

Africa

Zimbabwe election by July

Kiir unfit partner: US

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 25, (Agencies): US Ambassador Nikki Haley said Wednesday the United States is giving up on South Sudan's president after backing the country's independence in 2011 and investing

over \$11 billion, calling him "an unfit partner" in the pursuit of peace and urging an arms embargo on the conflict-racked nation.

She cited President Salva Kiir for almost immediately violating a Dec 21 cease-fire that took effect three days later, for blocking aid to millions in need despite a promise of "free and unhindered access," and for last month's promotion of three generals sanctioned by the UN Security Council in 2015 for leading "the slaughter" of civilians.

In a hard-hitting speech to the council, Haley called the generals' promotion "a slap in the face" of the council, of nations that supported the Kiir government, and "of basic decency."

Attempts to ease the suffering of the South Sudanese people aren't working, she said, "and what's worse, we're failing, not despite the leadership of South Sudan, but because of it."

**'Election by July':** Zimbabwe's new President Emmerson Mnangagwa said on Wednesday the country will hold transparent elections by July and he would respect the result if the opposition wins.

The election will be the first big test of his legitimacy since

he took power in November when the military ousted Robert Mugabe who ruled for 37 years. It will also test the country's electoral system after complaints of rigging at previous votes.

**Congo convicts 134:** A military tribunal investigating a wave of massacres in eastern Congo blamed on Ugandan rebels has convicted 134 people, a senior army prosecutor and a human rights group said on Wednesday.

More than 800 people were killed — often hacked to death with machetes during the night — around the town of Beni, near Democratic Republic of Congo's border with Uganda, between 2014 and 2016.

**'Somali forces kill boys':** US forces operating in Somalia took part in a mission in which their Somali counterparts killed fighters who appeared to be under 18, the US military's Africa Command said Wednesday.

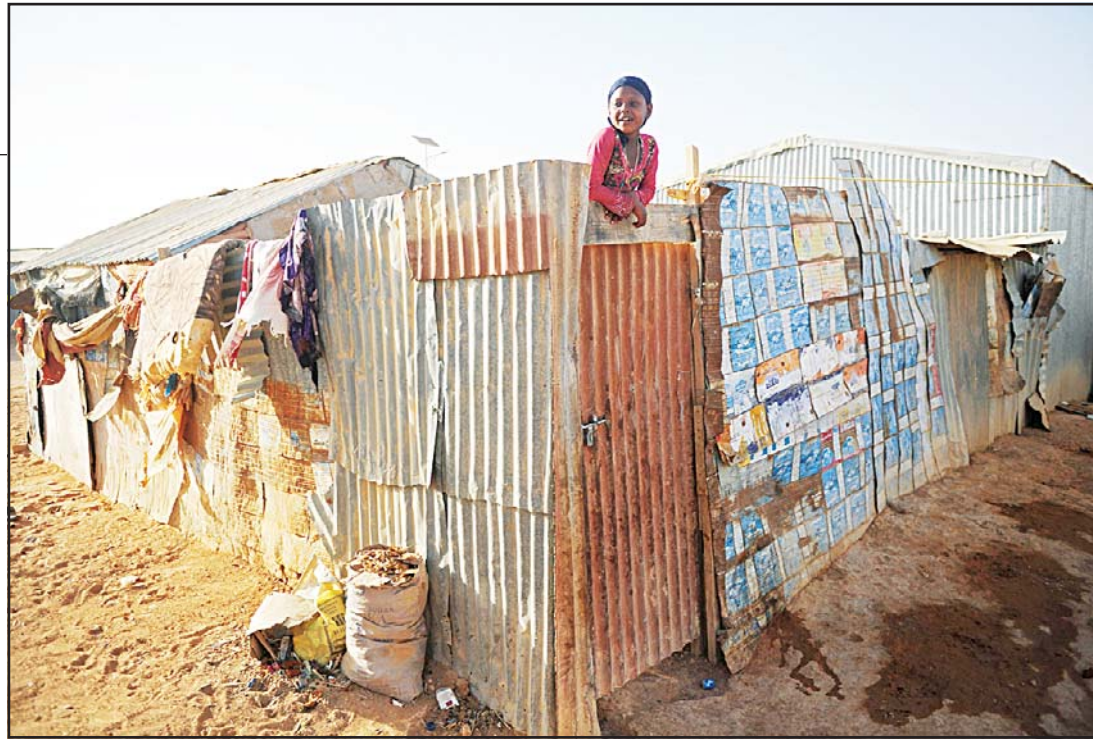
On Jan 18, US forces went in an advisory capacity with Somali partners on a mission in the Lower Shabelle region to an indoctrination center for the al-Qaeda-affiliated Shabaab group.

