

Israeli jets strike IS targets in Syria, Gaza

6 killed; 20 rockets fired from Palestinian enclave

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli air strikes targeting the Islamic Jihad militant group in the Gaza Strip and Syria killed at least six fighters, a war monitor said yesterday, after the jihadists fired a barrage of rockets at Israel.

In the latest tit-for-tat violence ahead of a March 2 general election in the Jewish state, the Israeli Air Force targeted "Islamic Jihad terror sites" throughout Gaza and near the Syrian capital Damascus, a military statement said.

It followed more than 20 rockets and mortars fired from the Palestinian enclave, themselves a response to the killing of an Islamic Jihad militant along the Gaza-Israel border.

Islamic Jihad, which along with allied group Hamas has fought three wars with Israel since 2008, operates in both the Gaza Strip and Syria.

The Israeli army said it had struck Islamic Jihad targets on the outskirts of Damascus, including a base "used as a hub" for the group's activities in the country.

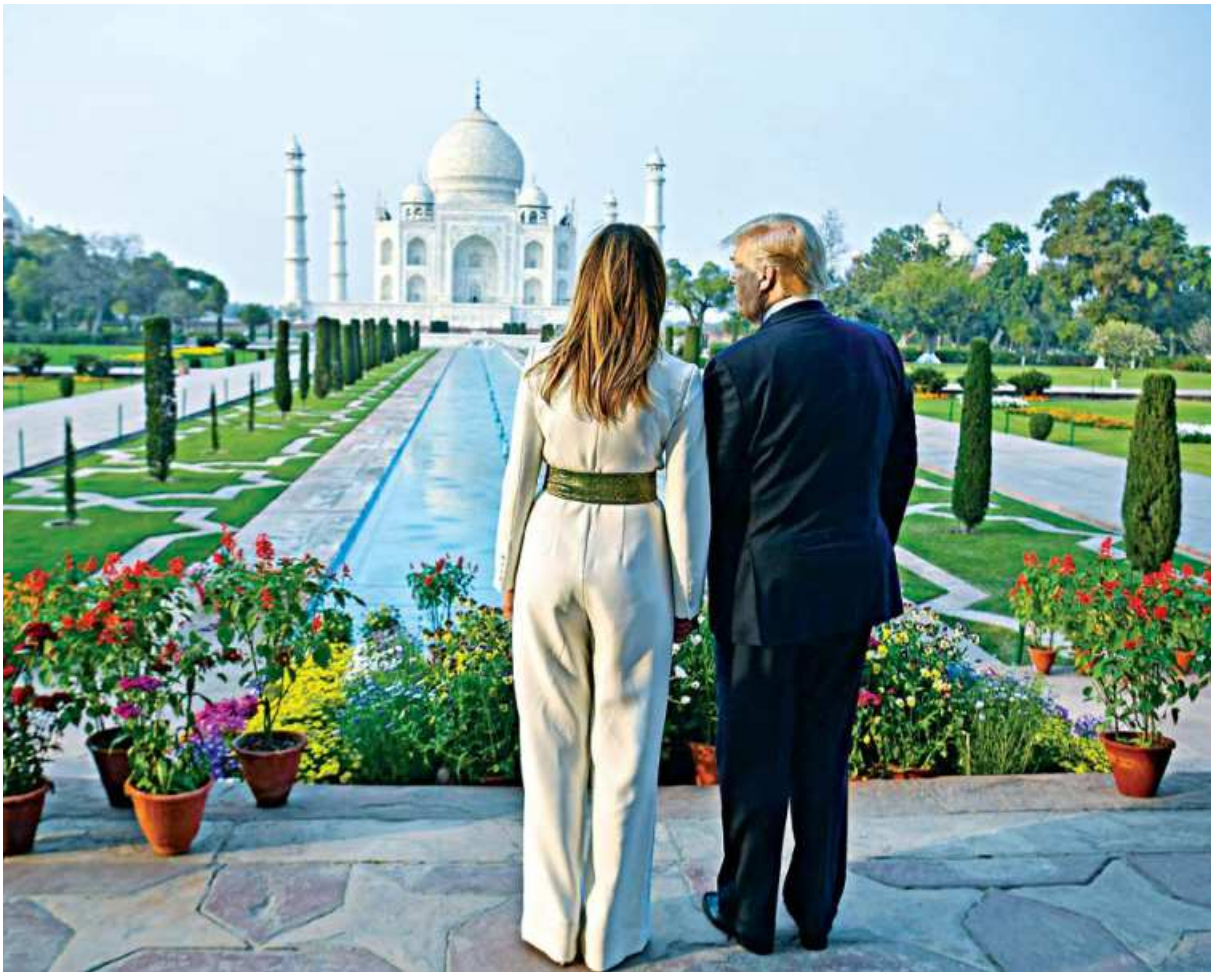
Islamic Jihad, which is allied with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, confirmed early yesterday that two of its fighters were killed.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, later confirmed that four additional pro-Assad, Iran-backed fighters died in the strike.

