

Russian 'advisers' training new Syrian army battalion

YAFOR, Syria: Wearing clean bullet-proof vests and knee pads, fighters from a new Syrian army battalion showcase the skills they have learned from Russia's military advisers. In the countryside west of Damascus, the soldiers carry out a mock assault, fire mortar rounds and rockets, perform mine-clearing and first aid exercises. Large clouds of dust rise over the training camp as troops in camouflage fatigue open fire.

In the afternoon sun, top brass from both countries and dozens of journalists, including an AFP team invited from Moscow, are looking on. "We sacrifice our blood for you Bashar," the soldiers chant in unison, throwing their fists in the air, in praise of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. With military backing from Russia, Assad's forces have retaken large parts of Syria from rebels and militants since 2015, and now control around 60 percent of the country.

Russia often refers to troops it deployed in Syria as military "advisers" even though its forces and warplanes are also directly involved in battles against militants and other rebels. On Tuesday, Russian advisers appeared in front of cameras, wearing green face masks and sunglasses, in a rare display of Moscow's military operations in war-torn Syria. With the help of an Arabic translator, an adviser instructed troops on how to detect and defuse mines, while another trained them on treating war injuries. "The battalion was created on August 10 and started

training that same day," said Omar Mohamed, who heads this new elite force. "Thanks to the Russian advisers, the level of preparation among soldiers has increased and they know how to use all types of weapons," he told AFP. After undergoing two months of individual military training, members of the force will now learn to operate in large groups.

The commanders do not rule out the possibility that troops could deploy to the last major opposition redoubt, Idlib in the northwest. A deal Russia and rebel-backer Turkey reached last year was meant to prevent a bloodbath in the militant-run region, but bombardment re-started in late April. Since August 31, a separate Russian-backed ceasefire has largely held, despite sporadic strikes.

But Damascus has repeatedly vowed to take back all of Syrian territory, including the Idlib region. "We pin our hopes on a political solution, but if we do not see results, we will then resort to the military option," one commander told reporters. General Hassan Hassan, head of the Syrian army's political administration division, is more definitive. "Idlib will be liberated in all cases" he said. "We will see each other there soon," he told reporters. The Syrian conflict has killed more than 370,000 people and driven millions from their homes since it started with the brutal repression of anti-government protests in 2011. — AFP



YAFOR, Syria: A picture taken during a tour with the Russian army shows Syrian elite soldiers taking part in an instruction session with Russian military trainers on Tuesday at an army base. — AFP

France's oldest mosque, in Indian Ocean, gets facelift

TSINGONI, France: At France's oldest mosque, a five-century-old edifice on the Indian Ocean island of Mayotte, the sound of jackhammers is broken intermittently by recitals by the faithful hunched over in prayer. The white-and-blue prayer hall at the mosque in Tsingoni, used five times a day, is plagued by crumbling ceilings, leaks, giant cracks and damp. "The humidity, the dust, the lack of ventilation, I can't stand it. I've developed allergies," complained Badirou Abdou, a local council representative who has prayed at the mosque since he can remember.

Abdou now worships in a temporary prayer

hall one floor above the original, which is getting a much-needed facelift along with the rest of the mosque at a cost of some two million euros (\$2.2 million) to the city of Tsingoni and the French state. The building, perched on an island whose population is 95 percent Muslim, is the oldest working mosque in France and classified as a French Historic Monument since 2016.

"The inscriptions on the side of the mihrab (a niche in the wall that shows the direction in which Muslims should pray) say that the mosque was built in 1538 by the sultan Insa," said Ambassador Ridjali, cultural director of the Tsingoni commune, formerly the island's royal capital. "The architecture of the western part (of the mosque) has remained unchanged since that time."

Excavations by France's INRAP national archaeological research institute have revealed that the spot hosted a place of worship already in the 14th century, "which makes it a contemporary of the Notre-Dame in Paris," Ridjali said. Outside, workers' footsteps echo on the steel

scaffolding erected around the much-newer minaret, built in 1994 and a historic monument in its own right. It is being repainted, and a new copper dome topped with a star and crescent has just been installed to replace its shattered concrete predecessor, which had been in danger of collapsing.

The work is expected to be completed by the end of 2020. The design of the mosque shows a strong Swahili influence from the East African coast, said Violaine Bressand, an engineer with Mayotte's cultural affairs agency. The holy place, in the meantime, is starting to attract visitors - and cash - to Tsingoni. "This contributes to the economic development of our territory while also safeguarding the historical aspect of the mosque", Ridjali said.

Despite the noise, dust and workmen, worshipper Abdillahi Salim continues to use the original prayer hall. "This is where my father and my grandfather prayed. I do not see myself praying anywhere else," he said. — AFP



TSINGONI, France: A picture taken on Sept 14, 2019 shows the under renovation minaret and mosque on the French island of Mayotte. — AFP

Iran rules out talks; US ramps...

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and their chief executives for buying Iranian oil. "We're telling China, and all nations - know that we will sanction every violation of sanctions of all activity," Pompeo told a pressure group opposed to Iran's clerical regime on the sidelines of the United Nations.

China, which is embroiled in a trade war as well as myriad other disputes with the United States, is believed to be the biggest foreign buyer of Iranian oil. The Trump administration in May said it would unilaterally force all countries to stop buying Iran's oil, its major export, sending tensions soaring. The United States blamed Iran for an attack earlier this month on the oil infrastructure of rival Saudi Arabia, which is also waging a devastating offensive in Yemen.

France, Britain and Germany this week said they agreed with the US findings. "Some have said that they've joined the United States; I think they have joined reality," Pompeo said of the Europeans. But the European powers, while criticizing Iran, believe that

diplomacy is the best way forward. The Europeans remain part of a nuclear accord negotiated by former US president Barack Obama, under which Iran drastically reduced its nuclear program in return for unmet promises of sanctions relief.

EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini acknowledged struggles to preserve the pact, from which Iran has stopped strict compliance as it presses for economic benefits. "I will not hide that it is increasingly difficult to do it," she told reporters after talks among European powers. We will try and continue keeping the agreement in place and overcome the difficulties we are facing," she said.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said that there had at least been progress in moving toward diplomacy. "The fact that all sides are basically willing to hold talks - the Iranian side as well as the American side - is a positive signal," he said. "Now it's about the conditions," he said. "And this will not be easy." After weeks of speculation over a possible meeting, Trump's attention was likely elsewhere yesterday. Leaders of the rival Democratic Party on Tuesday announced that they were opening an impeachment inquiry against him over allegations he pressured Ukraine's president to investigate the son of Joe Biden, the Democratic front-runner seeking to challenge him in next year's election. — AFP

make the UAE one of only a handful of states in the Middle East to have sent a person into space, as it looks to make good on a pledge to become a global leader in space exploration.

Mansoori plans to conduct experiments and said he would take Emirati food with him to share with the crew. Skripochka, first-time flyer Meir and Mansoori will join a six-member crew on the ISS and for a brief period of time the ISS will be home to nine astronauts. At a pre-flight conference, Meir, 42, said the crew communicated by using "Runglish" - a mixture of Russian and English. "We still need to work on our Arabic," she joked.

Russian Orthodox priests blessed the spacecraft ahead of the launch, in a traditional prayer service often held before Russian rocket launches. The spacecraft was the last to blast off from the launch pad where Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin went off into space onboard the Vostok 1, becoming the first man in space in 1961. Mansoori is set to return to Earth with NASA's Nick Hague and Russian cosmonaut Alexey Ovchinnikov on Oct 3. Skripochka and Meir are set to remain on the ISS until the spring of 2020.

The first Arab in outer space was Saudi Arabia's Sultan bin Salman Al-Saud, who flew on a US shuttle mission in 1985. Two years later, Syrian air force pilot Muhammad Faris spent a week aboard the Soviet Union's Mir space station. As part of its space plans, the UAE has also announced its aim to become the first Arab country to send an unmanned probe to orbit Mars by 2021, naming it "Hope". In the long-term, it says it is planning to build a "Science City" to replicate life on Mars and aims to create the first human settlement on the red planet by 2117.

But already, Emiratis believe they have shown the world what they can do. "We have talent here in the UAE, and now the world will see that," said Fatima Al-Ghurair at the Mohammed Bin Rashid Centre. The International Space Station - a rare example of cooperation between Russia and the West - has been orbiting Earth at about 28,000 km per hour since 1998. Russia is resolved to keep its position as a leader of the space industry, particularly for manned space flights. — Agencies

Toilet row: Modi ignores protests...

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foundation is to preserve life and fight inequity," they wrote, urging the Gates Foundation to change its decision.

In addition to a rise in mob lynchings of Muslims, Christians, and Dalits, they noted the decision by Genocide Watch to issue warnings for the state of Assam and Indian-administered Kashmir. The disputed territory is under a communications blackout that has

lasted 50 days after Modi rescinded its autonomy. The award was also protested in an online petition that garnered 100,000 signatures as well as a comment piece co-authored by feminist leader Gloria Steinem.

Modi won a second term in a huge election victory in May and drew tens of thousands of diaspora fans on Sunday in an unusual joint rally in Houston with President Donald Trump. He did not respond to the criticism over the award. The Gates Foundation told AFP in a statement: "Before the Swachh Bharat mission, over 500 million people in India did not have access to safe sanitation, and now, the majority do. "The Swachh Bharat Mission can serve as a model for other countries around the world that urgently need to improve access to sanitation for the world's poorest!" — AFP

Mourides build biggest mosque...

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Yesterday, spectators were already gathering for the opening, some sleeping on the floor, while on scaffolding, painters worked on the oriental-style decorations of the main door. Uniformed police were also already visible. Today and tomorrow, around 1,600 officers will be posted around the mosque site as tens of thousands of visitors are expected to clog up the streets.

The massive building embodies the Brotherhood's rise, said researcher Cheikh Gueye. The Mourides "dominate trade, import-export, agriculture and even the media," he said. The mosque is a "symbol of this economic power, which will help reinforce their political and cultural influence". The lavish interiors include a gold-leaf dome, giant chandeliers and decorations hand drawn by Moroccan workmen.

"With this jewel, we are on a par with what we see in Arab countries and other places in Africa," said Mbackiou Faye, who coordinated the construction work. The cost

exceeded \$30 million (\$33 million), all of which came from donations, he said. The government has additionally provided \$10.5 million for lighting, sanitation and road works, according to Infrastructure Minister Oumar Youm.

The mosque is smaller than Casablanca's Hassan II - which is spread over nine hectares, can accommodate 105,000 worshippers and has a minaret spiralling 210 m. Another mosque being built in Algiers is sprawled over nine hectares with a 265-m minaret. It will be able to accommodate 120,000 people.

The Mourides are one of four important Sufi brotherhoods followed by Senegal's Muslims, who overwhelmingly practice a moderate version of Islam while following the teachings of local spiritual guides. Bamba, a peaceful opponent of French colonialism, was exiled by the French authorities to Gabon (1895-1902) and then to Mauritania from 1903 to 1907 before being allowed to return to Senegal, where he was placed under house arrest at his home in the north of the country. He died in 1927.

The holy city of Touba, founded by Bamba in 1888, has grown to be Senegal's second-largest after Dakar, with some 1.5 million inhabitants. The mosque will be inaugurated at 1400 pm (local and GMT) in the presence of President Macky Sall. An Islamic institute, residence and museum are scheduled to be added to the complex in the future. — AFP

Rocket blasts off with first Arab...

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Mansoori will spend eight days on the ISS and will be the first Emirati and the first Arab on the orbiting laboratory, but not the first Muslim.

Writing on Twitter before the launch, the former pilot in the UAE armed forces said he was "filled with this indescribable feeling of glory and awe". "Today I carry the dreams and ambition of my country to a whole new dimension. May Allah grant me success in this mission," he said. The day before the launch, he said he would record his prayer routine on the ISS and broadcast it to people on Earth. "As a fighter pilot I already prayed in my aircraft," he said, explaining that he had experience of prayers at high speed.

Some people gathered at the Dubai center carried UAE flags, while others were dressed in blue jumpsuits spelling out: "Future astronaut". Badriya Al-Hamadi, 38, said she was so proud of the historical moment, adding: "I feel like I am the one going to space." According to Amer Al-Ghafri, of the Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Centre, Mansoori's launch is only just the beginning of the UAE's dreams of space exploration. "There are a lot of ambitions and a lot more work," he said.

A Holy Quran, a UAE flag, pictures of his family, and a book by Ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum were among the few things he was allowed to pack for his space adventure. Dubai's iconic Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest skyscraper, lit up the moment of blast-off at 5:57 pm local time.

Sheikh Mohammed, also the UAE's vice president and prime minister, vowed in 2017 to send four Emirati astronauts to the space station within five years. "The arrival of Hazzaa Al-Mansoori to space is a message to the Arab youth... that we can progress and move forward," Sheikh Mohammed said on Twitter yesterday. "Our next stop is Mars." The astronaut program would

Trump asked Ukraine to...

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not show Trump explicitly tying aid to Ukraine to Zelensky probing Biden, which has fed the calls to impeach the US leader. But the two did discuss aid, which had been frozen by Trump at the time and was only released in recent weeks. The memo also shows Trump asking Zelensky for a "favor" on an issue unconnected to Biden - just after noting that the US had been "very, very good to Ukraine".

Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi announced the launch of impeachment proceedings Tuesday, alleging that Trump had betrayed his country in seeking Ukraine's help to find dirt on Biden, the leading Democratic candidate for the November 2020 presidential election. The White House was scrambling though to defend Trump, who faces the possibility of becoming the third US president in history to be impeached. In New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly, Trump branded the impeachment probe the "single greatest witch hunt in American history... a disgraceful thing".

The White House was stunned when Pelosi, the powerful speaker of the House of Representatives, suddenly abandoned months of resistance and announced the impeach-

ment investigation. Only two presidents in US history have been impeached, Andrew Johnson in 1868 and Bill Clinton in 1998, deeply tarring both of their legacies.

Pelosi declared the formal investigation 11 days after the news that an anonymous US intelligence official had filed a formal whistleblower complaint on Trump's alleged double-dealing with Ukraine, tying aid to the country for dirt on Biden. "The actions of the Trump presidency revealed the dishonorable facts of the president's betrayal of his oath of office, betrayal of our national security, and betrayal of the integrity of our elections," she said.

With the call transcript not a verbatim record, Democrats made clear its release would not satisfy their investigation into whether the US leader broke the law. They demanded the full release of the whistleblower complaint, even as the Justice Department declared that it showed no wrongdoing and said "no further action was warranted". Pelosi had resisted pressure from the party rank-and-file for impeachment, preferring to focus their energies on the presidential and congressional elections next year as the public has shown little taste for a full-blown congressional probe into Trump.

A Quinnipiac poll released yesterday said that only 37 percent of voters support impeaching Trump while 57 percent oppose, even if more than half disapprove of the US leader's performance. But Pelosi said there was now strong evidence of Trump's wrongdoing. "No. You don't ask foreign governments for help in our elections. That is not right," she tweeted yesterday. — AFP