

VIENNA TALKS

Israel open to 'good' Iran nuke deal

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett yesterday said that Israel would not automatically oppose a nuclear deal with Iran but world powers must take a firmer position.

"We are not the bear who said 'no'," Bennett said in an interview with Israel's Army Radio, referring to a popular naysaying character from children's literature.

Israel prefers a more result-oriented approach, he said.

"For sure there can be a good agreement. For sure. We know the parameters. Is that expected to happen now in the current dynamics? No. Because there needs to be a much firmer position," he said.

"Iran is negotiating with a very weak hand. But unfortunately the world is acting like Iran is at a strong point."

Bennett declined to comment on Israel's military strike capabilities against Iran, saying he preferred the approach of "speak little and do a lot".

On Monday, Iran and the US resumed indirect talks in Vienna on salvaging the 2015 Iran nuclear deal with Iran focused on one side of the original bargain, lifting sanctions against it, despite what critics see as scant progress on reining in its atomic activities.



Handout picture released by the official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) shows firefighters battling the blaze at Syria's Latakia port after an Israeli air strike early yesterday. An Israeli air strike hit Syria's Latakia port, the second such attack on the key facility this month, according to Syrian state media. Since the outbreak of Syria's civil war in 2011, Israel has routinely carried out air strikes on its strife-torn neighbour. Britain-based war monitor, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said the cargo was "arms and munitions," which had detonated in "powerful explosions that were felt across the city of Latakia and its suburbs".

PHOTO: AFP



DECEMBER 29

1835 - Treaty of New Echota is signed between the US government and representatives of a minority Cherokee political faction to cede all lands of the Cherokee east of the Mississippi River to the United States.

1911 - Sun Yat Sen became the first president of the Chinese Republic.

1940 - German aircraft dropped thousands of incendiary bombs on London's city centre.

1978 - Spain's new democratic constitution, providing for a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary government, takes effect.

SOURCE: REUTERS

India boosts arsenal

Okays Merck pill, two more vaccines against Covid

REUTERS, Bengaluru

India has approved Merck's Covid-19 pill and two more vaccines for emergency use as the world's second most populous country braces for a possible spike in coronavirus cases due to the rapidly spreading Omicron variant.

Asia's third-largest economy has already said it will allow Covid-19 booster shots for some of its population as some Indian states logged an uptick in Omicron cases.

The emergency approvals come at a time measures are being taken to ramp up oxygen supplies and strengthen the country's health infrastructure.

Molnupiravir will be manufactured in India by 13 companies for restricted use under emergency situation for treatment of adult patients with COVID-19, the country's Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya said yesterday.

Merck's anti-viral pill molnupiravir was authorised by the United States last week for certain high-risk adult patients and has been shown to reduce hospitalisations and deaths by around 30 percent in a clinical trial.

Earlier this year, Aurobindo Pharma, Cipla, Sun Pharmaceuticals and some others signed non-exclusive voluntary licensing agreements with Merck to manufacture and supply molnupiravir in India.

Two other Covid-19 vaccines, Serum Institute of India's version of Novavax Inc's shot, Covovax, and homegrown drugmaker Biological E's Corbevax were also granted emergency use approval, Mandaviya said on Twitter.

Medical experts have said India needs to double down on its vaccine campaign

and some states have imposed night curfews and other restrictions in the run up to New Year festivities to prevent a spike in infections and a repeat of summer 2021 when a devastating second wave of infections left tens of thousands dead.

The country's inoculation drive so far has been dominated by a domestically produced version of the AstraZeneca Covid-19 shot by Serum Institute and Bharat Biotech's inactivated vaccine Covaxin.



India has so far administered 1.43 billion Covid-19 vaccine doses and 62 percent of its eligible population have received both doses. The country plans to start vaccinating those aged 15-18 from Jan. 3.

The coronavirus has killed at least 5,404,577 people since the outbreak emerged in China in December 2019, according to a tally Tuesday from official sources compiled by AFP.

Overall, the United States has recorded the most Covid deaths with 818,371, followed by Brazil with 618,534, India with 480,290 and Russia with 306,090.

Afghan women protest against Taliban killings of former soldiers

AFP, Kabul

A crowd of women marched through the Afghan capital yesterday, accusing Taliban authorities of covertly killing soldiers who served the former US-backed regime.

Around 30 women gathered near a mosque in the centre of Kabul and marched a few hundred metres chanting "justice, justice" before they were stopped by Taliban forces, an AFP correspondent saw.

The Taliban also tried to prevent journalists from covering the march, organised against the "mysterious murders of young people, particularly the country's former soldiers", according to social media invitations.

