

Over 1,000 Islamist Militants Killed in U.S. Strikes in Syria: Monitor

AMMAN - Three months of U.S.-led strikes in Syria have so far killed at least 1,171 people, mostly Islamic State militants, a British-based Syrian monitoring group said on Tuesday.

Rami Abdulrahman, the head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, told Reuters only 52 were civilians. But his network of activists, who are based around Syria,



said the death toll since the military campaign was launched in late September was probably higher among hardline Islamist insurgents.

"This is because of the difficulty of activists reaching areas hit by the coalition and also because the Islamic State keeps a tight lid on its human losses," Abdulrahman said. The United States and its allies have significantly

scaled down their air strikes in Syria since late September compared to the first month of the campaign.

In total, the United States carried out 488 air strikes in Syria through Dec. 15, according to U.S. military data published by Reuters. The Observatory figures do not include casualties from air strikes on Islamic State targets in Iraq. (Reuters)

UN Warns of Potential War Crimes in Libya

GENEVA - The U.N.'s top human rights official says fighting between armed groups in Libya has killed hundreds of civilians and could lead to prosecution for war crimes.

The U.N. high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Raad al-Hussein, says there have been hundreds of civilian deaths, widespread displacement of people and serious challenges to daily living for those

trapped in areas of Libya where armed groups have fought in recent months.

A report Tuesday from the U.N. human rights office and the U.N. Support Mission in Libya found indiscriminate shelling of some civilian areas and at least 120,000 people driven from their homes in an escalating humanitarian crisis.

Libya's worst fighting since longtime dictator



Moammar Gadhafi was overthrown in 2011 has fractured the country among two rival governments and several militant groups. (AP)

Ukraine Takes Historic Step toward NATO

KIEV - Ukraine took a historic step toward NATO on Tuesday in a parliamentary vote that stoked Russia's anger ahead of talks on ending the ex-Soviet state's separatist war. Lawmakers in the government-controlled chamber overwhelmingly adopted a bill dropping Ukraine's non-aligned status - a classification given to states such as Switzerland that refuse to join military alliances and thus play no part in wars.

President Petro Poroshenko had vowed to put Ukraine under Western military protection after winning an election called in the wake of the February ouster in Kiev of a Moscow-backed president. "Ukraine's fight for its independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty has turned into a decisive factor in our relations with the world," Poroshenko told foreign ambassadors in Kiev on Monday night.

"European and Euro-Atlantic integrations - that is Ukraine's XX course," Poroshenko tweeted mo-



ments after the 303-8 vote. Ukraine assumed neutrality under strong Russian pressure in 2010. It had sought NATO membership in the early post-Soviet era but -- its once-mighty army in ruins and riven by corruption -- was never viewed as a serious candidate.

Last winter's revolution in Kiev upset Russian President Vladimir Putin's plans to enlist Ukraine in a new bloc he was forging in order to counterbalance NATO and the European Union. And Moscow had set Kiev's exclusion from all military blocs as a condition for any deal on ending the pro-Russian uprising that has killed 4,700 in the eastern Ukrainian

rustbelt in the past eight months.

Putin's view of NATO as modern Russia's biggest threat has only been reinforced by this year's dramatic spike in East-West tensions over Ukraine.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov demanded that Kiev "put an end to confrontation" and stop adopting "absolutely counterproductive" measures that only stoked tensions between the two sides.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said even more bluntly that "in essence, an application for NATO membership will turn Ukraine into a potential military opponent for Russia." (AFP)

S. Korea to Continue Efforts for Dialogue with DPRK

SEOUL - South Korean President Park Geun-hye said Tuesday that the government will continue efforts for dialogue with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), vowing to actively prepare for future reunification of the two Koreas from 2015.

"The government will continue efforts for dialogue in terms of inter-Korean relations, with a sincere and broadly open mind and in accordance with principle," Park said during a Cabinet meeting.

Park pledged to actively build preparations for future reunification of the two Koreas from next year, saying South Korea will prepare to provide real assistance for people in the DPRK.

Park has advocated the unified Korea as a "bonanza" for the Korean Peninsula and the region as well as the world.

To prepare for the reunification era, South Korea said Monday in its 2015 economic policy direction that it would push for aggressive exchange and cooperation with the DPRK if inter-Korean relations improve.

As part of those efforts, South Korea would push to hold a general meeting of the Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI) next year in Seoul to help the DPRK develop utilities and infrastructure.

Created in 1995, the GTI is an inter-governmental cooperation mechanism in northeast Asia supported by the UN Development Program (UNDP). Its four members are South Korea, China, Russia and Mongolia. The DPRK took its name off the GTI in November 2009.

