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BARISHA: Syrian bikers ride past a damaged car at the site of a suspected US-led operation against Islamic State (IS) chief Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi on the edge of the small Syrian village of Barisha in the country's opposition-held north-western Idlib province. —AFP

SE Asia expects long fight against IS

Concerns about lone wolf attacks, online radicalization

MANILA: Southeast Asian countries fighting Islamic State's influence in the region lauded the killing of its leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi but said security forces were preparing for a long battle to thwart the jihadist group's ideology. The Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, home to some of Asia's most organized Islamist militants, said yesterday they were braced for retaliation by Islamic State loyalists, including "lone wolf" attacks by locals radicalized by the group's powerful online propaganda. Baghdadi killed himself in a tunnel in northwest Syria by detonating a suicide vest as US forces closed in, according to US President Donald Trump.

Though his death will unsettle Islamic State, it remains capable and dangerous, said Delfin Lorenzana, defense secretary of the Philippines, where the group's influence has taken a hold among unschooled Muslim youth in its troubled Mindanao region. "This is a blow to the organization considering al-Baghdadi's stature as a leader. But this is just a momentary setback considering the depth and reach of the organization worldwide," Lorenzana said. "Somebody will take his place."

Southeast Asia has long been an important focus for Islamic State, which has inspired Islamist militants

in West Africa, across the Middle East and Asia and through to Indonesia and the Philippines. The Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia are concerned Islamic State supporters from the region and those fleeing Iraq and Syria could exploit the porous borders, lawlessness and abundant arms found in Mindanao to take refuge in its far-flung villages.

Islamic State has claimed responsibility for four suicide bombings since July last year in the Philippines, which fought its toughest battle since World War Two in 2017 when extremists seeking to establish an Islamic State laid siege to Marawi City and occupied it through five months of air and ground assaults. Fighters from at least seven countries took part, including Malaysia, which remains on high alert and has arrested 400 people suspected of links to militant groups.

Malaysian police counter-terrorism chief Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay said the real concern was not

Islamic State's leadership but the effect of its teachings. "It's good news, but his death will have little impact here as the main problem remains the spread of the Islamic State ideology," he said. "What we are most worried about now are 'lone wolf' attacks and those who are self-radicalized through the internet. We are still seeing the spread of IS teachings online.

IS publications and magazines from years ago are being reproduced and re-shared," he said.

Chatrooms in messaging applications used by Islamists such as Telegram showed defiant messages about Baghdadi's death, according to a researcher who monitors activity by Islamic State sympathizers. "God Willing, whatever happens, Islamic jihad will not rely on any one individual, but will always stand tall on the orders of God and His Prophet," read one posting under the handle Ansurul Ummah.

Another participant, Abu Abdullah Asy Syami, posted: "Jihad will never stop, even if our own caliph

dies." Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison made a similar observation, and said Baghdadi's death was by no means the end. "This is a many-headed monster ... As you cut one off, another one inevitably arises," he told reporters.

Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim-majority country, is grappling with a resurgence in militancy and has detained hundreds of suspects this year under tightened anti-terrorism laws. Authorities believe thousands of Indonesians draw inspiration from Islamic State and about 500 are thought to have joined the group in Syria. Indonesia's intelligence agency said it was ready for retaliation and though Baghdadi's death would be a psychological blow, Islamic State would have a successor in place.

"It is a war. Usually, there must be a counterattack or the like. When it comes to security, we are sure that we will secure this country," said its spokesman, Wawan Purwanto. Security analyst Rommel Banlaoi said Baghdadi's demise and uncertainty about the leadership could undermine operations of Islamic State loyalists seeking to regroup and establish their own territory in Southeast Asia. "Pro-ISIS groups in the Philippines will surely re-examine their roles in the post-Baghdadi era," he said. —Reuters



Security forces wary of reprisals by IS supporters

Trump wins big with Baghdadi death - and intends to milk it

Washington: President Donald Trump took a victory lap Sunday over the killing of Islamic State group leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi—and he's likely just getting warmed up. "This is the biggest there is," Trump said at a White House appearance, reaching into his customary arsenal of superlatives after announcing the dramatic raid by special forces into Syria. The raid was, by US accounts, a remarkable success of intelligence gathering, cooperation with multiple foreign powers in the Syrian war, and ruthless execution by helicopter-borne American soldiers.

But Trump—threatened by a snowballing impeachment threat in Washington and stung by widespread criticism of his overall Syria policy—needs the victory to be his. So amid a sometimes surprising level of detail in his account of the raid, the president shoehorned in plenty of politics—lines that had less to do with counter-terrorism than they did with Trump's need to boost Donald Trump.

The Baghdadi victory wasn't just the "biggest." It had to be bigger than the killing in a similarly daring raid in 2011 of Al-Qaeda founder and 9/11 mastermind Osama bin Laden. Perhaps that's because bin Laden was killed under Trump's predecessor, Democratic president Barack Obama. "Osama bin Laden was big, but Osama bin Laden became big with the World Trade Center. (Baghdadi) is a man who built a whole, as he would like to call it, a country," Trump said.

Military credibility

The 45th president has long struggled, politically speaking, with the mantle of commander-in-chief. He is dogged by his history of having avoided conscription—along with many other young men of that generation—during the Vietnam War. And his push to extract the United States from what he calls "stupid" wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan may be popular with many voters, but is seen as dangerously naive by the Washington elite, including much of his own Republican party.

A recent abrupt decision to yank a contingent of US troops from a traditionally Kurdish area of Syria-giving Turkey a green light to attack the same Kurdish forces who had partnered with the US-sparked especially deep anger. The Baghdadi raid provides Trump with a perfect riposte.

Lindsay Graham, one of the senior Republican senators who lambasted Trump

over the Kurdish controversy, was among the first to declare he'd seen the light. "This is a moment where President Trump's worst critics should say, 'Well done,'" he said. "What I see happening in Syria, makes sense to me," he said. "Now I understand what the president wants to do." It was a remarkable turnaround—and a boost for Trump's chances that the Republican majority in the Senate will stick by him and refuse to convict on the Democrat-led lower house's likely impeachment vote.

Bullish

After being on the back foot for weeks—and with a potentially damaging week ahead in the impeachment saga—Trump again has a spring in his step. He peppered his lengthy remarks at the White House with congratulations to himself in the third person. He stated falsely that he was one of the first to predict bin Laden would become a problem, though he did write in his 2000 book "The America We Deserve" that the US was at risk of a devastating terrorist attack.

He referred to the Islamic State group's successful use of social media for spreading its ideology, saying "they use the internet better than almost anybody in the world, perhaps other than Donald Trump." He mockingly threatened US allies in Europe over citizens who joined the Islamic State group and are now held prisoner in a legal limbo, with their home countries unwilling to bring them back. "I'm going to drop them



MARYLAND: US President Donald Trump speaks to the press before boarding Air Force One at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland en route to Chicago. —AFP

right on your border and you can have fun capturing them again," he said. "They can't walk back to our country. We have lots of water in between our country and them."

The starkest evidence of his reinvigorated bullishness, though, was closer to home. Trump announced that he'd told the Russians about the raid before it happened, because the US raiders would need to cross Russian-

controlled air space. He told numerous Republicans and administration officials of the heads-up. But his impeachment foes—the top Democrats in Congress, who are among the most senior figures in the country's political hierarchy—were kept in the dark. He couldn't trust House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, he indicated. "I wanted to make sure this kept secret." —AFP