

Violence in Gaza as Abbas visits Israel

REUTERS, Jerusalem

An Israeli was wounded in a shooting attack on the Gaza border yesterday, the military said, after a rare visit to Israel by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas drew condemnation from the enclave's Hamas rulers.

The Israeli military said it responded to the shooting with tank fire, targeting Hamas posts in the northern Gaza Strip. Gaza health officials said three Palestinian farmers were wounded.

Israel's Defence Minister Benny Gantz hosted Abbas in his home late on Tuesday, the Western-backed Palestinian leader's first such visit to Israel in more than a decade, although it signalled few prospects for any resumption of long-stalled peace negotiations.

Following their talks, the Israeli Defence Ministry announced a series of what it described as "confidence-building measures" that would ease the entry of hundreds of Palestinian business people to Israel.

In Gaza, Hazem Qassem, a Hamas spokesman, said that by meeting Gantz, Abbas was "deepening Palestinian political divisions" and encouraging accommodation with "the occupation", a term the Islamist militant group uses to describe Israel.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the shooting attack from Gaza, which the Israeli military said slightly wounded the civilian. The border has been largely quiet since an 11-day war between Israel and Gaza militants in May.

Gantz, in his summation of the meeting on Twitter, made no mention of a peace process, stalled since 2014 after US-backed talks collapsed. Palestinians seek to establish a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

"We discussed the implementation of economic and civilian measures, and emphasised the importance of deepening security coordination and preventing terror and violence - for the well-being of both Israelis and Palestinians," Gantz wrote.

In a move that could ease travel for thousands of Palestinians, the Defence Ministry said Gantz approved registration as West Bank residents for some 6,000 people who had been living in the territory, captured by Israel in a 1967 war, without official status.

Another 3,500 people from Gaza would also receive residency documentation, the ministry said.



This photo taken on Tuesday and released yesterday shows a man taking photo of ice sculptures at the Harbin Ice and Snow World in Harbin, in northeastern China's Heilongjiang province.

PHOTO: AFP

MORE NEWS

Russia court hits Memorial rights group with second ban

A Moscow court yesterday hit Russia's most prominent rights group, Memorial, with a second ban in as many days despite an international outcry. Judge Mikhail Kazakov ordered the dissolution of Memorial's Human Rights Centre, which campaigns against contemporary rights abuses in Russia, at the request of prosecutors. On Tuesday, the country's Supreme Court had ordered the dissolution of Memorial International, the group's central structure which chronicles Stalin-era purges and maintains the network's extensive archives in Moscow.

Former US Senate leader Harry Reid dies at 82

Former US Senate majority leader Harry Reid, a Nevada Democrat who rose from humble beginnings to lead the upper chamber during the presidencies of George W Bush and Barack Obama, died Tuesday. He was 82. Reid, who used his experience in Congress to help Obama steer his landmark Affordable Care Act through the Senate, had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2018. A prize-fighter in his youth, he used his pugilistic instincts to work his way up to becoming one of the longest-serving majority leaders in US Senate history.



South Africa's Tutu to lie in state for two days

The body of South Africa's revered anti-apartheid fighter Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who died at the weekend aged 90, will lie in state for two days ahead of his funeral on New Year's Day, his foundations said. The lying in state was initially scheduled to last just one day - Friday - but has been extended to Thursday "to accommodate more mourners," the Archbishop Tutu IP Trust and Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation said. Tutu's body will lie in St. George's Cathedral, in his former Cape Town parish. His body will be cremated after the funeral and his ashes then placed in the cathedral.

Rapid Covid tests not as accurate with Omicron: FDA

Rapid Covid home tests are more likely to give a false negative with the heavily-mutated Omicron variant compared to earlier strains, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said Tuesday. In a statement, the FDA said it was collaborating with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to study the performance of home tests, also known as "antigen" tests, against patient samples containing live versions of the Omicron variant. "Early data suggests that antigen tests do detect the Omicron variant but may have reduced sensitivity," the agency said.

US keeps carrier in the Med amid Russia tensions

The United States has ordered an aircraft carrier to remain in the Mediterranean in a bid to reassure European allies amid fears Russia will invade Ukraine, an official said Tuesday. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin ordered the USS Harry S Truman aircraft carrier strike group to stay in the region and hold off on its scheduled onward voyage to the Middle East. The move comes despite an agreement by the United States and Russia to hold talks on January 10 on Geneva on tensions including over Ukraine.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

PANDEMIC PROGNOSIS 2022

Where does it go from here?

AFP, Geneva

Two years in, as the now Omicron-fuelled Covid crisis rages, there is still hope the pandemic could begin fading in 2022 - though experts say gaping vaccine inequalities must be addressed.

It may seem like a far-off reality, as countries impose fresh restrictions to address the fast-spreading new variant and surging cases and a depressing feeling of deja vu sets in.

"We're facing another very hard winter," World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said last week.

But health experts say we are far better equipped now than a year ago to tame the pandemic, with ballooning stocks of safe and largely effective vaccines and new treatments available.

