

Scores killed as IS bombs hit Syrian strongholds

By PHILIP ISSA
Associated Press

BEIRUT — A series of coordinated blasts hit bus stations, an electricity plant and a hospital across two Syrian cities Monday, killing at least 80 people in the first major security breach of President Bashar Assad's coastal strongholds in the country's five-year war.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attack on social media. The militants are not known to maintain a presence in the surrounding countryside, an area in which mainstream rebels and al-Qaida affiliated insurgents form the predominant opposition to Assad's forces.

The seven closely-coordinated morning blasts in the pro-government cities of Tartus and Jableh targeted civilians in large numbers, and seemed intended to send a message that no part of Syria is safe from violence.

They also underlined the worrying inability of world powers to jumpstart Syrian peace talks in Geneva as the violence worsens.

A coalition of nearly 30 rebel factions said Sunday they would give the government 48 hours to end its offensives around besieged opposition-held suburbs of Damascus or they would consider the partial ceasefire brokered in late February "dissolved." Yet fighting had



In this photo released by the Syrian official news agency SANA, Syrians gather in front of a burning car at the scene where suicide bombers blew themselves up Monday, in the coastal town of Tartus, Syria.

already resumed in earnest around the country by late April.

The peacefulness of the two coastal cities meant they housed hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people who fled violence from other parts of the country — and who are now coming under suspicion by shell-shocked long-term residents and government security forces.

Syria's state news agency, SANA, reported that four explosions struck Jableh, the result of three suicide

attacks and a car bomb. The targets included the emergency entrance of the Jableh National Hospital, it said.

Shortly afterward, suicide bombers followed by an explosives-laden car tore through a packed bus station and a petrol station in Tartus, minutes apart, TV reports and residents said. More than 38 people were killed and many injured in those blasts, Syrian state media reported.

A resident said she heard the first explosion, followed by the wail of ambulance

sirens rushing to the scene. The bombs struck busy areas of the city, she said. The bus stop would have been crowded with school students, who had just finished taking their exams when the blasts occurred just after 9.30 a.m. local time. On most mornings more than 100 cars would have been lining up at the targeted gas station, because of petrol shortages.

She spoke on condition of anonymity, citing fears for her own safety.

The Syrian Observatory

Islamic State advances in eastern Syria

The Islamic State group launched an offensive in Deir el-Zour on Saturday. Government-held areas in the city have been under a months-long siege and the U.N. has been airdropping aid to residents amid food and medicine shortages.



SOURCE: Maps4News/HERE

for Human Rights, an opposition monitoring group based in Britain, put the death toll much higher than Syrian government sources, saying that more than 145 had been killed.

The four explosions in Jableh and three in Tartus ripped through both locations almost simultaneously, indicating a high degree of organization.

They sparked a backlash against the displaced, including a reprisal attack on a camp for those internally displaced by war located in Tartus. Parts of the al-Karnak camp were burned down, according to Ghassan Hassan, who heads the Tartous2day media agency.

Some 700,000 refugees from the war-torn Aleppo, Idlib, and Raqqa governorates are settled in Tartus, Hassan said. Security forces arrested dozens of refugees in sweeps of Jableh and Tartus, the Observatory reported.

The local community of Tartus and Jableh had co-existed relatively well with the tens of thousands of refugees they host.

Russia, which is heavily invested in the Syrian war on behalf of Assad's government, keeps a naval base in Tartus, the only such base on the Mediterranean. It also has an air base in Latakia province, about three miles north of Jableh.

Officer cleared of all charges in Gray case

By JULIET LINDERMAN
Associated Press

BALTIMORE — Prosecutors failed for the second time in their bid to hold Baltimore police accountable for the arrest and death of Freddie Gray when an officer was acquitted Monday in the racially charged case that triggered riots a year ago.

A judge cleared Officer Edward Nero of assault, reckless endangerment and misconduct, concluding that Nero played little role in Gray's arrest and wasn't responsible for the failure to buckle the black man into the police van where he suffered a broken neck.

Upon hearing the verdict, Nero hugged his attorney and appeared to wipe away a tear.

Nero, who is white, was the second of six officers charged in the case to stand trial. The manslaughter case against Officer William Porter ended in a mistrial in December when the jury deadlocked. Prosecutors plan to retry him in September.

Nero's lawyers said he and his wife and family are "elated that this nightmare is finally over."

"The state's attorney for Baltimore City rushed to charge him, as well as the other five officers, completely disregarding the facts of the case and the



Protesters gather outside of a courthouse after Officer Edward Nero, one of six Baltimore city police officers charged in connection to the death of Freddie Gray, was acquitted of all charges Monday in his trial in Baltimore.

applicable law," they said in a statement.

Prosecutors had no comment; they are under a gag order.

Trial No. 3 — that of van driver Caesar Goodson, who prosecutors believe is most culpable in Gray's death — is set to begin in two weeks. He is charged with second-degree murder.

David Weinstein, a Florida attorney and former federal civil rights prosecutor who has been following the case, said the verdict will probably serve as a "wake-up call" for prosecutors.

"This speaks to the notion a lot of people had when this first happened, which is that

it was a rush to judgment," Weinstein said. "The state's attorney was trying to balance what she had with the public outcry and call to action given the climate in Baltimore and across the U.S. concerning policing, and I think she was overreaching."

