

US-backed forces cut off last IS escape route from Raqa

BEIRUT, JUNE 30 /--/ US-backed forces cut off the last escape route for the Islamic State group from Raqa, trapping the besieged jihadists inside their de facto Syrian capital. But IS fighters hit back with a counterattack that included several suicide bombings against the Syrian Democratic Forces, an alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters trying to seize control of the city. The SDF captured two villages on the southern bank of the Euphrates River that the jihadists had been passing through to withdraw from the city, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. "The SDF has been able to completely encircle Raqa," said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Britain-based monitoring group, which relies on a network of sources on the ground. It was the latest setback for IS, also known as ISIS, which declared its "caliphate" straddling Syria and Iraq three years ago but has since lost most of the territory it once controlled. It came too as Iraqi forces announced the recapture of an iconic mosque in IS's last major Iraqi bastion

Mosul, prompting Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to declare "the end" of the "fake" jihadist state. The SDF, backed by the US-led anti-IS coalition, broke into Raqa on June 6 after spending months chipping away at jihadist territory around the city. Its fighters have since captured two eastern and two western districts of the city and are pushing towards its centre, where IS fighters are holding tens of thousands of civilians. Around 2,500 jihadists are fighting in the city, according to British Major General Rupert Jones, a deputy commander for the US-led coalition. The SDF had surrounded the jihadists from the north, east and west but they were still able to escape across the Euphrates, which forms the southern border of the city. Yesterday's advance saw SDF fighters capture the villages of Kasrat Afnan and Kasab on the southern bank of the Euphrates, cutting off the route the jihadists were using to withdraw to territory IS controls in the Syrian desert and in Deir Ezzor province. The SDF has

"continued to advance eastward south of the Euphrates River, moving to completely encircle ISIS in Raqa," said Colonel Ryan Dillon, spokesman for the US-led coalition. The SDF now control all high-speed avenues of approach into Raqa from the south," he added. But the jihadists appear determined to make a bloody last stand. Several dozen jihadists disguised in SDF uniforms launched an attack from the city centre, which they still control, on two districts in the southeast of the city. They carried out three suicide car bomb attacks, deployed drones armed with explosives, seized six SDF positions and killed several fighters, Abdel Rahman said. "Even totally besieged, jihadists are able to carry out operations," he added. The war in Syria, which has seen jihadists, moderate rebels and forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad pitted against each other, has killed more than 320,000 people since the spring of 2011. A recent fact-finding mission by the UN's chemical watchdog found that sarin was used as a chemical

weapon in an April 4 attack in the Syrian town of Khan Sheikhun, which killed at least 87 people including many children. The findings by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), documented in a report partially seen by AFP Thursday, will now be taken up by a joint UN-OPCW panel to determine whether Syrian government forces were behind the attack. (AFP) IS overran Raqa in mid-2014 as part of the offensive that saw it seize control of large parts of Syria and Iraq. The city became infamous as the scene of some of the group's worst atrocities, including public beheadings, and is thought to have been a hub for planning attacks overseas. The United Nations estimates some 100,000 civilians remain in the city with the jihadists accused of using them as human shields. Marking the third anniversary of IS's declaration of a state on June 29, 2014, a leading analysis firm said the jihadists had since lost more than 60 percent of their territory and 80 percent of their revenue.



French President Emmanuel Macron shakes hands with soldiers after a military ceremony at the Hotel des Invalides in Paris, France - REUTERS

5 militants blow themselves up during raids in Lebanon

BEIRUT, JUNE 30 /--/ Five militants blew themselves up during raids on two refugee camps in eastern Lebanon near the border with Syria in which seven soldiers were wounded, the army said. Four of the suicide bombers struck in one camp near the border town of Aarsal, wounding three soldiers. One militant blew himself up in a second camp near the town, while another militant threw a grenade at troops wounding four of them. The raids, which are aimed at "arresting terrorists and seizing weapons," are still ongoing, the army command said. (AFP)

Obama making nostalgic visit to city of his childhood

BOGOR, JUNE 30 /--/ Former President Barack Obama and his family are set to visit his childhood home city of Jakarta at the end of their 10-day vacation to Indonesia, where they went whitewater rafting and visited an ancient Buddhist temple. Indonesian President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo will host Obama today at the Bogor Palace in West Java, a grand Dutch colonial building famous for its 200-acre botanical gardens and the herd of spotted deer that roam the grounds. Obama was incredibly popular in Indonesia during his presidency, and many here saw him as a symbol of hope and religious tolerance because of his years living in the Muslim country. A statue of the kid still remembered as "Barry" by childhood friends was erected outside the elementary school he attended in Jakarta. (Agencies)

