

DAESH to keep US-backed Syria force from Old City

UNHCR seeks access to civilians in IS-held Raqqa

BEIRUT, June 13, (Agencies): The UN's refugee agency on Tuesday called for better access to northern Syria's Raqqa province, where US-backed forces are trying to drive the Islamic State group out of its self-styled capital, saying close to half a million people are in need of assistance.

Kurdish-led forces attacked the provincial capital, also called Raqqa, a week ago, hoping to drive the militants out with the aid of US-led coalition airstrikes.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said IS launched counterattacks in one of the neighborhoods where the Syrian Democratic Forces are advancing. The SDF

said it is helping to get people to safety in at least four neighborhoods seized from IS militants.

Clearing operations around the city have been underway for months, and the UNHCR says 100,000 people were displaced in May alone.

UNHCR spokesman Andrej Mahecic said the barriers to movement have made aid operations "costly and complex."

He said all land routes to the region have been blocked by other parties to Syria's civil war that are hostile to the US-backed force, forcing the aid agency to rely on airlifts.

"Resources are also badly needed," said Mahecic. "Funding is not keeping

up with needs on the ground."

The UN has managed to raise only \$29 million of the \$153 million it budgeted to meet humanitarian needs in Raqqa province.

Turkey, which views the main Kurdish militia taking part in the fight against IS as a terrorist group because of its links to Kurdish rebels, has sealed much of its border with northern Syria, disrupting aid operations and the movement of refugees. The Islamic State group has blocked humanitarian access to Raqqa from the south.

Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, an activist group reporting from the city, says food and medicine are running low and shops are shut.

Human Rights Watch has meanwhile called on the US-led coalition to make protection of civilians a priority in the campaign to recapture Raqqa.

"We have already documented a series of rights abuses in the context of anti-ISIS operations," said Lama Fakih, the deputy Middle East director for Human Rights Watch, using another acronym for IS.

The New York-based group said in a statement that the United States and allied ground forces must respect the human rights of everyone caught up in the battle.

It also urged the US to investigate airstrikes that have allegedly targeted civilians, respect detainee rights, pro-

vide safe passage for the displaced and intensify efforts to clear land mines. And it sought guarantees against enlisting child soldiers into the ranks of US partner forces.

The US is providing ground and air support to the SDF in the battle for Raqqa, which has since 2014 been the Islamic State group's main base in Syria. HRW reported in 2014 the SDF's leading faction, the People's Protection Units (YPG), had enlisted soldiers under the age of 18.

Islamic State group jihadists waged fierce battles Tuesday in their Syrian stronghold Raqqa in a bid to repel US-backed fighters advancing towards the walls of the Old City.

The Kurdish and Arab fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) entered Raqqa a week ago, after months of fighting to encircle the northern city that has become a jihadist base.

Since then, they have seized one neighbourhood in western Raqqa and another in the east, where they are now battling to secure control of the Al-Senaa district that leads to the Old City.

Jihan Sheikh Ahmed, spokeswoman for the SDF campaign for Raqqa, said the jihadist group was putting up stiff resistance. "There is fierce fighting against Daesh which is making heavy use of mines and snipers and sometimes car bombs," she told AFP, using the Arabic acronym for IS.

Bilingual better?

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same sentence — is frequent amongst bilinguals. Most parents of bilingual children are bilingual themselves, therefore, it is very common for both sides to use codeswitching frequently. Unfortunately, there is not enough research conducted about the impact of codeswitching on language development. Nonetheless, bilinguals appear to successfully manage the use of codeswitching from an early age.

The best age to learn two languages

Many people think that it is best to learn a language at an early age. The "critical period" theory suggests that learning a second language is easiest during early childhood. However, although our brains are more easily able to learn language earlier in life, the relationship between biological and environmental factors impacts language learning.

It is generally acknowledged that younger learners develop more native-like pronunciations, and a bigger, more varied vocabulary compared to older learners. However, older learners are still able to pick up vocabulary, grammar and academic language.

