

Aid heads for Madaya

Nearly 400,000 people living in besieged areas: UN

AGENCIES

Dozens of aid trucks headed yesterday to the besieged rebel-held Syrian town of Madaya, where more than two dozen people are reported to have starved to death.

The aid convoys were set to arrive in the town after an outpouring of international concern and condemnation over the dire conditions in Madaya, where some 42,000 people are living under a government siege.

The delivery will happen simultaneously with aid entering two government-held towns under rebel siege in the northwest of the country. It comes after the Doctors Without Borders (MSF) charity said some 28 people had died of starvation in Madaya since December 1.

According to the UN, an estimated 400,000 people are living under siege in 15 areas across Syria, reports Al Jazeera.

Residents have described desperate scenes, saying they have been reduced to eating weeds and paying exorbitant prices for what little food could be smuggled through the siege.

Forty-four trucks operated by the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Syrian Red Crescent, the United Nations and World Food Programme left from

Damascus for Madaya yesterday afternoon.

Earlier, 21 trucks carrying similar supplies left for the government-held towns of Fuua and Kafraya, which are under rebel siege in the northwest of the country. Fuua and Kafraya are more than 300 kilometres from Damascus, while Madaya is about 40 kilometres from the capital.

The trucks are carrying food, water, infant formula, blankets and medication for acute and chronic illnesses, as well as surgical supplies.

SYRIA CRISIS

Meanwhile, at least 12 children and three adults were killed in a Russian air strike that hit a school in Syria's Aleppo province yesterday, a monitor said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the three adults included a teacher, and that the strike in the town of Anjara also injured at least 20 people, all of them children and teachers.

The monitor said there had been heavy air strikes and clashes between government and rebel forces since Sunday in the northern province, which is controlled by a mixture of moderate and Islamist rebels.

Photos distributed by media activists in Aleppo province showed a classroom full of rubble with the wooden tops of desks blown off their metal frames.



A convoy consisting of Red Cross, Red Crescent and United Nations gathered before heading towards Madaya from Damascus, and to al Foua and Kefraya in Idlib province, Syria yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEW YEAR'S EVE VIOLENCE German probe blames migrants

AFP, Cologne

German authorities said yesterday that nearly all the suspects in a rash of New Year's Eve violence against women in Cologne were "of foreign origin", as foreigners came under attack amid surging tensions.

Ralf Jaeger, the interior minister of North Rhine-Westphalia state, released initial findings of a criminal probe over the crime spree that has piled pressure on Chancellor Angela Merkel over her liberal stance towards refugees.

"Witness accounts and the report by the (local) police as well as findings by the federal police indicate that nearly all the people who committed these crimes were of foreign origin," he said.

Although no formal charges have been laid, Jaeger said the attackers emerged from a group of more than 1,000 "Arab and North African" men who gathered between the main railway station and the city's iconic Gothic cathedral during the year-end festivities.

Amid concerns over reprisal assaults, police said a mob attacked a group of six Pakistanis late Sunday in Cologne, two of whom had to be hospitalised.

In the face of outrage over the New Year's Eve violence, Merkel has taken a tough line against convicted refugees. She has signalled her backing for changes to the law to ease expulsion rules, with officials within her ruling coalition expected to swiftly negotiate the proposals this week.

Police said late Sunday that more than a week on from New Year's Eve, some 516 complaints had now been lodged, including 40 percent that are related to sexual assault.

No talks with Pakistan till action on terror

Says India's NSA; Islamabad arrests some suspects

THE HINDU ONLINE

India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval yesterday said that there will be no talks between the Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan on January 15, and that India "will talk only if Pakistan takes action" on the perpetrators of Pathankot airbase attack.

In remarks to ANI news service, the NSA reportedly clarified that no date had been confirmed for the talks, so they were not being cancelled, but added in a conversation with NDTV news channel yesterday morning that talks will happen only if Pakistan takes action.

The flurry of comments and clarifications from the NSA and the PMO followed the publication of an interview by Hindi newspaper Dainik Bhaskar, in which Doval reportedly said the talks "had been cancelled".

"We have only one policy. Until Pakistan takes action on the perpetrators of Pathankot [airbase attack] and India is not satisfied, there will be no peace talks. That is why we have cancelled the India Pakistan Secretary-level talks to be held in Lahore on

January 15. Now, no talks before [Pakistani] action," Doval was quoted as having said in the interview which contained a defence of the Air Force and forces involved in the Pathankot airbase operation.

