



Leaders and representatives of member states pose for a group photo during an Extraordinary Summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on last week's US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, in Istanbul, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Saudi-led raids on Yemen prison kill 30, wound 80

AFP, Sanaa

Saudi-led air strikes on a prison run by rebels in Yemen killed 30 people and wounded 80 yesterday, the rebels' Al-Masirah TV reported.

The rebel outlet earlier reported that 12 people were killed -- all prisoners -- when the pre-dawn raids hit the military police compound in the capital Sanaa where the detention centre is located.

The latest update did not say how many of the dead were detainees or Huthi rebels.

There has been no let-up in the air campaign against the rebels that a Saudi-led coalition has been waging since March 2015 despite an appeal by UN chief Antonio Guterres on Sunday for a renewed push to end the "stupid war".

An AFP photographer saw rebel fighters carrying away bodies from the rubble of heavily damaged buildings.

One of the guards, Mohammed al-Aqel, said the strikes had begun at 1:00 am (2200 GMT Tuesday).

He said a first strike had damaged one wing of the jail, prompting some of the prisoners to try to escape, but it was then almost flattened by a second strike.

Three further strikes damaged two other prison buildings and the perimeter wall, Aqel added.

On Sunday, Saudi-led strikes on a rebel training camp northwest of the capital killed at least 26 rebel fighters, security sources said.

On Friday, a strike on a rebel-controlled television station in Sanaa killed four guards.

The raids come with Yemen plunged deeper into turmoil by the killing this month of ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh by the rebels after their uneasy alliance collapsed.

Despite the superior firepower of the Saudi-led coalition, the rebels still control the capital and much of the north.

More than 8,750 people have been killed since the coalition intervened, most of them civilians, according to the World Health Organization.



Ex-Malaysia PM quizzed over alleged insult

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian police yesterday questioned former leader Mahathir Mohamad, who is seeking to oust the government at looming polls, for allegedly insulting a seafaring ethnic group when he attacked the country's scandal-plagued premier.

Political tensions are rising, with Mahathir -- who was premier for 22 years -- gearing up to take on Prime Minister Najib Razak at elections that must be called by August.

At a rally in October against a massive financial scandal embroiling the current government, Mahathir had said Najib was descended from "Bugis pirates".

The Bugis are a seafaring ethnic group that come from neighbouring Indonesia. Large numbers migrated to Malaysia, and many in the country claim Bugis ancestry.

The comments sparked anger among the Bugis community and last month the powerful Sultan of Selangor called for Mahathir to face a sedition probe as the remarks insulted his royal family, who claim descent from the ethnic group.

Malaysia has nine state sultans who have no formal power, but are accorded great respect.

Yesterday, Mahathir was questioned by police at his office in the administrative capital Putrajaya for 45 minutes, his lawyer Haniff Khatri told AFP.

Talks 'without' 'preconditions'

Tillerson urges dialogue with regime; Russia, China hail 'constructive' US position

AGENCIES

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson offered to begin direct talks with North Korea without preconditions, backing away from a key US demand that Pyongyang must first accept that giving up its nuclear arsenal would be part of any negotiations.

Tillerson's new diplomatic overture comes nearly two weeks after North Korea said it had successfully tested a breakthrough intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that put the entire United States mainland within range of its nuclear weapons.

"Let's just meet," Tillerson said in a speech to Washington's Atlantic Council think tank on Tuesday.

The White House later issued an ambiguous statement that left unclear whether President Donald Trump -- who has said Tillerson was wasting his time pursuing dialogue with North Korea -- had given his approval for the speech.

"The president's views on North Korea have not changed," the White House said.

In Beijing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang said China welcomed all efforts to

ease tension and promote dialogue to resolve the problem, reported Reuters.

China hopes the United States and North Korea can meet each other halfway and take meaningful steps on dialogue and contact, he told reporters.

Russia said it welcomed US Secretary of State

NORTH KOREA NUCLEAR TENSIONS



Rex Tillerson's statement that Washington is ready for talks with North Korea without preconditions, calling this a constructive approach, reported AFP.

"We can state that such constructive statements impress us far more than the confrontational rhetoric that we have heard up to now.

Undoubtedly this can be welcomed," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists.

Ahead of Tillerson's speech, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un vowed to develop more nuclear weapons while personally decorating scientists and officials who contributed to the development of Pyongyang's most advanced ICBM, state media said yesterday.

While reiterating Washington's long-standing position that it cannot tolerate a nuclear-armed North Korea, Tillerson said US was "ready to talk any time they're ready to talk", but there would first have to be a "period of quiet" without nuclear and missile tests.

United Nations political affairs chief Jeffrey Feltman, who visited Pyongyang last week, said senior North Korean officials did not offer any type of commitment to talks, but he believed he left "the door ajar".

"Time will tell what was the impact of our discussions, but I think we have left the door ajar and I fervently hope that the door to a negotiated solution will now be opened wide," Feltman told reporters after briefing the UN Security Council on Tuesday.

Israel hits Gaza after rocket fire; 3 injured

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli air force hit the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip yesterday lightly wounding three people, after Palestinians fired at southern Israel, the military and Gaza security officials said.

Israel also arrested a number of senior Hamas members in the occupied West Bank overnight, including one of its leaders in the territory.

Late on Tuesday, the military said that an undefined "projectile" was fired from Gaza towards southern Israel.

A spokeswoman told AFP that it was "very probably" a rocket but that it was not clear where it hit.

Palestinians in the coastal territory have fired both rockets and mortar rounds into Israel over the past week amid anger over US President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as its capital.

