

Quote of the day



Democracies of course have the right to work closely with a close partner such as Ukraine and our relation with Ukraine is defensive. ... Basically I believe that today Russia itself is paving the difficult path of Ukraine to Nato.

NATO SECRETARY GENERAL JENS STOLTENBERG REJECTS RUSSIAN CALLS FOR UKRAINE TO BE EXCLUDED FROM FUTURE MEMBERSHIP IN THE ALLIANCE



Rescue workers evacuate residents from their flooded homes amid heavy rains brought by Super Typhoon Rai in Cagayan de Oro City, on the southern island of Mindanao, Philippines, yesterday. Thousands of people in the Philippines fled their homes as the category-5 typhoon slammed into the country. Rai is the strongest storm to hit the archipelago this year.

PHOTO: AFP

POST-COUP MYANMAR

Hundreds flee as junta, KNU rebels clash

AFP, Yangon

Hundreds of Myanmar villagers have fled to Thailand after junta troops clashed with an ethnic rebel group, officials told AFP yesterday.

Fighting between Karen National Union (KNU) and the military broke out on Wednesday in the town of Lay Kay Kaw near the Thai border -- the first such clashes in months.

Yesterday, photos by local media showed dozens of people lining up to cross a river that forms part of the border.

A Thai government official in Tak province who spoke on condition of anonymity told AFP 700 people had crossed the border, and would be given food and shelter.

Naw K'nyaw Paw, general secretary at the Karen Women's Organisation, told AFP that more than 1,000 had been allowed to cross after community leaders negotiated with Thai authorities.

The clashes broke out on Wednesday, a day after state media reported junta troops entered KNU territory and arrested several dissidents, including a former lawmaker from Aung San Suu Kyi's ousted government.

The group's fighters had since injured and killed junta troops, said a KNU source, without providing details. AFP could not verify the claims and the junta did not respond to requests for comment.

Its fighters have clashed sporadically with the Myanmar military along the Thai border. In March, its fighters seized a military post and the army retaliated with air raids, the first in more than 20 years in Karen state.

Myanmar has more than 20 ethnic rebel groups, many of whom hold territories in the country's border regions.

MORE NEWS

US releases trove of secret files on Kennedy assassination

US authorities released 1,491 files of secret documents Wednesday on president John F. Kennedy's assassination, a case that still fuels conspiracy theories despite the official conclusion he was shot by Lee Harvey Oswald. The CIA and FBI files show US investigators spread their net wide and deep to find out if Oswald conspired with others in the November 22, 1963 murder that shocked the world. Kennedy's assassination has long given rise to numerous conspiracy theories that do not accept the official verdict that Oswald worked alone when he shot Kennedy as the young president was rolling through the streets of Dallas, Texas in a convertible limousine.



Blinken cuts short Asia trip due to Covid case in delegation

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday cut short a trip to Southeast Asia after a member of his delegation contracted the coronavirus, a spokesman for the US State Department said. The top US diplomat was due to meet Thai officials in Bangkok yesterday after visiting Indonesia and Malaysia, but this final leg of the three-country tour has been cancelled. A journalist with the travelling party tested positive for Covid on arrival in Malaysia on Tuesday night, he added. No other members of the press or advisers close to Blinken returned a positive result, he said. The US embassy in Malaysia said in a statement that the person with Covid-19 did not participate in any of Blinken's planned activities in Kuala Lumpur.

US lawmakers urge sanctions against spyware firms

A group of US lawmakers is asking the Treasury Department and State Department to sanction Israeli spyware firm NSO Group and three other foreign surveillance companies they say helped authoritarian governments commit human rights abuses. Their letter sent late Tuesday also asks for sanctions on top executives at NSO, the United Arab Emirates cybersecurity company DarkMatter, and European online bulk surveillance companies Nexa Technologies and Trovicor. The letter says the companies facilitated the "disappearance, torture and murder of human rights activists and journalists."

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Omicron 'serious threat'

Warns UK chief medic; France tightens UK travel restrictions

AGENCIES

England's Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty said the Omicron coronavirus variant posed a really serious threat and that what health officials already knew about was "bad."

"This is a really serious threat at the moment. The how big a threat - there are several things we don't know, but all the things that we do know, are bad," Whitty told a news conference on Wednesday.

"And the principle one being the speed at which this is moving, it is moving at an absolutely phenomenal pace."

He added: "We do have some things going for us this time of which the most important is the existence of effective vaccines and the ability to boost at speed at this stage."

Britain recorded 78,610 coronavirus cases in laboratories Wednesday, the highest daily total since the pandemic hit last year.

France announced yesterday that because of surging Covid-19 cases in Britain only designated categories of people would be allowed to travel between the two countries, and anyone arriving from Britain would have to self-isolate.

Truck drivers will though be exempt from the

new rules, the French government said, easing British concerns the restrictions could cause supply chain disruptions.

Malaysia yesterday announced new restrictions, including banning mass gatherings and requiring booster doses for high-risk groups, as it reported its second case of the Omicron variant, reports Reuters.

Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin said authorities were also verifying 18 more suspected cases of the variant, believed by experts to be the most transmissible yet, with results expected by today.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo urged people to stick to health protocols and ensure they are vaccinated against Covid-19, after the world's fourth most populous country detected its first domestic case of the Omicron variant.

South Korea said yesterday it will reinstate stricter social distancing rules a month-and-a-half after easing them under a 'living with Covid-19' policy, as the number of new infections and serious cases spirals.

Denmark yesterday recommended US drugmaker Merck's anti-Covid treatment molnupiravir for at-risk patients with symptoms, becoming the first EU country to do so.



FAILURES IN AFGHANISTAN

US Congress votes to set up commission

AFP, Washington

The US Congress yesterday voted to set up a commission to assess the failures of the 20-year war in Afghanistan following the Taliban's victory.

The commission was part of a \$768 billion annual defense package passed by the Senate 89-10 after similarly overwhelming approval last week by the House of Representatives.

President Joe Biden, who controversially pulled out US troops in August to end America's longest war, is expected to sign the National Defense Authorization Act.

The Commission on Afghanistan will include 16 members appointed by the two major parties and was given a deadline to issue an initial report within a year of its first meeting, and a final report within three years.

The commission will also look at George W. Bush's launch of the war as well as US policy on Afghanistan before 2001, when the September 11 attacks triggered the US invasion that overthrew the Taliban's draconian earlier regime.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia yesterday sent two aircraft carrying humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, state media reported, its first such initiative since the Taliban took control of the crisis-stricken country in August.

The kingdom's state-run King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSRelief) sent more than 65 tonnes of aid, including 1,647 food baskets, the official Saudi Press Agency said.

British PM faces crucial vote in party heartland

AFP, London

Under-fire British Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday faced a crucial test of his leadership as polls opened in a constituency his party has never lost, where defeat would intensify calls for a new leader.

Johnson, 57, is already reeling after roughly 100 of his own MPs on Tuesday voted against government plans to introduce vaccine passes for large events. The UK leader's authority has been clobbered repeatedly in recent weeks by claims of corruption and reports that he and his staff broke coronavirus restrictions last Christmas.

Weeks of bad headlines have turned what would normally be a routine victory in a safe rural seat into a much more fraught process for Johnson's Conservatives. Ahead of polls opening in North Shropshire at 0700 GMT, Johnson was struggling to convince many to stick with him, prompting predictions of a historic loss in a seat where the previous Conservative MP won a huge 23,000 majority in the last election.

Voting, which closes at 2200 GMT with a result expected hours later, is increasingly seen as a referendum on Johnson's premiership just two years after his landslide general election victory in December 2019.

Defeat would probably see more MPs filing letters of no-confidence in their leader, which could trigger an internal party vote to remove him.

The same process saw his predecessor Theresa May ousted in mid-2019 after MPs including Johnson voted against her Brexit deal in parliament.

The Liberal Democrats have the best chance of overturning the Conservatives' huge majority, helped by supporters of the main national opposition Labour party lending them their votes.

The atmosphere is a far cry from May, when the Conservatives swept to an unprecedented by-election victory in the northeast England seat of Hartlepool on the back of a successful vaccine rollout.



A handout photograph released by the UK Parliament shows Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson gesturing during prime minister's questions in the House of Commons in London, England, on Wednesday. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Wednesday fended off attacks about his fitness to lead, after nearly 100 of his own MPs broke ranks and rebelled against his new coronavirus restrictions.

PHOTO: AFP



This handout photograph taken yesterday and released by the Indian Press Information Bureau (PIB) shows India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (C) paying homage at the National War Memorial in New Delhi to celebrate the 50th Victory Day of Bangladesh, which marks the end of Bangladesh's bitter nine-month war of independence from Pakistan.

PHOTO: AFP

EU mulling new sanctions against Russian 'surprises'

France, Germany seek fresh peace talks with Moscow

AGENCIES

European Union leaders were to consider yesterday what economic sanctions they could impose on Russia if Moscow were to launch a new attack on Ukraine, Slovenia's prime minister said, warning that the bloc was prepared for Russian "surprises".

Ukraine is currently the main flashpoint between Russia and the West. The United States says Russia has amassed more than 100,000 troops on Ukraine's borders, possibly in preparation for an invasion. Moscow says its actions are purely defensive and accuses Kyiv and the West of provocative behaviour.

"I'm worried because the military concentration, especially on the Ukrainian border with Russia (is) very strong," said Prime Minister Janez Jansa, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, as he arrived for the one-day summit.

"And so there is no doubt that Russia is using military power to make pressure ... we are prepared to avoid such kind of surprises we met during the occupation of Crimea," he said, referring to Russia's seizure of the

Ukrainian peninsula in 2014.

Back then, the EU, along with the United States, imposed economic sanctions on Russia, targeting its energy, banking and defence sectors in response.

Jansa declined to give details about what new sanctions were possible, but he said hitting the Nord Stream 2 pipeline between Russia and Germany to prevent it becoming operational was also an option.

Earlier on Wednesday, the leaders of France and Germany sought to revive talks with Russia while keeping up pressure on Moscow.

French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy met on the sidelines of an EU summit in Brussels to find ways to restart negotiations in the "Normandy format" that also includes Russia, Macron's office said.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

DECEMBER 17

1903 - Wilbur and Orville Wright made the first successful controlled flight in a powered aircraft, the Wright "Flyer", on the beach at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. They made four flights in all, the longest lasting almost a minute.

2004 - The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan banned tobacco sales and smoking in public, the first country in the world to do so.

2010 - Mohamed Bouazizi sets himself alight in Tunis, becoming the catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution and the wider Arab Spring.

SOURCE: REUTERS