At least one of the Iran-backed fighters was Syrian, while the nationalities of the others remained unknown, Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP.

Meanwhile, Islamic Jihad fired a further volley of rockets and mortars from Gaza towards Israel yesterday.

Israel's army said in a statement that 20 "projectiles" had been fired from the Palestinian enclave, 18 of them intercepted by its air defence systems.



US President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump visit the Taj Mahal in Agra, India yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Expelled WSJ reporters leave China after headline row

Two Wall Street Journal reporters left China yesterday after being expelled over a controversial headline in an op-ed that angered Beijing. Three reporters were ordered out of the country last week over what Beijing deemed a racist headline that the journalists were not involved in writing -- marking one of the harshest moves against foreign media in years. But analysts noted that the decision to revoke their press credentials came a day after Washington tightened rules on Chinese state media operating in the United States -- raising suspicion that Beijing had retaliated. The Journal opinion piece -- headlined "China is the Real Sick Man of Asia" -- was written by a US professor who criticised the Chinese government's initial response to the coronavirus outbreak. China's foreign ministry said it was "racially discriminatory", and as the newspaper would not apologise, the three China-based reporters had their press cards revoked.

Lanka deploys troops to control worsening traffic

Sri Lanka will deploy troops to help police control worsening traffic congestion in the capital, the army said yesterday. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a retired army officer, ordered the military to assist traffic officers at the main entry and exit points to Colombo, a city which nearly a million people enter or leave daily, a spokesman said. The military police will also lend support "in any other area where their services are required", spokesman Chandana Wickremasinghe added. Traffic slows to a snail's pace in Colombo during the morning and evening rush hours making it one of the slowest road systems in South Asia. Recent studies have shown average speeds drop below seven kilometres (4.3 miles) an hour in the morning and the evening.

Schools reopen across J&K



Schools in Kashmir reopened yesterday after remaining shut for nearly seven months following the abrogation of Article 370. Officials of the Jammu and Kashmir education department said all arrangements had been put in place for the students to attend schools after the institutions remained shut for months since August after scrapping of its special status and due to winter break. The government had made several efforts last year to reopen the schools in a phased manner, but it failed to bear any fruit as the parents kept their wards at home due to apprehensions about their safety. Towards the end of the year, few schools opened, but students were asked to attend classes without wearing school uniforms.

SOURCES: AFP, INDIA TODAY

'No one cares'

Locked-in Wuhan residents adapt to find food

AFP, Beijing

The lockdown of Guo Jing's neighbourhood in Wuhan -- the city at the heart of China's new coronavirus epidemic -- came suddenly and without warning.

Unable to go out, the 29-year-old is now sealed inside her compound where she has to depend on online group-buying services to get food.

"Living for at least another month isn't an issue," Guo told AFP, explaining that she had her own stash of pickled vegetables and salted eggs.

But what scares her most is the lack of control -- first, the entire city was sealed off, and then residents were limited to exiting their compound once every three days.

Now even that has been taken away. Guo is among some 11 million residents in Wuhan, a city in central Hubei province that has been under effective quarantine since January 23 as Chinese authorities race to contain the epidemic.

Since then, its people have faced a number of tightening controls over daily life as the death toll from the

virus swelled to over 2,500 in China alone.

But the new rules this month barring residents from leaving their neighbourhoods are the most restrictive yet -- and for some, threaten their livelihoods.

"I still don't know where to buy

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

Wuhan scraps easing of quarantine

Mongolia bans S Korea flights over virus fears

Pak quarantines 200 near Iran border

things once we've finished eating what we have at home," said Pan Hongsheng, who lives with his wife and two children.