"In response to the projectile fired from the Gaza Strip at Israel earlier, the Israel air force targeted a Hamas military compound in the southern Gaza Strip," the army said yesterday.

Gaza security officials said that aircraft hit a Hamas naval base west of the city of Khan Yunis and open land nearby.

Three Palestinians were lightly wounded in the strikes, the health ministry in Gaza said. No casualties were reported on the Israeli side.

Those arrested overnight included Hassan Yousef, one of the founders of the Islamist movement. He was arrested in Ramallah, a Hamas statement said.



Palestinian lawyers run during clashes with Israeli troops at a protest against US President Donald Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, near the Jewish settlement of Beit El, near the West Bank city of Ramallah, yesterday; Palestinian protestors throw stones towards Israeli security forces in Ramallah; and an undercover Israeli policeman detains a Palestinian protester there. PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



NEWS IN brief

Duterte wins extra yr of martial law powers
AFP, Manila

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte yesterday won martial law powers across the southern third of the country for one more year to combat Islamic militants and leftist rebels, as Congress brushed aside fears of a looming dictatorship. Duterte's request to extend martial law in the Mindanao region until December 31 next year and detain rebellion suspects there without charge was approved by 240 votes to 27 at a joint session of the Senate and House of Representatives.

China marks 80 years since Nanjing massacre
AFP, Nanjing

Sirens blared and thousands of doves were released yesterday as Chinese President Xi Jinping presided over a sombre ceremony in Nanjing marking 80 years since the wartime massacre in the city by Japanese troops. According to China, 300,000 civilians and soldiers were killed in a frenzy of murder, torture, rape, arson and looting in the six weeks after invading Japanese troops seized Nanjing, then the capital city, on December 13, 1937.

US wants \$250m cut to UN budget
AFP, United Nations

The United States is seeking a \$250 million cut to the core budget of the United Nations for 2018-2019, on top of \$200 million in savings already proposed by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, diplomats said Tuesday. The budget is under negotiations in a General Assembly committee which is expected to adopt it before the end of December. The United States is the UN's number one financial contributor, providing 22 percent of the core budget.

Earth's island offers clues for life on Mars

AFP, Wellington

The world's newest island -- formed during a volcanic eruption in the remote Pacific three years ago -- may offer clues to how life potentially developed on Mars, NASA said yesterday.

The island of Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai rose from the seabed about 65 kilometres northwest of the Tongan capital Nuku'alofa in late 2014-early 2015.

Scientists initially expected the island to wash away within a few months. But NASA said it had proved more resilient than expected giving scientists a rare chance to study the life cycle of a newly created island.

Jim Garvin, the chief scientist at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, said Mars had many similar volcanic islands that appeared to have been surrounded by water when they were created. Garvin said such spots may be prime locations to look for evidence of past life because they combined a wet environment with heat from volcanic processes.



ROHINGYA CRISIS

Life 'stopped in tracks' in Rakhine state: Red Cross

AFP, Geneva

Rohingya Muslims remaining in Myanmar's Rakhine state and other communities in the violence-racked region are so terrified of each other that life has basically ground to a halt, the Red Cross said yesterday.

More than 620,000 of Myanmar's Muslim minority have fled across the border to Bangladesh since late August, when the Myanmar army launched a sweeping crackdown on Rohingya rebels in northern Rakhine state.

The Red Cross, the only international aid organisation with broad access on the ground in Rakhine, estimates that only about 300,000 Rohingya remain in the entire state.

But Dominik Stillhart, director of operations at the International Committee of the Red Cross, said the number should be taken with a "big pinch of salt" since a proper count has so far been impossible.

Speaking to reporters in Geneva after a three-day visit to the area, Stillhart said the situation in Rakhine appeared to have "stabilised", with few incidents of violence.

Yet people are continuing to flee, with around 300 still crossing the border each day, mainly because of fear and anxiety for the future, he said.

He said he was especially struck by a lack of people on the roads, in the markets and out in the fields.

"Life has stopped in its tracks... There are hardly any people moving around and you can really see that life has come to a halt," Stillhart said.

While it was no surprise that the remaining Rohingya are living in fear, he said it was striking that Buddhist populations in neighbouring villages also appeared to be frightened.

"You really get a sense that both communities are deeply scared of each other," he said.

Meanwhile, Red Cross staff in the area had not seen many wounded people in the hospitals, and surprisingly few people appeared to have been rounded up and detained, he said.

2 Reuters reporters arrested in Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

Two Reuters journalists have been arrested in Myanmar for the possession of "important security documents", the government said yesterday.

Myanmar reporters Wa Lone, 31, and Kyaw Soe Oo, 27, had been missing since Tuesday evening, the news agency had earlier said.

The pair were arrested under the Official Secrets Act, for allegedly intending "to send important security documents regarding security forces in Rakhine State to foreign agencies," the statement released by the information ministry said.

Rakhine has been in the international spotlight after a brutal, military-led crackdown forced more than 620,000 Rohingya Muslims to flee the state and cross the border to Bangladesh since August.

A photo showed the handcuffed reporters with documents displayed before them.

Reuters global communications chief Abbe Serphos said: "We are urgently seeking more information about the circumstances of their arrest and their current situation."

Before joining the agency, Wa Lone, 31, worked at the English language newspaper The Myanmar Times. Kyaw Soe Oo has worked for the company since September, the agency said.

Since Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi came to power in 2016 after decades of junta rule, media advocates have pointed to little progress on freedom of expression, with online defamation cases skyrocketing compared to the previous military-backed administration.