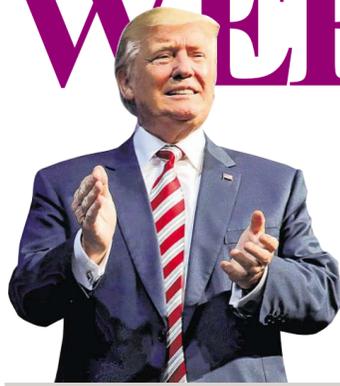
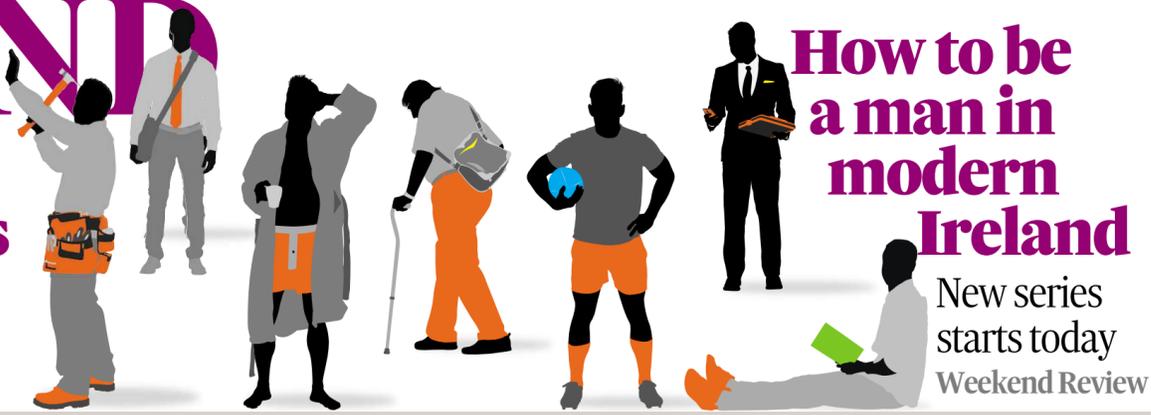


WEEKEND



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Government withholds €7m in funding from Goal

Move prompted by US investigation into international aid operations in Syria

RUADHÁN MAC CORMAIC
Foreign Affairs Correspondent

A senior manager has resigned from Goal and the Government has withheld a further €7 million in funding from the aid agency as the fallout continues over a US investigation into

international aid operations in Syria.

As chief operations officer, Jonathan Edgar was a key figure at Goal during a period of major expansion, having joined the agency when it was led by its founding chief executive, John O'Shea. A Goal spokesman con-

firmed Mr Edgar had resigned but declined to comment further.

Goal and other agencies operating in Syria were ordered to halt procurement using some American funds earlier this year as the US government's foreign aid arm, USAID, began an investigation into alleged bribery and bid-rigging. Last June the Department of Foreign Affairs withheld €2.95 million in humanitarian funding for Goal. A spokesman yesterday confirmed that,

"pending further clarification" on the investigation, another €7.16 million in long-term development funding had since been held back, bringing the total to €10.1 million.

Irish Aid funding accounted for 9 per cent of Goal's funding in 2015, providing humanitarian aid to more than 1.15 million people across 10 countries. "Any funding interruptions present challenges but Goal is managing the situation and all current and ongoing Irish Aid-funded programmes are

continuing as normal," a spokesman for the agency said. "However, a number of new proposals that had been earmarked for Irish Aid funding are currently on hold."

Mr Edgar was one of three people with connections to Goal who in 2013 set up a private firm, Noble House Business PLC, which provides logistics support to aid agencies in the field.

Goal said it became aware of the potential conflict of interest in 2013 and made it clear that

involvement by staff with potential service providers was "not acceptable". It is understood Mr Edgar was already in the process of severing his ties with Noble House by that time.

As a supplier to many NGOs on the Turkey-Syria border, Noble House has been part of the USAID investigation.

There is no suggestion of wrongdoing by Mr Edgar, however, and he is not believed to be under investigation by USAID. He did not respond to calls this week.



Ferocious Aleppo bombardment raises fear of 'monstrous atrocity'

Russian air strike leaves at least 70 dead in push that may lead to major escalation

Government forces blockade rebel-held districts trapping 250,000 residents

Warplanes battered Aleppo with the fiercest bombardment of the five-year civil war as Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's forces launched another campaign to retake the rebel's last big urban stronghold.

The Syrian army, backed by Russian air cover, began the attack on Thursday at the same time world powers in New York gathered to discuss the Syria crisis - a sign that international diplomacy has failed to salvage the country's ceasefire deal.

Government forces have the rebel-held eastern districts of Aleppo under siege, meaning that its 250,000 residents are trapped inside.

Residents said the ground shook beneath their feet from the strength of blasts that continued all night Thursday and all of yesterday. Video uploaded by activists showed rescuers digging people out of the wreckage with their bare hands, and entire streets blown to pieces by the bombardment.

"It's like Aleppo has been in a storm for two days... I haven't seen anything like this in the past five years," said Mohammed Abu Rajab, a radiologist in one of the opposition-held neighbourhoods. "We have just one message to the world today: We are pleading for them to help us stop these warplanes. Leave us under siege, we will deal with thirst and hunger. But please, stop these bombs."

Watershed moment

The offensive could be a watershed moment of the war if Mr Assad's backers, Russia and Iran, pump in enough support to help him take Aleppo, which is split between rebels and regime forces. As the opposition's last urban stronghold, Aleppo would be an important strategic and political win for the regime.

Mr Assad's forces will probably struggle to take the city; rebels have dug fortifications and underground tunnels. But if the offensive continues with the same ferocity, it threatens being one of the most horrific battles of a war that has already taken more than 300,000 lives.

"The only way to take eastern Aleppo is by such monstrous atrocity that it would resonate for generations," a western diplomat said. "It would be the stuff of history."

US secretary of state John Kerry said the only way to revive the ceasefire plan was for all military aircraft to be barred from flying missions over contested areas of the country.

In Aleppo, the rescue group known as the White Helmets said about 70 people were killed yesterday and 40 buildings destroyed. Video uploaded

by activists showed blasts lighting up the sky, shooting spirals of smoke and debris into the air. Rescue workers say four hospitals and two rescue centres were bombed. Activists in the city posted photographs of residents using sheets and stretchers to pull out the dead and wounded, as well as piles of burned, mangled limbs.

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Hostilities escalate over role of al-Nusra; Scores of bodies pulled from sea after Egyptian boat disaster: page 9



Big in New York Irish fashion pioneers

MAGAZINE



Women's showdown Noelle Healy interview

DUBLIN v CORK SPORTS WEEKEND



Don't blame Angelina Jennifer O'Connell

WEEKEND REVIEW

Weather

Wet and windy at first but drier later with sunny spells and only occasional showers. Highs of 17-19 degrees.

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Sports Weekend

Rugby: Johnny Sexton marked his return to Leinster with a try and a sure-footed 16-point haul to help his side beat Ospreys 31-19 in the Guinness Pro 12.

Soccer: Martin O'Neill has signed a new two-year contract on what are believed to be improved terms.

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