

Syrian president arrives in US for landmark visit

The United States plans to establish a military base near Damascus

● Sharaa is expected to seek funds for Syria

● Trip comes after his landmark visit to the United Nations in September

AFP | Washington, United States

Syria's President Ahmed al-Sharaa arrived in the United States on Saturday for a landmark official visit, his country's state news agency reported, a day after Washington removed him from a terrorism blacklist.

Sharaa, whose rebel forces ousted longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad late last year, is due to meet US President Donald Trump at the White House on Monday.

It's the first such visit by a Syrian president since the country's independence in 1946, according to analysts.

The interim leader met Trump for the first time in Riyadh during the US president's regional tour in May.

Washington's envoy to Syria, Tom Barrack, said earlier this month that Sharaa would "hopefully" sign an agreement to join the international US-led alliance against the Islamic State (IS) group.

The United States plans to establish a military base near Damascus "to coordinate humanitarian aid and observe developments between Syria and Israel," a diplomatic source in Syria told AFP.



Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani (Top-CL) and Syria's President Ahmed al-Sharaa (Top-CR) posing with representatives of Syrian-American organizations in Washington DC.

The State Department's decision Friday to remove Sharaa from the blacklist was widely expected.

State Department spokesman Tommy Pigott said Sharaa's government had been meeting US demands including on working to find missing Americans and on eliminating any remaining chemical weapons.

"These actions are being taken in recognition of the progress demonstrated by the Syrian leadership after the departure of

Bashar al-Assad and more than 50 years of repression under the Assad regime," Pigott said.

The spokesman added that the US delisting would promote "regional security and stability as well as an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process."

The Syrian interior ministry announced on Saturday that it had carried out 61 raids and made 71 arrests in a "proactive campaign to neutralise the threat" of IS, according to the

official SANA news agency.

It said the raids targeted locations where IS sleeper cells remain, including Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs, Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Damascus.

After his arrival, Sharaa met with representatives from Syrian organizations in Washington, according to his country's official media.

The Syrian foreign minister posted a social media video, filmed before Sharaa's departure, of him playing basketball

with CENTCOM commander Brad Cooper and Kevin Lambert, the head of the international anti-IS operation in Iraq, alongside the caption "work hard, play harder."

Transformation

Sharaa's Washington trip comes after his landmark visit to the United Nations in September -- his first time on US soil -- where the ex-jihadist became the first Syrian president in decades to address the UN General

Assembly in New York.

On Thursday, Washington led a vote by the Security Council to remove UN sanctions against him.

Formerly affiliated with Al-Qaeda, Sharaa's group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), was delisted as a terrorist group by Washington as recently as July.

Since taking power, Syria's new leaders have sought to break from their violent past and present a moderate image more tolerable to ordinary Syrians and foreign powers.

The White House visit "is further testament to the US commitment to the new Syria and a hugely symbolic moment for the country's new leader, who thus marks another step in his astonishing transformation from militant leader to global statesman," International Crisis Group US program director Michael Hanna said.

Sharaa is expected to seek funds for Syria, which faces significant challenges in rebuilding after 13 years of civil war.



In October, the World Bank put a "conservative best estimate" of the cost of rebuilding Syria at \$216 billion.

Super Typhoon Fung-wong makes landfall in Philippines

AFP | Manila, Philippines

Super Typhoon Fung-wong slammed into the Philippines' eastern seaboard on Sunday, the national weather service said, after killing at least two people and forcing more than a million to evacuate.

The storm, with a radius spanning nearly the whole of the Philippines, made landfall in Aurora province on the main island of Luzon at 9:10 pm (1310 GMT), the state forecaster reported.

Fung-wong is expected to bring wind and heavy rain to swathes of the archipelago nation, which just last week saw more than 220 people killed by Typhoon Kalmaegi.

Earlier Sunday, one of the already storm-stricken provinces in the central Philippines recorded the first known death from the new typhoon.

Rescuer Juniel Tagarino in Catbalogan City told AFP the body of a 64-year-old woman attempting to evacuate had been pulled out from under debris and fallen trees.



Houses amid surging floodwaters as Super Typhoon Fung-wong hit the coast in Pandan, Catanduanes province

"The wind was so strong and the rain was heavy... According to her family members, she might have forgotten something and went back inside her house," Tagarino said.

The civil defence office later confirmed a second death, a per-

son who drowned in a flash flood on Catanduanes island.

In Aurora, where the eye of the storm made landfall, government worker Aries Ora was boarding up his home in Dipaculao town with steel sheets and wooden boards.

"What really scares us is that the expected landfall is at night," the 34-year-old told AFP earlier on Sunday.

"Unlike previous typhoons, we won't be able to clearly see the movement of the wind and what's happening around us."

Further north, in Cagayan province, people sheltering in an evacuation centre told AFP that fear of flooding had convinced them to leave their homes.

"We often suffer flooding in our home, so when we were told to evacuate, we evacuated, because we would be trapped," said Loretta Salquina.

"The typhoon might blow away our roofs... We're safer here." Schools and government offices have been ordered closed on Monday across the main island of Luzon, including the capital Manila, where nearly 300 flights have been cancelled.

'The ground was shaking'

Catanduanes, a small island that the state weather service said could take a "direct hit", was already being lashed by wind and rain early Sunday, with storm surges sending waves hurtling over streets and floodwaters rising in some areas.

"The waves started roaring around 7:00 am. When the waves hit the seawall, it felt like the ground was shaking," Edson

Casarino, 33, a resident of Catanduanes' Virac town, told AFP.

Video verified by AFP showed a church in the town surrounded by floodwaters that reached halfway up its entrance.

Flooding was also reported in southern Luzon's Bicol region, according to civil defence deputy administrator Rafaelito Alejandro, who later confirmed the preemptive evacuation of nearly 1.2 million people nationwide.

In Guinobatan, a town of about 80,000 in the region's Albay province, verified video showed streets transformed into a raging torrent of floodwaters.

Typhoon Fung-wong is expected to bring at least 200 millimetres (eight inches) of rain to many parts of the country, according to government meteorologists.

Scientists warn that storms are becoming more powerful due to human-driven climate change. Warmer oceans allow typhoons to strengthen rapidly, and a warmer atmosphere holds more moisture, meaning heavier rainfall.