Some neighbourhoods have organised group-buying services, where supermarkets deliver orders in bulk.

But in Pan's community, "no one cares".

"The three-year-old doesn't even have any milk powder left," Pan told AFP, adding that he has been unable to send medicine to his in-laws -- both in their eighties -- as they live in a different area.

"I feel like a refugee."

Authorities in Wuhan yesterday reversed a decision that would have allowed some people to leave the quarantined city at the centre of China's deadly virus epidemic, and reprimanded officials who had made the announcement.

Meanwhile, Mongolia bans flights to and from South Korea starting today until March 2 due to the outbreak of the new coronavirus, weeks after closing its border with China over the epidemic.

Pakistan began quarantining at least 200 people near the Iranian border, officials said yesterday.

The quarantine announcement came hours after Pakistan sealed off its land border with Iran while neighbouring Afghanistan said it had detected its first infection.

Spread of COVID-19 confirms WHO fears

Say experts, appeal for greater vigilance

AFP, Paris

The sharp rise in cases and the geographical spread of the coronavirus outside China confirm WHO fears over dealing with the crisis, experts warned Sunday as they appealed for ever greater vigilance.

"There has been a profound shift in the direction that COVID-19 (new coronavirus) is taking over the past 48 hours," said Professor Devi Sridhar, Director of the Global Health Governance Programme at the University of Edinburgh Medical School.

"The WHO and its member state governments now need to be thinking about transitioning from containment to mitigation, ie. reducing the negative impacts of continued transmission," Sridhar warned.

On Friday, World Health Organization (WHO) chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus had already sounded the alarm, saying the window to stem the virus was shrinking.

"We are still in a phase where containment is possible... our window of opportunity is narrowing," he warned, adding if countries did not quickly mobilise to counter the virus spread, matters could get "messy."

He also warned that Africa's poor health infrastructure left it vulnerable to the COVID-19 disease, which has spilled out of China to more than 25 countries.

Those fears have been compounded by three fatalities in recent days in Italy -- where some 50,000 people are in lockdown -- eight in Iran and six in South Korea.

The WHO has expressed concern at the apparent emergence of cases without a clear epidemiological link to China, where it emerged.

"It's what we call the passage to community transmission," said Professor Arnaud Fontanet, specialist in epidemiology of emerging diseases at France's Pasteur Institute.

NEWSIN brief

Libya's warring sides propose truce deal

AFP, Geneva

Libya's warring sides have proposed a draft ceasefire agreement that would see the United Nations monitor the safe return of civilians to their homes, the UN said yesterday. The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) said it would facilitate the ceasefire process alongside a military commission with members from both sides.

7 hurt in shooting at Houston market

REUTERS, Houston

A gunman opened fire at a flea market in Houston on Sunday, wounding seven people in an area known for its Hispanic community, with a suspect being taken into custody at the scene. "No one is critically wounded," Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez said, adding that the victims were being taken to hospitals and that some injuries may have been a result of a bullet ricochet.

Sherpa team aims for record Everest ascent

AFP, Kathmandu

A team of four Sherpas yesterday set off to attempt a record winter ascent of Mount Everest in just five days, which would also be the first winter climb of the peak in more than quarter of a century. The last successful winter ascent was in 1993 by a Japanese team. "A winter speed climbing expedition has not happened yet and so we are attempting a new record," team leader Tashi Lakpa Sherpa, who has summited Everest eight times, told reporters.



Policemen stand along a road scattered with stones as smokes billows from a house in flames following clashes between supporters and opponents of a new citizenship law, at Bhajanpura area of New Delhi yesterday. A constable was killed after receiving a critical head injury, local media reported, while another senior officer was injured.

PHOTO: AFP

US accuses Assange of endangering sources

AFP, London

A lawyer for the United States yesterday accused WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange of risking the lives of intelligence sources by publishing classified US government documents, as his extradition hearing opened in a London court.

Assange faces charges under the US Espionage Act for the 2010 release by his whistleblowing website of a trove of files detailing the realities of US military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Assange spent much of the past decade holed up in Ecuador's London embassy to avoid separate legal proceedings in Sweden, but Washington is now seeking his transfer from Britain to stand trial.