South Korea plans to go ahead with the tripartite transport project, which uses the DPRK-Russia railway and port. The test-run was conducted earlier this month by transporting about 40,000 tons of coal from Russian border city of Khasan to the DPRK's port city of Rajin via the 54-kilometer railway before moving it by sea route to Pohang, South Korea's southern port city. (Xinhua)

Man Haron Monis, a self-styled sheikh, held hostages at gunpoint at the Lindt Chocolate Cafe in Martin Place, a central Sydney shopping and office precinct, from mid-morning on Monday last week. Two hostages, cafe manager Tori Johnson and lawyer Katrina Dawson, were killed along with Monis when police stormed the cafe. An official investigation into the final moments of the siege and the deaths of all three is underway.

"I'm alerting people to the fact that the terror level remains high and at this level an attack is likely," Abbott said. (Reuters)

PNA to withdraw the resolution, saying "we believe in Hamas that this draft resolution doesn't cover full Palestinians and here is a large factional opposition." Earlier this week, senior

Hamas Opposes Palestinian Draft Resolution Presented to UN

GAZA - Hamas movement announced on Tuesday that it opposes the Palestinian draft resolution presented to the UN Security Council which demands an end of Israeli occupation.

Sami Abu Zuhri, Hamas spokesman in Gaza, said in an emailed press statement that the draft resolution presented by the Palestinian Authority to the Security Council "doesn't represent consensus of the Palestinian people." Last week, the Palestinians presented an Arab-backed draft resolution through Jordan to the Security Council, demanding an end to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories in 1967. The draft resolution called for an end to the Israeli occupation until 2017 and established a Palestinian state on these territories.

It also called for a limited one year of direct peace talks to agree on implementing the resolution. Abu Zuhri called on the

Australia PM Warns of 'Chatter' As Memorials Held for Siege Victims

SYDNEY - Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott said on Tuesday security officials had intercepted a heightened level of "terrorist chatter" in the aftermath of the Sydney cafe siege. As memorial services were held for the two victims of the 16-hour siege a week ago, Abbott warned that the public needed to remain alert as the country headed into Christmas and New Year celebrations. "The national security agencies today indicated that there has been a heightened level of terrorist chatter in the aftermath of the Martin Place siege," Abbott told reporters in Sydney.

Nearly 300 Heritage Sites Hit By Syria War: UN



BEIRUT - Nearly 300 cultural heritage sites have been destroyed, damaged and looted in Syria since its conflict broke out in 2011, the UN said Tuesday in a report citing satellite evidence.

Among the areas exposed to major damage were UNESCO world heritage sites such as Aleppo, where settlements have been in place for 7,000 years, and the fabled desert Greco-Roman oasis of Palmyra.

"Looting, destruction from aerial bombardment and other explosions, as well as infrastructure construction at cultural sites significantly threatens the heritage to future generations of these historic structures and objects," the UN said in a statement.

The report focused on 18 areas, of which six are UNESCO-listed: the Old City of Aleppo; Bosra; Damascus; the Dead City; Crac des Chevaliers and

Palmyra. Detailed analysis of satellite imagery of 290 locations at these sites showed 24 of them had been destroyed, 104 severely damaged, 85 moderately damaged and 77 possibly damaged.

The United Nations said the report was "alarming testimony of the ongoing damage that is happening to Syria's vast cultural heritage" and called for efforts to scale up their protection. The satellite images were put together by UNOSAT, a Geneva-based UN institute.

"It is very sad for Syria as well as the world that this is happening," said UNOSAT director Einar Bjorgo.

"Humankind is losing hundreds and thousands of years of heritage," he told AFP. "Perhaps some of it can be rebuilt, but what is looted may be lost, unless it resurfaces and is given back." (AFP)

Sex Slavery Pushes Iraq IS Victims to Suicide: Amnesty



BAGHDAD - Women and girls from Iraq's Yazidi religious minority forced into sexual slavery by the Islamic State jihadist group have committed suicide or tried to, Amnesty International said on Tuesday.

IS militants have overrun swathes of Iraq since June, declared a cross-border caliphate also encompassing parts of neighbouring Syria, and carried out a litany of abuses in both countries. The group has targeted Yazidis and other minorities in north Iraq in a campaign that rights group Amnesty said amounted to ethnic cleansing, murdering civilians and enslaving others for a fate that some captives consider even worse than death.

"Many of those held as sexual slaves are children -- girls aged 14, 15 or even younger," Donatella Rovera, Amnesty's senior crisis response adviser, said in a statement. Amnesty said that many of the perpetrators are IS fighters, but may also include supporters of the group. A 19-year-old named Jilan committed suicide

out of fear she would be raped, Amnesty quoted her brother as saying. A girl who was held with her but later escaped confirmed the account, saying: "One day we were given clothes that looked like dance costumes and were told to bathe and wear those clothes. Jilan killed herself in the bathroom."

