

●RUSSIA

Putin offers Iraq military support

RUSSIA offered visiting Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi military aid to help push back Islamic State militants.

The advances by IS have exposed the shortcomings of Iraq's army and the limitations of US air strikes.

In going ahead with his visit to Moscow despite the worsening security crisis, Abadi said he had wanted to underline the importance of his country's ties with Russia, adding that he had disregarded "certain forces" advising him to cancel the trip.

"We are expanding co-operation in the area of military technology," Russian President Vladimir Putin said, hailing Iraq as an "old and reliable partner in the region".

●MALAYSIA

Rescue mission for migrant ships

MALAYSIA has become the first country to order a search and rescue mission for Rohingya migrants.

In the past three weeks more than 3,000 people – Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution in Burma and Bangladesh trying to escape poverty – have arrived in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. The UN believes there are 4,000 still at sea.

Prime Minister Najib Razak posted on Twitter that he had ordered the navy and coast guard "to conduct search and rescue efforts [for] Rohingya boats. We have to prevent loss of life".

●KENYA

Al-Shabab take over mosque

MILITANTS from the Islamist group al-Shabab briefly took over a mosque in Garissa county in northern Kenya, local leaders say.

The jihadists are said to have addressed the congregation for two hours. They criticised Kenyan authorities and warned people not to pass intelligence to the security forces.

The mosque is 150 miles from Garissa town, where al-Shabab last month killed at least 148 people at a university.

Police commander Caleb Matoke said he believed the group was sent by Mohamed Kuno, the man Kenyan authorities have accused of being behind the university attack.

PALMYRA

PROFILE



WHAT'S THE STORY?

A MASSACRE has begun and the "birthplace of human civilisation" is in danger after Islamic State militants seized Unesco World Heritage Site Palmyra yesterday.

Islamic State (IS) now has control of more than half of Syria after seizing the town next to the ancient ruins, known as the Venice of the Sands.

While there were no immediate reports of the expected destruction of the site, the militants are hunting down members of the Shaitat tribe, which has backed Syrian government forces.

More than 100 government troops were killed defending

Tadmur, the modern city beside Palmyra, which is strategically important because of its location between the contested city of Deir al-Zour in the east and the Syrian capital of Damascus.

The rapid collapse of President Assad's troops and militias has sent a shockwave through the West, as the area is close to the gas and oil fields that power much of the country currently under government control.

There is also concern over

the fate of the residents trapped in Tadmur who are believed to number

between 60,000 and 70,000. Around 1,500 have already fled the city.

Meanwhile the fate of Palmyra looks grim.

"This is the fall of a civilisation.

Human, civilised society has lost the battle against

barbarism. I have lost all hope," said Maamoun Abdul Karim, above, Syria's head of antiquities.

He said some of the smaller

statues had been moved to safety before the IS takeover but the large monuments were in imminent danger.

WAR CRIME

ANY destruction of Palmyra would be "not just a war crime but...an enormous loss to humanity", said Unesco's director-general, Irina Bokova.

"It's the birthplace of human civilisation. It belongs to the whole of humanity and I think everyone today should be worried about what is happening," she said.

As the militants have reportedly taken control of Palmyra's prison, military air base and intelligence headquarters, they are likely to





Clockwise from left: The ruins of Palmyra are a World Heritage Site; the city's Victory gate; a Syrian tank takes up position

millennium BC, Palmyra was an established caravan oasis, well known for its palm dates, when it came under Roman control in the mid-first century AD as part of the Roman province of Syria.

It grew steadily in importance as a city on the trade route linking Persia, India and China with the Roman Empire, marking the crossroads of several civilisations in the ancient world.

ONE OF A KIND

UNLIKE any other city of the Roman Empire, Palmyra was artistically and culturally set apart. Usually the landed class controlled affairs, but in Palmyra it was the merchant class that held sway because of the importance of the trading caravans that crossed the desert.

Like Venice, Palmyra was the centre of a huge trading network, although the main vehicles for carrying goods were camels, not boats. However, it is known that the Palmyrans also maintained a seaborne trade with the Mediterranean ports and even India.

Some of the great wealth generated by their trade resulted in the grand architecture that can still be seen today.

Its preservation in the sands

of the desert astonished the western travellers of the 17th and 18th centuries who came across it, with their discovery having a major influence on subsequent architectural styles in the West.

Edifices that remain well preserved include the great temple of Ba'al which is considered to be one of the most important religious buildings of the first century AD in the East and is of a unique design.

"The carved sculptural treatment of the monumental archway through which the city is approached from the great temple is also an outstanding example of Palmyrene art," according to Unesco.

Equally impressive is the grand colonnaded street which is open in the centre with covered side passages.

Smaller streets of similar design together with the major public buildings form "an outstanding illustration of architecture and urban layout at the peak of Rome's expansion in and engagement with the East".

Just outside the city walls is the Valley of the Tombs where the large scale funeral monuments display distinctive decoration and construction methods.

It has all stood for centuries but whether any of it will remain by next week is looking increasingly unlikely.



DB HR officer, Ulrich Weber

●GERMANY

Train drivers stop strike to start talks

GERMAN train drivers have agreed to call off their strike and enter talks with Deutsche Bahn.

It was agreed the strike, which began on Tuesday, would end at 7pm local time yesterday.

The GDL train drivers' union has staged nine walkouts in 11 months to call for a 5 per cent pay rise for 20,000 drivers and a shorter working week.

Deutsche Bahn – which employs 200,000 and is Europe's largest rail operator, carrying 2 billion passengers a year – has offered a 4.7 per cent pay rise plus a one-off €1,000.

Around 5.5 million people travel daily by train in Germany and it is estimated the strike earlier this month cost the economy €750 million.

●OCEANIA

Australians now switching to NZ

FOR the first time in 24 years more Australians have moved to New Zealand to live and work than the other way around.

The latest New Zealand government figures show that last month 100 Australian migrants arrived in the country. The countries have an agreement allowing their citizens to live and work freely in either state.

Previously, 40,000 New Zealanders a year flocked to Australia, attracted by high wages. However, that number is falling. The countries have seen a reversal of economic fortunes, with Australia facing the end of a mining boom, a slowdown in China's demand for minerals and rising unemployment, while New Zealand is expected to have a budget surplus by the next financial year.

concentrate on these before destroying the ancient city.

The site has already suffered "considerable damage" because of Syrian air strikes and the digging of trenches by government troops, but it is probable that IS will attempt to complete the destruction as the militants believe the preservation of such ancient sites is idolatry. They can also make money on the black market by selling the looted artefacts.

Last year they destroyed Iraq's historic Assyrian sites in Nineveh and have looted other historic treasures as well as razing Roman-era buildings.

The jihadists seem to take pleasure in inciting global horror at its actions and there

is no doubt the destruction of Palmyra would send shockwaves round the world.

THE HISTORY

AN OASIS in the Syrian desert, north-east of Damascus, Palmyra contains the monumental ruins of a great city that was one of the most important cultural centres of the ancient world.

From the first to the second century, the art and architecture of Palmyra, standing at the crossroads of several civilisations, married Greco-Roman techniques with local traditions and Persian influences.

First mentioned in the archives of Mari in the second