

MERRY CHRISTMAS

(From Left, clockwise) A child runs towards a man dressed as Santa Claus in a slum of Iraq's southern city of Basra, Iraq; people wearing Santa Claus costumes surf at Cocoa Beach, Florida, US; and people wearing Santa hats take part in a laughter yoga session during Christmas celebrations on a beach in Mumbai, India, yesterday. Commercial airlines around the world canceled more than 4,500 flights over the Christmas weekend, as billions around the world again marked Christmas under the shadow of the coronavirus.



PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



MILITARY OPERATION IN MYANMAR'S KAYAH STATE 30 killed, 'bodies burnt'

Say reports; rights groups condemn brutal killings

REUTERS

More than 30 people, including women and children, were killed and their bodies burnt in Myanmar's conflict-torn Kayah state on Friday, according to a local resident, media reports and a local human rights group.

Karenni Human Rights Group said they found the burnt bodies of internally displaced people, including elders, women and children killed by the military that rules Myanmar, near Mo So village of Hpruso town yesterday.

"We strongly denounce the inhumane and brutal killing which violates human rights," the group said in a Facebook post. The Myanmar military said it had shot and killed an unspecified number of "terrorists with weapons" from the opposition armed forces in the village, state media said. The people were in seven vehicles and did not stop for the military, it said.

The Myanmar military could not immediately be reached for comment.

Photos shared by the human rights group and local media showed the charred remains of bodies on burnt-out truckbeds.

The Karenni National Defence Force, one of the largest of several civilian militias

opposing the junta that led a Feb. 1 coup, said the dead were not their members but civilians seeking refuge from the conflict.

"We were so shocked at seeing that all the dead bodies were different sizes, including children, women and old people," a commander from group told Reuters, asking not to be named.

A villager who asked not to be named for security reasons said he was aware of the fire on Friday night but could not go to the scene as there was shooting.

"I went to see this morning. I saw dead bodies that had been burnt, and also the clothes of children and women spread around," he told Reuters by phone.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military overthrew the elected government of Nobel Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi almost 11 months ago, claiming fraud in a November election that her party had won.

Civilians enraged by the coup and subsequent crackdown on protesters have been taking up arms. Many local resistance forces have sprung up across the country.

The military has outlawed many opponents, labelling them traitors or terrorists, including a self-proclaimed National Unity Government that seeks to lobby the international community and prevent the junta from consolidating power.



MALAYSIA FLOODS

Death toll rises to 46

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The death toll from Malaysia's worst floods in years rose to 46 yesterday, with five people still missing, officials said, as work crews continued a massive clean-up on Christmas day.

Days of torrential rain caused rivers to overflow last weekend, swamping cities, cutting off major roads, and forcing tens of thousands of people to flee their homes.

Selangor -- Malaysia's most densely populated and wealthiest state, encircling the capital Kuala Lumpur -- has been one of the worst-hit areas.

The Southeast Asian nation is hit by floods annually during the monsoon season, from November to February, but those at the weekend were the worst since 2014.

Global warming has been linked to worsening floods. Because a warmer atmosphere holds more water, climate change increases the risk and intensity of flooding from extreme rainfall.

'Value the little things in life'

Pope calls for dialogue, humility in Christmas message



AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis yesterday urged dialogue on both personal and political levels as he celebrated a second Christmas under the shadow of a coronavirus pandemic that was pushing people into isolation.

In his traditional Urbi and Orbi Christmas Day message to the faithful gathered in St Peter's Square at the Vatican, the pontiff also deplored that the "immense tragedies" in Syria, Yemen and Iraq were "being passed over in silence" and cautioned against fresh violence in the simmering conflict in Ukraine.

Around the world, "we continue to witness a great number of conflicts, crises and disagreements. These never seem to end; by now we hardly even notice them. We have become so used to them that immense tragedies are now being passed over in silence," he said.

On Friday, the Pope called on the faithful to value the "little things in life" and show solidarity with the poor in his Christmas Eve mass in St. Peter's Basilica.

The 85-year-old Argentinian pontiff recalled the shepherds in the tale of the nativity, who lived modestly and were witness to the birth of Jesus.

"That is where Jesus is born: close to them, close to the forgotten ones of the peripheries. He comes where human dignity is put to the test."

He called for people to seek out "littleness" -- in "our daily lives, the things we do each day at home, in our families, at school and in the workplace".

"Jesus asks us to rediscover and value the little things in life," he said.

Francis, formerly the Archbishop of Buenos Aires Jorge Mario Bergoglio, called for more solidarity with those living in poverty.

