

Russian Airstrikes Allegedly Kill 3,000 People in Syria Since September

DAMASCUS - At least 3,000 people have been killed in Russian airstrikes in Syria since Sept. 30 of last year, a Syrian monitor group reported on Wednesday.

The airstrikes killed a total of 1,015 civilians, including 238 children under 18, 640 men and 137 women, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Additionally, the UK-based monitoring group said the strikes killed 893 militants with the Islamic State



(IS) group and 1,141 others from various jihadi groups, including the al-Qaida-linked Nusra Front.

The officials in Syria or Russia have yet to comment on the death toll.

The Russian air force has been backing the Syrian ground force with airstrikes since last September.

Government officials in Syria said the strikes were effective in curbing the expansion of the radical groups in the war-torn country. (Xinhua)

IS Releases 270 out of 400 Kidnapped in Syria

DAMASCUS - The Islamic State (IS) group released 270 out of 400 people it had kidnapped, when its militants stormed a town in the countryside of Syria's eastern province of Deir al-Zour earlier this week, a monitor group reported on Wednesday. The 270 released people were kids under 14, and men over 55 years old, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. It added that 130 men between the age 15 and 55 are still held by the IS militants, who will inter-

rogate them on charges of cooperation with the Syrian government in the town of Bughailiyeh. Aside from the originally captured 400 men, the UK-based watchdog group, which relies on a network of activists on ground, said the IS group captured another 50 people over the past 24 hours during raids in Bughailiyeh in the countryside of Deir al-Zour. Upon storming Bughailiyeh last week, the IS militants had killed as many as 280 people, ...*(More on P4)...(26)*

Kurds Destroy Thousands of Arab Homes in Northern Iraq

BAGHDAD - Kurdish forces have destroyed thousands of Arab homes in northern Iraq in an apparent attempt to uproot Arab communities, Amnesty International said in a report on Wednesday.

Kurdish forces, known as Peshmerga, and other Kurdish militias in northern Iraq have "bulldozed, blown up and burned down thousands of homes in an apparent effort to uproot Arab communities in revenge for their perceived support for the so-called Islamic



State (IS)," the human rights watchdog said. "The KRG (Kurdish Regional Government) forces appear to be spear-

heading a concerted campaign to forcibly displace Arab communities by destroying entire villages in areas they have recap-

tured from IS in northern Iraq," said Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International's Senior Crisis ...*(More on P4)...(27)*

German President Argues Moral Imperative in Limiting Migrant Flow

DAVOS - Germany's president said Wednesday it is "morally and politically necessary" to limit Europe's refugee influx, warning that failing to do so meant ceding ground to populists and extremists. "Limits are not unethical: they help to maintain acceptance within society," Joachim Gauck told the world's political and economic elite gathering at the Swiss ski resort of Davos. "Without acceptance, a society is not open and not willing to take in refugees," said

Gauck, noting that this was why EU leaders are battling to stem the continent's biggest migrant crisis since World War II. "A limitation strategy can be both morally and politically necessary to preserve the state's ability to function," said the former Protestant pastor. "It may also be necessary in order to ensure that refugees receive all the assistance they require once they have arrived."

Debate is raging in Germany over the country's ability to cope with a



record 1.1 million asylum seekers who arrived in 2015. Gauck stressed however that the drastic action of slamming the

door shut to refugees -- as sought by populists and the far-right -- was not an option. An isolation strategy ...*(More on P4)...(28)*

Netherlands Says 'Serious' Concerns about Belgium Nuclear Plants

DOEL - The Netherlands has "serious" concerns about neighbouring Belgium's ageing nuclear reactors, the Dutch environment minister said Wednesday during a joint inspection of one plant with her Belgian counterpart. Belgium has recently opened up its two nuclear plants to inspections by ministers from Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands after a series of problems including shutdowns, leaks and cracks. "There are concerns because of the age of

the nuclear plant and the incidents that have been occurring," Dutch environment minister Melanie Schultz van Haegen told a press conference after an inspection at the Doel plant near the Dutch border. "The incidents have not caused any risk to the nuclear site. Now it's not a nuclear incident but maybe tomorrow it is. These worries are serious and this is why we are here, to give maximum transparency, to show them what it is really about," she said. But ...*(More on P4)...(29)*

Red Doors Making Asylum Seekers in UK Targets: Report

LONDON - Britain's interior ministry said Wednesday it will probe asylum-seeker housing in northeast England over complaints that the properties' red doors identify them as targets for abuse.

The announcement follows an investigation by the Times newspaper into properties run by Jomast, a subcontractor for security giant G4S, which provides asylum accommodation in the northeastern town of Middlesbrough. Local asylum seekers told the Times they had been verbally abused, had their properties vandalised and had the sign of the far-right National Front carved on their front doors. "I am deeply concerned by this issue and I have commissioned Home Office officials to conduct an urgent audit of asylum seeker housing in the north-east," said immigration minister James Brokenshire. "I condemn absolutely any actions that sow divisions within communities. We have been in contact ...*(More on P4)...(30)*

Ukraine Expands Bitter Trade War with Russia

KIEV - Ukraine on Wednesday escalated its bitter trade war with Russia in punishment for Moscow's seeming efforts to choke off its westward-leaning neighbour's economic ties with other former Soviet states.

Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk told a cabinet meeting that Kiev was adding 70 food products to its existing list of items Russia cannot sell in Ukraine. The hawkish government leader said the measure was being adopted in response to "Russia's economic aggression" -- a reference to its own Ukrainian food ban that Moscow imposed



at the start of the year. "And we will continue to defend our domestic market in the future," Yatsenyuk warned. The food fight came in response to Ukraine's decision to enter a landmark free trade and political association agreement

with the European Union on January 1. Former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich's shock decision to nix the EU pact in November 2013 led to three months of violent street protests that toppled his government and ...*(More on P4)...(31)*

Top EU Official Seeks Migration Summit as Crisis Deepens

BRUSSELS - The head of the European Commission on Wednesday called for a special summit of EU leaders to deal with the refugee emergency amid criticism that the bloc's migrant strategy is unraveling fast.

"I'm rather worried that we won't have enough time to tackle the refugee question in sufficient depth," European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker told reporters.

He recommended holding a new summit because the next meeting of EU government leaders in February will be too focused on keeping Britain in the European Union.

European Council President Donald Tusk, who chairs EU summits, warned on Wednesday that the EU's passport-free travel area could break apart if the migrant strategy is not sorted out within two months.

Juncker's Commission has floated an action plan of short and long term measures aimed at coping with Europe's biggest refugee emergency in more than half a century. Ideas include the relocation plan distribute refugees among EU nations, which would be strung out over two years, and more than 3 billion dollars over two years plus fast track visa and EU membership process for Turkey in exchange for stopping people leaving for Europe.

The Commission also advocates tougher measures to return people who don't qualify for asylum, and tripling funding for the Frontex border agency. (AP)

China, Saudi Arabia Agree to set up High-Level Committee to Steer Cooperation

RIYADH - China and Saudi Arabia have decided to establish a high-level committee to guide and coordinate bilateral cooperation, the two countries' foreign ministers announced here Wednesday. This was agreed by visiting Chinese President Xi Jinping and Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al

Saud, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told reporters. "It is one of the major outcomes of President Xi's visit to Saudi Arabia, and also the first major step for the two sides to build a comprehensive strategic partnership," Wang said. "With guidance and coordination ...*(More on P4)...(32)*

Faced with EU and U.S. Criticism, Israeli Insults Fly

JERUSALEM - U.S. and European criticism of Israeli actions in the occupied West Bank have drawn a furious response from Israel this week, including a former official dismissing the U.S. ambassador to Tel Aviv as a "little Jew boy". Although the concerns expressed by Israel's closest allies were partly cloaked in diplomatic language they struck a nerve in Israel, which is anxious

to counter what it sees as growing attempts to isolate it over its policies toward Palestinians. Ambassador Dan Shapiro's supposed misstep was to observe in a speech to a security conference that Israel applies the law differently to Israelis and Palestinians living in the West Bank. "There seem to be two standards," he said. It is a ...*(More on P4)...(33)*

Neighbor News

No Military Solution Possible in Syria: Iran

DAVOS - Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Wednesday there could be no military solution to the devastating war in Syria and said further confrontation with Saudi Arabia was in no one's interest.

"There is no military solution to the (Syrian) crisis. We need a political solution," Zarif told an audience at the World Economic Forum in the Swiss resort of Davos.

Iran is a major player in this year's edition of the Davos meeting, just days after Tehran sealed a historic deal

ending punishing sanctions by the West over its nuclear programme. But a US decision on Sunday to reimpose some sanctions, this time over Iran's missile programme dampened the proceedings, with Zarif calling the move "bizarre".

"I find it rather bizarre that the United States expresses concern over the Iranian missile programme, which is defensive and does not violate any current international regulation," Zarif said, addressing an audience of bankers and top business figures. (AFP)

Pakistan Reiterates Support "One-China" Policy

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan firmly believes in "One China" policy and supports China's efforts to safeguard sovereignty, the Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday. Pakistan will continue to provide staunch support to the government of the Peoples Republic of China in its efforts to safeguard its sov-

eignty and territorial integrity, the Foreign Ministry spokesman said in response to a question about recent regional elections in China's Taiwan.

The spokesperson said in a statement that abiding by the 1992 Consensus is essential for peaceful and stable development of cross-Strait ties. (Xinhua)

China to Issue Digital Currency "as soon as Possible"

BEIJING - China's central bank on Wednesday announced that it will try to issue digital currency "as soon as possible."

A team in the central bank is examining domestic and global experiences. Digital currency costs less in circulation than traditional paper, facilitates trade, boosts transparency, and cuts money laundering and tax evasion, according to the

People's Bank of China at a conference on digital currency.

They will improve the central bank's control of currency to better support development, and bolster new financial infrastructure and complete payment systems, it added.

The team was set up in 2014 and has made progress on technology, legal issues, and the impact on financial systems. (Xinhua)

Pakistan Not to Join any Anti-Iran Alliance: Minister

ISLAMABAD - Pakistani Defence Minister Khawaja Asif says Islamabad would under no circumstances join a military alliance against Iran. Khawaja Asif, who was addressing Pakistan's National Assembly on Tuesday, made the remarks in an apparent reference to the recently-announced Saudi-led coalition of countries allegedly formed to fight terrorism, to which Pakistan

has reportedly agreed to join. The Pakistani defense minister reiterated that his country would never commit its military to any alliance against another Muslim country. Last month, Saudi Arabia said it had patched together a coalition of 34 Muslim countries to fight against terrorism in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Egypt and Syria. The announcement, however, ...*(More on P4)...(34)*

Tajikistan will Expand Cooperation with Russia in Addressing Modern Threats

DUSHANBE - In a major foreign policy address, President Rahmon said on January 20 that to deal with threats posed by international terrorism, political extremism, fundamentalism, separatism, drug trafficking, and transnational organized crime Tajikistan would continue to follow an "open door" policy of developing "relations of friendship, disinterested and mutually beneficial cooperation with all countries of the

world." He stated that close ties with neighboring and regional states were a priority, to be based on "friendship, good neighborliness, and non-interference in each other's internal affairs."

"We will continue cooperation with traditional partners, in particular with Russia," said Rahmon. "We want to expand cooperation with Russia in addressing modern threats and challenges." (Asia-Plus)