"She cut her wrists and hanged herself. She was very beautiful; I think she knew she was going to be taken away by a man and that is why she killed herself."

Another former captive told the rights group that she and her sister tried to kill themselves to escape forced marriage, but were stopped from doing so.

"We tied... scarves around our necks and pulled away from each other as hard as we could, until I fainted... I could not speak for several days after that," Wafa, 27, told the rights group. Amnesty also recounted the story of 16-year-old Randa, who was abducted with her family and raped by a man twice her age. (AFP)

Neighbor News

Sharif Calls Parliamentary Leaders Today to Finalise Anti-Terror Plan

ISLAMABAD - Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has called in a meeting of Parliamentary leaders at the Prime Minister House in Islamabad on Wednesday (today). The meeting would finalise the national action plan aimed at countering terrorism and extremism which has been prepared by a parliamentary committee in consensus with all political stakeholders in the country.

Prime Minister Nawaz would also consult Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif in this regard. Anti-terrorism action committee meeting under way in Parliament House

A meeting of the anti-terrorism action committee meeting on Tuesday,

with members of all parliamentary parties in attendance, is under way at the Parliament House in the federal capital.

The meeting is being headed by Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan.

The recommendations collected by the recently constituted anti-terrorism working group of counter-terror experts will be brought forward for discussion.

Earlier, the working group had finalised its recommendations in relation to measures that can be taken for effectively combating the scourge of terrorism. The working group had evaluated the post Peshawar tragedy scenario and discussed laws pertinent to terrorism. (Monitoring Desk)

Iran Felicitates Iraq on Triumphs in Anti-Terror Campaign

TEHRAN - Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Marziyeh Afkham voiced pleasure in the recent victories of the Iraqi army and popular forces in their fight against the ISIL Takfiri terrorists, describing unity and solidarity of the Iraqi nation and army as the key to their recent success.

"The Iraqi nation's unity, national solidarity and companionship with the country's armed forces are the key to the recent victories in the battle against terrorists in Iraq," Afkham said, voicing pleasure in the recent gains of Iraq against the ISIL.

She reiterated Iran's continued supports for the Iraqi government and nation in the war on terrorism and Takfiri terrorists, and expressed the hope that the Iraqi government and nation would embrace final victory in light of their national

unity and solidarity.

Her remarks came after the Iraqi army, popular troops and Kurdish Peshmarga forces gained a chain of victories, which started with the conquer of the formerly ISIL-controlled Jurf al-Sakhr last month and continued with major victories in Sinjar, Tal Afar and several other strategic regions in Mosul province near the borders with Syria in the last few days. Informed sources said earlier today that ISIL has started massive troops pullout from the city of Mosul in the Western parts of Iraq following a series of gains by Peshmarga forces in the region.

"Hundreds of ISIL terrorists have started fleeing Mosul towards the Syrian borders after the Peshmarga forces regained control of the nearby Sinjar city in Nineveh province," the sources said. (FNA)

China to Advance Agricultural Modernization

BEIJING - China concluded a tone-setting central rural work conference on Tuesday, vowing to push forward agricultural modernization through reform and innovation.

China made great progress in rural development in 2014, but it is facing "unprecedented" challenges if the country wants to achieve sustained and stable development in the agricultural sector, according to a statement released after the two-day meeting. The country pledged to make more efforts to speed up agricultural modernization in order to unleash farmers' con-

sumption potential and spur investment in rural infrastructure.

An expanding agricultural sector will also forge new engines to propel China's economic growth, according to the statement.

"Food security is China's top priority during the agricultural modernization process. China will keep cereal largely self-sufficient and staples absolutely safe," the statement read.

China will guide orderly transfer of management rights of rural lands and development of new agricultural entities in hope of boosting scale management. (Xinhua)

Tajik Leader Expected to Present Main Directions of CSTO Activities in 2015

DUSHANBE - A session of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Collective Security Council is being held in Moscow on Tuesday. At the CSTO Collective Security Council meeting, the presidents of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan are reportedly discussing expansion of allied cooperation among the CSTO member nations and the current regional situation.

According to the CSTO Secretariat, a number of

important issues have been tabled to the meeting's agenda, including the crisis response system against the backdrop of global and regional security challenges.

The CSTO Secretary-General Nikolai Boroduyzha will report on the progress of implementation of the CSTO's decision on rendering collective assistance to Tajikistan to strengthen the Tajik-Afghan border that was adopted on September 23, 2013. (Asia-Plus)