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U.S.-backed Syrian force launches ‘final battle’ against Islamic State

QAMISHLI, Syria (Reuters) - The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) began an assault against the final Islamic State enclave in eastern Syria on Saturday, aiming to wipe out the last vestige of the jihadist group's "caliphate" in the SDF's area of operations.

President Donald Trump, who is planning to pull U.S. forces out of Syria, said on Wednesday he expected an announcement as early as next week that the U.S.-led coalition operating in support of the SDF had reclaimed all the territory previously held by the jihadist group.

The enclave is close to the Iraqi border and comprises two villages, though Islamic State (IS) also still has territory in the part of Syria that is mostly under the control of the Russian- and Iranian-backed Syrian government.

SDF official Mustafa Bali, speaking to Reuters, described the assault as "the last battle". He later wrote on Twitter that the attack had started and the enclave would "be cleared soon". The SDF had handled the last 10 days "patiently" as more than 20,000 civilians were evacuated from the besieged IS enclave, Bali said.

Senior SDF official Redur Xelil told Reuters the force hoped to capture the area by the end of February, but cautioned that IS would continue to pose "great and serious" security threats even after that.

Islamic State redrew the map of the Middle East in 2014 when it declared a caliphate across large areas of Syria and Iraq. But the group steadily lost ground and its two main prizes - the Syrian city of Raqqa and Iraq's Mosul - fell in 2017.

SDF ADVANCE

Two U.S. security sources said the U.S. government's top experts strongly believe IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is still alive and possibly hiding in Iraq.

Spearheaded by the Kurdish YPG militia, the SDF has been the main U.S. partner in Syria and has driven Islamic State out of a swathe of the north and east over the last four years. The remaining Islamic State territory in Syria is west of the Euphrates.

Trump said in December he was pulling all 2,000 U.S. troops out of Syria, saying the battle against Islamic State there was almost won.

But a top U.S. general said on Tuesday the group would pose an enduring threat following the U.S. withdrawal, as it retained leaders, fighters, facilitators and resources that would fuel a menacing insurgency.

'Death to America' really 'Death to Trump': Iran The Wall Street Journal reported on Friday that the U.S. military was preparing to withdraw from Syria by the end of April. A U.S. official confirmed that target date to Reuters, saying the withdrawal included a pull-out from the U.S. military base at Tanf, near the Syrian border with Iraq and Jordan.

The U.S.-led coalition has said it is not discussing the timeline of the U.S. withdrawal from Syria.



FILE PHOTO: Fighters from Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are seen after arresting a wounded man during their fighting with Islamic State in the northern area of Deir al-Zor, Syria September 24, 2017. REUTERS/ Rodi

Venezuela shifts oil ventures' accounts to Russian bank - document, sources

CARACAS (Reuters) - Venezuela's state-run oil company PDVSA is telling customers of its oil joint ventures to deposit sales proceeds at an account it recently opened at Russia's Gazprombank AO, according to sources and an internal document seen by Reuters on Saturday.

PDVSA's move follows tough, new U.S. financial sanctions imposed on Jan. 28 and aimed at blocking leftist President Nicolas Maduro's access to the country's oil revenue. The United States and dozens of other nations have refused to recognize Maduro, characterizing his election last year to another six-year term as fraudulent.

Since then, PDVSA has been pressing its foreign partners at joint ventures in its Orinoco Belt producing area to formally decide whether they will continue in the projects, according to two sources with knowledge of the talks. The joint ventures' partners include Norway's Equinor ASA, U.S.-based Chevron Corp and France's Total SA.

PDVSA also ordered its Petrocedeno joint venture with Equinor and Total to halt extra-heavy oil output and upgrading due to a lack of naphtha needed to dilute production, as sanctions prohibited U.S. sup-

pliers of the fuel from exporting it to Venezuela.

"We would like to make formal your knowledge of new banking instructions to make payments in U.S. dollars or euros," said PDVSA's finance vice president, Fernando De Quintal, in a letter dated Feb. 8 to the PDVSA unit that supervises its joint ventures.

Even after a first round of financial sanctions in 2017, PDVSA's joint ventures managed to keep bank accounts in the United States and Europe to receive oil-sales proceeds. They also used correspondent banks in the United States and some European nations to move money to PDVSA's own collecting accounts in China.

PDVSA several weeks ago informed customers of the new bank directions and has begun moving the accounts of its joint ventures, which can export crude separately. The decision was made amid tension with some of its partners, which have withdrawn staff from Caracas since sanctions were imposed.

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Indigenous Pemon on Venezuela's border with Brazil vow to let aid in

PUERTO ORDAZ, Venezuela (Reuters) - Venezuela's Pemon, an indigenous people living along the border with Brazil, are determined to allow into the embattled country any foreign aid that may arrive, even if that means a showdown with Venezuelan security forces and the government of President Nicolas Maduro.

Amid a hyperinflationary economic collapse that has caused malnutrition and the exodus of millions of people, humanitarian aid has become a flashpoint in an intensifying political crisis.

Opposition leader Juan Guaido said last week a global coalition that includes the United States was sending food and medicine to collection points in Colombia, Brazil and an undisclosed Caribbean island before delivering the aid into Venezuela.

Brazil has joined the United States as well as most countries in Latin America and Europe in recognizing Guaido as Venezuela's legitimate interim leader, arguing that Maduro was re-elected in a fraudulent May 2018 vote.

But Maduro denies there is even a crisis, saying it is part of a U.S.-directed plot to undermine and overthrow his government.

Six leaders of the Pemon community residing in the "Gran Sabana" (or "Great Savannah") municipality bordering Brazil told Reuters that the population's pressing needs should trump any politicization of humanitarian aid.

The Gran Sabana, a grassy plain dotted with immense tabletop mountains in the southern state of Bolivar, is home to the only paved border crossing between Venezuela and Brazil.

"We are physically prepared - without weapons - and willing to open the border to receive the humanitarian aid," Gran Sabana Mayor Emilio Gonzalez told Reuters.

"Neither the National Guard nor the government can stop this."

Indigenous communities boast a greater degree of autonomy than others in Venezuela.

The Bolivar governor and military chief for the region of Guayana, which comprises the states of Bolivar and Amazonas, were not immediately available for comment.

OUTSIDERS EYED WARILY

"We are the natives of Gran Sabana and we will not allow some generals from outside to decide for us," said Jorge Perez, the region's councilman for indigenous communities. "We are the legitimate authorities."

Perez said he conducts daily visits to the local hospital where patients and doctors alike despaired over the lack of medicine.

Slideshow (3 Images)
"For any emergency, they are taking us to Brazil - it's embarrassing; the hospital of Boa Vista is full of Venezuelan patients," he said.

Boa Vista, the capital of the Brazilian border state of Roraima, has received tens of thousands of Venezuelans fleeing turmoil in recent years.

Mount Roraima, standing at over 2,800-meters (9,200-feet) high and straddling the border, is sacred ground for the Pemons and a spiritual symbol for many Venezuelans.

Mayor Gonzalez said authorities in Brazil had not yet informed him of a precise date for the arrival of aid at the border.

A Brazilian government spokeswoman declined to comment on the issue of aid, but confirmed ground transportation into Gran Sabana was possible.

France's "yellow vest" protests rage for 13th week
Venezuela's opposition has so far



FILE PHOTO: A Pemon indigenous porter walks on the road to Mount Roraima, near Venezuela's border with Brazil

only publicly announced the arrival of aid in the Colombian border town of Cucuta, where it is now being stockpiled as Venezuelan authorities have made it clear they will not allow it to enter the country.

Pemon leaders said they had already demonstrated their willingness to confront the Venezuelan military over aid after troops with metal barriers blocked the road between the town of Santa Elena de Uairen and the Brazilian border.

The Pemon community, which numbers more than 10,000 in Venezuela, has a history of skirmishes with the military over issues ranging from gasoline cuts to informal mining.

The military was trying to capture a colonel, they said, who had disavowed Maduro and was trying to help coordinate the arrival of aid, adding that he managed to cross the border into Brazil.

The Pemon removed the barriers and had a standoff with the military until the troops agreed to withdraw, they said.

"If humanitarian aid arrives and is prevented from entering, we will suspend the entry of government trucks too," said Angel Paez, a Pemon leader from the Akurimo territory of Gran Sabana.

"If there aren't for the people, then there won't be for the government."

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Editor's Choice



A giant plastic bottle is seen on a beach, during a performance by Greenpeace to warn of the presence of plastics on the coasts of Vina del Mar



Fans with white roses outside of the club's headquarters to honor fire victims at Flamengo's training centre



A man holds a cardboard painted as the Venezuelan flag as people cross the Colombian-Venezuelan border over the Simon Bolivar international bridge in Cucuta



A Colombian police officer talks with a woman at the Colombian-Venezuelan border over the Simon Bolivar international bridge in Cucuta



U.S demonstrators hold U.S flags at the open border to make a human wall in support of the construction of the new border wall between U.S and Mexico in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico February 9, 2019. REUTERS/Jose Luis Gonzalez



U.S demonstrators gather at the open border to make a human wall



A man holds a cardboard painted as the Venezuelan flag at the Colombian-Venezuelan border over the Simon Bolivar international bridge in Cucuta



U.S. demonstrators holding U.S. flags gather at the open border to make a human wall in support of the construction of the new border wall between U.S. and Mexico, in Ciudad Juarez

The cannabis drug arrived at the Lindeen household in a UPS shipping box marked “critical.”