Nearly half a million displaced Syrians return home: UN

GENEVA, JUNE 30 /--/ Nearly half a million displaced Syrians have returned to their homes since the beginning of the year, mainly to find family members and check on property, the UN refugee agency said today. The agency said it had seen "a notable trend of spontaneous returns to and within Syria in 2017." Since January, about 440,000 people who had been displaced within the war-ravaged country had returned to their homes, mainly in Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus, Andrej Mahecic, a spokesman for the agency, known as the UNHCR, told reporters in Geneva. In addition, around 31,000 refugees in neighbouring countries had also returned, he said, bringing to 260,000 the number of refugees who have returned to the country since 2015. But Mahecic said this is a mere "fraction" of the five million Syrian refugees hosted in the region. He said

the main factors prompting the returns to return home were "seeking out family members, checking on property, and, in some cases, a real or perceived improvement in security conditions in parts of the country." He said it was too early to say if the returns might be directly linked to a palpable drop in violence since Turkey agreed at talks in Astana in May with Russia and Iran, allies of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, to establish four safe zones across Syria to ban flights and ensure aid drops. But this week, the UN's special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, told the Security Council that since the May 4 deal, "violence is clearly down. Hundreds of Syrian lives continue to be spared every week, and many towns have returned to some degree of normalcy." Mahecic nonetheless cautioned that "while there is overall

increased hope linked to the recent Astana and Geneva peace talks, UNHCR believes conditions for refugees to return in safety and dignity are not yet in place in Syria." "The sustainability of security improvements in many return areas is uncertain, and there remain significant risks of protection thresholds for voluntary, safe and dignified returns not being met in parts of the country," he added. "Access to displaced population inside Syria remains a key challenge," he added. But "given the returns witnessed so far this year and in light of a progressively increased number of returns," the agency had begun scaling up its operations inside Syria to better be able address the needs of the returnees, he said. Syria's war has killed more than 320,000 people and forced millions from their homes since it began in March 2011. (AFP)

Ex-CIA agent convicted over imam kidnapping to face sentencing

LISBON, JUNE 30 /--/ A former Indian-origin CIA agent who was found guilty of kidnapping an Egyptian imam by an Italian court more than a decade ago has said she intended to return to Italy to face her sentence, but hopes to avoid prison. Sabrina de Sousa, who holds dual American and Portuguese nationality, said yesterday she would leave Portugal to face the Italian courts over the abduction of radical preacher Abu Omar from a Milan street in 2003 in an operation allegedly led jointly by the CIA and the Italian intelligence services. She has already gone on trial in absentia along with 22 others in what were the first

legal convictions in the world against people involved in the CIA's extraordinary renditions programme that followed the September 11, 2001 attacks. "I'm going back to Italy next week to serve sentence that will be determined by the Italian courts," 60-year-old de Sousa told AFP, saying she hoped to be released on parole and carry out community service. At the end of February, Italian President Sergio Mattarella granted her a partial pardon of one year's imprisonment, reducing her jail time to three years of a lenient form of sentence that does not necessarily need to be served behind bars and allows the convict to work. Italy then withdrew the European arrest warrant issued after her arrest in October 2015 at Lisbon airport. In an email sent from the US, where she just had surgery, de Sousa said even if she were able to do her community service in Portugal she "would have reason to be very concerned about what would happen to me." Portugal after all threw me in prison for 10 days with no plausible reason for doing so." Omar was kidnapped on February 17, 2003, before being transferred to Egypt where his lawyers said he was tortured in a case that highlighted the

controversial secret renditions of suspected radicals by the United States and its allies. "This operation was approved by the highest levels of the US government," said de Sousa. What US officials in Washington and some in the Italian Government were told was that Abu Omar was a dangerous terrorist; and with that justification the CIA chief in Rome obtained the necessary approvals," she added. "This obviously turned out not to be the case and Abu Omar was released from an Egyptian prison. As with most cover-ups lower level officers like myself end up paying the price for decisions for which we had no input." (AFP)

Canada prolongs Iraq mission to 2019

OTTAWA, JUNE 30 /--/ Canada will continue to train Kurdish militia for another two years as part of the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State group in Iraq, the defense minister announced today. The mission extension is the third in as many years, and Defense Minister Harjit Sajjan left open the possibility of ramping up the efforts if saying the military would "deploy capabilities as needed." "The coalition has made significant progress in the fight against Daesh in Mosul," Sajjan said in a statement, using the Arabic name for the IS group. "As the situation evolves, Canada will continue to remain flexible and adapt to changing threats." Implicit in the announcement is a rejection of accusations that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government has been waging a secret war in Iraq without parliamentary approval.