Gray died a week after suffering a spinal injury in the back of the van while he was handcuffed and shackled but not belted in.

His death set off looting and arson that prompted authorities to declare a citywide curfew and call out the National Guard to quell unrest in Baltimore for the first time since the riots that erupted in 1968 over

the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Gray's name became a rallying cry in the growing furor over the deaths of black men in clashes with police.

Nero, 30, waived his right to a jury trial, choosing instead to let Circuit Judge Barry Williams decide his fate. The assault charge alone carried up to 10 years in prison.

"The state's theory has been one of recklessness and negligence," the judge said in his ruling. "There has been no evidence that the defendant intended for a crime to occur."

Nero remains on desk duty and still faces a departmental investigation that could result in disciplinary action.

About a dozen protesters gathered outside the courthouse as the verdict was read, but they were far outnumbered by members of the media.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake noted the departmental review and pleaded for calm.

"We once again ask the citizens to be patient and to allow the entire process to come to a conclusion," she said. "In the case of any disturbance in the city, we are prepared to respond. We will protect our neighborhoods, our businesses and the people of our city."

Sanders: Dem convention could be 'messy'

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Bernie Sanders predicted Monday that the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia could be "messy" as he pushed the party to adopt his progressive agenda, but added, "Democracy is not always nice and quiet and gentle."

The Democratic presidential candidate said in an interview with The Associated Press that his supporters hoped to see a platform at the July convention that reflects the needs of working families, the poor and young people as opposed to one that represents Wall Street and corporate America.

The Vermont senator said he will "condemn any and all forms of violence" but his campaign was bringing in newcomers to the process and first-time attendees of political conventions. He said the Democratic Party could choose to be more inclusive.

"I think if they make

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the right choice and open the doors to working-class people and young people and create the kind of dynamism that the Democratic Party needs, it's going to be messy," Sanders said. "Democracy is not always nice and quiet and gentle but that is where the Democratic Party should go."

Asked if the convention could be messy, Sanders said: "So what? Democracy is messy. Everyday my life is messy. But if you want everything to be quiet and orderly and allow, you know, just things to proceed without vigorous debate, that is not what democracy is about."

Obama lifts Vietnam arms embargo

HANOI, Vietnam (AP) — Eager to banish lingering shadows of the Vietnam War, President Barack Obama lifted the U.S. embargo on selling arms to America's former enemy Monday and made the case for a more trusting and prosperous relationship going forward. Activists said the president was being too quick to

gloss over serious human rights abuses in his push to establish warmer ties.

After spending his first day in Vietnam shuttling among meetings with different government leaders, Obama will spend the next two days speaking directly to the Vietnamese people and meeting with civil society groups and young entrepreneurs. It's all part of his effort to "upgrade" the U.S. relationship with an emerging economic power in Southeast Asia and a nation that the U.S. also hopes can serve as a counterweight to Chinese aggression in the region.

Tracing the arc of the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship through cooperation, conflict, "painful separation" and a long reconciliation, Obama marveled during a news conference with the Vietnamese president that "if you consider where we have been and where we are now, the transformation in the relations between our two countries is remarkable."

President Tran Dai Quang said later at a lavish state luncheon that he was grateful

for the American people's efforts to put an end to "an unhappy chapter in the two countries' history," referring to the 1965-1975 U.S. war with Vietnam's communists, who now run the country.

The conflict killed 57,000 American military personnel and as many as 2 million Vietnamese military and civilians.

Iraqi leader cites early success in Fallujah offensive

BAGHDAD (AP) — Iraq's prime minister hailed "big successes" Monday by government troops after launching an offensive to retake Fallujah from Islamic State militants, but the operation promises to be one of the toughest challenges yet for the country's struggling security forces.

Troops recaptured some agricultural areas in Garma, a district along the northeastern edge of Fallujah, under intensified Iraqi airstrikes and heavy artillery, said Col. Mahmoud al-Mardhi, who leads Shiite militia forces in the operation.

School threats could be latest in 'swatting'

DENVER (AP) — Threats made against schools across the United States led to the evacuation of students Monday in what could be the latest example of so-called "swatting" against schools.

In recent months, hoaxers playing online games have allegedly used proxy servers and other high-tech identity-disguising tools to anonymously threaten schools online or in phone messages with electronic voices to trigger a huge police response, including SWAT teams.

The latest threats led to the evacuation of schools in Colorado, Utah, Delaware, Minnesota, New Hampshire and Wisconsin. Media outlets in the United Kingdom also reported evacuations.

The threats were made against elementary, middle and high schools, with some schools choosing to continue classes and others to put buildings on lock-

down rather than evacuate. Some schools resumed classes after sweeps by authorities failed to turn up explosives or other threats.

Some officials described Monday's threats as automated or robotic and at least two — at Lakewood High School outside Denver and at Ben Franklin Elementary School in Rochester, Minnesota — came in just before noon local time. Also in Minnesota, Forest Lake Elementary in the city of Forest Lake was evacuated after getting a bomb-threat call around 12:15 p.m.

Meanwhile, students at Murray High School outside Salt Lake City were sent home and bomb-sniffing dogs were brought in. No explosives were found.

Two elementary schools were evacuated in Colorado — Liberty Point Elementary School in Pueblo West and Cherokee Trail Elementary in the Denver suburb of Parker.

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