Taliban fighters briefly detained a group of reporters and confiscated equipment from some photographers, deleting images from their cameras before returning them.

Since the hardliners returned to power in August they have effectively banned unsanctioned protests and frequently intervene to block demonstrations against their austere brand of Islam.

The protest comes weeks after separate reports by the United Nations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said there were credible allegations of more than 100 extrajudicial killings by the Taliban since their takeover.

"I want to tell the world, tell the Taliban to stop killing. We want freedom, we want justice, we want human rights," said protester Nayera Koahistani.

In a statement read aloud by protester Laila Basam, the demonstrators called on the Taliban "to stop its criminal machine".

The statement said former soldiers and government employees of the old regime are "under direct threat", violating a general amnesty announced by the Taliban in August.

The protesters also aired objections to the ratcheting restrictions women are facing under Taliban rule.

The government issued new guidelines at the weekend banning women from travelling long distances unless escorted by a close male relative.

"Women's rights are human rights. We must defend our rights," said Koahistani.

Video footage posted online on Tuesday showed another women's protest held elsewhere in the capital that also called for women to be allowed education and work opportunities.

MORE NEWS

India restricts foreign funding for Mother Teresa charity

India has moved to cut off foreign funding to a charity founded by Mother Teresa, a decision critics described as further evidence of harassment of Christians under the Hindu nationalist government. The Missionaries of Charity was founded in 1950 by the late Mother Teresa, a Catholic nun who devoted most of her life to helping the poor in the eastern city of Kolkata. Her organisation runs shelter homes across India. According to the Hindu daily, it received around \$750 million from abroad in the 2020-21 financial year. The statement issued on Monday said the reason was "not meeting the eligibility conditions" under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act after "adverse inputs were noticed", without giving further details.

Japan aims to put a person on the moon by late 2020s

Japan revised the schedule of its space exploration plans yesterday, aiming to put a Japanese person on the moon by the latter half of the 2020s. According to the draft schedule of the plan, Japan aims to put the first non-American on the moon as part of the Artemis programme, a US-led initiative that aims to return astronauts to the moon. The plan also spells out Japan's aspirations to launch a probe to explore Mars in 2024, as well as to find ways to generate solar electricity in space.



Death toll from Brazil flooding rises to 20

The death toll from heavy rain and flooding that has plagued the northeastern Brazilian state of Bahia since November rose to 20 on Monday, amid incessant torrents that have displaced almost 63,000 people, authorities said. Two new fatalities were recorded in the town of Itabuna: a 21-year-old man who was swept away by currents and a 33-year-old woman was killed in a landslide, according to a local government report. Houses were under water and streets turned into rivers in several municipalities in the south of the state, pounded since Thursday by heavy rainfall that caused dams to burst and rivers to overflow at the weekend.

France closes mosque after 'unacceptable' preaching

France has ordered the closure of a mosque in the north of the country because of the radical nature of its imam's preaching, regional authorities told AFP yesterday. The mosque in Beauvais, a town of 50,000 people some 100 kilometres north of Paris, will remain shut for six months, according to the prefecture of the Oise region where Beauvais is located. It said the sermons there incite hatred, violence and "defend jihad". The move comes two weeks after Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said he had triggered the procedure to close the site because the imam there "is targeting Christians, homosexuals and Jews" in his sermons. This, the minister said, was "unacceptable". The French government announced earlier this year that it would step up checks of places of worship and associations suspected of spreading radical Islamic propaganda.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

EUROPE'S SECURITY, UKRAINE

US, Russia to meet early Jan in Geneva

AFP, Moscow

The United States and Russia will hold much-anticipated talks in January on European security and the Ukraine conflict after Moscow listed demands including to end Nato's expansion.

A spokesperson for the US National Security Council told AFP on condition of anonymity late Monday that the talks with Russia will take place on January 10.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov yesterday confirmed the date and said that they will take place in Geneva, where US President Joe Biden and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin met for their first summit in June.

The Kremlin has grown increasingly insistent that the West and Nato are encroaching dangerously close to Russia's borders.

Moscow earlier this month presented the West with sweeping security demands, saying Nato must not admit new members and seeking to bar the United States from establishing new bases in former Soviet republics.

Moscow and Nato representatives are then expected to meet January 12, while Russia and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which includes the United States, will meet January 13, the spokesperson added.



A Palestinian woman is blocked by Israeli security forces as she tries to stop the demolition of her home, located within the "Area C" of the occupied West Bank, where Israel retains full control over planning and construction, in the occupied West Bank town of Hebron, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP