

UN warns of 'mass deaths' from starvation, disease

US says situation in the country getting worse

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The UN's special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar has warned of "mass deaths" from starvation and disease in the wake of fighting between rebel groups and junta forces in the east of the coup-stricken country.

Myanmar has been in chaos and its economy paralysed since the February putsch and a brutal military crackdown on dissent that has killed over 800, according to a local monitoring group.

Fighting has flared in several communities -- especially in townships that have seen a high death toll at the hands of police -- and some locals have formed "defence forces".

Clashes have escalated in Kayah state near the Thai border in recent weeks.

Locals have accused the military of firing artillery shells that have landed near villages and the UN estimates around 100,000 people have been displaced.

"The junta's brutal, indiscriminate attacks are threatening the lives of many thousands of men, women and children in Kayah state", Tom Andrews said in a statement posted on Twitter Tuesday.

"Let me be blunt. Mass deaths from starvation, disease, and exposure, on a scale we have not yet seen... could occur in Kayah state absent immediate action."

AFP images from Kayah state have shown villagers manufacturing guns in makeshift factories as local defence groups go up

against Myanmar's battle-hardened military.

Meanwhile, President Joe Biden's policy coordinator for the Indo-Pacific region said on Tuesday the situation inside military-ruled Myanmar was deeply concerning and continuing to get worse and the United States was looking at all possible scenarios there.

Kurt Campbell noted that Myanmar's coup leader Min Aung Hlaing had admitted in an interview aired on military-owned television he had not anticipated the level of civil unrest.

Diplomatic efforts to halt the bloodshed have been led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) -- of which Myanmar is a member -- but the bloc is riven with infighting and has managed to put little pressure on the junta.

An emergency summit in April produced a "five-point consensus" statement that called for an immediate halt to violence and a visit to Myanmar by a special envoy.

But a special envoy has yet to be appointed, and violence has continued across the country.

China -- which enjoys exceptional leverage over Myanmar -- has also been unwilling to condemn the junta and has refused to label its power-grab a coup.

Its foreign minister Wang Yi said Tuesday that Beijing's policy towards its neighbour "is not affected by changes to Myanmar's domestic and external situation."



Kira Stephani speaks with her daughters Aisha Sayyed (front) and Aliyah Sayyed at a makeshift memorial at the fatal crime scene where a man driving a pickup truck jumped the curb and ran over a Muslim family in what police say was a deliberately targeted anti-Islamic hate crime, in London, Ontario, Canada, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWSIN brief

10 mine-clearing Afghan workers killed

Masked gunmen killed 10 people working for the HALO Trust mine-clearing organisation in northern Afghanistan, the interior ministry said yesterday, blaming the Taliban for the latest attack to rock the violence-wracked country. The raid happened on Tuesday evening as dozens of deminers were relaxing at a compound in Baghlan province, around 260 kilometres north of the capital, after a day spent looking for ordnance in the area. A Taliban spokesman denied responsibility.

Israeli strikes kill 11 Syria troops

Israeli air strikes in central Syria killed at least 11 government troops and militiamen late Tuesday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. The Observatory said the strikes targeted air force positions near the village of Khirbet al-Tin on the outskirts of Homs, as well as an arms depot belonging to the Lebanese Hezbollah movement. Since civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, Israel has carried out hundreds of air strikes on Syrian territory, targeting government positions as well as allied Iran-backed forces. Israel has said repeatedly that it will not allow neighbouring Syria to become a launchpad for its arch foe Iran.

EU pledges extra €250m famine aid

The European Commission will promise an extra 250 million euros (\$304 million) in famine aid for Africa, Afghanistan and Venezuela ahead of the G7 summit, an EU official said yesterday. The move comes ahead of a meeting of the leaders from the Group of Seven major industrialised economies in Britain later this week. The leaders are facing calls to make good on commitments to provide billions in extra aid to tackle and ward off famine in vulnerable nations. The United Nations warned in March that 34 million people worldwide are just one step away from starvation and that acute hunger was set to soar in over 20 countries.

SOURCE: AFP

Tiny worm comes back to life after 24,000 yrs

REUTERS, Moscow

A microscopic organism has wriggled back to life and reproduced asexually after lying frozen in the vast permafrost lands of northeastern Siberia for 24,000 years.

