

Syria widens assault in southwest, hits Daesh pocket

The Syrian government widened its offensive to recover the southwest on Wednesday, extending it to an enclave held by Daesh-affiliated terrorists as Russian warplanes targeted the area, a war monitor said.

The bombardment targeted the Yarmouk Basin area, which is held by the Daesh-affiliated Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, Reuters reported.

President Bashar al-Assad is seeking to recover the entire southwestern corner of Syria in an offensive that got underway last month and has so far recovered swathes of territory from armed groups fighting under the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA) banner.

The so-called Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Wednesday's airstrikes marked the first Russian strikes on the Yarmouk Basin area in the war.

Government helicopters had also dropped barrel bombs on the area — containers filled with explosive material, the Britain-based observatory said.

Syrian forces have so far recovered swathes of Dara'a Province in the southwest from FSA armed groups, many of whom have been forced into surrender agreements mediated by Russian officers. The United States, which once armed the southern FSA, told them at the start of the attack not to expect its intervention.

The Syrian government earlier this week took control of a strategically vital strip of the border from FSA armed groups in Dara'a Province, denying them any access to the Jordanian frontier that was once an enemy lifeline.



A Syrian Army soldier stands next to a Syrian flag in Umm al-Mayazen, in the countryside of Dara'a, Syria, on July 10, 2018. OMAR SANADIKI/REUTERS

Abe visits flood-hit western Japan as deaths reach 176

Evacuations ordered for up to 5.9m people

At least 176 people have been killed and millions have been evacuated from areas affected by landslides in western Japan.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited an evacuation center in the city of Kurashiki in Okayama prefecture, where more than 40 of the 176 victims died, AP reported.

The prime minister and his government pledged an initial \$4 billion towards relief efforts on Tuesday, and have offered an additional special budget if needed.

Tens of thousands of rescue and recovery workers and volunteers were searching for people still missing.

Record rainfall began last Thursday and continued over the weekend, pounding western and central prefectures. Officials said at least 176 people have died and dozens more are still missing, Reuters reported Wednesday.

Authorities have warned that new landslides could be triggered by thunderstorms and intensifying heat gripping the country.

This is the highest death toll caused by rainfall that Japan has seen in decades.

Authorities on Sunday ordered evacuations for up to 5.9 million people in 19 nearby prefectures, The Japan Times reported. 30,000 people had taken refuge in

evacuation centers on Sunday afternoon, according to Japan's Fire and Disaster Management Agency, Reuters reported.

Residents shoveled mud and debris to clear streets so they could get out for food and other supplies



Wednesday in areas of western Japan hard hit by landslides and flooding that still swamped some areas. In areas where search-and-rescue operations had

ended, construction workers and residents worked in neighborhoods to clear mud and debris and restore vehicle access to the outside and get supplies and food.

Most of the deaths were in Hiroshima and the surrounding area, but the damage was widespread.

The government has mobilized 75,000 troops and emergency workers and some 80 helicopters for the search and rescue effort, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said.

Delivery companies Sagawa Express Co. and Yamato Transport Co. and cargo service Japan Freight Railway Co. said some of their shipments to and from the flooded areas have been suspended or reduced. Supermarkets have closed stores or shortened hours due to delivery delays and supply shortages.

Thousands of homes were still without clean water and electricity. Residents lined up for water under a scorching sun as temperatures rose to 35 Celsius (95 Fahrenheit), raising the risk of heat stroke.

Suga said earlier the government was spending 2 billion yen (\$18 million) to hasten deliveries of supplies and other support for evacuation centers and residents.

Abe canceled a planned trip to Europe and the Middle East this week to oversee the emergency response.

Greece, Russia to expel diplomats in Macedonia tussle

Greece and Russia were poised on Wednesday to expel two of each other's diplomats in a rare dispute that Greek media said had been prompted by the issue of Macedonia, which expects this week to be formally invited to join the NATO alliance.

Athens will expel the two Russian diplomats and ban entry to two others on suspicion that they tried to undermine an accord clinched between Greece and neighboring Macedonia last month, the Greek daily Kathimerini reported, citing diplomatic sources, Reuters reported.

That deal — whereby Macedonia will become formally known as the Northern Republic of Macedonia — will unlock a formal invitation from NATO for the tiny ex-Yugoslav republic to join the bloc, a move strongly opposed by Moscow.



MICHALIS KARAGIANNIS/REUTERS

Russia's Foreign Ministry said it would respond in kind to the expulsions, Interfax reported.

Greece and Russia share the Orthodox Christian religion and have traditionally had warm ties. Greece did not join most other NATO allies in March in withdrawing diplomats from Moscow over the alleged poisoning of a former Russian spy in England. Britain blamed Russia for that incident. Moscow denied involvement.