Making the US government case on the first day of the extradition hearing in London, lawyer James Lewis denied the prosecution was motivated by

embarrassment over the WikiLeaks release.

"It is solely where risk of harm is caused," he told Woolwich Crown Court as Assange, who is being held in the high security Belmarsh prison next door, listened attentively in the dock.

"The United States is aware of sources whose unredacted names and/or other identifying information was contained in classified documents published by Wikileaks who subsequently disappeared."

WikiLeaks initially worked with a string of high-profile newspapers to publish details from the leaked State Department and Pentagon files, which caused a sensation -- and outrage in Washington.

One video from 2007 showed an Apache helicopter attack in which US soldiers gunned down two Reuters reporters and nine Iraqi civilians in broad daylight in Baghdad.

EXTRADITION HEARING



Conservatives claim victory in Iran polls

AFP, Tehran

Iran's conservatives claimed victory Sunday in a general election marked by the lowest turnout since the 1979 Islamic Revolution amid public anger against the government, an economic downturn and the disqualification of half the candidates.

A conservative resurgence would heap pressure on beleaguered President Hassan Rouhani and signal a shift from four years ago when reformists and moderates won a slender majority in parliament.

The interior ministry announced results of 95 percent of the 208 constituencies in Friday's election, declaring the names of the winning candidates but without specifying their political affiliation.

"Victory for the anti-American candidates, a new slap for Trump," crowed the ultra-conservative Kayhan newspaper.

"The people have disqualified the reformists," it added, alluding to Rouhani's backers, who have been weakened by President Donald Trump pulling the US out of a landmark nuclear deal and by a slew of economic and political crises.

Seventeen women were elected, the website of the government newspaper Iran said -- the same number as in the outgoing 290-seat parliament.

Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli announced the participation rate was 42.6 percent -- the lowest in four decades.

The election came two days after Iran announced its first cases of the deadly new coronavirus that emerged in China.

"We held these elections when there were various incidents in the country: we had bad weather, there was this coronavirus disease, there was the plane crash," Rahmani Fazli said, referring to the January 3 downing of a Ukrainian airliner which killed 176 people.

Human rights under assault

Says UN chief highlighting persecution of minorities

AFP, Geneva

UN chief Antonio Guterres yesterday launched a "call to action" against rising attacks on human rights, highlighting the persecution of minorities and "alarming levels of femicide".

"Human rights are under assault," said the secretary-general as he opened the UN Human Rights Council's main annual session in Geneva.

"People are being left behind. Fears are growing," he said, pointing to swelling divisions and political polarisation in many countries.

"A perverse political arithmetic has taken hold: divide people to multiply votes," he said, warning that "the rule of law is being eroded".

Guterres said civilians were being "trapped in war-torn enclaves, starved and bombarded in clear violation of international law" as well as "human trafficking, affecting every region in the world, preying on vulnerability and despair".

He also said women and girls were being "enslaved, exploited and abused", "activists

tossed in jail, and religious and ethnic minorities groups persecuted".

UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet also stressed the need for urgent action on human rights.

"Let us not deliver to our young people

Guterres launches a "call to action" against rising attacks on human rights



and to their children an uncontrollable firestorm of intersecting and escalating human rights crises," she told the council.

Guterres launched a "call to action" to "people everywhere" to take action in seven areas -- including halting violence against women and girls, boosting protection for people trapped in conflict and recognising the challenges created by the climate crisis and new technologies.

"We see a pushback against women's

rights, alarming levels of femicide, attacks on women human rights defenders, and the persistence of laws and policies that perpetuate subjugation and exclusion," Guterres said.

He said work towards gender equality "starts within", stressing that the UN had already achieved gender parity across its most senior ranks and promised to achieve the same throughout the UN system by 2028.

Guterres, who mentioned no countries by name, has faced criticism for not speaking out more forcefully against rights violations carried out by powerful countries like the US, Saudi Arabia and China -- appearing to opt instead for behind-the-scenes diplomacy.

Former UN rights chief Zeid Raad al-Husseini told Foreign Policy magazine this month that historians might interpret Guterres's reluctance to speak out as weakness rather than prudence.

Kenneth Roth of the Human Rights Watch NGO welcomed the call to action but said it would succeed only if Guterres "does not shy away from naming abusers".