Thus, earlier is better, but it's never too late to learn a new language.

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Khadeejah Buabbas is a speech and language therapist at FSRI, working with patients suffering from a wide range of speech, language, hearing, and swallowing disorders. As a pathologist, Khadeejah has experience working with a variety of patients, including both children and adults, in a range of different settings including schools, hospitals, and community health centers. You can contact her by calling FSRI at 25720338.

Insurance solution

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Article 22, parents and siblings, can now renew their visas after the department retracted its earlier decision.

The number of those who are expected to benefit from the decision is believed to be about 12,000 residents.

However, they will be subjected to certain controls such as mandatory health insurance and also medical treatment at private hospitals.

Tehran urges

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our southern neighbours in the Gulf through dialogue but in fact establish a permanent mechanism for consultation, conversation and conflict resolution in our region," Zarif said.

He said this could be along the lines of the 1975 Helsinki accords — agreements signed during the Cold War to reduce tensions between western and Communist nations.

"I think if it worked at the height of the Cold War here in Europe, it should work," Zarif said.

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain broke off relations with Qatar on June 5, accusing the small but oil-rich emirate of supporting "terrorism" and being too close to Iran, which is Riyadh's regional rival.

Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have escalated as Iran's Revolutionary Guards blamed the deadly June 7 Tehran attack on Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic State group (IS) claimed responsibility for the twin attacks that killed 17 people and wounded dozens.

"We have intelligence that Saudi Arabia is actively engaged in promoting terrorist groups operating on the eastern side of Iran in Baluchestan," Zarif said.

He said the militants were "using the territory of one of our neighbours against its will to launch attacks against Iran which only two months ago led to the murder of nine Iranian border guards."

The April 29 attack by Sunni militants took place on the frontier with Pakistan.

"On the Western side the same type of activity is being undertaken, again by using the diplomatic hospitality of other neighbours," Zarif said.

Broad support

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business is discussed in private.

It is not yet clear whether the ICAO council, which is holding regularly scheduled meetings in Montreal this week, would agree to intervene, and how long any efforts would take. The matter is expected to be discussed at council by Friday, said one of the sources.

"I would not expect any overnight resolutions," he said.

ICAO spokesman William Raillant-

Iraqi armed forces announce progress in Mosul campaign

Terrified civilians hide from gunfire

Major obstacles remain for Iraqi Kurds

Journey to statehood still long

BAGHDAD, June 13, (Agencies): Iraqi forces on Tuesday reported progress in the US-backed campaign to dislodge Islamic State from Mosul, announcing the capture of a district just north the city's historic centre.

With the loss of the Zanjili neighbourhood, the enclave still held by Islamic State in the northern Iraqi city has shrunk to two districts along the western banks of the Tigris river - the densely populated Old City centre and the Medical City.

Iraqi government forces retook eastern Mosul in January and began a new push on May 27 to capture the remaining enclave, where up to 200,000 people are trapped.

The Mosul offensive started in October with air and ground support from a US-led international coalition. It has taken much longer than expected as Islamic State is fighting in the middle of civilians, slowing the advance of the assailants.

The fall of Mosul would, in effect, mark the end of the Iraqi half of the "caliphate" declared in 2014 over parts of Iraq and Syria by Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in a speech from a historic mosque in the old city.

In Syria, Kurdish forces backed by US-air strikes are besieging Islamic State forces in the city of Raqqa, the militants' de facto capital in that country.

About 800,000 people, more than a third of the pre-war population of Mosul, have already fled, seeking refuge either with friends and relatives or in camps.

The bullets of jihadists rain down outside the Mosul kindergarten, where dozens of terrified Iraqi civilians are sheltering from fighting in their northern city.

Confused, scared and exhausted, the civilians — mostly women, including one in a wheelchair — huddle in the pre-school after Iraqi forces brought them in for protection.

The sounds of sniper fire, air strikes, and shelling echo all around them, as Iraqi forces fight to dislodge Islamic State group fighters from a nearby building.

Clark said the agency could not make an immediate comment.

The UN aviation agency, which is headquartered in Montreal, does not impose binding rules, but wields clout through safety and security standards that are usually followed by its 191-member countries.

Earlier in the day, the chief executive of Qatar Airways told CNN that ICAO should declare the measures against Qatari air traffic to be illegal.

"We have legal channels to object to this," he said. "ICAO... should heavily get involved, put their weight behind this to declare this an illegal act."

Baker said 18 destinations were now out of bounds for the airline.

He also criticised Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both members of ICAO's governing council, for shutting down the airline's offices.

He added that he was "extremely disappointed" in US President Donald Trump. "(The US) should be the leader trying to break this blockade and not sitting and watching what's going on and putting fuel on (the) fire," he said.

Trump last week waded into the worst Gulf Arab rift in years and praised the pressure on Qatar, which Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain accuse of supporting Iran and funding Islamist groups, charges Doha denies.

Saudi Arabia's civil aviation authority said on Tuesday that the closure of its airspace to flights from Qatar was within the kingdom's sovereign right to protect its citizens from any threat.

The agency was commenting in reaction to remarks made by Qatar Airways' chief executive that Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain were violating international law by shutting out Qatari flights.

The airspace closure was to protect the country and its citizens from anything it sees as a threat and as a precautionary measure, Saudi Arabia's General Authority of Civil Aviation said in

BAGHDAD, June 13, (AFP): Many Iraqi Kurds hailed last week's announcement of a September referendum on independence as historic, but major obstacles will remain on the path to statehood after an expected landslide "yes".

The autonomous region is still at war with the Islamic State group, it hosts a displaced population of more than a million and its once promising economy has taken a double hit from conflict and low oil prices.

The northern region's leader, Masoud Barzani, announced on June 7 that a referendum would be held in Kurdish areas of Iraq on September 25 to ask voters if they want a separate state.

The vote is non-binding, but sets the wheels in motion for an independent state that has been gestating since Iraq's Kurds gained autonomy from Baghdad on the back of the 1991 Gulf War.

Hoshyar Zebari, a former foreign minister of Iraq and a senior negotiator in Kurdistan's independence process, described the decision as signifying that the Kurds had "crossed the Rubicon", the point of no return.

Besides obvious security and economic challenges that need to be overcome for any viable state project, the other necessary conditions are internal unity and external assist.

Neither is guaranteed.

Iraqi forces are fighting to retake Mosul from IS, after the jihadist group overran the city in 2014, imposing its brutal rule on its inhabitants.

Naja Abdallah, 70, says she didn't dare leave her house until Iraqi forces arrived in her district of west Mosul, and even then fled with family members under heavy fire.

"We had no more electricity, no water, no medicine — nothing but God's mercy," she says, as sniper and artillery fire continue unabated in the Al-Shifaa district outside.

Iraqi forces have managed to retake most of Mosul since launching the battle for IS's last major Iraqi stronghold

"The two biggest obstacles to Kurdistan's independence are the question of its boundaries with Iraq and international recognition," analyst Nathaniel Ribkin said.

"If no agreement is reached with Baghdad on borders, many countries will be reluctant to recognise a unilateral declaration of independence," said Ribkin, managing editor of the Inside Iraq Politics newsletter.

Iraqi Kurdistan's most powerful neighbours Turkey and Iran, which have their own Kurdish minorities and support one of the autonomous region's two main rival parties, have spoken against the referendum.

Tehran warned it could "only lead to new problems" while Turkey, through which Iraqi Kurdish oil is being exported, called the decision to organise the referendum "irresponsible" and a "grave mistake".

Baghdad, much like the Kurdish region's key US ally, has reacted relatively tamely by stressing the need to comply with the constitution and reaffirming its commitment to Iraq's territorial integrity.

The official reactions are as predictable as the referendum itself, which the Kurdish administration had promised would be held after Mosul is retaken, but the more distant prospect of secession is already being discussed by all sides.

seven months ago, but the advance has slowed in the last districts under jihadist control.

