

world

Hundreds flee from IS holdout

AFP | Near Baghouz, Syria

US-backed forces pressed the battle to expel die-hard jihadists from the last pocket of land under their control in eastern Syria yesterday after hundreds fled the holdout overnight.

Outside the “Baghouz pocket”, the plains were littered with empty pistachio-coloured rocket shells, water bottles, clothes left behind, and rotting dog carcasses.

The extremist group declared a cross-border “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq in 2014, but various military campaigns have chipped it down to a fragment on the Iraqi border.

After a pause of more than a week to allow out civilians, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) declared a last push to retake the pocket from the extremists on Saturday.

Aided by the warplanes and artillery of a US-led coalition, the Kurdish-led alliance has pressed into a patch of four square kilometres (one square mile).

SDF spokesman Mostefa Bali said heavy clashes were under-



Women and children fleeing from the last Islamic State group's tiny pocket in Syria sit in the back of a truck near Baghuz, eastern Syria

way on Tuesday, after hundreds fled the battle zone during the night.

“A group of 600 civilians escaped from Baghouz at one in the morning and they are being

searched now,” he said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the new arrivals included women and children from France and Germany.

“Most of those who got out are

foreigners,” Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said.

Coalition spokesperson Sean Ryan said US-backed forces were facing a fierce fightback.

“The progress is slow and

methodical as the enemy is fully entrenched and IS fighters continue to conduct counter attacks,” he said.

“The coalition continues to strike at IS targets whenever available.”

In the past two months, more than 37,000 people, mostly wives and children of jihadist fighters, have fled into SDF-held areas, the Observatory says.

At a gathering point for new arrivals, dozens of men knelt on the ground.

Iraqi and Syrian women and children prepared to make the long journey north to a Kurdish-held camp for the displaced, after spending the night in tents.

A very thin child with dark circles around his eyes stumbled onto a truck, as other children screamed out for water and their mothers asked how long the drive would take.

“Six hours? In the cold?” shouted a wrinkled Iraqi woman.

Bali, the SDF spokesman, said on Saturday that up to 600 jihadists could still be left inside the pocket.

Russian MPs back bill to isolate country's internet

Moscow, Russia

Russian lawmakers yesterday backed a bill that could cut off the country's internet traffic from servers abroad which critics say is a step towards censorship and possibly an isolated network like in North Korea.

The bill passed its first reading by 334 votes to 47 after an unusually heated debate in the State Duma, where many lawmakers from minority parties criticised it as too costly and argued that it was not written by experts.

Sri Lanka seeks hangmen to resume executions

Colombo, Sri Lanka

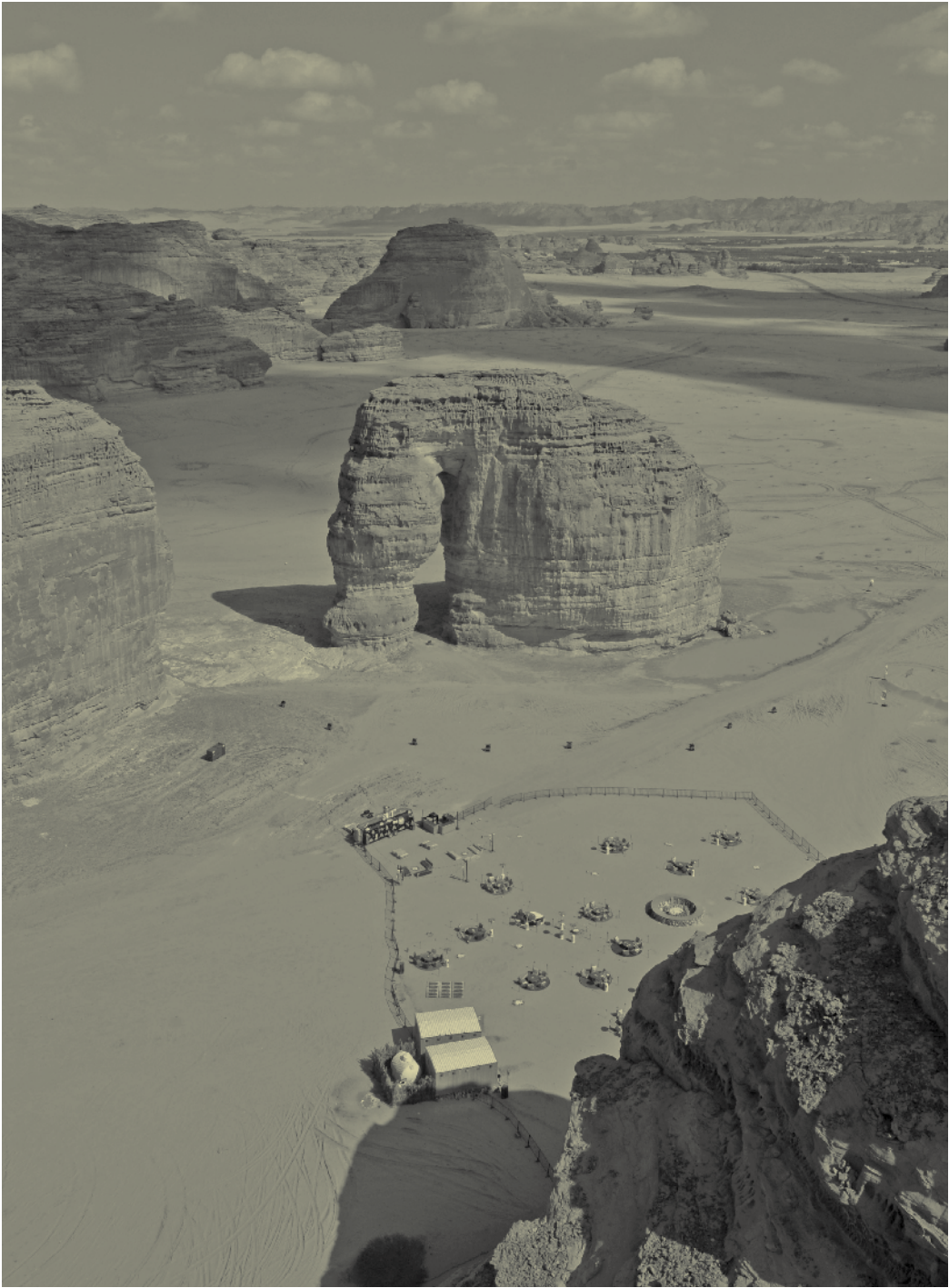
Sri Lanka has started advertising for hangmen, after the president vowed to resume executions for the first time in four decades as part of a hardline anti-drugs crackdown.