Piper and Brian Lindeen had been monitoring news of Epidiolex for months. The drug meant another chance at treating their 10-year-old son Zach’s ongoing seizures, and a possibility for broader medical cannabis access in Texas.

The cannabidiol, or CBD, made by the British company GW Pharmaceuticals, aims to treat epileptic seizures of patients with Dravet syndrome and Lennox-Gastaut syndrome.

Successful clinical trials, including some with Texas patients, helped Epidiolex become the first CBD medication to gain approval earlier this year from both the Food and Drug Administration as well as the Drug Enforcement Administration. Prescriptions for the drug became available in the United States last month.

Currently the only two legal options to get medical cannabis in Texas are through the limited state registry, known as the Compassionate Use Program, and from prescription Epidiolex.

Marijuana advocates, including the Lindeens in Sugar Land, hope Epidiolex’s federal approval could sway any state legislators wary of expanding legal access to medical cannabis. Several marijuana-related bills were filed for the next legislative session.



State Sen. Jose Menendez, D-San Antonio, authored Senate Bill 90 for expanding the state medical cannabis program, which formally kicked off this year.

He believes the research that went into the development of Epidiolex, and which helped the drug gain federal approval, could be key to pushing his bill and similar ones next year.

“I’m going to use any and every tool pos-

Federally Approved Cannabis Drug Offers Hope For Patients And Marijuana Advocates

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor



Brian and Piper Lindeen aid their son, Zach, as he experiences an epilepsy seizure Sunday, Dec. 2, 2018, in Sugar Land. The first FDA approved cannabis-based medication is available to U.S. patients through a prescription, but its high cost, \$32,500 a year, puts it out of reach of several patients.

sible,” Menendez said. Yet advocates are also concerned that so much pressure on Epidiolex may backfire if the drug ultimately fails to generate enough positive results.

As the Lindeens have learned through years of treating Zach, what may work for one patient doesn’t work for all. “[Epidiolex] is something that’s standardized and reproducible and some people do well with that,” Piper Lindeen said, “but some people need variability.”

A Sense Of Hope
Zach has been prescribed at least eight different pharmaceuticals for the seizures that began when he was about 3 and half years old. They’ve each worked in varying degrees, but have also left concerning side effects including the risk of losing speech and noticeable aggression. “He punched the end of his bed one time,”

Brian Lindeen said of his son. “I had never seen him so angry.”



.It wasn’t until Zach began taking medical cannabis this year from a dispensary in Austin that the Lindeens began to feel a sense of hope.

Zach managed to go seizure free for about six months —the longest stretch the Lindeens had ever recorded.

Yet in the last few weeks, the seizures returned, about twice a day.

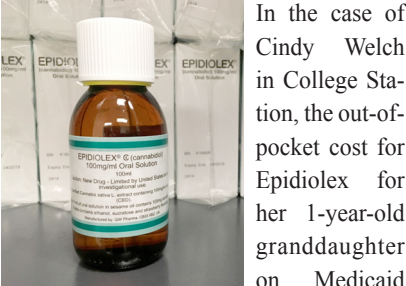
By then their neurologist, Dr. Michael

Newmark at Kelsey-Seybold Clinic, who is registered to prescribe medical cannabis through the state registry, suggested the Lindeens consider Epidiolex as a treatment for Zach’s Lennox-Gastaut syndrome.

There was some initial research required, not just of the drug’s clinical test results, but also of its cost.

Earlier this year GW Pharmaceuticals listed the drug’s weighted average price at \$32,500 for the first year of use. For some patients Medicare and Medicaid may cover the cost, but Stephen Schultz, the company’s vice president of investor relations, noted that most patients will rely on a number of private insurance options to make the drug more affordable.

In the case of the Lindeens, a recent switch to a new insurance plan brought their first prescription co-pay to about \$160, which was ultimately covered by co-pay assistance. They’ve been paying about \$500 a month out-of-pocket for medical cannabis from the state-licensed dispensary, Compassionate Cultivation.



comes to about \$1,500 a month. They currently pay about \$380 a month to Compassionate Cultivation.