IS's grip on Mosul has been reduced to the Old City and several nearby areas, but the jihadists are putting up significant resistance and up to 200,000 civilians may be caught in the fighting.

Iraqi fighters inside the pre-school have led women to one room, while they check the identities of the men — young and old — somewhere else.

The anti-IS forces thoroughly screen fleeing civilians in a bid to make sure no jihadists escape among them.

Omran, a 24-year-old who has grown his beard long like all men under

as inhumane and contrary to Islamic values after key Gulf states broke off ties with Ankara's ally.

"Taking action to isolate a country in all areas is inhumane and un-Islamic," Erdogan said in televised comments to his party in Ankara, after Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain broke off relations with Qatar on June 5, accusing it of supporting "terrorism".

In his strongest comments yet on the crisis, Erdogan added that Qatar was a country "on which a death sentence had in some way been pronounced".

The crisis has put Turkey in a delicate position as Ankara regards Qatar as its chief ally in the Gulf but is also keen to maintain its improving relations with the key regional power Saudi Arabia.

Turkey also is eager to maintain workable relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia's foe with whom Doha's critics say Qatar maintained excessively close ties.

Erdogan added he would hold three-way phone talks on the crisis later Tuesday with French President Emmanuel Macron and Qatar's Amir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani.

The move by Saudi and its allies came shortly after US President Donald Trump visited Riyadh, with some analysts saying the US leader had emboldened the Saudi leadership.

Earlier, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said that Erdogan would hold talks on the crisis with Trump in the coming days.

Erdogan vehemently rejected the accusations — already strongly denied by Doha — that Qatar supports terrorism, arguing the country had been a staunch opponent of Islamic State (IS) jihadists.

"Qatar is a country which, like Turkey, has adopted the most resolute stance against DAESH (IS)," said Erdogan. "Let's stop fooling ourselves." Striking a careful balance, Erdogan

The federal government has already set up a committee to discuss the shape of relations between Baghdad and a future, independent Kurdistan.

Turkey has expressed strong displeasure at the date of the referendum but may ultimately not be completely hostile to Kurdish independence in Iraq if this can help it contain Kurdish separatism at home.

Washington also objected to the timing of the vote, but has repeatedly expressed its support for the principle of self-determination.

"Without ironclad US security guarantees, an independent Kurdistan is unlikely to survive," Amberin Zaman, a fellow at the US-based Wilson Center, wrote in a recent paper on the issue.

Iraqi Kurdish leaders enjoy strong support in Congress and appear to be taking the bet that Washington will be pragmatic and endorse a fait accompli, as it did a quarter of a century ago when the Kurds used a US-enforced no-fly zone to start building their institutions.

But Iraq's roughly five million Kurds do not all agree between themselves on the referendum, whose announcement prompted some suspicious reactions internally.

The region is in political limbo. Barzani's mandate as regional president expired nearly two years ago and parliament was suspended a few weeks later.

IS rule, is one of those who is separated from his family for vetting.

"We've lived through tough, terrifying days. We've really been through a lot," he says, just before he is whisked away. The fighting intensified around his home in recent days, he says, and his family escaped to their neighbour's house after their own was hit in the fighting.

"I hope to God it all gets better," Omran says. Women quietly break down into tears after the men are taken away, as an Iraqi commander shouts coordinates over the radio for warplanes and artillery gunmen to target the jihadists.

stopped short of directly criticising Saudi Arabia's actions but called on Saudi King Salman to show leadership by solving the crisis.

"I think that as the elder statesman of the Gulf, the king of Saudi Arabia should solve this affair and show leadership," said Erdogan.

Turkey's parliament last week approved deploying troops to a Turkish base in Qatar in what was seen as a show of support for its embattled ally.

Envoys

The US ambassador to Qatar said Tuesday she is leaving her post in Doha, in the midst of the worst diplomatic crisis involving America's Gulf allies in years.

