

Taliban blow up Afghan
army outpost; 5 killed

REUTERS, Kabul

Taliban fighters detonated explosives planted in a tunnel below an Afghan military outpost, killing five soldiers, a police official said yesterday. Six soldiers were wounded in the attack on Tuesday in the Maiwand district of the southern province of Kandahar.

Philippine floods
toll climbs to 85

AFP, Manila

The death toll from landslides and devastating floods in the central Philippines triggered by a tropical depression climbed to 85, officials said yesterday. 20 people were still missing. The depression, which weakened into a low pressure system before leaving the Philippines on Sunday, brought heavy rain that triggered landslides and flooding in the Bicol and eastern Visayas regions.

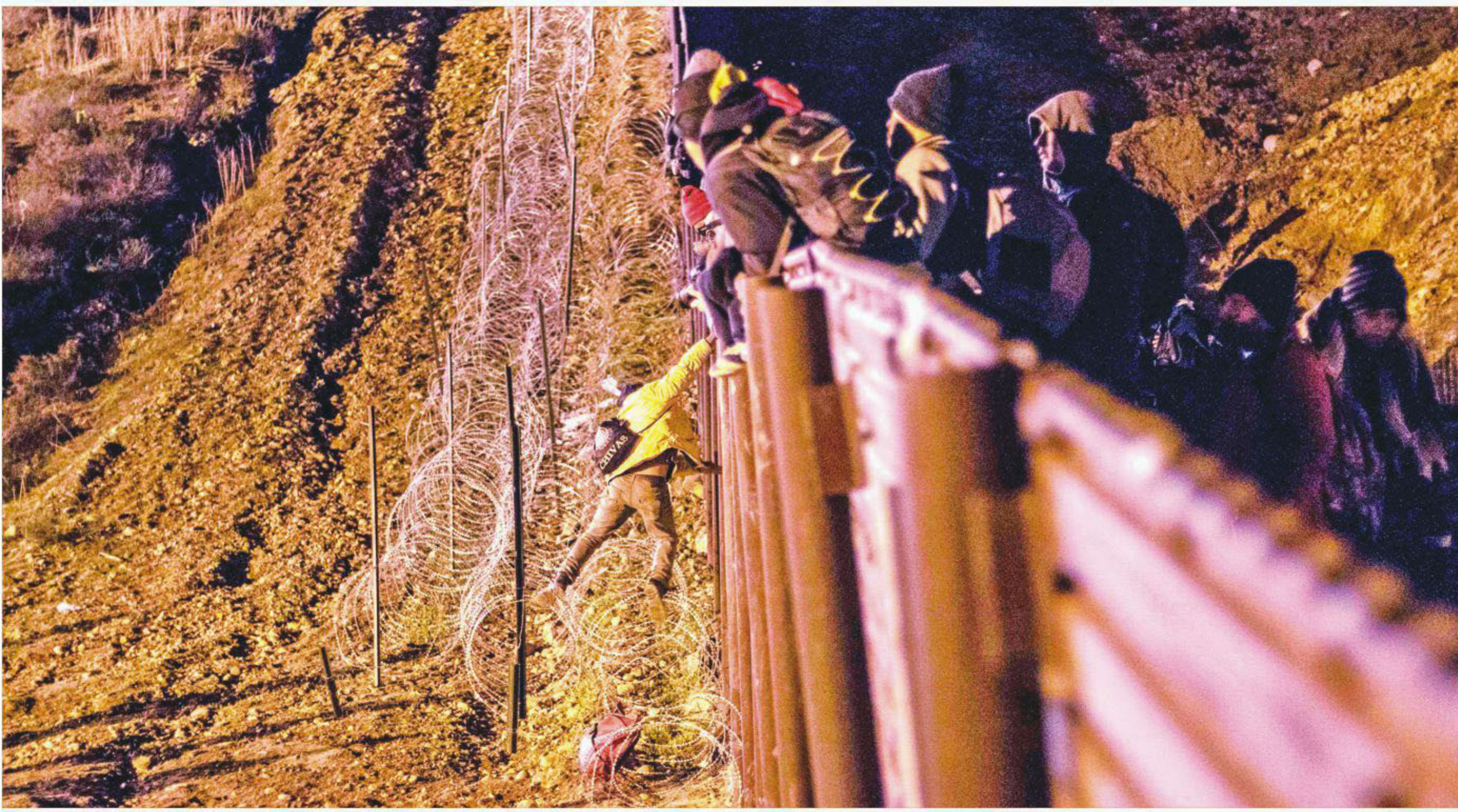
Somalia orders top
UN envoy to leave

AFP, Mogadishu

Somalia's government has ordered the UN top envoy to the troubled country to leave, accusing him of "deliberately interfering with the country's sovereignty." The order comes days after the official, Nicholas Haysom, raised concerns at the action of Somalia's UN-backed security services in recent violence that left several people dead.

BITS OF HISTORY
(JANUARY 02)

- 1992: Singapore government bans chewing gum.
- 2001: The first Taiwanese boats in more than 50 years to make legal, direct trips to the Chinese mainland docked in the southeastern province of Fujian.
- 2007: UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon started his first day in office by departing from the traditional UN opposition to the death penalty, saying nations could make their own decision.



A Central American migrant, jumps over the US-Mexico border fence from Tijuana to San Diego in the US as seen from Tijuana, Baja California state, Mexico, on Tuesday. US Border Patrol agents used tear gas and pepper spray to counter rock-throwing migrants when a group of about 150 tried to illegally cross the border from Mexico, leading to 25 arrests, the agency said on Tuesday.

PHOTO:
AFP

GAS EXPLOSION AT RUSSIAN HIGH-RISE
Death toll hits 21;
20 still missing

REUTERS, Moscow

Rescuers yesterday hunted for survivors in the rubble of a Russian apartment building wrecked by a New Year's Eve gas explosion, but found only bodies as the number of confirmed dead rose to 21.

Twenty people were still missing following the explosion, which destroyed 35 high-rise apartments in the Ural mountains city of Magnitogorsk.

Braving temperatures that fell as low as minus 27 degrees Celsius (minus 16 degrees Fahrenheit), rescue workers were combing through mangled concrete and metal.

Their efforts were given a boost on Tuesday when a 10-month-old baby boy was found alive and reunited with his mother. But hope was starting to fade of finding many more survivors.

The explosion, believed to have been caused by a gas leak, tore through the 10-storey building in the industrial town nearly 1,700 kilometres (1,050 miles) east of Moscow, in the early hours of Monday.

Witnesses described a "wave of fire" and said the blast was strong enough to shatter windows in nearby buildings.

The Soviet-era apartment block was home to about 1,100 people and the explosion left dozens homeless over the New Year -- the biggest holiday of the year in Russia.

Women defy ancient ban

REUTERS, Kochi/new Delhi

Two women defied a centuries-old ban on entering a Hindu temple in the Indian state of Kerala yesterday, sparking protests and calls for a strike by conservative Hindu groups outraged by their visit.

Police fired teargas and used water cannons to disperse a large crowd of protesters in the state capital of Thiruvananthapuram, television news channels showed.

There were protests in several other cities in the state, media reported.

India's Supreme Court in September ordered the lifting of the ban on women or girls of menstruating age from entering the Sabarimala temple, which draws millions of worshippers a year.

But the temple refused to abide by the ruling and subsequent attempts by women to visit it had been blocked by thousands of devotees.

The Kerala state government is run by left-wing parties and it has sought to allow women into the temple - a position that has drawn the criticism of both of BJP and Congress. The uproar has put the issue of religion, which can be highly contentious in India,

squarely on the political agenda months before a general election, which is due by May.

The possibility of more confrontations was raised by a call from an umbrella group of right-wing Hindu groups in Kerala, the Sabarimala Karma

SABARIMALA TEMPLE ROW

BJP official says visit a 'deep wound on the chest of devotees'

Main opposition party, Congress, calls it 'treachery'

Priest briefly shuts hill temple for 'purification' rituals

Samithi, which is supported by the BJP, for a state-wide protest strike today.

The BJP called for protesters to be peaceful.

Earlier, the Kerala state president of the BJP described the women's visit as "a conspiracy by the atheist rulers to destroy the Hindu temples".

Officials from the main opposition Congress party in the state, in a rare alignment with their main rival for power at the national level, the BJP, also called for protests.

"This is treachery ... The government will have to pay the price for the violation of the custom," K Sudhakaran, vice-president of the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee, said in a statement.

Conservative Hindu groups say they believe women of menstruating age would defile the temple's inner shrine. The ban was imposed on all females between the ages of 10 and 50.

News channels reported the chief priest briefly shut the temple for "purification" rituals after the women visited. Later, media reported it had re-opened.

