with Russia and we expect Russia to abide by this agreement," Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said in comments published on Sunday on the defence ministry's Twitter account. "We will by no means empty those 12 observation posts, we will not leave there," Akar said.

His comments came during a visit, together with top army commanders, to the southern province of Hatay on the Syrian border to inspect Turkish troops on Saturday. Turkey, worried over a new wave of refugees from

the Idlib region, is pressing for a fresh ceasefire deal, as it sent a delegation to Moscow on Monday.

"We are doing what's needed to put an end to this massacre," Akar was quoted as saying by the official news agency Anadolu. He said Ankara expected Damascus ally Russia to "use its influence on the regime in order to stop ground and air assault" in Idlib.

The latest violence has displaced more than 235,000 people and killed scores of civilians, despite an August ceasefire deal and international calls for a de-escalation.

The Idlib region hosts some three million people including many displaced by years of violence in other parts of Syria. "As long as this pressure remains in place, it will trigger a new migrant wave and put further burden on Turkey which is already hosting nearly four million Syrian brothers," said Akar.

Around 300 protesters—mostly Syrians living in Turkey — held an anti-Moscow demonstration near the Russian consulate in Istanbul on Saturday against the intensified attacks in Idlib, shouting "murderer Putin, get out of Syria!", referring to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

### Libya timetable

Akar's visit to soldiers on the border

region comes as Turkey is also readying to send troops to support the UN-recognized government in Tripoli against strongman Khalifa Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army. "The Turkish Armed Forces are ready for whatever task is given in order to protect our country and people's interests," Akar said.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Thursday said Ankara would respond to an invitation from the Libyan national unity government and that the Turkish parliament would vote on a motion to send troops as soon as it returns from recess as early as next month. Ankara signed in November a security and military cooperation deal with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) but in order to send troops, parliament needs to vote through a motion as it does for Iraq and Syria.

Anadolu news agency, citing sources in Erdogan's ruling party, reported that the timetable could be brought forward and the motion could be presented to the parliamentary speaker's office on Monday.

The General Assembly could vote the measure in an extraordinary session on Thursday, it said. Parliament is due to return from recess on January 7.

The European Union meanwhile, called on

Syria's regime and its allies to halt "indiscriminate" military attacks on civilians in the country's north west, where an intensifying bombardment by Damascus and Russian forces has displaced tens of thousands.

Civilians have streamed out of affected areas of jihadist-dominated Idlib province in recent weeks to escape heightened attacks on the southern edge of the final major opposition-held pocket of Syria, eight years into the country's devastating war. "The escalation of violence in the Northwest of Syria by the Syrian regime and its allies must cease," the EU said in a statement by spokesperson for European Foreign Minister Josep Borrell, which said airstrikes and shelling had led to "countless civilian deaths".

"All parties have the obligation to protect civilians. The regime and its allies must cease indiscriminate military attacks and respect international humanitarian law," the statement said.

Violence has intensified since mid-December despite an August ceasefire deal and international calls for a de-escalation. More than 235,000 people fled the area between December 12 and 25, mostly from the beleaguered city of Maaret Al-Numan, according to the United Nations' humanitarian coordination agency OCHA. The EU

called for urgent unhindered humanitarian access to the three million civilians thought to be living in Idlib province.

It acknowledged that "terrorist groups" were operating in the region, but stressed that combating these networks "does not permit the undermining of international humanitarian law or the targeting of civilians". The Idlib region is dominated by the country's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. Residents in the province mainly depend on critical cross-border aid, which came under threat in December after Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that would have extended such deliveries for a year.

The move raised fears that vital UN-funded aid could stop entering Idlib from January unless an alternative agreement is reached.

The Damascus regime, which now controls 70 percent of Syria, has repeatedly vowed to take back the region. Backed by Moscow, Damascus launched a blistering offensive against Idlib in April, killing around 1,000 civilians and displacing more than 400,000 people.

Syria's war has killed over 370,000 people and displaced millions since beginning in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-government protests.—AFP

## French government, unions exchange barbs in deadlock

**PARIS:** The French government and a key trade union on Sunday exchanged bitter accusations over who was to blame for France's over three-week transport strike against pension reforms, as the stalemate showed little sign of relenting. Deputy Transport Minister Jean-Baptiste Djebbari accused the hardline CGT union of a "systematic opposition to any reform" while the union's chief Philippe Martinez charged the government with strewing "chaos" in the conflict.

The strike—now longer than the notorious 22-day strike of winter 1995 — has now lasted 25 days and is on course to surpass the longest transport strike in France which lasted for 28 days in 1986 and early 1987. Aside from two driverless lines, the Paris metro was again almost completely shut down yesterday while only a fraction of high-speed TGV trains were running.

The government and unions are only due to hold their next talks on January 7, two days ahead of a new day of mass demonstrations against the reform which is championed by President Emmanuel Macron. In an interview with the Journal de Dimanche newspaper, Djebbari angrily accused the CGT of "attitudes of intimidation, harassment and even aggression" against railway workers who had opted not to down tools.

He accused the CGT of showing a "systematic opposition to any reform, of blocking and sometimes intimidation". "The

CGT wants to make its mark through media stunts. But the French are not going to be duped by the extreme-left politicization of this movement," he added.

### 'Like Thatcher'

But in an interview with the same newspaper, Martinez accused the government of trying to ensure the conflict deteriorated further. "Emmanuel Macron presents himself as a man of a new world but he is imitating Margaret Thatcher," he said, referring to the late British prime minister who sought to break the power of the unions in 1980s standoffs.

"There is real anger. Of course, not being paid for 24 days is tough. But the conflict is the result of two-and-a-half years of suffering," Martinez added. He said he was awaiting concessions from Macron in a New Year's address Tuesday evening as well as recognition that "most people are not happy and that he (the president) was wrong". The French president, elected in 2017 on pledges to reform France, has remained virtually silent on the standoff, save for a call for a Christmas truce that went unheeded and a vow not to take a presidential pension.

This will intensify attention on December 31 address, with all eyes on whether Macron offers steps to defuse the conflict or indicates he is ready for a long, grinding standoff.

The unions are demanding that the government drops a plan to merge 42 existing pension schemes into a single, points-based system. The overhaul would see workers in certain sectors—including the railways—lose early retirement benefits. The government says the pension overhaul is needed to create a fairer system. But workers object to the inclusion of a so-called pivot age of 64 until which people would have to work to earn a full pension—two years beyond the official retirement age.—AFP



PARIS: Protesters demonstrate as part of a nationwide multi-sector strike against French government's pensions overhaul near the city hall in Paris on Saturday.—AFP