If it hadn’t been for the dispensary, Welch said, her family would have had to move to Colorado to get medical access.

Morris Denton, the dispensary CEO, said he’s already lost patients like the Lindeens whose insurance makes Epidiolex a more

affordable medical cannabis option than his product, which cannot be covered by any insurance. Yet there are several more who must still check to see if their insurers cover Epidiolex.

Time will tell whether the new federally approved drug negatively impacts business at the state’s three existing dispensaries, Denton added. Epidiolex doesn’t contain the THC chemical compound allowed at the state dispensaries which can better help some patients than CBD alone. “It’s ultimately a good thing to have choice,” Denton said.

More options needed
Choice has been a main driver behind Piper Lindeen’s advocacy for marijuana legalization. Treating epilepsy can at times feel like a guessing game, switching medications and doses in and out to find the best fit, she said.



Pharmaceutical options are known to carry harsh side effects and patients can experience physical withdrawals when transitioning between brands.

Anecdotally, no such withdrawals have been reported among patients in legal states switching between cannabis options, Lindeen added.

But she remains frustrated at only having two medical cannabis options in Texas.

“We really need a wide variety of therapeutics,” Lindeen said.

Newmark said in an email that he hopes Epidiolex will reduce the number of Zach’s seizures substantially. The neurologist’s only concern is a bit of sedation the boy may experience.

“I firmly believe that as more knowledge is obtained about the use of these compounds that there will be much greater acceptance in the future,” Newmark added. “Texas will be unlikely to go against the trend.” (Courtesy the Houston Chronicle)

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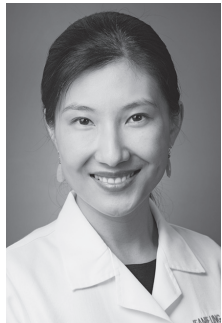


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Dr. Jeanie Ling completed her medical degree at Baylor College of Medicine and her residency in Ophthalmology at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville. She also completed her Fellowship in glaucoma at The University of Texas Houston Health Science Center at Houston. Her special clinic interests include diagnosing glaucoma, glaucoma surgery, eyelid and laser surgery.

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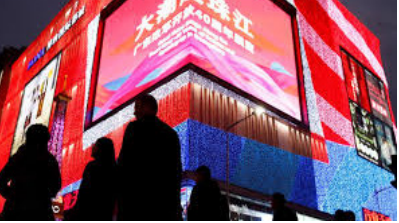
HONG KONG -- China's economy will grow at the slowest pace in 29 years in 2019, as the true impact of the trade war with the U.S. sets in, a new survey of economists projects.

The world's No. 2 economy is expected to expand 6.2% in real terms, based on the average forecasts of 32 economists polled by Nikkei and its group company, Nikkei Quick News. China's outlook is becoming murkier, with many of the economists saying the effects of fiscal stimulus and other measures are unlikely to show up until the second half of 2019 or thereafter.

While economists' individual forecasts range widely, from as low as 6% to up to 6.6%, most project a slowdown from 2018.

For the October-December period of this year, the economy is expected to grow 6.4%, down by 0.1 of a point from the previous quarter. For all of 2018, the growth rate is forecast to reach 6.6%, clearing the government's target of around 6.5% but falling short of the 6.7% logged in 2016.

Chinese growth has not been this slow since 1990, when the economy was thrown into confusion after the Tiananmen Square crackdown the year before. And the economists foresee an even poorer performance in 2019.



The trade war will shave 0.6 to 0.8 of a point off China's gross domestic product growth, Kenny Wen of Everbright Sun Hung Kai said, adding that a slowdown will be unavoidable even if the government takes countermeasures like boosting infrastructure investment and cutting taxes. The trade war is already taking a toll. In November, retail sales grew at the slowest clip in 15 and a half years.

Average forecasts by China economists polled by Nikkei and NQN (in percent)

GDP growth	CPI growth	Yuan per dollar exchange rate*
Oct.-Dec. 2018: 6.4	Dec. 2018: 2.2	End of 2018: 6.92(-6.0)
'18: 6.6	'18: 2.2	End of '19: 6.95(-0.4)
'19: 6.2	'19: 2.3	End of '20: 6.94(0.1)
'20: 6.1	'20: 2.3	

*Annual changes (in percent)

Economists Predict 6.2% Slump Despite Prospect Of Aggressive Stimulus
Trade War-Hit China Faces Slowest Growth In Three Decades This Year

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor



A containership docks at a port in Qingdao, in China's Shandong Province. Economists see the trade war as the primary risk to the country's economy in 2019. (Photo/Reuters)

Shen Jianguang of JD Finance said that consumer spending and investment have fallen into the doldrums, and that the property market will enter a downtrend in two years' time.

