

Missile attack hits refugees in Idlib

AGENCIES

A missile has crashed near civilians in Syria's Idlib province at a makeshift camp for displaced people from the nearby Hama province.

Dramatic footage captured in the countryside area by Al Jazeera showed men, women and children desperately trying to find the nearest cover after the attack - images of which were also included in the film.

Al Jazeera's Sinem Koseoglu, reporting from Antakya in southern Turkey, said the missile strike was the strongest violation yet of a peace accord agreed in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, recently between Russia, Turkey and Iran.

SYRIA WAR

Strike was strongest violation yet of a peace accord agreed in Astana

A push by forces loyal to Assad causing a new wave of displacement from rebel-held territories

"Syrians are not surprised. Many of them believe that it is a kind of the diplomatic leverage game just before the Sochi meeting that is going to be held at the end of January," she said.

A push by the forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad aided by Russian air raids was causing a new wave of displacement from rebel-held territories.

About 120,000 people have fled their homes in Idlib province in recent weeks.

At least 179 people were killed in the besieged Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta in the past two weeks, according to activists.

Several people were in hospital after a bombing by government forces in Eastern Ghouta.

Aid workers on the scene said there were being treated for



This handout picture from the Transport Ministry of China released yesterday shows smoke and flames coming from the burning oil tanker Sanchi at sea off the coast of eastern China.

PHOTO: AFP

Tunisia vows reform amid new protests

REUTERS, Tunis

Hundreds of Tunisians demonstrated peacefully against government austerity measures in the capital after nearly a week of sometimes violent protests yesterday, the seventh anniversary of the ousting of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Protests erupted last Monday in several towns and cities across Tunisia, triggered by tax and price hikes imposed on January 1 as the government seeks to reduce a budget deficit to meet an agreement with its international donors.

Almost 800 people have been arrested for vandalism and acts of violence, including throwing petrol bombs at police stations, according to the interior ministry.

The government late on Saturday pledged extra aid for poor families and needy people in response to the demonstrations but protesters still took to the streets, holding banners with slogans against rising prices and new taxes.

One rally took place in front of the Labor Union (UGTT) headquarters and several other protests were held along the central

Habib Bourguiba Avenue, to which hundreds of riot police had been deployed.

"This is what the government has done to us," said one a protester named Fouad. "Pockets are empty by unfair decisions of the government...I am a professor and my wife is a teacher, but we are suffering today to meet what we need."

"We have only won the freedom of expression after 2011 revolution ... but we will remain in the streets until we win our economic rights just as we have our freedom", he added.

Govt pledges extra aid for poor families in response to unrest

Police seeking to separate supporters of the opposition Popular Front party and the Islamist Ennahda party, which is part of the ruling coalition. The government and Ennahda

accuse the PF of being behind some of the violence last week.

Prices have increased for fuel and some consumer goods, while taxes on cars, phone calls, the internet, hotel accommodation and other items have also gone up.

Tunisia has been hailed as the only democratic success of the Arab Spring; the one Arab country to topple a long-serving leader in that year's uprisings without triggering widespread violence or civil war.

Engulfed in flames, Iranian tanker sinks

Official says no hope of survivors

AFP, Beijing

A stricken Iranian oil tanker burst into flames from end to end and sank yesterday, eight days after a collision with a cargo ship off China, state media said.

A Tehran official said even before news of the sinking that there was no hope of saving some 30 missing crewmen. But Chinese officials played down fears of a major environmental disaster.

The Sanchi, carrying 136,000 tonnes of light crude oil from Iran, had been in flames since colliding with the CF Crystal, a Hong Kong-registered bulk freighter, on January 6.

Around midday, the ship "suddenly ignited", with the entire vessel burning fiercely and a pall of smoke around 800-1,000 metres high, China's transport ministry said, releasing dramatic pictures showing the entire vessel obscured by thick black smoke.

The ship later sank, the official news agency Xinhua cited the State Oceanic Administration as saying.

"There is no hope of finding survivors among the members of the crew," Mohammad Rastad, spokesman for the Iranian rescue team dispatched to Shanghai, told Iran's state broadcaster in Tehran before the tanker went down.

Rastad said information from members of the Crystal crew suggested all the personnel on the Sanchi were killed in the first hour of the accident.

"Despite our efforts, it has not been possible to extinguish the fire and recover the bodies due to repeated explosions and gas leaks," he said.