**Mali landmine kills 24:** Twenty four civilians travelling from Burkina Faso were killed on Thursday when their vehicle ran over a landmine in central Mali, local officials and a security source said, giving a provisional toll.

"Thirteen Malian and Burkinabe civilians were killed near the town of Boni when their vehicle struck a mine," local official Mahmoud Traore told AFP, as a Malian security source blamed "terrorists" for the blast.



Kiir



A Somali girl looks out from a wall above a row of makeshift shelters, at a camp for Internally Displaced People (IDP) on Jan 23, in Garowe, in the northern breakaway state of Puntland. (AFP)

Brazil

Brazil offers e-visas to Americans

Court rejects Lula's appeal

PORTO ALEGRE, Jan 25, (Agencies): A Brazilian appeals court Wednesday upheld ex-president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's conviction for corruption, dealing a body blow to his hopes of running for re-election this year.

The three-judge panel sitting in the southern city of Porto Alegre unanimously ruled that his original 9.5-year jail sentence be extended to more than 12 years.

Thousands of Lula supporters rallied in Sao Paulo to protest the verdict.

Wearing a short-sleeved black T-shirt, the 72-year-old was defiant, telling the crowd of around 10,000 that he intended to run for the presidency despite the court setback.

"Now I want to run for the presidency," he said to wild cheers. "They can take away my rights; no big deal. What I'd like to differ with them on is the conscience of the Brazilian people."

"Mandela was put in prison and then he came back and became president of South Africa," he

added, comparing himself to the great African statesman.

One of the judges, Joao Gebran Neto, said in his ruling that during his 2003-2010 presidency, Lula was one of the architects "of a sophisticated scheme of fraud and corruption" that had weakened Brazil's entire political system.

A defiant Lula said before the judgment he would continue to fight "for the dignity of the Brazilian people" and insisted he had committed no crime.

Lula is likely to remain out of prison for many months. He is expected to continue to challenge the conviction through higher courts, initially in the Superior Court of Justice and ultimately in Brazil's Supreme Court.

However, Wednesday's ruling deals a severe blow to his hopes of running in this year's presidential election, which he was favored to win.

Also:

**SAO PAULO:** Brazil is making it easier and cheaper for Americans

to apply for a visa following a decline in the number of visitors from the US in recent years.

Starting Thursday, Americans can complete the visa process completely online, instead of visiting a consulate or paying an expeditor to do so. The price of the visa will drop from \$160 to \$40.

The new e-visa program has already been put in place for Australians, Japanese and Canadians as part of Brazil's efforts to attract more foreign tourists.

South America's biggest country offers a wide variety of destinations for visitors, from eco-tourism in the Amazon rain forest to colonial towns built by the Portuguese to miles and miles of unspoiled beaches. Yet in 2016, Brazil welcomed fewer than 6.6 million foreigners, about half the number that traveled to the city-state of Singapore.

American visits have dropped in recent years. Their numbers fell from approximately 657,000 in 2014 to 576,000 in 2015.

Lat/Am

**Venezuela polls rejected:** The US State Department on Wednesday rejected a call by Venezuela's ruling party to hold an early presidential election, saying that will deny citizens of the crisis-ridden nation their democratic rights.

The "snap" election wouldn't be free or fair, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said in a statement.

Her comments came a day after Venezuela's national constituent assembly approved the move to hold the presidential election by the end of April — months ahead of when presidential voting has traditionally taken place.



Maduro

President **Nicolas Maduro** then said he would seek a second term.

The US and several European countries consider the national constituent assembly an illegitimate congress, formed last year by Maduro's ruling party to maintain its grip on power. Critics say that power belongs to the democratically elected National Assembly, which is controlled by the opposition. (AP)

**Guatemala bus crashes:** At least eight people were killed and 15 were seriously injured in Guatemala when a minibus came off the edge of a road and plunged down a ravine, an emergency services official said on Wednesday.

The vehicle was traveling in the San Pedro Necta municipality in a mountainous part of western Guatemala when the accident occurred, a spokesman for fire services said.

It was not immediately clear what caused the minibus to careen off the road, the spokesman said. (RTRS)

**Guatemala to get compensation:** Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht has agreed to pay Guatemala \$17.9 million in compensation for bribes paid to an official for public work, the attorney general's office of the Central American nation said on Wednesday.

Odebrecht has been accused of using bribes in several Latin American countries to win lucrative business, and in 2016 company executives admitted making illicit payments to secure a Guatemalan highway contract in 2012.

An investigation by Brazilian and Guatemalan prosecutors with the UN-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) revealed this month that ex-infrastructure minister Alejandro Sinibaldi had agreed to take \$19.5 million to arrange for Odebrecht to secure the \$300 million contract. (RTRS)

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