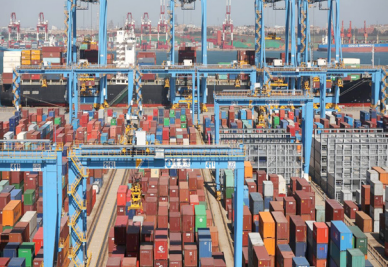
Xia Le of BBVA said, "The downward adjustment of the housing market as well as high local government and corporate debt also weigh on growth."

Yao Wei of Societe Generale Corporate and Investment Banking warned: "Trade tensions look unlikely to be resolved quickly and will soon cause material drags on exports. The economy will face greater challenges in 2019."

Asked to pick from multiple factors that could cause an economic downturn, 12 of 17 economists selected for an extended survey said a more intense trade war is the No. 1 risk. "The theme [of the conflict] will extend from trade friction to technological hegemony, and consumer and investor sentiments may become worse while the confrontation prolongs," said Mihoko Hosokawa of Mizuho Bank (China).

Cheng Shi of ICBCI said that although

there may be a lull, the U.S.-China confrontation will drag on, and that the trade friction will fuel market volatility.



The 17 economists were divided over what to expect from the 90-day talks between Beijing and Washington on trade and structural problems. While five said the U.S. would agree to defer additional tariffs, four said new levies would be imposed. Five others said the negotiations would continue beyond the 90 days. "The structural changes required by the U.S. are too difficult for China to deliver," said Kevin Lai of Daiwa Capital Markets, one of the four economists who are skeptical about the possibility of a deal. "To reach an agreement means that China will

have to abandon the China Model and run the risk of political destabilization." Sean Taylor of DWS Group said the recent arrest of Huawei Technologies' CFO and "further scrutiny of Chinese tech companies could complicate the negotiation process."

"The timing of a potential U.S.-Chinese agreement is difficult to predict," Taylor said. "Our base scenario is by the end of Q1 2019."

Many see the "forced transfer" of technology to Chinese companies as a major sticking point in the talks.

Although China may come to terms with the U.S. on the bilateral trade imbalance and intellectual property rights, it may be unable to compromise if the U.S. takes issue with its high technology and other industrial policies, cautioned Tetsuji Sano of Sumitomo Mitsui Asset Management. Sano noted that China has already become reliant on high value-added industries and cannot halt its policy of promoting more sophisticated lines of business.

A builder carries a sack of cement in



central Beijing on December 19. (Photo/Reuters)

While Arjen van Dijkhuizen of ABN AMRO Bank said China is "unlikely" to give up its state capitalist model, he said that "it is possible that some compromise could be found in the areas of intellectual property protection." Either way, he said, "Strategic competition between the [countries] will stay in the coming years."

In their assessments of the trade war for the coming year, the economists were also split. Seven said it would cool off gradu-

ally, while four predicted few changes and the same number said it would worsen.

"Taxing the remaining half of Chinese exports to the U.S. would start to severely hurt the U.S. consumer [and U.S. President Donald] Trump's voter base," said Susan Joho of Julius Baer. "So [Trump] may be more careful to risk that quickly. Raising the existing tariff rate from 10% to 25%, however, is still likely in 2019."

Despite all this, China's economic measures are expected to keep growth above 6%. The Central Economic Work Conference, held recently to determine the country's economic management policy for 2019, made it clear that President Xi Jinping's administration plans to shore up the economy with aggressive fiscal and monetary maneuvers.

Stimulus measures introduced after July 2018 are starting to pay off and steady growth of over 6% is likely to continue, said Fan Xiaochen of MUFG Bank. Xie Yaxuan of China Merchants Securities predicted that growth will bottom out in the second half of 2019 thanks to the measures.

Many of the economists said the govern-



ment will mainly rely on fiscal moves like tax cuts and infrastructure investments. "We expect fiscal policy to do more heavy lifting to support the economy than monetary policy," said Aidan Yao of AXA Investment Managers.

If the Chinese economy grows 6.6% in 2018 and nearly 6.2% in the following two years, China can theoretically clear a long-term target of doubling its GDP in 2020 from 2010.

"We expect China to use fiscal and monetary stimulus in order to maintain an acceptable rate of growth, which probably means anything above 6%," said Richard Jerram of Bank of Singapore. A number of other economists suggested Beijing would pull out all the stops to achieve its goal. (Courtesy <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Trade-war>)

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