Russian scientists found the tiny, ancient animal called the bdelloid rotifer in soil taken from the river Alazeya in Russia's region of Yakutia in the far north. The bdelloid rotifer, a multicellular organism found in freshwater habitats across the world, is known to be able to withstand extreme cold.

Previous research suggested it could survive for a decade when frozen at -20 degrees Celsius.

This new case, which was detailed in a study in the journal Current Biology, is by far the creature's longest recorded survival period in a frozen state.

The organism was recovered from samples taken 3.5 metres below ground. The material was dated from between 23,960 and 24,485 years ago, the study said.

Land encased in permafrost - where the ground is frozen all year round - has for years thrown up startling scientific discoveries.

Scientists earlier revived microscopic worms called nematodes from sediment in two places in northern Siberia that were dated over 30,000 years old.

'You are not alone'

Canada PM vows to fight far-right groups after Muslim family slain in 'terrorist attack'

AFP, Ottawa

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Tuesday denounced the killing of four Muslim family members, run down by the driver of a pick-up truck, as a hate-driven "terrorist attack," and urged the nation to stand up against intolerance.

He also promised to redouble efforts to fight far-right groups.

The victims -- a husband and wife, their teenage daughter and the child's grandmother -- were killed Sunday when the truck mounted a curb and struck them in the city of London, in Canada's central Ontario province.

The couple's nine-year-old son, orphaned in what police said was a planned attack targeting a Muslim family, was recovering in hospital from serious injuries.

"This killing was no accident. This was a terrorist attack, motivated by hatred, in the heart of one of our communities," Trudeau said during an impassioned speech at the House of Commons.

The Canadian leader later addressed an outdoor vigil of thousands at the mosque the family attended, speaking directly to the country's Muslim community.

"You are not alone. All Canadians mourn



with you, and stand with you tonight," he said at the vigil, which was attended by all of the country's political leaders.

He said Canada was "not immune" to the rising discrimination and division witnessed elsewhere in the world in recent years.

"Together, we can counter this darkness, and this intolerance," he said.

The victims of Sunday's attack have been identified as Madiha Salman, age 44, who had done post-graduate work in civil and environmental engineering; her husband, Salman Afzaal, age 46; their 15-year-old daughter, Yumna Salman; and a woman reported to be Afzaal's 74-year-old mother, who was not named.

Canada's long reputation for tolerance has

been bruised in recent years amid a series of hate and race-based crimes starting with a 2017 shooting at a Quebec City mosque that claimed six lives.

The country's Muslim population, just three percent of the total, has been left feeling increasingly vulnerable. Several Muslim organizations have demanded action to curb far-right extremist groups.

The suspect, identified as 20-year-old Nathaniel Veltman, was arrested at a mall seven kilometers away from the site of Sunday's attack, said Detective Superintendent Paul Waight.

Veltman has been charged with four counts of first-degree murder and one count of attempted murder.

"They were all targeted because of their Muslim faith," Trudeau said, promising to step up the country's fight against far-right racist groups. "This is happening here, in Canada. And it has to stop."

Party leaders in the House of Commons condemned the violence as an act of "Islamophobia."

"The reality is, our Canada is a place of racism, of violence, of genocide of indigenous people," said Jagmeet Singh, leader of the New Democrats.



An activist from climate action group Ocean Rebellion wearing a mask depicting Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson and another representing the fossil fuel industry, known as "Oil head" demonstrate in St Ives Harbour, ahead of the G7 summit, in St Ives, Cornwall, Britain yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Don't mess with IAEA's work

US warns Iran as row deepens over nuke accord, says 'hundreds' of sanctions to remain in place

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The United States told Iran on Tuesday that it must let the UN atomic agency continue to monitor its activities, as laid out in an agreement that has been extended until June 24, or put wider talks on reviving the Iran nuclear deal at risk.

The International Atomic Energy Agency and Iran reached a three-month agreement in February cushioning the blow of Tehran's decision to reduce its cooperation with the agency by ending extra monitoring measures introduced by the 2015 deal.

Under that new side agreement, which on May 24 was extended by a month, data continues to be collected in a black-box-type arrangement, with the IAEA only able to access it at a later date. It is unclear whether the agreement will be extended again; the IAEA has said such negotiations are getting harder, reports Reuters.

