

18 school shootings in US in 2018

AFP, Washington

The deadly gun rampage at a Florida high school on Wednesday took to 18 the number of school shootings across the United States so far this year -- a phenomenon that authorities seem powerless to prevent.

The stunning number underscored how commonplace gun violence has become in America, with students in elementary and secondary schools regularly performing drills on how to react in an "active shooter" situation.

According to the independent Everytown for Gun Safety group, eight of the 18 school shooting incidents so far this year, which cover primary schools to universities, involved guns being discharged with no one injured. Two were suicide attempts, and the rest attacks on others.

On January 23, a 15-year-old boy opened fire with a handgun at the start of the school day at a Kentucky high school, killing two students and wounding others.

The day before, a teenager was wounded by a shot fired in her school cafeteria in Texas. The same day, a bullet grazed a 14-year-old boy in the parking lot of a New Orleans high school.

Earlier in January, shootings took place in Iowa, Washington state and California, among other places.

Since January 2013, there have been at least 291 school shootings, according to Everytown for Gun Safety, a non-profit group that advocates for gun control.

The frequency of the incidents has somewhat dulled their ability to shock.

Each incident like the one in Parkland brings calls for more strict laws on gun sales and ownership, but gun rights campaigners regularly succeed in stifling those calls.

Indeed, laws on carrying guns in public have been made less strict in many areas.



Relatives comfort each other after a mass shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School where 17 people were killed, on Wednesday in Parkland, Florida. Inset, Students form a chain as they are brought out of the school. Story on page 16.

PHOTO: AFP



FLORIDA SCHOOL SHOOTING

Suspect's digital profile 'very, very disturbing'

CNN

Nikolas Cruz, described as a loner by a former classmate, had once been expelled from a Parkland, Florida, high school for disciplinary reasons.

On Wednesday, the 19-year-old former student returned to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and is suspected of gunning down at least 17 people, in a massacre that has now become one of the 10 deadliest mass shootings in modern US history.

After the shooting, he is believed to have concealed himself among the hundreds of students fleeing the school, according to the Broward County Sheriff's Office. Investigators were able to identify Cruz from school security videos and found him in a nearby neighborhood in Coral Springs, Florida, according to police. Officers arrested him without incident.

Meanwhile, details have begun to emerge of the suspect's disturbing social media presence and his family life.

Broward County Sheriff Scott Israel said Cruz's digital profile contained what he called "very, very disturbing" content.

He had a variety of gun and violence-related postings on social media sites.

Postings under the name Nikolas Cruz included threatening comments under videos on YouTube and other sites, including "I whana shoot people with my AR-15" (sic), "I wanna die Fighting killing s**t of people" and "I am going to kill law enforcement one day they go after the good people."

On his Instagram page, Cruz posted a photo of a shotgun, in another photo he is shown brandishing a pistol that appears to be a type of BB gun. In other pictures he is covering his face with a kerchief, and brandishing long knives.

Police say Cruz was armed with multiple magazines and at least one AR-15 style rifle.

The suspected shooter bought the firearm in the past year



Syria war at critical point

UN special envoy says civilians being killed on horrific scale as powers jostle for control

AGENCIES

The UN special envoy for Syria has given warning that violence in the country is the worst he has seen since taking the job four years ago.

Staffan de Mistura's remarks on Wednesday came as the US and Russia again traded blame at the UN over the ongoing conflict.

Next month the war in Syria will enter its eighth year with diplomatic efforts stalled as violence rages on the ground.

"Civilians have been killed on a horrific scale - reports suggest more than 1,000 civilians in the first week of February alone," he told the UN Security Council.

"I have been now four years as the special envoy. This is as violent and worrying and dangerous a moment as any that I have seen in my time of tenure so far."

De Mistura mentioned all the countries now fighting in Syria, including the Turkish operation around Afrin and the Syrian government's continued bombardment of Eastern Ghouta and Idlib.

He talked of developments in recent days, including the US attack on Assad's forces near Deir Az Zor and Israeli air attacks in Syria including on Iranian targets. But both these operations were later defended by Nikki Haley, the US

ambassador to the UN.

She criticised Russia for failing to stop the Assad regime from bombing and gassing civilians, drawing a sharp response from Moscow's permanent representative to the UN, Vassily Nebenzia.

Nebenzia said the US and its allies should use their influence over the opposition groups to prevent violence.

Syria denies having chemical weapons after France's strike threat
Turkey demands US expel Kurdish militia from anti-IS force as rift widens

Meanwhile, the Syrian government on Wednesday denied it possessed chemical weapons and branded the use of such arms "immoral and unacceptable", following a French warning of punitive strikes.

France's President Emmanuel Macron warned on Tuesday that his country would launch strikes if proof emerged that the Syrian regime had used banned chemical weapons against its civilians.

This was reaffirmed on Wednesday by his

foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, who spoke of "military strikes" in case of any new chemical attacks "since these attacks are lethal and the responsibility of the regime is proven".

According to Washington, at least six chlorine attacks have been reported since early January in rebel-held areas, resulting in dozens of injuries.

Meanwhile, Turkey yesterday said it had demanded that the United States expel a Kurdish militia from the ground forces it backs in Syria, underscoring the widening gulf between the Nato allies since Ankara launched a new Syrian offensive last month.

Ties between Turkey and the United States, both allies in a US-led coalition fighting against Islamic State, have been strained to the breaking point by Washington's support for the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, which Ankara sees as terrorists.

Ankara considers the YPG to be an arm of the PKK, a banned group that has waged a decades-long insurgency in Turkey.

"We demanded this relationship be ended, I mean we want them to end all the support given to the Syrian arm of PKK, the YPG," Turkish Defence Minister Nurettin Canikli told reporters in a briefing in Brussels, a day after meeting US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis on the sidelines of a Nato meeting.