"This month, I end my 3 years as US Ambassador to #Qatar. It has been the greatest honor of my life and I'll miss this great country," Dana Shell Smith wrote on Twitter.

Smith did not say why she was stepping down, if she was staying within the diplomatic service or who would replace her.

In Washington, officials said the ambassador had made a personal decision to leave the post earlier this year after serving a normal three-year tour.

"Ambassador Dana Smith's assignment as ambassador comes to an end this month and she will depart Qatar later this month as part of the normal rotation of career diplomats throughout the world," a senior State Department official said.

"Her decision to leave the foreign service was made earlier this year. We wish her the best as she moves on from the Department of State."

Smith's departure comes with Washington sending mixed signals over the Gulf crisis, which saw Saudi Arabia and several of its allies cut ties with Qatar claiming that Doha supported extremist groups.

Saudi Arabia has called time out on

new subscriptions to Qatar-linked satellite television network beIN Sports, a major broadcaster of international football across the region.

Morocco said it would send plane-loads of food to Qatar to boost supplies there after Gulf Arab states cut diplomatic and economic ties with Doha.

Qatar, which imported 80 percent of its food from bigger Gulf Arab neighbours before the diplomatic shutdown, has also been talking to Iran and Turkey to secure food and water.

"This decision was made in conformity with Islamic precepts that call for solidarity and mutual aid between Muslim people, notably during this holy month of Ramadan," the Moroccan foreign ministry statement said on Monday.

On Sunday, Morocco said it would remain neutral in the dispute, offering to mediate between the Gulf countries, which are all close allies to the North African kingdom. Qatar's finance minister said on Monday the world's richest country per capita has the resources to endure and played down the economic toll of the confrontation.

Newswatch

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in southeast Bangladesh, burying many in their homes as they slept, authorities said Tuesday.

Three young children from the same family were among those killed in the disaster, which comes just weeks after a cyclone battered the region and destroyed camps housing thousands of Rohingya refugees. (AFP)

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TORONTO: Two cyber security firms have uncovered malicious software that they believe caused a December 2016 Ukraine power outage, they said on Monday, warning the malware could be easily modified to harm critical infrastructure operations around the globe.

ESET, a Slovakian anti-virus software maker, and Drago Inc, a US critical-infrastructure security firm, released detailed analyses of the malware, known as Industroyer or Crash Override, and issued private alerts to governments and infrastructure operators to help them defend against the threat. (RTRS)

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DUBAI: Two Saudi suspects killed when their car exploded in a mainly Shiite district of the kingdom were wanted for murdering police officers, the interior ministry said on Tuesday.

DNA testing identified **Fadil al-Hamada** and **Mohammed al-Suwaimil**, both Saudis, as the men who died on June 1 in **Qatif** city. (AFP)

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WASHINGTON: It may not be necessary to expand a ban on laptops and other large electronics in the cabins of many international flights into the **United States** right now, Homeland Security Secretary **John Kelly** said Tuesday.

Kelly didn't rule out an expansion from 10 current airports, mostly in the Middle East and Africa, to all nonstop flights from Europe to the US, but he said he has a "fair amount of confidence" that aviation security can be raised enough to limit or eliminate some inconveniences for travelers. (AP)

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OSLO: European foreign policy chief **Federica Mogherini** said on Tuesday she was confident the **United States** would stick to the 2015 **Iran** nuclear deal, despite its protestations to the contrary, as the deal is working.

"I am confident that the review in the United States will bring to wise decisions, which means keeping something that is working," she told a news conference on the margins of a peace mediation conference in Oslo. (RTRS)

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WASHINGTON: The Senate headed toward a showdown vote over President **Donald Trump's** proposed weapons sale to **Saudi Arabia** that, if successful, would be a rebuke of one of the new administration's most prominent successes.

A vote is expected Tuesday afternoon on whether to block the sale of an estimated \$510 million in precision-guided munitions, part of Trump's proposed \$110 billion arms package to **Riyadh**. (AP)