Candidates must have “mental strength” and “excellent moral character”, according to job ads placed by prison authorities to fill long-vacant positions.

There are two vacancies, and only Sri Lankan men aged between 18 and 45 need apply.

Sri Lanka has not hanged any convicts since a moratorium on capital punishment was imposed in 1976, but President Maithripala Sirisena last week announced plans to resume hangings within two months. Sirisena said he was committed to bringing back the death penalty for drug offenders, after vowing a tougher line on spiralling narcotics-related crime, modelled on a crackdown in the Philippines.

Weirdest natural wonders



An aerial view of the Elephant rock in the Ula desert near the northwestern Saudi town of al-Ula. Visitors to Al-Ula get to explore the Elephant Rock which lies 11km northeast of the province, at a height of 52 meters. The natural formation looks like an elephant with a ground-bound trunk, and it is surrounded other hundreds of rock monoliths.

‘El Chapo’ found guilty

New York, United States

Mexican mobster Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman was found guilty Tuesday by a New York jury of crimes spanning a quarter of a century as head of one of the world's most powerful drugs gangs.

The 61-year-old former head of the Sinaloa cartel -- famed for his brazen escapes from Mexican prisons -- faces a possible life sentence after being convicted of smuggling tons of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine and marijuana into the United States.

He was also found guilty of money laundering and illegal

weapons possession charges.

In a three-month trial that unfolded like a real-life telenovela, Guzman's former beauty queen wife and a parade of his lovers and henchmen took the witness stand under the gaze of the onetime drugs kingpin.

Guzman's lawyer Jeffrey Lichtman asked the jury not to convict on the basis of the “garbage” testimony of government witnesses.

Lichtman contended that Guzman was merely a “scapegoat,” and that the real culprit in the drug trafficking operations was Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada, the co-founder of the Sinaloa cartel.

Fire at budget hotel in Delhi kills 17

New Delhi, India

At least 17 people died when a fire ripped through a budget hotel in Delhi yesterday, prompting authorities to launch a safety check of other buildings in the vicinity.

Victims included a woman and a child who jumped from a window to escape the blaze that broke out before dawn at the budget Hotel Arpit Palace.

Images showed flames and thick smoke billowing out of the top floor of the hotel, located in a congested part of the Indian capital. Guests at the hotel -- popular with budget and business travellers -- were unable to use corridors to escape because of wooden panelling, according to a fire officer.

Delhi home minister Satyendra Jain told reporters that rules were flouted to construct extra floors, with a ter-



Delhi Fire Services (DFS) and Delhi police personnel stand outside Hotel Arpit Palace after extinguishing a fire that broke out on its premises

race being used as an open air restaurant. He also directed the fire department to inspect other buildings in the congested area and file a report within a week.

Three Myanmar citizens staying at the hotel were missing, the NDTV news network reported.

Most of the guests were sleeping at the time the fire broke out and suffocated to death.

Four people were injured in the incident. It is estimated around 120 people were inside the hotel -- built around 25 years ago -- when the fire started.