'NOTPETYA' CYBER-ATTACK

UK blames Russia

AFP, London

Britain yesterday accused the Russian military of being behind last year's "NotPetya" cyber-attack, which started in Ukraine and Russia before spreading globally, affecting thousands of computers.

"The UK Government judges that the Russian Government, specifically the Russian military, was responsible for the destructive NotPetya cyber-attack of June 2017," Foreign Office minister Tariq Ahmad said in a rare direct rebuke.

The Kremlin denied the accusation.

"We categorically reject such accusations. We consider them unsubstantiated and groundless. This is nothing but a continuation of a Russophobic campaign that is not based on any evidence," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists.

The ransomware attack contaminated thousands of computers worldwide, particularly affecting multinational companies and critical infrastructure, such as radiation monitors at the old Chernobyl nuclear power plant and the ports of Mumbai and Amsterdam.

Companies hit included the Russian oil group Rosneft, Danish shipping company Maersk, US pharmaceutical giant Merck, French construction specialist Saint-Gobain and the British advertising firm WPP.

Ukraine was the worst-affected country, with banking operations compromised in what authorities said was an unprecedented attack.



A general view shows the destruction in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. Iraq received pledges totalling \$30 billion at an international conference for reconstruction of the war-torn country, the host Kuwait announced.

PHOTO: AFP

350m children living in conflict zones

REUTERS, London

More children than ever before are living in conflict areas and are at risk of death and violence, the charity Save the Children said yesterday, with Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia the worst countries for young people.

In a report, the global charity said at least 357 million children - or one in six worldwide - were living in conflict zones, an increase of 75 per cent since the early 1990s.

Increased urbanisation, longer-running conflicts and a rise in the number of schools and hospitals being targeted heightened the danger for children, according to Save the Children.

Other threats include abduction and sexual violence.

"We are seeing a shocking increase in the number of children growing up in areas

affected by conflict, and being exposed to the most serious forms of violence imaginable," Helle Thorning-Schmidt, chief executive of the charity, said in a statement.

"Children are suffering things no child ever should; from sexual violence to being used as suicide bombers. Their homes, schools and playgrounds have become battlefields," added Thorning-Schmidt, the former prime minister of Denmark.

United Nations figures show more than 73,000 children have been killed or maimed in 25 conflicts since 2005, the year it

started collating such statistics, according to the report.

Since 2010, the number of UN-verified cases of children being killed and maimed has gone up by almost 300 per cent.

Aid agencies say the true figure is likely to be far higher given the difficulties of verifying accounts in conflict zones.



Ultra-processed foods linked to cancer: study

AFP, Paris

Scientists yesterday suggested a link between cancer and "ultra-processed" foods such as cookies, fizzy drinks and sugary cereals, though outside experts cautioned against reading too much into the study results.

Researchers from France and Brazil said the results of the study showed 10-per cent increase in the proportion of ultra-processed foods in the diet was associated with increases of 12 per cent in the risk of overall cancer and 11 per cent in the risk of breast cancer.

Foods on the list included packaged breads, buns, pizzas and cakes, crisps, sodas, instant noodles and soups.

UPROAR OVER HIGH PROFILE AFFAIR

Australia bans sex between govt ministers and staff

AFP, Sydney

Australia's prime minister imposed a formal ban on sex between ministers and their staff on Thursday after his deputy made "a shocking error of judgement" by having an affair that left an aide pregnant and the government reeling.

Malcolm Turnbull announced the amendment to the ministerial code of conduct at an extraordinary press conference during which he slammed deputy Barnaby Joyce for causing "terrible hurt and humiliation" to his wife and four children.

"Barnaby made a shocking error of judgement in having an affair with a young woman working in his office," he said.

"In doing so, he has set off a world of woe for those women and appalled all of us.

Vikki Champion, 33, who is now pregnant with their child, became public last week.

It has led to allegations that he breached ministerial rules, with the crisis dominating the front pages and parliament question time, with calls mounting for him to resign.

Joyce, whose National Party is in a coalition with the prime minister's Liberals, will take leave next week, allowing him to side-step the role of acting leader while Turnbull is on a visit to the United States.

Turnbull departs for Washington next Wednesday for meetings with US President Donald Trump and is scheduled to be overseas for four days.

Turnbull said the break would allow Joyce to "consider his own position".

The prime minister could sack him, but that risks fracturing the ruling coalition and could cause a rift between the Liberal and National parties.



MSF reveals cases after Oxfam scam

AFP, Paris

A scandal over sexual abuse in the foreign aid industry that began with Oxfam spread on Wednesday, as French group Doctors Without Borders revealed it had fired 19 staff last year for harassment or abuse.

The Paris-based group, known by its French acronym MSF, said it had received 146 complaints or alerts last year, of which 40 were found to be allegations of harassment or sexual assault.

It said in a statement that it had acted on 24 of these cases, firing 19 employees as a result.

With 40,000 staff around the world, MSF is one of the world's largest aid groups, best known for its work offering medical aid in conflict zones.

"Even though reports of abuse have steadily increased, MSF is aware that abuse goes under-reported," the charity said.

The revelations came as Oxfam grapples with allegations that it was not transparent about a scandal involving some of its staff for using prostitutes in Haiti following a devastating 2010 earthquake.

The scandal has led to the resignation of Oxfam's deputy head and has thrown into question British government funding for the charity, which amounted to around £32 million (36 million euros, \$44 million) last year.

Britain warned on Wednesday it would cut off ties with foreign aid charities that cover up sex scandals.

An Oxfam spokeswoman on Wednesday said the aid agency had received 1,270 cancellations of donations by direct debit between Saturday and Monday -- compared to a normal monthly average of 600.