The PMO denied that the NSA had given any such interview, however The Dainik Bhaskar, in its website, uploaded a clip of the portion on the talks.

Meanwhile, Pakistani authorities carried out raids at different places following attack on the Pathankot air base in India, leading to some arrests, intelligence officials said yesterday.

They said that raids were carried out in Gujranwala, Jhelum and Bahawalpur districts and an unspecified number of people were arrested.

"Probe has been going to ascertain if they were involved in the attack or some of them facilitated it," they said.

The arrests led Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to order a Joint Investigation Team of IB, Inter-Services Intelligence, Military Intelligence, Federal Investigation Agency and Police to thoroughly probe the Pathankot attack links to Pakistan.

PATHANKOT ATTACK



Afghanistan peace talks begin

Hopes pinned on negotiations to lead to efforts to engage Taliban

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday opened four-country talks aimed at luring the Afghan Taliban back to the negotiating table with the Kabul government, even as the insurgents wage an unprecedented winter campaign of violence.

The talks in Islamabad, announced in December, come as the Taliban's insurgency intensifies particularly in the country's south, testing the capacity of Afghanistan's overstretched military and placing pressure on Pakistan to rein in its one-time proxies.

Some analysts hope the added presence of China and the United States may help overcome mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad, though it remains unclear when the Taliban



Pakistan's National Security Advisor Sartaj Aziz (R) speaks with Chinese Special representative for Afghanistan, Deng Xijun, prior to the start of the first ever round of four-way peace talks meeting in Islamabad yesterday.

NEWS IN brief

Saudi embassy attack: Iran sacks official

AFP, Tehran

Iran has sacked a senior security official over his failure to stop the ransacking of Saudi Arabia's embassy, which led the Sunni-ruled kingdom to sever diplomatic relations. Safar Ali Baratlou's replacement as security deputy to Tehran's governor general was already under review, but the interior ministry said "a blind eye could not be turned" to what happened at the embassy.

S Korea, US mull strategic deployment

AFP, Seoul

South Korea said yesterday that further US "strategic assets" might be deployed to the Korean peninsula, following a flyover by a US B-52 bomber in response to North Korea's nuclear test. Seoul also announced new restrictions on the movement of its citizens to the jointly-run Kaesong industrial park, just a few kilometres over the border inside

Deadly strike on Yemen MSF clinic

AFP, Dubai

A missile strike on a Doctors Without Borders clinic in Yemen killed at least four people Sunday, the group said, condemning what it called a "worrying pattern" of such attacks. The raid was the third of its kind in four months in the war-ravaged country, where a Saudi-led coalition has been battling Shia Huthi rebels who have seized territory from the internationally-recognised government.

Nepal district chief wins 'Integrity Idol'

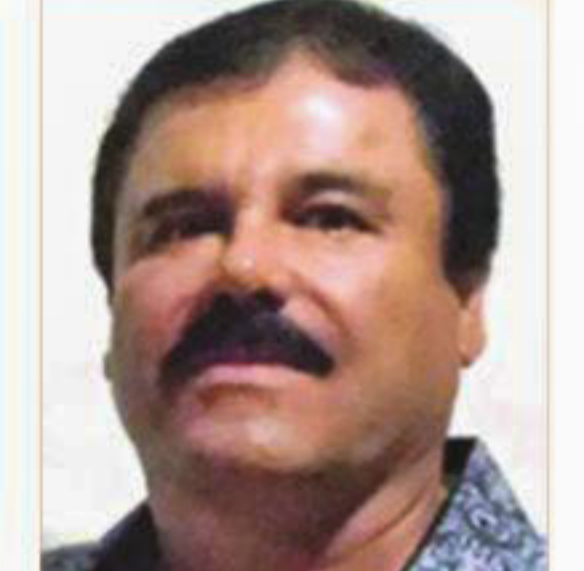
AFP, Kathmandu

Nepali bureaucrat Pradip Raj Kandel on Sunday clinched the title of Integrity Idol, a television talent show-styled initiative that awards honest civil servants. The contest, in its second year, saw over 50,000 people cast their votes via text message and social media in a bid to encourage honesty in the corruption-ridden Himalayan nation, where many citizens are forced to pay bribes for essential services.

