



Buttigieg exits race as 'Super Tuesday' looms

## Nighat Dad, Pakistan's digital warrior battling the patriarchy

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HAZANO: Turkish military vehicles drive through Hazano in the rebel-held northern countryside of Syria's Idlib province on the way to the border to cross back into Turkey yesterday. —AFP

# Turkish drones kill 19 Syria troops

## UN probe highlights Russia, Turkey roles in Syria 'war crimes'

**ANKARA:** Turkish drone strikes in Syria's northwestern Idlib province killed 19 government soldiers, a war monitor reported yesterday, as tensions soared between Damascus and Ankara. The 19 died in strikes on a military convoy in the Jabal Al-Zawiya area and a base near Maaret Al-Numan city, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The report came hours after Turkey shot down two Syrian warplanes, in an escalating offensive against the Damascus government in Idlib, where Islamist fighters backed by Ankara pose the biggest obstacle to Damascus seizing back control over all of Syria. Following weeks of violence in the province, Turkey confirmed a full military operation against Russian-backed Syrian forces after 34 Turkish soldiers were killed last week in an air strike blamed on Damascus.

However Ankara has insisted it does not want to clash directly with Moscow. "One anti-aircraft system that shot down one of our armed drones and two other anti-aircraft systems have been destroyed, and two SU-24 regime planes that were attacking our aircraft have been downed," Turkey's defense ministry said. Syrian state media said Turkish forces "targeted" two of its planes over Idlib. A rebel group and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, both said the planes had been downed.

The situation in Idlib was already volatile as the government supported by Russian air power pressed an assault on the region in a bid to retake the last opposition enclave in a nine-year civil war. The confrontation between the Russia-backed Syrian forces and NATO-member Turkey, which supports Syrian rebels, has prompted worries over a wider conflict and a migrant crisis in Europe similar to 2015.

Migrant numbers have already surged along the rugged frontier after Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, seeking to pressure the EU over Syria, said the country had "opened the doors" to Europe. Greece said Sunday it has blocked nearly 10,000 migrants at its border with Turkey, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar announced "operation 'Spring Shield'" for the first time, adding that it "successfully continues".

Turkish forces hit Syrian government positions after Erdogan warned Damascus would "pay a price" for the air strike. Under a 2018 deal with Russia meant to bring calm to Idlib, Turkey has 12 observation posts in Syria-but several have come under fire from Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's forces. Turkey wants the international community to establish a no-fly zone over Idlib. SANA Syrian state media reported that the government shot down a Turkish drone near the town of Saraqeb, publishing footage of an aircraft tumbling from the sky in flames.

### Syria 'war crimes'

Meanwhile, Moscow has participated in war crimes connected with deadly air strikes in Syria, UN investigators said yesterday, warning that Ankara could also be responsible for similar crimes against Kurds there. The charges come as tensions soar between Turkey and Russian-backed Syrian forces following escalating clashes in the last rebel stronghold of Idlib, but predates the latest unrest. The UN Commission of Inquiry on the rights situation in Syria said in its latest report that it had evidence that Russian planes participated in two air strikes, in Idlib and in rural Damascus last July and August, which killed more than 60 people.

### 'Criminal responsibility'

The report, which covers the period from July 2019 to January 10 this year, said there was evidence to prove Russian planes took part in both attacks, and that since the attacks were not directed at military objectives they amounted to a "war crime." The investigators also said Turkey might be held criminally liable for serious violations by its allies, the Syrian National Army rebel fighters. Turkish troops and their Syrian proxies overran a swathe of northern Syria last October, after a military campaign against Kurdish forces resulted in tens of thousands fleeing their homes.

The UN investigators referred to allegations that Ankara-backed Syrian rebels had carried out executions, home confiscations and looting. They highlighted in particular the case of Hevran Khalaf, the 35-year-old leader of the Future Syria Party, who on October 12 was pulled from her car and executed along with her driver. They had been travelling from Qamishli when members of the Syrian National Army's Brigade 123 pulled Khalaf from the car by her hair and mutilated her body before the executions. The Commission said there were "reasonable grounds" to believe that the Syrian National Army fighters committed several war crimes, including "murder".

If it could be shown they had acted under "the effective command and control of Turkish forces" it could entail the "criminal responsibility" for such commanders who knew or should have known about the crimes," it warned. While the investigators acknowledged they had not uncovered evidence the Turkish forces gave orders leading to the violations, the report pointed out that liability could also fall on those who "failed to take all necessary and reasonable measures to prevent or repress their commission."

The investigators also referred to an air strike on a civilian convoy the same day as the Khalaf's murder and in the same region that killed 11 people and wounded 74. And they highlighted the

apparent targeting of non-military sites such as strikes near the Aluk water station that cut the water supply to 460,000 people. Ankara has denied involvement, but the commission urged "Turkish authorities to launch (their) own investigations and make the findings public".

### Children 'freezing to death'

The UN's Syria commission, set up in 2011 shortly after the civil war began, has repeatedly accused the various sides of war crimes and in some cases crimes against humanity. Yesterday's report was the 19th to date. It also indicated a range of violations by Damascus-backed forces, including targeting civilian sites such as schools and medical facilities in western Syria. The investigators expressed alarm at the growing humanitarian tragedy at Syria's border with Turkey, where they said some 1.5 million people displaced by violence around Idlib had become stranded in desperate conditions.

"It is scandalous that the international community has not been able ... to deal with the situation," commission chair Paulo Pinheiro told reporters. "You have children in open air with their families, without a tent, without shelter, without blankets," he said, lamenting that "children are freezing to death." In nearly nine years of conflict, more than 380,000 people have been killed and millions have been displaced from their homes. —Agencies

## Virus reopens religion versus science debate in Iran

**TEHRAN:** The novel coronavirus has sparked intense debate in Iran between ultra-conservative Shiite clerics and the government on how to most effectively tackle the deadliest outbreak of the disease outside China. The issue has also been divisive among religious authorities. "This is a historic debate between Muslim jurists that dates back to the early days of Islam," said Mohsen Alviri, an academic and theologian from Qom, a Shiite holy city that is the epicenter of Iran's coronavirus outbreak.

"Some people prioritize religious rituals, which they place above everything, even medical science," said the hodjatoleslam, or middle-ranking cleric. Others "think we can abandon obligatory prayers to save a human being's life," he added. Ayatollah Mohammad Saeidi, head of the Fatima Masumeh mausoleum in Qom, a place of pilgrimage visited each year by crowds of Shiites from Iran and abroad, is from the first category.

In an online video that went viral last week, Saeidi insisted the place of worship should remain open to the faithful, despite the COVID-19 illness outbreak, which Iran

says has claimed 66 lives out of 1,501 cases of infection. "This sacred shrine (is) a house of healing," he said, inviting pilgrims to come so that they can be "healed of their physical and spiritual illnesses".

### 'Antibacterial effects'

Two days earlier, Qom's top security body had ordered the suspension of collective prayers in the province. It also ordered the disinfection of the mausoleum and the installation of barriers to keep people back from a tomb whose ornate silver-plated enclosure is usually touched or kissed by the faithful. An article published a few hours later on the mausoleum's website criticized the decision as "an error based on lack of faith".

The article, which was referred to as a statement by Iranian media but is no longer available online, repeatedly referred to what it presented as "the antibacterial effects of silver". Following the exchange between the government and the mausoleum, Health Minister Saeed Namaki announced restrictions on the entry to Shiite holy sites. The government had to make concessions, he implied, while indicating that it had made proposals that were "stricter" than those that were finally adopted.

Under the government's new guidelines, worshippers would only be allowed to enter pilgrimage sites if they had hand sanitizing liquid and masks, and as long as they avoided close contact with each other and simply prayed before leaving. Advice on ways to prevent novel coronavirus infections has appeared in droves on bill-



TEHRAN: Women wearing protective masks stand at a bus station in the Iranian capital Tehran yesterday, following the COVID-19 illness outbreak, which Iran says has claimed 66 lives out of 1,501 cases of infection since February. —AFP

boards and on television in Iran. Authorities also took the rare decision to cancel the main weekly Muslim prayers in Tehran and other cities, including Mashhad, an important pilgrimage site.

"Nothing justifies the closure of this divine duty," Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda, the imam who leads prayers in northeastern Mashhad, was quoted as saying by state news agency IRNA. But one hodjatoleslam has a different opinion. "If specialist doctors recommend collective prayers should be temporarily suspended or that attendance at religious sites should be reduced, then this should be adhered to,"

Mohammadreza Zaeri said.

"If someone were to be contaminated by (a cleric's) negligence, then (this cleric) would certainly be religiously responsible," Zaeri, who writes for a religious monthly, said on the messaging service Telegram. Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei entered the debate on Thursday, praising doctors and nurses and expressing hope that their dedication would "soon eradicate the sinister virus". In Qom, Grand Ayatollah Safi Golpayegani issued a fatwa on Saturday calling on the population to "take into account" the health ministry's recommendations. —AFP

## Manila mall hostage-taker surrenders

**MANILA:** A sacked security guard gave himself up and set free dozens of hostages he seized at gunpoint yesterday in a Manila mall, ending a day-long standoff that terrified shoppers and left one man wounded. The gunman, who launched the attack over his dismissal, walked out of the V-Mall and was able to complain to reporters about his former employers before police tackled him. Authorities initially said about 30 people were held in an office inside the mall, but once the standoff ended they said the number was up to 70.

"The crisis is over," said Francis Zamora, mayor of San Juan City, which includes the mall. "They're all safe now." The drama kicked off yesterday morning when the suspect shot and wounded another security guard, who was rushed to hospital in stable condition, and barricaded the hostages in an office. The gunman was armed with a pistol and what he claimed was a hand grenade when he burst into the mall, sending terrified shoppers and workers fleeing.

Heavily armed police in battle gear and carrying assault rifles massed at the shopping center while scores of onlookers snapped pictures with their mobile phones. Zamora told reporters the hostage-taker was upset after losing his job, and had turned to violence to air his grievances. Authorities worked for hours to convince him to surrender, and later in the day held a press conference where company officers apologized for upsetting him.

"I deeply regret my shortcomings," one of his former supervisors said. "Because of this, I will resign from my post... to give way to a solution to our current problem." Police were in contact with the suspect for hours via a walkie-talkie. —AFP