Greece accused the Russian diplomats of activities inconsistent with their status, including illegal activities against national security, Kathimerini reported, adding that these had included attempts at bribery.

Asked about the report, Greek government spokesman Dimitris Tzanakopoulos told Skai TV: "The Greek government ... cannot tolerate behavior which violates international law and which does not show respect for the Greek state."

"It is our assessment that there has been such behavior, and for that precise reason all necessary measures will be taken," he added, without explicitly confirming the expulsions.

The Greek Foreign Ministry, contacted by Reuters, echoed the spokesman's statement and did not go further.

A member of Russia's upper house of parliament, Andrei Klimov, told RIA news agency that Moscow would expel two Greek diplomats in response to the Greek move.

Moscow has long opposed the eastern expansion of NATO, regarding it as a direct threat to its own security.

Macedonia expects to receive the invitation to join NATO at a two-day summit of the alliance that started in Brussels on Wednesday, though it will only become a member if it adopts the new name agreed in principle with Greece.

Greece had long argued that Macedonia's name implies a territorial claim over its northern province of the same name, and had previously blocked its neighbor's attempts to join NATO. Macedonia will hold a referendum on the name deal.

Suicide bombing kills 21 at Pakistan election rally

A suicide bombing at an election rally killed at least 21 people, including a politician, in northwestern Pakistan on Tuesday, police said, amid concerns about security ahead of national polls later this month.

The attack targeted a campaign event organized in the city of Peshawar by the Awami National Party, which has been targeted by terrorists in the past over its vocal opposition to extremist groups like the Taliban.

The Pakistani Taliban on Wednesday claimed responsibility for the overnight suicide bombing at the rally, AP reported.

Mohammad Khurasani, a spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban, said they targeted the Awami National Party rally in the northwestern city of Peshawar, killing Haroon Ahmed Bilour, a candidate for a seat in the provincial legislature. Another 65 people were wounded.

The bombing came hours after the Pakistan military spokesman said there were security threats ahead of national elections scheduled for July 25.

This was the first major attack on a campaign event for Pakistan's July 25



Pakistani volunteers carry an injured girl for medical treatment at a hospital in Peshawar, Pakistan, on July 10, 2018. AP

general election.

Police chief Jameel said the number of casualties was high because the ANP event was taking place at a house in a narrow street.

An AFP reporter saw human remains, shoes, broken chairs, and caps littered at the scene.

Another party worker, Yaseen Khan, said a deafening explosion rocked the compound as Haroon Bilour shook hands with supporters.

Pakistan's Election Commission has asked the military to help hold a "free

and fair election" in the face of security threats.

More than 380,000 personnel will be deployed for the elections, according to Major General Asif Ghaffor, the military spokesman, AFP reported.

The ANP and its ally the Pakistan People's Party were unable to campaign for the last general election in 2013 because of threats and attacks on their events and supporters by extremist groups like the Pakistani Taliban.

But ANP leaders have vowed to continue their campaign this year despite the bombing in Peshawar.

Pakistan has been fighting homegrown terrorism since 2004, when militants displaced by the US-led invasion of Afghanistan came to its border tribal areas.

These groups have often targeted political parties and leaders opposed to their views.

Pakistani militant organizations have claimed responsibility for attacks on several prominent political figures, including the assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto in 2007.

May says Brexit plan delivers 'people's vote'



Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May arrives at the NATO summit in Brussels, Belgium, on July 11, 2018. DARRIN ZAMMIT LUPUREUTERS

British Prime Minister Theresa May defended her Brexit plan on Wednesday, saying it delivered on the vote of the people to leave the European Union.

"The Chequers deal ... is there because it delivers on the vote that people gave," May told reporters upon arrival at a NATO summit, referring to a deal brokered at the prime minister's

country residence last week, Reuters reported.

She said the deal would end freedom of movement, the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and "vast" British payments into the EU budget.

"We deliver that Brexit and we do it in a way that protects jobs and livelihoods and meets our commitment to Northern Ire-

land," she said. Britain and the EU have agreed on a "standstill" transition period whereby EU rules remain in force in Britain until the end of 2020, which would ensure continuity in cross-border financial contracts like insurance policies and derivatives.

But this transition is part of a broader divorce settlement that is still being negotiated, and will not be legally watertight until it is finalized before Britain pulls out in March.

The European Commission's vice president said on Wednesday existing financial contracts, such as derivatives or insurance, are unlikely to be affected by Britain's departure from the European Union, quelling concerns raised by the Bank of England.

The BoE has said \$2 billion pounds (\$109 billion) of insurance liabilities involving 48 million policyholders could be affected across Britain and the European Economic Area. Derivatives worth a notional 26 trillion pounds are also caught in the Brexit crosshairs.