China asserts right to flights to S China Sea

AFP, Beijing

Beijing said yesterday it did not need to notify Vietnam about flights to a disputed reef in the South China Sea, after Hanoi complained to a UN aviation body about the controversial trips. Vietnam accused Beijing of threatening regional safety by conducting "unannounced" flights through its airspace to a newly built runway on the Fiery Cross reef, which is claimed by both countries.



Mexico begins extradition of 'El Chapo'

AFP, Mexico City

Mexican authorities launched Sunday the process to extradite drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman to the United States, as they also sought to question US actor Sean Penn over their clandestine meeting.

The extradition bid marks a reversal from President Enrique Pena Nieto's refusal to send Guzman across the border prior to his July escape from a maximum-security prison.

The attorney general's office said in a statement that Interpol Mexico agents went to Guzman's prison near Mexico City to execute two arrest warrants for his extradition, two days after he was captured in a deadly military raid.

Mexico received the US extradition requests last year on a slew of charges, including drug trafficking and homicide. Guzman is wanted in a half-dozen US states.

A federal official told AFP the process could take "months," but that authorities will likely "try to do it fast."

After judges rule on the extradition, the foreign ministry has to issue a decision, which Guzman can appeal.

His attorney has vowed a "tough" legal fight that could reach the Supreme



Students who survived the Garissa University College attack take a group selfie photograph as they return to the campus in Kenya's northeast town of Garissa. The campus reopened yesterday nine months after an attack by Somalia-based al-Qaeda linked al-Shabaab Islamist militants.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Spanish princess on trial in fraud case

AFP, Palma

Spain's Princess Cristina and her husband went on trial yesterday under intense global media scrutiny in a landmark corruption case that has outraged the country and sullied the monarchy's reputation.

Cristina, a 50-year-old mother-of-four with a master's degree from New York University, is the first Spanish royal to face criminal charges since the monarchy was reinstated following the 1975 death of dictator General Francisco Franco.

The princess and her husband, former Olympic handball medallist Inaki Urdangarin, arrived together at a makeshift courtroom in Palma on the Mediterranean island of Mallorca as photographers snapped pictures and a police helicopter flew overhead.

Following courtroom rules, they had to sit apart as judges read out the alleged crimes committed by the total of 18 suspects in the case, which alleges that Urdangarin embezzled public funds through a foundation he once chaired.

Cristina has been charged with tax evasion while her husband is accused of embezzlement.



Sanctions are hurting us

Says Putin
AFP, Berlin

President Vladimir Putin yesterday acknowledged in an interview with German daily Bild that Western economic sanctions over the Ukraine crisis are affecting Russia. "Concerning our possibilities on the international financial markets, the sanctions are severely harming Russia," he said in a long interview, calling the EU sanctions "a theatre of the absurd".

Moscow has been hit by US and European sanctions over the conflict between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian forces which has claimed more than 9,000 lives since April 2014.

In late December, the EU extended its sanctions by six months, arguing that the Minsk peace agreement signed by Moscow has not been fully implemented.

Saudi Arabia will pay for executing militants

Warns al-Qaeda; UK MPs resume scrutiny of arms exports to Riyadh

AGENCIES

The Saudi-Yemeni and North African branches of al-Qaeda have threatened to avenge Saudi Arabia's execution of more than 40 jihadists, calling the measure a "foolish act."

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb said in an online statement Sunday that the kingdom executed the militants despite knowing that the "mujahedin have pledged to avenge the pure blood of their brothers".

The January 2 executions were a "new crime committed by the regime of Al-Saud, demonstrating their tyranny and their fight against jihad (holy war)", the statement added, claiming that the judicial system serves the ruling family in "cementing their rule and oppressing their opponents".

"They should fear the day when the relatives of those martyrs, their brothers and partisans... celebrate (vengeance) against the infidel tyrants."

The statement charged that the rulers of the leading Sunni Muslim kingdom "shed the blood of the mujahedin as an offer to the crusaders who were celebrating the beginning of their new year."

In an audio statement posted online, leading Saudi al-Qaeda chief Ibrahim al-Assiri warned: "we will deal with Al-Saud, now that the blood has been shed". AQAP is considered by the United States to be the most dangerous affiliate of the global extremist network.

Meanwhile, British defence exports to Saudi Arabia are set to come under parliamentary scrutiny this month with the revival of a cross-party committee on international arms sales.

The Committee on Arms Exports Controls has lain dormant since the general election, but MPs have told House of Commons clerks to set it up again in the wake of the executions in Saudi Arabia earlier this month.