Trump launches personal attack on 'crazy, low IQ' female journalist



WASHINGTON, JUNE 30 /--/ President Donald Trump today launched a brutal personal attack on MSNBC journalist Mika Brzezinski, after she sharply criticised his administration's dysfunction in a segment on her show. "I heard poorly rated @Morning_Joe speaks badly of me (don't watch anymore)," Trump wrote, referring to a morning news show featuring Brzezinski and co-host Joe Scarborough. "Then how come low IQ Crazy Mika, along with Psycho Joe, came to Mar-a-Lago 9 nights in a row around New Year's Eve, and insisted on joining me. She was bleeding badly from a face lift. I said no!" Trump tweeted. The president, an avid cable news watcher, appears to have been responding to sharp comments by Brzezinski during Thursday "Morning Joe" program on the left-leaning MSNBC cable network.

"Everybody in Washington," Brzezinski said, "in the administration, needs to look at this from a point of view where they're not lobotomised because you're sitting in there and you're so scared of him, and you think you need to suck up to the president." If a boss at NBC-MSNBC's parent company - started tweeting wildly about people's appearances, bullying people, talking about people in the competition, lying every day, undermining his managers, throwing them out the (bus) - that person would be thrown out. It's just not normal behaviour," she said. "In fact, there would be concerns that the person who runs the company is out of his mind." Brzezinski also appeared to be uncoined by Trump's Twitter attack. She responded to his tweet with a post of her own, a photo of a young child reaching for Cheerios cereal.

"Made for little hands," the picture caption read - a schoolyard taunt that has been used against the inane-conscious Trump since the days of his candidacy. Scarborough re-tweeted a comment from CNN reporter Jake Tapper: "This reminds me: how is @FLOTUS's campaign against cyber-bullying going?" It said, referring to First Lady Melania Trump. Trump was often interviewed on "Morning Joe" during the 2016 presidential campaign, but as the White House relationship with much of the US media has soured he has recently favoured interviews with friendly right-wing outlets. Brzezinski, 50, is the daughter of the late Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was chief of staff to Jimmy Carter's national security advisor. Scarborough, 54, is a Republican former congressman who represented a Florida district in the 1990s. The two are engaged to marry. (AFP)

US travel ban 'truly shameful': Iran foreign minister

TEHRAN, JUNE 30 /--/ A people of Iranian origin living in the US, the legal battle over President Donald Trump's proposed ban has created months of anxiety for families. Trump says the 90-day ban on visitors from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen - and a 120-day ban for refugees - is necessary to block terrorists from entering the country. Many Iranian-Americans tweeted with the hashtag #GrandparentsNotTerrorists to voice their opposition. "This is my lovely have a 'bone fide' connection to the country. This includes parents and siblings, but excludes grandparents and National Iranian American children, adults and grandmothers. I've tweeted pictures of their grandparents. (AFP)

Indian-American held for injuring ex-wife, killing husband

HOUSTON, JUNE 30 /--/ An Indian-origin man in the US has been arrested for allegedly injuring his ex-wife and killing her husband following an argument in Texas, police said. Sayantan Ghose, 41, was detained at a border checkpoint near New Mexico yesterday and charged with murder for the incident which took place on Wednesday in League City, the Galveston County District Attorney's Office said. His bond was set at USD 150,000. The shooting took place at a house in the 700 block of Mayhill Ridge Lane, during an argument between Ghose and the two residents, police said. Amanda Harris, 36, who was shot at, was taken to a nearby hospital where she was recovering, they said. The body of Her husband Clarence Wayne Harris II, 43, who was shot several times, was found lying in front of the house. According to the Houston Police Department, Ghose shot at Amanda's husband Wayne after an argument broke out between them, police said. Ghose was present during a party at the couple's house but at some point of time, they had an argument with him, leading to the shooting, police said. In an affidavit, Amanda said that she called police shortly before 9 PM (local time). She told police that she was going to make a citizen arrest because her ex-husband, Ghose, was at her doorstep. Amanda also alleged that Ghose had been stalking her for years. Apparently, she and her husband both had weapons on them. The police officer on the line heard her scream, "Get away from my gun!" and then additional screams and yelling in the background. Shots began to fire off in the background. The police said in a release that Ghose had already left the home before they could arrive. (PTI)