'Putin wants to destroy Ukraine'

AFP, Kiev

Russian President Vladimir Putin is bent on destroying Ukraine but there is no major risk of an imminent invasion, a senior Ukrainian security official said on Friday.

Speaking to AFP in an interview, Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, said that talk of Moscow's invasion could destabilise Ukraine and play into Putin's hands.

"Putin wants to destroy our country. Will he succeed? No, he will not," said Danilov.

"Our citizens will protect our country," he said, adding that both the army and civilians will form a broad national "resistance" movement if Russia attacks.

"We are going to protect our country. Full stop."

Tensions have been building since mid-November when Washington sounded the alarm over a massive Russian troop build-up on Ukraine's border and accused Putin of plotting an invasion.

But Danilov, 59, downplayed the risk of a major military escalation, saying Ukrainian officials have not seen any "critical build-up."

According to Kiev's estimates, the number of Russian troops along Ukraine's borders has increased from around 93,000 troops in October to 104,000 now.

"We don't think this is a big surge," Danilov said.

Iran: Drills in Gulf warning to Israel

REUTERS

War games conducted this week by Iran in the Gulf were intended to send a warning to Israel, the country's top military commanders said on Friday, amid concerns over possible Israeli plans to target Iranian nuclear sites.

The Revolutionary Guards' war games included firing ballistic and cruise missiles. State television showed missiles flattening a target which resembled Israel's Dimona nuclear reactor at the conclusion of the exercises on Friday.

"Through a simulation of the Dimona atomic facilities, the Revolutionary Guards successfully practiced attacking this critical centre of the Zionist regime in its missile exercise," the semi-official news agency Tasnim said.

"These exercises had a very clear message: a serious, real ... warning to threats by the Zionist regime's authorities to beware of their mistakes," Guards chief General Hossein Salami said on state TV.

"We will cut off their hands if they make a wrong move. ... The distance between actual operations and military exercises is only a change in the angles of launching the missiles," Salami added.

Armed Forces Chief of Staff Major General Mohammad Bagheri said 16 ballistic missiles of different classes had been fired simultaneously and had destroyed predetermined targets.

Britain condemned the launch of ballistic missiles during the war games.

"These actions are a threat to regional and international security, and we call on Iran to immediately cease its activities," the Foreign Office said in a statement.

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Saeed Khatibzadeh, rejected the British statement as "meddling in Iran's defensive capacity," state media said.

Iran says its ballistic missiles have a range of 2,000 km and are capable of reaching arch-foe Israel and U.S. bases in the region.

Iran has one of the biggest missile programmes in the Middle East, regarding such weapons as an important deterrent and retaliatory force against US and other adversaries in the event of war.

Israel, which opposes efforts by world powers to revive Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal, has long threatened military action if diplomacy fails. Iran says its nuclear ambitions are peaceful.

Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz has called on world powers not to allow Iran to play for time at the nuclear negotiations, in recess at Iran's request and scheduled to resume next Monday.

Israel is widely believed to be the only Middle Eastern country with a nuclear arsenal.

Russia blocks rights monitor website

Accuses it of promoting 'terrorism' and 'extremism'

AFP, Moscow

Russia has blocked the website of a rights monitor tracking political persecution, saying it promoted terrorism and extremism, amid an unprecedented official crackdown on dissent.

The move comes in a year that has seen the opposition dismantled and scores of independent media and rights groups branded as "foreign agents" or banned outright.

OVD-Info, which tracks opposition protests and also provides legal support to victims of political persecution, said the Roskomnadzor media regulator had blocked its website earlier this week.

"At the moment, we have not received a notice and do not know the reason for being blocked," the group tweeted.

A Roskomnadzor registry of blocked websites showed that a Moscow region court had issued a ruling dated December 20 to "limit" access to the site.

The website was not accessible by AFP journalists in Russia yesterday.

Later, Russian news agencies cited Roskomnadzor as confirming that it had blocked OVD-Info's website because the Moscow region court had ruled that the group's activities were aimed at promoting "terrorism and extremism" in Russia. Roskomnadzor added that it had sent "demands" to social media networks to "delete the organisation's accounts".

The pressure on social media companies to remove OVD-Info from their platforms comes after a Moscow court on Friday slapped Google with an unprecedented fine of nearly \$100 million, while Meta (formerly Facebook) received a fine of \$27 million for failing to remove banned content.



Missiles are launched during a joint exercise called the 'Great Prophet 17', in the southwest of Iran. Picture was taken on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP