

## Many make pilgrimage on foot from Iraqi capital

## Millions of Shiites gather in Karbala for Arbaeen

BAGHDAD, Dec 2, (AP): Millions of pilgrims gathered in Iraq's holy city of Karbala amid tight security on Wednesday to mark Arbaeen, the annual commemoration of the end of the 40-day mourning period after the seventh century martyrdom of a central figure in Shiite Islam.

Many made the pilgrimage on foot from the Iraqi capital, walking along roads lined with blast walls and razor-wire, and waiting at checkpoints to be frisked by security forces. Soldiers and police also mingled with the pilgrims, most of whom wore black out of mourning.

Iraqi officials said security was increased this year, with operations coordinated between the Interior Ministry, Shiite militias and Iranian advisers. The Islamic State group has repeatedly targeted Iraq's Shiite majority, viewing them as apostates deserving of death.

Iraqi state-run media said Wednesday that more than 22 million pilgrims have visited Karbala, setting a record for the annual pilgrimage. That number could not be independently verified. Iraqi authorities said last year's Arbaeen drew 17 million pilgrims.

Arbaeen commemorates the end of the 40-day mourning period after the killing of Imam Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, in a climactic battle in A.D. 680 that cemented the rift with Sunnis.

The faithful traditionally walk for a day or longer to reach Karbala where crowds chant and march around the Imam Hussein shrine. The holiday is observed in Shiite communities worldwide, with large gatherings in Iran and southern Lebanon.

On the walk to Karbala, which can take up to two days,

## Soviet spy who long duped Israel dies at 97

## Israeli broadcaster says Palestinians bust bomber cell

JERUSALEM, Dec 2, (Agencies): Israel's national broadcaster on Tuesday said Palestinian authorities had prevented a bomb attack on Israeli troops in the occupied West Bank, a report suggesting the strength of security ties despite public feuding over a two-month wave of unrest.

Israel Radio said six Islamic Jihad militants from the town of Tubas were in Palestinian custody, accused of filling a gas balloon with explosives in order to blow up a military target, an attack that would have marked a major escalation in violence.

Contacted by Reuters, officials in Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's US-backed administration and Islamic Jihad spokesmen had no immediate com-

ment on the report, which cited unnamed Palestinian sources.

A surge in Palestinian knifings, car-rammings and occasional shootings of Israelis since Oct. 1 has put Abbas in an awkward position as he tries to curb the grassroots violence in West Bank areas under his authority while publicly condemning Israel's policies.

Meanwhile, the man considered the Soviet Union's most successful spy in Israel before being unmasked more than 30 years ago has died in Paris at the age of 97, his daughter said Tuesday.

Marcus Klingberg was sentenced to 20 years in prison in 1983 for having passed information to Moscow on Israeli biological weapons research.

Murtada Ahmed, 23, who walked to Karbala from Baghdad with friends, spoke with disdain about the passing convoys of SUVs with blacked-out windows, the preferred mode of transport for the country's political elite.

"They don't even bother themselves to walk," Ahmed said. "They just stay in their cars and really just annoy the rest of the pilgrims."

pilgrims said security was the main topic of conversation, closely followed by politics.

"We are commemorating the death of Imam Hussein, who led a revolution for reforms," said Ali Tahir, a pilgrim from Baghdad. "We are facing the same problem now, which is corruption and lack of services. The current government pays no heed to the people."

## Cameroon troops 'kill' 100 Boko Haram fighters, free 900 hostages

Over 410 births in camps for insurgency displaced

YAOUNDÉ, Dec 2, (AFP): Cameroon troops killed around 100 Boko Haram Islamist fighters from Nigeria, freed almost 900 hostages and seized Islamic State (IS) flags last week, the defence ministry said Wednesday.

"A special clean-up operation from Nov 26 to 28" against Boko Haram fighters in the border area with Nigeria "neutralised more than 100 jihadists", Defence Minister Joseph Beti Assomo said in a statement broadcast on national radio.

The sweep enabled troops "to release almost 900 hostages, seize a large stock of arms and munitions as well as black-and-white Islamic State flags", the statement added, without providing details on the identities of those freed.

No independent confirmation of the statement was immediately available from the region, which is inaccessible to the media.

Some security sources reached by telephone confirmed that the raid took place but were unable to confirm the figures released in the government statement.

Meanwhile, more than 410 babies were born in the space of two months in camps for people displaced by the Boko Haram insurgency in northeast Nigeria, the country's main relief agency said on Tuesday.

"Over 410 births were recorded between August and September" in the camps in Borno and Adamawa state, said the head of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), Muhammad Sani Sidi. In the same period, there were 187 marriages — 100 in camps in the Borno state capital, Maiduguri, and 87 in neighbouring Adamawa, he added in a statement.

Boko Haram's fight to create a hardline Islamic state in north-east Nigeria, which began in 2009, has killed at least 17,000 people and made more than 2.6 million others homeless.

Some 10 percent of the 2.0 million or so Nigerians internally displaced by the conflict now live in government-run camps, according to the International Organization for Migration.

In recent months, the camps have also accommodated hundreds of women and children kidnapped by the insurgents and rescued by the military during its counter-offensive.

A statement from Borno state governor Kashim Shettima in May said the rebels "deliberately rape women with the intention of getting them pregnant so they would give birth to future insurgents".

The same month, a retired midwife helping at the Malkohi camp outside the Adamawa state capital, Yola, told AFP 10 to 15 women were in the early to mid-stages of pregnancy.

Pregnancy tests were also given as part of medical screening for women among the 275 people rescued from Boko Haram's Sambisa Forest stronghold earlier that month.

NEMA's Sidi, however, made no reference as to whether the births in September and October were from women kidnapped by Boko Haram and forced into marriage with Islamist fighters.

The agency's spokesman, Manzo Ezekiel, also declined to comment, saying how the women became pregnant was not their focus. "We just help them deliver," he told AFP by telephone from Maiduguri.

"The period of time these people were displaced is not more than one year. You can still assume the husbands were responsible for the pregnancy," he added.

No other figures were available on births in the camps, he said. The US Treasury singled out two leaders of the violent Boko Haram Islamist group in Africa for economic sanctions Tuesday, saying both are closely involved in deadly attacks in Nigeria.

The Treasury said Mohammed Nur, a Boko Haram commander who has represented the group in negotiations with the Nigerian government, was placed on its financial blacklist for his involvement in suicide bomb attacks, including one on the United Nations headquarters in Abuja in 2011.

He was sentenced in July to five years in prison in a retrial. The Court of Cassation on Wednesday accepted to hear his appeal and ordered a retrial from Feb 3, the official MENA news agency and Nazif's lawyer Wahig Abdelmalak said. Its verdict cannot be appealed.



Freed soldier George al-Khouri, who was kidnapped by jihadist groups in early August 2014 in the eastern border town of Arsal, celebrates his release on Dec 2, in his hometown of al-Kobaiyat. Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate freed 16 Lebanese soldiers and police held for more than a year in exchange for the release of prisoners and delivery of aid, authorities said. (AFP)

## Court orders retrial for Mubarak-era PM

## Egypt lawyers say scribe detained for 'false news'

CAIRO, Dec 2, (Agencies): An Egyptian researcher and freelance journalist detained upon arrival in Egypt is being investigated for spreading false news, in what his lawyers say is the latest in a crackdown on press freedoms in the country.

After more than eight hours of questioning in Cairo on Tuesday, prosecutors ordered Ismail Alexandrani jailed for 15 days pending investigations, his lawyers from the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights said in a statement.

Alexandrani is being accused of joining an illegal organization, campaigning for that organization and spreading false news with the intent of disturbing the public peace and spreading horror among people, his lawyers said in the statement that did not identify the organization in question.

A police official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to talk to

reporters, said the Egyptian Embassy in Berlin had notified airport authorities when Ismail Alexandrani arrived in the country on Sunday.

Alexandrani's lawyers and his wife Khadeega Ga'far also said they were told his arrest was due to a complaint filed by the embassy in Berlin. Egypt's Foreign Ministry spokesman Ahmed Abouzeid denied Egypt's diplomatic missions abroad have anything to do with the case.

Journalist Abdelrahman Ayyash said on his Facebook page that Alexandrani, an expert on militants operating in Egypt's northern Sinai Peninsula, recently gave a presentation in Berlin on the topic.

The Egyptian government has been battling a long-running insurgency in the region, which escalated after the military ousted Islamist president Mohammed Morsi in July 2013 amid massive protests against his rule.

A crackdown launched after Morsi's overthrow initially focused on his Islamist supporters

but was soon broadened to other dissidents, including secular activists who led the 2011 uprising that ousted longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak.

In another development, an Egyptian court on Wednesday ordered a final retrial in a corruption case against Ahmed Nazif, who was prime minister under ousted president Hosni Mubarak, state media and his lawyer said.

Nazif, who was sidelined by Mubarak to appease protesters days before the president's overthrow in February 2011, was convicted of using his position to amass a fortune of \$8.2 million (7.5 million euros).

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## Experts to decide if Erdogan insulted

## Court asks is Gollum good or bad?

ANKARA, Turkey, Dec 2, (Agencies): A Turkish court overseeing the case of a doctor accused of insulting President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has ruled that a committee of experts should assess whether the fictional Lord of the Rings character Gollum is good or bad.

Bilgin Ciftci faces up to two years in prison for allegedly insulting a state official by juxtaposing pictures of Gollum and Erdogan on social media.

Lawyer Hicran Danisman told the AP Wednesday that she was forced to argue in court this week that "Gollum is not a bad character" because she got "nowhere" with a defense case

based on freedom of expression. Unable to decide whether Erdogan truly looks like Gollum, the court in the western province of Aydin asked a group of experts — two academicians, two psychologists as well as a cinema authority — to determine whether the comparison was an insult, Milliyet newspaper reported.

The judge took the decision after admitting to not having seen the whole of the fantasy blockbusters, based on the novel and directed by Peter Jackson.

The court agreed to adjourn the case until February while the experts analyse Gollum, Milliyet said.

## Lebanese PM 'thanks' Qatar

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BEIRUT, Dec 2, (KUNA): Lebanese Prime Minister Tammam Salam contacted by phone Tuesday the Amir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, thanking him on behalf of the Lebanese over efforts that resulted in the release of Lebanese servicemen.

Salam's office, in a statement, said the premier told his interlocutor that the joy that prevails over the Lebanese scene would contribute to further strengthening fraternal relations between the two peoples.

For its part, Sheikh Tamim extended good wishes for Lebanon.



In this Sept 29, 2015 file photo, a Taliban fighter sits on his motorcycle adorned with a Taliban flag on a street in Kunduz, Afghanistan. Two months after the Taliban rampaged through the northern Afghan city of Kunduz, residents are still shifting through the rubble, wondering how they will ever rebuild and worrying that the insurgents will return. (AP)



An aerial view taken on Dec 1, 2015 shows Iraqi Shiite pilgrims gathering at the shrines of Imam Abbas ibn Ali (front), and Imam Hussein (background) during the Arbaeen religious festival which marks the 40th day after Ashura, commemorating the seventh century killing of Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imam Hussein. (AFP)

## NATO to keep 12,000 troops

## Afghans facing daunting task in rebuilding Kunduz

KUNDUZ, Afghanistan Dec 2, (Agencies): Two months after the Taliban rampaged through the northern Afghan city of Kunduz, residents are still sifting through the rubble, wondering how they will ever rebuild and worrying that the insurgents will return.

The Taliban swept into the strategic northern city in late September, holding it for three days and looting and destroying shops before being driven out by a massive counteroffensive backed by US airstrikes.

The street by street fighting devastated wide swaths of Kunduz at a time when Afghanistan's finances are stretched thin by a seemingly never-ending war. International aid is being scaled down alongside the withdrawal of most foreign troops, who officially concluded their combat mission last year.

## Outskirts

The Taliban are meanwhile dug in on the city's outskirts, and many fear they could return.

"I lost everything I had — my house, my business and my property," said Ahmad Jan, who sold TVs and DVDs in Kunduz. The Taliban torched his shop, and then his home was demolished during the battle to drive them out, he said. He moved his family to a neighboring province for safety.

"I can't trust the government anymore, I have lost my hope in them," he said.

During a visit to Kunduz last week, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said the government would protect the city and help residents rebuild. "We won't allow a repeat of what happened to Kunduz," he said, as rocket-fire rumbled off in the distance, where near-daily battles have erupted just outside the city.

Ghani has ordered the dismissal and military trial of an undisclosed number of intelligence officials, including the provincial intelligence chief, over the failure to anticipate September's attack, which was the latest in a series of attacks on the city. He has also ordered a security review by the newly appointed army division commander.

But many residents said they remain fearful, especially after seeing the Taliban make off with armored vehicles and tanks.

As winter sets in, local offi-

cials and residents are taking stock of the devastation wrought by the fighting. The damage to public infrastructure alone has been estimated at around \$82 million, according to Hamdullah Danishi, the acting governor of Kunduz province.

He said the damage to private property is still being assessed. "It could be that the cost of rebuilding privately owned properties will be several times that of the public infrastructure because they took the brunt of the fighting over several days," he added.

Zabihullah Majidi, a civil society activist in Kunduz, said the fighting destroyed hundreds of shops and homes, including high-rise apartment buildings. Much of the city is still without water or electricity. Half the city's 300,000 residents fled during the fighting, and it's unclear how many have returned.

"The cost of reconstruction will probably be less than it was after the last war with the Taliban, but substantial nevertheless," he said, referring to the 2001 US-led invasion that toppled the Taliban.

Among the facilities destroyed in the fighting was a trauma hospital operated by Doctors Without Borders, which was the target of a sustained US air assault that killed at least 30 people and sparked an international outcry. US President Barack Obama apologized for the attack, which came at the request of Afghan forces.

## Destroyed

Just next door to the hospital was the warehouse where Abdul Maroof stored electronic goods for his trading company. The attack on the hospital destroyed the building and everything inside, causing hundreds of thousands of dollars in losses and leaving him unable to pay back loans, he said.

"From an economic point of view, I can assure you that for the next five years our Kunduz cannot be the same as it was in the past," he said, adding that many businessmen have quit the town, fearing another attack.

A commission has been set up to process applications for the recovery of damaged or destroyed assets, but Basel could not say when funds will be dispersed. "The exact cost of the war is difficult to say at moment," he said.

NATO will keep some 12,000 troops in Afghanistan for an extra year in 2016 to prevent the country again becoming a terrorist safe haven, alliance head Jens Stoltenberg said Tuesday.

## News in Brief

## Jordan launches census:

Jordan launched a national census Monday to provide greater clarity about a population that includes large numbers of Syrian refugees and foreign workers.

Some 21,000 field researchers began visiting homes, for the first time using electronic tablets for data entry. Official results will be released in February.

One key figure will be the number of Syrian refugees, which will help determine how much foreign aid Jordan can request.

The UN refugee agency says some 628,000 registered refugees are in Jordan, but growing numbers have left regional host countries for Europe. (AP)

## Israel demolish home:

Israeli police say authorities have demolished the home of a Palestinian who killed two officers and wounded several others in an attack last year.

Spokeswoman Luba Samri said security was out in force Wednesday in Shuafat, a Palestinian neighborhood in east Jerusalem. Police have said Ibrahim Al-Akri drove his minivan into a train platform then attacked bystanders. He was

shot dead at the scene.

Israel is currently struggling to contain near-daily Palestinian attacks that have been ongoing for over two months with no signs of relenting. Palestinians have killed 19 Israelis in stabbings, shootings and vehicular attacks.

At least 100 Palestinians were killed, including 65 said by Israel to be attackers.

Last month, Israel renewed a policy of demolishing homes of Palestinians accused of carrying out deadly attacks. (AP)

## Israel honours USA POW:

An American POW who protected Jewish inmates in a wartime German camp has been named "Righteous Among the Nations", the first US soldier to receive the Israeli honour, a statement said Wednesday.

Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial said that Master Sergeant Roddie Edmonds of Knoxville, Tennessee, who died in 1985, was the senior American soldier being held at the Stalag IXA camp.

The camp's commandant sought to single out Jewish prisoners-of-war from the other internees at a time when many Jewish prisoners were sent to extermination camps or murdered. (AFP)