"We strongly encourage Iran to avoid any action that would prevent the collection of

or IAEA access to the information necessary for it to quickly re-establish ... continuity of knowledge," a US statement to a meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency's 35-nation Board of Governors said.

"Such action would, at a minimum, seriously complicate ongoing efforts to reach an understanding on how Iran can return to compliance with its JCPOA commitments in return for a similar US resumption," it added, referring to the 2015 deal by its full name, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Meanwhile, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Tuesday that "hundreds" of US sanctions will remain on Iran even if the United States rejoins a nuclear accord, reports AFP.

"I would anticipate that, even in the event of a return to compliance with the JCPOA, hundreds of sanctions remain in place, including sanctions imposed by the Trump administration," Blinken told a Senate hearing.

MOST LIVEABLE CITY

Auckland wins top spot as Covid shakes up rankings

REUTERS, VIENNA

Covid-19 has shaken up the Economist Intelligence Unit's annual ranking of most liveable cities, propelling Auckland to first place, replacing Vienna, which crashed out of the top 10 as the island nations of New Zealand, Australia and Japan fared best.

The Austrian capital had led the list since 2018 and for years ran neck and neck with Melbourne at the top of the survey of 140 urban centres. New Zealand's elimination of Covid-19 within its borders through lockdown measures helped by its geographic isolation, however, gave its cities a big boost.

The EIU generally does not make the full ranking public. The last time Auckland was in the top 10 was in 2017, when it came eighth, a position Melbourne shared with Geneva this

year. Vienna fell to 12th.

Illustrating New Zealand's advantage this year, Wellington also entered the top 10. It came fourth behind Osaka, which rose two spots to second place, and Adelaide, which leapfrogged its compatriots Sydney and Melbourne to third place from 10th.

The latest ranking is from 2019 as last year's was cancelled. "The Covid-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll on global liveability," the EIU said.

The European Union struggled to get its vaccination campaign off the ground and many member states including Austria imposed more lockdowns than they had hoped to, hurting their cities' scores in the measure of 'culture and environment'. The four other categories assessed are stability, healthcare, education and infrastructure.

Biden leaves US to meet allies, Putin

AFP, Washington

Joe Biden yesterday departed Washington on the first foreign trip of his presidency, launching an intense series of summits with G7, European and Nato partners before a tense face-to-face with Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Biden, 78, heads from the White House first to Britain ahead of a G7 summit in a Cornish seaside resort from Friday to Sunday.

From there, in rapid succession, the veteran Democrat will visit Queen Elizabeth II at Windsor Castle, fly to Brussels for summits with the Nato military alliance and European Union, then finish up in Geneva, where he meets Putin next Wednesday.

With the world still crawling out from under the wreckage of Covid-19, Biden is casting his diplomatic marathon as a return to badly needed US leadership.

But beyond the immediate challenges of boosting vaccine donations to poorer regions and reinvigorating post-pandemic economies, Biden's agenda features the even bigger task of shoring up a somewhat-tattered group of democracies against Russia and China.

"This is a defining question of our time," Biden wrote in The Washington Post ahead of



his trip.

Biden's pitch marks a return to a traditional US worldview after four years during which Donald Trump flirted with autocrats and recast multilateralism as a dirty word.

Trump argued that the United States can't afford to be the world's policeman, an isolationist stance popular with his voters. The Biden administration has performed another 180-degree turn, declaring "America is back."

According to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the alternative is China taking over or even "chaos."

Still reeling from Trump shock, European partners may eye Biden's vows with skepticism.

There was friction last month when Washington blocked French attempts at the United Nations to demand a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Biden's ramping up of vaccine donations around the world also follows what critics saw as a long period of hoarding.

Expectations for the Putin summit are so low that simply making US-Russian relations "more stable" would be considered a success, Blinken and other White House officials say.

The White House sees the extension of the New START nuclear arms treaty in February as an example of where business can be done. Biden also needs the Kremlin to make progress with Iran, which is close to Russia.

The list of tensions, however, is far longer. Biden blames Russia for the massive SolarWinds cyber-attack, election interference, and at the very least harboring criminals behind ransomware attacks.

Biden will also press Putin about Ukraine, Alexei Navalny, and his support for Alexander Lukashenko, the Belarusian strongman.

It's a long to-do list for the US president on his first foreign trip. But Press Secretary Jen Psaki said that Biden "has been getting ready for 50 years," she said.