VOA NEWS

December 7, 2017

From Washington, this is VOA news. I'm Jonathan Jones reporting.

Saying "our greatest hope is for peace," President Trump reversed decades of U.S. policy Wednesday, recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and setting in motion the process of moving the American embassy from Tel Aviv to the ancient holy city.

He spoke in a highly anticipated speech from the White House Diplomatic Room, the internationally televised 11-minute speech, he said, "Today, we finally acknowledge the obvious: that Jerusalem is Israel's capital. This is nothing more or less than a recognition of reality."

"While previous presidents have made this a major campaign promise, they failed to deliver. Today, I am delivering.

I've judged this course of action to be in the best interests of the United States of America and the pursuit of peace between Israel and the Palestinians. This is a long-overdue step to advance the peace process and to work towards a lasting agreement."

Given the potential for a violent backlash against Israel and American interests in the region, the U.S. Consulate General is restricting American government workers and their families from personal travel in Jerusalem's Old City and West Bank, including Bethlehem and Jericho, amid widespread calls for demonstrations.

The international community reacted swiftly. U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres leading the chorus of global voices Wednesday urging calm and restraint.

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A study by the U.N. refugee agency finds what it calls "shocking evidence" of widespread sexual violence against Syrian men and boys inside Syria and in neighboring countries where they seek asylum.

Correspondent Lisa Schlein reports for VOA from Geneva that nearly 200 refugees in Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan were interviewed for the study late last year.

The study indicates violence against men and boys is far more widespread than previously believed. It finds gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex individuals are most vulnerable to sexual assault, with the victims ranging in age from 10 to 80.

U.N. refugee agency spokesman Andrej Mahecic says sexual violence against men and boys inside Syria is practiced by all the combatant groups, who use it as a weapon of war. He tells VOA one of the victims who gave evidence says he and about 80 other people were held in a tiny cell without any light for 30 days.

"They were all stripped naked. During the night, they would be hung by the hands and their captors would basically torture them with electricity."

Lisa Schlein, for VOA new, Geneva.

The Pentagon says there are about 2,000 U.S. troops in Syria. That's quadruple the number U.S. officials had acknowledged until now.

The figure reflects an order by the defense secretary, Jim Mattis, to revise how the Pentagon accounts for deployed personnel carrying out major operations in Iraq and Syria. The new number does not mean additional troops have been deployed to the volatile country, but it does show the large inaccuracy of previous figures.

The U.S. House of Representatives on Wednesday [combined] condemned the "ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya," passing a resolution by a two-thirds vote "calling for an end to the attacks" against the Muslim minority in Myanmar, also known as Burma.

A U.S. B-1B bomber flew over South Korea on Wednesday as part of a joint military exercise that comes a week after North Korea test-fired an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of hitting the United States.

The bomber was joined by F-22 and F-35 stealth fighters for what South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said were simulated strikes at a military field.

The United States and South Korea began the five-day drill called "Vigilant Ace" on Monday amid increased tensions with North Korea. It's an annual exercise.

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That's the latest world news from VOA.