



Debris litters the road near the site of an explosion in the area of Second and Commerce in Nashville, Tennessee, US, on Friday. A motor home parked on a street exploded in the US town at dawn on Friday, moments after a recorded message emanating from the vehicle warned of a bomb, in what police called an “intentional act” in the heart of America’s country music capital. Three people were injured in the Christmas morning blast, though none critically. Authorities said it was uncertain whether anyone was inside the recreational vehicle when it exploded, but police reported hours later that investigators had found possible human remains nearby. Authorities offered no explanation as to a possible motive, and there was no claim of responsibility.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS IN BRIEF

Death toll from attack in Ethiopia reaches 222

The death toll from a Wednesday attack in the western Benishangul-Gumuz region of Ethiopia has risen to 222 people, a volunteer from the country’s Red Cross told Reuters on Friday. “Yesterday we buried 207 people who are the victims and 15 more from the attackers,” said the volunteer, Melese Mesfin. The attack occurred in the village of Bekoji in Bulen county in the Metekel zone, and the state-appointed Ethiopian Human Rights Commission initially estimated more than 100 people had been killed. More than 40,000 people fled their homes due to the ethnic fighting, Bulen county spokesman Kassahun Addisu said. The military also killed 42 armed men accused of attacking the village.

China lowers age of criminal responsibility to 12

China has lowered the age of criminal responsibility to 12 years old for “abominable” crimes such as murder or causing injury that leads to death or severe disabilities by extremely cruel means, the China Daily said. The revision was passed by the National People’s Congress Standing Committee yesterday after a third review and will be effective from March 1. It applies to children aged between 12 and 14, the state-backed newspaper said. Children in China aged 14-16 can be held criminally liable if they intentionally commit serious violent crimes such as murder and rape. For most other offences, the age of criminal liability is 16.

Indian state passes forced religious conversion bill



Indian state Madhya Pradesh’s cabinet yesterday passed by a voice vote a bill aimed at curbing forced religious conversions. If passed into law, it will include a maximum punishment of up to 10 years in jail and up to Rs1 lakh in fine, with the burden of proof virtually falling on the accused and those associated with the accused, including organisations and institutions. Those looking to change their religion will have to notify two months ahead, failing which the marriage will be considered null and void under the new law. The Madhya Pradesh government’s move comes months after a similar law was passed by Uttar Pradesh.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

LOFTY PROMISES AND GROUND REALITY

The worldwide effort to prevent Earth from becoming an unlivable hothouse is in the grips of “net zero” fever.

More than 110 countries have committed to becoming carbon neutral by mid-century, including major greenhouse gas emitters such as Britain, Japan and South Korea, according to the United Nations.

The European Union has taken the vow, as has incoming US President Joe Biden.

China -- which generates a quarter of all carbon pollution -- set 2060 as the year when any remaining emissions from energy, agriculture or industry must be offset by tree farms or experimental technologies that suck CO2 from the air.

More than 65 percent of global CO2 emissions now fall under such pledges, according to a UN estimate.

But what is being promised?

And will it deliver the Paris Agreement goals of capping global warming at “well below” two degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels or, better yet, under

the treaty’s aspirational 1.5C ceiling?

Earth’s surface has already warmed 1.2C on average, making extreme weather more deadly, and new research shows that a return to 2019 levels of carbon pollution would likely push the world past the 1.5C milestone around 2030.

“The devil is in the details,” said Kelly Levin, a senior associate with the World Resources Institute’s (WRI) global climate program.

There are several keys to evaluating the worth of carbon neutral promises, Levin and other experts said.

The first is whether they apply to all greenhouse gases, or just carbon dioxide.

CO2 is responsible for more than three-quarters of global warming. But concentrations of methane -- mostly from natural gas leaks and animal husbandry -- are rising, and could capsize the Paris treaty goals if not brought to heel.

New Zealand for instance cemented its net-zero-by-2050 vows into law

in November 2019, but with a woolly caveat: it only applies to CO2. A third of the country’s total emissions come from belching cattle and especially sheep.

A second red flag is the lack of intermediate hard targets before 2050, said Teresa Anderson, climate policy coordinator for ActionAid International.

The UN’s climate science advisory

NET ZERO CLIMATE TARGETS

panel, the IPCC, has said that manmade emissions must drop 45 percent by 2030 -- and then 100 percent by 2050 -- to have any hope of staying on this side of the 1.5C guardrail.

Only a few nations have done so.

A third crucial measure is how much of a net zero commitment will be fulfilled with short-term emissions cuts, and how much will come from so-called “negative emissions technologies”.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Will 2021 be different?

AFP, Paris

2020 was a year turned upside-down by the novel coronavirus. But with the prospect of several vaccines coming online and less stringent restrictions, experts say it’s possible 2021 will return to a semblance of normality.

With a second Covid-19 wave currently battering Europe, the United States battling its third, and Hong Kong facing a fourth, disease specialists say they can’t rule out more resurgences in cases and deaths as 2021 gets underway.

France’s scientific council, which guides government policy on the pandemic, envisages “several successive waves” of Covid-19 over the winter and well into next year.

Flavio Toxvaerd, lecturer at the University of Cambridge’s Faculty of Economics, told AFP the question of how many waves the world still faces depends on a variety of factors. These include “seasonal changes in contact patterns as well as how well the disease is managed through a combination of social distancing and vaccines,” said Toxvaerd, who specialises in the economics of infectious diseases and economic epidemiology.

Lessons learned from past interventions could allow countries to fine-tune their counter-virus measures, implementing modified restrictions while avoiding total lockdowns.

Governments will seek to administer

“the minimal effective dose” of measures, such as bans on large gatherings or high-risk activities, according to Anne-Claude Cremieux, an infectious diseases expert at Paris’ Saint-Louis hospital. She referred to a strategy of “surgical strikes” against the virus.

Even if several vaccines are made available, they alone will not be enough to return to normal.

Arnaud Fontanet, an epidemiologist at the Pasteur Institute told RMC/BFM TV television that normality could be restored

“only by Autumn 2021” -- and even then only if 80-90 percent of the population are vaccinated.

Universal coverage would be “an extremely ambitious goal given the hesitancy that exists today towards

vaccines,” he said.

And the logistics of mass vaccination remain dizzying. Even as vaccines are being rolled-out across the globe, little still is known about how long the immunity they render will last.

Fontanet said that even the most effective vaccines could not be treated as a magic wand guaranteeing protection.

And how and when the poor, underdeveloped and developing countries will receive vaccine remain a mystery.

Experts say, even vaccines are made available, safe social behaviours are unlikely to be limited to 2020 alone, as protective measures will still be needed until everyone is out of the woods.



Israeli air strikes damage Gaza children’s hospital

AFP, Gaza City

Hamas yesterday denounced as “barbaric” overnight strikes it said damaged a Gaza children’s hospital, while the Israel army said it was responding to rocket fire from the enclave.

The Israel army said it struck three Hamas targets, including a rocket manufacturing site, underground infrastructure and a military post, after two rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip.

But Gaza’s ruling Hamas in a statement said a “barbaric” Israeli strike had damaged a children’s hospital and a centre for people with special needs.

Medical sources in Gaza said the strikes “lightly wounded” two civilians, including a child.

“Hamas will bear the consequences for all terror emanating from Gaza,” the Israeli army said in a tweet.

Sirens had sounded on Friday night in the southern port city of Ashkelon and the area surrounding the Gaza Strip, according to an army statement.

“Two rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip towards Israeli territory,” the army statement said, adding that they were intercepted by the Iron Dome Aerial Defence System.

There were no reports of damage as a result of the interceptions. Israeli emergency medical services said several people were treated for shock.

The latest fire from the Palestinian enclave came over a month after one rocket was fired from the coastal strip into Israel.

Islamist group Hamas, which Israel considers a terrorist organisation, seized control of Gaza from rival Palestinian movement Fatah in 2007 in a near civil war. Since then Hamas has fought three devastating wars with Israel in the coastal territory, where about two million Palestinians live. Israel has since maintained a crippling blockade on the Gaza Strip to prevent Hamas from arming.



A man prepares to tie a black ribbon next to a makeshift memorial during a prayer ceremony for the victims of the 2004 tsunami on the 16th anniversary of the disaster, at Marina Beach in Chennai, India, yesterday. The tsunami triggered by a 9.1 earthquake killed more than 230,000 people in South and Southeast Asia.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Blasts kill two Afghan policemen in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

Two Afghan policemen were killed as three separate “sticky bombs” exploded in Kabul yesterday, the latest violence to hit the Afghan capital.

The policemen were killed when a sticky bomb attached to their pick-up truck exploded in a central district of Kabul, police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz told reporters.

A civilian was also wounded in the blast, he said.

Two security personnel were wounded in another similar bomb attack targeting a second police pick-up truck in a western district of Kabul, Faramarz said.

He said a third bomb also exploded in the city but caused no casualties.

‘Some people in Delhi try to teach me democracy’

Indian PM hits back at Rahul Gandhi as he launches healthcare scheme for all Kashmiris

AGENCIES

Some people in Delhi “want to teach me lessons in democracy”, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said yesterday, hitting back at top Congress leader Rahul Gandhi after the latter, in his recent attack of the government and PM Modi, said there was “no democracy” in India and that those who stood up against the PM were labelled terrorists.

“There are people in Delhi who always taunt and insult me. They want to teach me lessons in democracy. I want to show them Jammu and Kashmir DDC (District Development Council) polls as an example of democracy,” Modi said after launching the Ayushman Bharat scheme for health insurance coverage to all residents of the union territory.

Modi said getting free treatment up to 5 lakh rupees under this scheme would improve the ease of living of all 21 lakh families of Jammu and Kashmir.

He said the recent local body election in Jammu and Kashmir “strengthened roots

of democracy” and congratulated voters for exercising their franchise in the eight-phase election.

In the first-ever District Development Council (DDC) polls across 20 districts in Jammu and Kashmir, the Farooq Abdullah-led Gupkar alliance, along with the Congress, won in 13 districts. The BJP won in six districts in Jammu.

75 DETAINED AFTER J&K LOCAL POLLS

However, leaders and a police official of the former state said India’s government detained at least 75 Kashmiri political leaders and activists after the polls.

The new detentions, including separatist leaders and members of the banned Jamate-Islami group, were for preventive custody, said a senior police official.

The detentions undermine the verdict of the people, said Imran Nabi Dar, spokesman for the National Conference.

The alliance’s victory shows that Kashmiris have not accepted Modi’s decision to end Kashmir’s special status, said Omar Abdullah, a former chief minister and head of the National Conference.



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