The Sanchi, which was headed to South Korea to deliver its cargo, had a crew of 32 -- 30 Iranians and two Bangladeshis. Only three bodies have so far been recovered.

Immigration deal probably dead: Trump

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump said yesterday a deal to resolve the status of hundreds of thousands of immigrants who entered the United States illegally as children is "probably dead," blaming it on Democrats.

Trump came back on the issue in a pair of early morning tweets three days after igniting outrage by referring to African and Haitian immigrants as coming from "shithole countries."

Global condemnation of the remark as racist has put the president on the defensive amid bipartisan attempts to negotiate a budget deal that would avert a looming government shutdown and remove the threat of deportation of the so-called "dreamers."

"DACA is probably dead because the Democrats don't really want it, they just want to talk and take desperately needed money away from our Military," Trump said, referring to the Deferred Action on Childhood



Arrivals program.

"I, as President, want people coming into our Country who are going to help us become strong and great again, people coming in through a system based on MERIT. No more Lotteries! #AMERICA FIRST," he said.

DACA, established in 2012 by Trump predecessor Barack Obama, protects from deportation hundreds of thousands of immigrants whose parents brought them into the country illegally as children.

Trump said in September he was scrapping the program but delayed enforcement to give Congress six months -- until March -- to craft a lasting solution.

But a federal judge on Tuesday ordered the government to keep DACA going pending resolution of court challenges to the president's decision.



suffocation after a suspected chlorine gas attack.

Syrian troops have recaptured dozens of towns and villages from jihadist fighters, a monitor said yesterday, bringing them closer to a key military airport in the country's northwest.

"In the past 24 hours, regime forces have taken at least 79 villages in the southern parts of Aleppo province, an area near the Abu Duhur military airport," said Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor.

Russia-backed regime troops are aiming to reach the Abu Duhur base as part of a weeks-long assault against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which is dominated by al-Qaeda's former Syria affiliate, reported AFP.

The offensive has seen Syrian forces seize surrounding territory in the provinces of Aleppo and Hama as they close in on Abu Duhur, which lies just inside the Idlib province. They briefly broke into the air base this week from the south but were ousted in a ferocious counter-offensive by jihadists and rebels.

With the latest push in Aleppo province, Abdel Rahman said, army troops were seeking to open a new front on the airport's northern and eastern flanks.

"Regime troops lost control of those villages in southern Aleppo province in 2012," he said.



A Pegasus Airlines Boeing 737 passenger plane is seen stuck in mud on an embankment, a day after skidding off the airstrip, after landing at Trabzon's airport on the Black Sea coast yesterday. Officials confirmed that there were no injuries among the 162 passengers onboard as well as two pilots and four cabin crews after they were evacuated.

Doctors want Trump's head examined

CNN ONLINE

President Donald Trump is "in excellent health," White House physician, Dr Ronny Jackson, said following his physical Friday. But it's not clear whether any mental health tests were conducted, despite urging from mental health professionals.

Jackson received an urgent letter from dozens of doctors and health professionals Thursday urging him to perform basic mental health tests on the President.

While reviews of the past five presidents' physical exams show only a brief mention of mental health and none of the records includes a readout of the mental health tests, this letter points out that mental evaluations are routine during physicals, particularly for patients who are 66 or older. Trump is 71.

Medicare guidelines suggest patients in this age range should be evaluated for cognitive and neural health function.

The White House has dismissed questions about Trump's mental fitness, calling them "disgraceful and laughable." They said, prior to the physical, that mental health testing was not something Trump would undergo. It will be up to President Trump what information he shares with the public.

The letter was written to Jackson, who examined Trump.

From paradise to panic

Hawaii sent into chaos after false alarm about incoming ballistic missile was mistakenly sent to residents

AFP, Honolulu

Authorities yesterday faced anger and demands for answers after a false alarm about an incoming ballistic missile caused panic in Hawaii, a Pacific archipelago already on edge over fears of a North Korean attack.

The notification was sent out just after 8:00 am (1800 GMT) on Saturday, lighting up phones with a disturbing alert urging people to "seek immediate shelter."

Emergency management officials later admitted "the wrong button was pushed" during a shift change.

But it took nearly 40 minutes for a corrected message to be issued -- with Hawaii's governor saying there was no automatic way to cancel the false alarm, meaning it had to be done manually.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which is responsible for standards, procedures and testing protocols for the Emergency Alert System that delivered the false alert, promised a "full

investigation".