The two women, identified by police as Bindu Ammini, 42, and Kanaka Durga, 44, had tried to go in on Dec 24, and later approached police for help, an officer said.

"There was an elaborate arrangement for them to come just after the temple was opened early morning," said the officer, who declined to be identified fearing reprisals from protesters. "The darkness gave them, and us, cover."

Trump 'looks forward' to Kim meet after warning

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump is looking forward to another summit with Kim Jong Un, he said Tuesday, after the North Korean leader warned Pyongyang could change its approach to nuclear talks if Washington persists with sanctions.

"I also look forward to meeting with Chairman Kim who realizes so well that North Korea possesses great economic potential!" Trump said in a brief tweet.

The two leaders made global headlines with an unprecedented summit in Singapore in June, where they signed a vaguely-worded pledge on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

But progress has since stalled with the two sides disagreeing over what the declaration means, and the pace of US-North Korean negotiations has slowed, with meetings and visits cancelled at short notice.

The North is demanding relief from the multiple sanctions imposed on it over its banned nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, and



has condemned US insistence on its nuclear disarmament as "gangster-like."

Speculation of a second Trump-Kim summit has ebbed and flowed, with the US president saying that he hoped it would take place early this year.

But a proposed visit by Kim to Seoul before the end of December did not materialise.

On Monday Kim said he might be "compelled to find a new way for defending the sovereignty of the country and the supreme interests of the state" if Washington continues with sanctions.

But he said he was willing to meet Trump at any time.

New Brazil leader targets crime, leftwing 'ideology'

AFP, Brasilia

Brazil's new far-right President Jair Bolsonaro declared a crusade against crime, corruption and leftwing ideology as he took office Tuesday for a four-year term at the helm of Latin America's biggest nation.

In his first public speech wearing the presidential sash, Bolsonaro said Brazil will "start to free itself of socialism" and "political correctness," breaking with policies brought in under decades of leftist rule.

The 63-year-old former paratrooper and veteran lawmaker received swift congratulations via Twitter from US President Donald Trump, with whom he shares a similar, brash style and outlook.

"Congratulations to President @jairbolsonaro who just made a great inauguration speech - the U.S.A. is with you!" Trump wrote.

Bolsonaro responded by saying: "I truly

appreciate your words of encouragement. Together, under God's protection, we shall bring prosperity and progress to our people!"

In his inauguration speech before Brazil's Congress, Bolsonaro called for "a true national pact" to restore his country's lackluster economy, "without ideological bias."

While Bolsonaro enjoys sky-high approval ratings, many in Brazil fear his nostalgia for the military dictatorship that reigned from 1964 to 1985, his hardline approach to fighting crime and his record of disparaging women and minorities could herald a harsh shake-up.

Bolsonaro has already said he will do all he can to challenge the leftist governments of Venezuela and Cuba.

In a sign of his leanings and alliances, Bolsonaro warmly welcomed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Brazil for his inauguration, and both leaders spoke of their "brotherhood."



Police remove members of Kerala Students Union, the student wing of India's main opposition Congress party, as they take part in a protest after two women entered the Sabarimala temple, in Kochi, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

UK KNIFE ATTACK
Suspect held under mental health law

AFP, Manchester

A British probe into a stabbing at a Manchester railway station on New Year's Eve which injured three people is being treated as "a terrorist investigation", the city's police force said on Tuesday.

The 25-year-old man who was arrested at the scene on Monday night is now being detained under a mental health law, Greater Manchester Police (GMP) said late Tuesday.

The suspect reportedly shouted "Allah" and "long live the Caliphate" during what GMP Chief Constable Ian Hopkins called a "horrific attack" on three people, including a police officer.

"(The) man arrested last night... following the incident at Manchester Victoria Station has been assessed by specialist medical staff and detained under the Mental Health Act," GMP said in a statement.

"The Counter Terrorism investigation remains ongoing."

"There is nothing to suggest the involvement of other people in this attack, but confirming this remains a main priority for the investigation," the force added.

A man and a woman, both in their 50s, were being treated in hospital Tuesday after sustaining serious but not life-threatening injuries to their abdomens, while the British Transport Police officer was stabbed in the shoulder, the GMP chief added.

Prime Minister Theresa May thanked emergency services for their "courageous response" in swiftly tackling the suspect.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack, which happened at around 8:50 pm (2050 GMT) when many revellers in the city would have been enjoying New Year's Eve celebrations.

60TH ANNIVERSARY OF CUBA REVOLUTION
Castro blasts US

REUTERS, Havana

On the 60th anniversary of Cuba's revolution, ruling Communist Party leader Raul Castro blasted the Trump administration for returning to an outdated path of confrontation with the island nation and of intervening in Latin America.

Castro and his late, elder brother Fidel Castro led the rebel band that in 1959 overthrew a US-backed dictator and installed a Communist-run country on the doorstep of the United States, setting the scene for decades of Cold War hostility.

At the time, their revolution inspired leftist movements throughout Latin America, but the celebrations on Tuesday came as the region is shifting rightwards, coinciding with the inauguration of Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro.

"Once again, the North American government is taking on the path of confrontation with Cuba," Castro said in the southeastern city of Santiago de Cuba where Fidel Castro proclaimed victory six decades ago.

Clad in military fatigues and cap, the 87-year old Castro said on Tuesday that Cuba had proven throughout six decades of revolution it could not be intimidated by threats. Instead it remained open, he said, to a peaceful and respectful coexistence.



Romney launches blistering attack on Trump's character

AFP, Washington

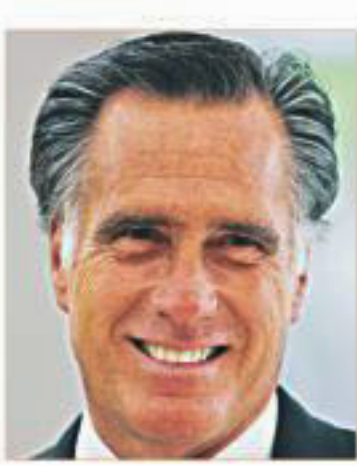
Incoming Senator Mitt Romney issued harsh criticism of President Donald Trump on Tuesday, saying he "has not risen to the mantle of the office."

The barbed remarks from the 2012 Republican presidential candidate two days before he and other lawmakers take up their seats in the new Congress seemed to suggest Romney is positioning himself to take over the role of Jeff Flake, a departing senator who was a vocal critic of Trump.

US media said Romney's comments even prompted suggestions online that he sounds like he is considering challenging Trump for the nomination in 2020.

"With the nation so divided, resentful and angry, presidential leadership in qualities of character is indispensable," Romney wrote in an op-ed piece in The Washington Post.

"And it is in this province where the incumbent's shortfall has been most glaring."



It is the latest twist in a relationship that has run hot and cold for years. Romney called presidential candidate Trump a fraud and a phoney in 2016. But last year he thanked Trump for his endorsement as Romney ran for a senate seat from Utah.

In the op-ed piece, Romney noted he had not supported Trump as the Republican Party's nominee in 2016.

He said he had hoped the Trump campaign would refrain from name-calling and had not. He said he was initially encouraged when Trump brought into his cabinet steady-hand figures like James Mattis as defense secretary and John Kelly as chief of staff.

"But, on balance, his conduct over the past two years, particularly his actions this month, is evidence that the president has not risen to the mantle of the office," Romney wrote.

Romney said last month -- when Trump abruptly announced he was pulling US troops out of Syria, and Mattis resigned in protest -- was particularly disturbing.

Fighting in Rakhine displaces thousands

REUTERS, Yangon

Myanmar police have clashed with insurgents in the troubled western state of Rakhine, state-run media said yesterday, as intensified fighting continued between the security forces and an armed group representing the Buddhist Rakhine ethnic group.

The United Nations said about 2,500 people had been driven from their homes since early December when clashes broke out with the Arakan Army, one of several groups fighting Myanmar's army that want more autonomy for ethnic minorities.

The Myanmar military last month announced a four-month halt in fighting in the north and northeast of the country in order to kick-start stalled peace talks with the armed groups.

Rakhine, in the west, was excluded from the pause, stoking doubts about the military's willingness to bring an end to all the country's conflicts.

In 2017, a military offensive has driven more than 730,000 Rohingya Muslims into bordering Bangladesh. Recent fighting has involved the Arakan Army, which claims to represent the Rakhine, the Buddhist ethnic group who make up the majority in the state of the same name.

Hundreds of border guard police had been deployed in areas far from the border with Bangladesh as part of a broader military offensive against the group, sources said.

Authorities, along with local and foreign aid groups, were providing aid to the displaced, the UN agency said in an update.