The alert, which read "BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL", sparked panic, with people rushing for safety whether in a bathtub, a basement, a manhole or cowering under mattresses.

And after it was declared a false alarm and the panic had subsided, there was anger, with many asking how such an error could have happened.

TERRIFIED AND ANGRY "Everyone in America needs to understand that if you had to go through this, you would be as angry as I am," Representative Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii wrote on social media.

"We're terrified and angry. Called my parents. Called my sister. Husband and I were shaking, verge of tears. Waited 40 minutes for a correction. No confidence in this emergency alert system," photographer Aislinn Victoria said on Twitter.

Adventurer Alison Telle called it "the worst moment of my life."

ANTI-CORRUPTION CRACKDOWN

Saudi Prince Talal begins release negotiations

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Saudi Arabia's billionaire Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, detained for over two months in an anti-corruption crackdown, is negotiating a possible settlement with authorities but so far has not agreed on terms, a senior official in the oil rich kingdom said.

Prince Talal, whose net worth has been estimated by Forbes magazine at \$17bn (£12.3bn), is chairman and owner of international investment firm Kingdom Holding and one of the country's most prominent businessmen.

"He offered a certain figure but it doesn't meet the figure required from him, and until today the attorney-general hasn't approved it," the official said on condition of anonymity under government briefing rules.

A second source familiar with Prince

Talal's case told the Reuters news agency that he had offered to make a "donation" to the Saudi government, which would avoid any admission of wrongdoing and to do so from assets of his own choosing. But the government refused those terms, the source said.

Since early November Prince Talal has been held, with dozens of other members of Saudi Arabia's political and business elite detained in the crackdown, in Riyadh's opulent Ritz Carlton hotel as authorities seek to reach settlements with the detainees.

Saudi officials say they aim to claw back some \$100bn (£72.8bn) of funds that rightfully belong to the state. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who launched the crackdown, has indicated he wants to close existing cases quickly and expects most suspects to cut a deal.



NEWSIN brief

Israeli PM eyes defence deal on India trip

REUTERS, New Delhi

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday began a six-day visit to India hoping to boost trade ties and iron out differences arising from New Delhi's decision to scrap a defence deal, officials from both countries said. Israel's state-owned defence contractor Rafael announced on January 3 that India had cancelled a \$500 million order to buy its Spike anti-tank guided missiles.

Brexit vote may be reversed: Farage

REUTERS, London

Brexit campaigner Nigel Farage said yesterday he was increasingly concerned that a vote for Britain to leave the European Union could be overturned by a powerful group of the bloc's supporters. In an interview with Britain's Observer newspaper, Farage said a well-organised and funded group of campaigners that wants to remain in the EU was drowning out those who want to leave.

Germany's SPD at odds over coalition plan

AFP, Frankfurt Am Main

Leading members of Germany's Social Democrats yesterday voiced scepticism over a preliminary coalition agreement reached with Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives, days after the hard-fought deal was hailed as a breakthrough. Berlin's SPD Mayor Michael Mueller said he was "very critical" about entering into another government with Merkel's CDU/CSU bloc after all three parties slumped to their worst results in decades in last September's election.

Israel destroys Hamas attack tunnel in Gaza

REUTERS, Jerusalem

The Israeli military said yesterday it had destroyed a cross-border attack tunnel that ran from Gaza into Israel and Egypt, dug by the Hamas, the Islamist group that controls the Palestinian enclave.

Residents in Gaza said Israeli jets bombed an area east of the southern town of Rafah, by the Egyptian and Israeli borders, late on Saturday night. Israel confirmed the attack immediately after, but gave no details until yesterday.

There was no immediate comment from Hamas or Egypt, or any reports of casualties.

Tensions have risen since President Donald Trump reversed decades of US policy on December 6 by recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Gaza militants have launched 18 cross-border rockets or mortar bombs, causing no fatalities or serious injuries in Israel, and 15 protesters and two gunmen have been killed by Israeli fire.

The attacks from Gaza, which Israel has blamed on groups not affiliated with Hamas, have drawn Israeli air strikes, usually on targets that have been evacuated.

"There are those who say the Israeli military attacks sand dunes - that is incorrect," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, addressing criticism from lawmakers who have called for a stronger armed response, told reporters after the tunnel was targeted.