"We have the tools that can bring (the pandemic) to its knees," Maria Van Kerkhove, the top WHO expert on the Covid crisis, told reporters this month.

"We have the power to end it in 2022," she insisted. But, she added, they must be used correctly.

A year after the first vaccines came to market, around 8.5 billion doses have been administered globally.

And the world is on track to produce around 24 billion doses by June - more than enough for everyone on the planet.

But glaringly unequal vaccine access has meant that as many wealthy nations roll out additional doses to the already vaccinated, vulnerable people and health workers in many poorer nations are still waiting for a first jab.

About 67 percent of people in high-income countries have had at least one vaccine dose, but not even 10 percent in low-income countries have, UN numbers show.

That imbalance, which the WHO has branded a moral outrage, risks deepening further as many countries rush to roll out additional doses to respond to Omicron.



Early data indicates that the heavily-mutated variant, which has made a lightning dash around the globe since it was first detected in southern Africa last month, is more resistant to vaccines than previous strains.

While boosters do seem to push protection levels back up, the priority must remain getting first doses to vulnerable people everywhere.

Allowing Covid to spread unabated in some places dramatically increases the chance of new, more dangerous variants emerging, experts warn.

So even as wealthy countries roll out third shots, the world is not safe until everyone has

some degree of immunity.

"No country can boost its way out of the pandemic," Tedros said last week. "Blanket booster programmes are likely to prolong the pandemic, rather than ending it."

The emergence of Omicron is evidence of that, WHO emergencies chief Michael Ryan told AFP. "The virus has taken the opportunity to evolve."

Ryan warns that if the world fails to address the imbalance in vaccine access, the worst could still lie ahead.

One nightmare scenario envisions the Covid pandemic left to rage out of control amid a steady barrage of new variants, even as a separate strain sparks a parallel pandemic.

Confusion and disinformation would shrink trust in authorities and science, as health systems collapse and political turmoil ensues.

But better global vaccine coverage could mean that Covid - though not likely to fully disappear - will become a largely controlled endemic disease, experts say.

But we're not yet there.

Experts caution against too much optimism around early indications that Omicron causes less severe disease than previous strains, pointing out that it is spreading so fast it could still overwhelm health systems.

That is a depressing prospect two years after the virus first surfaced in China.

Officially, nearly 5.5 million people have died worldwide, although the actual toll is likely several times higher. All vaccine hesitancy could increase that toll.

Indonesia to bring stranded Rohingya refugees to shore

AFP, Bireun

Indonesia yesterday said it will let dozens of Rohingya refugees come ashore after protests from locals and the international community over its plan to push them into Malaysian waters.

At least 100 mostly women and children aboard a stricken wooden vessel off Aceh province were denied refuge in Indonesia, where authorities on Tuesday said they planned to push them into the neighbouring Southeast Asian country after fixing their boat.

After a day-long meeting yesterday between officials in the coastal town of Bireun, Jakarta backtracked and said the refugees' boat would be towed to shore on humanitarian grounds.

"The decision was taken after considering the emergency condition of the refugees on that boat," said Armed Wijaya, head of the national taskforce on refugees.

The Rohingya boat is now about 50 miles (80 kilometres) from Bireun and would be pulled ashore, he said without elaborating on the timing.

"As it is now in the middle of the pandemic, all refugees will undergo medical screening," he said, adding that the taskforce will coordinate with related stakeholders to provide shelter and logistics for the refugees.

Indonesian authorities first spotted the wooden boat two days ago, stranded about 70 nautical miles off the Indonesian coast, according to a local navy commander. Local fishermen had alerted them on December 25, one of them said.

On Tuesday, Amnesty International and the UNHCR called on the government to let the stranded group of Rohingya refugees land.

The earlier plan by authorities in Aceh to send the refugees into Malaysia also angered locals in Bireun, where a group of fishermen on Wednesday organised a protest demanding authorities to instead allow the Rohingya to disembark.



Stand News acting chief editor Patrick Lam is being taken away by police after a raid in his office in Hong Kong, China, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

POLICE RAID ON PRO-DEMOCRACY MEDIA OUTLET IN HONG KONG

Stand News shuts down

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Hong Kong pro-democracy media outlet Stand News shut down yesterday after police raided its office, froze its assets and arrested senior staff on suspected "seditious publication" offences in the latest crackdown on the city's media.

The police action prompted censure from the Committee to Protect Journalists and the UN Human Rights Office in Geneva which said it was alarmed at the "extremely rapid closing of the civic space and outlets for Hong Kong's civil society to speak and express themselves freely".

Stand News, set up in 2014 as a non-profit organisation, was the most prominent remaining pro-democracy publication in Hong Kong after a national security investigation this year led to the closure of Apple Daily tabloid.

The raid raises more concerns about press freedom in the former British colony, which returned to Chinese rule in 1997 with the

promise that a wide range of individual rights would be protected.

"Stand News is now stopping operations," the publication said on Facebook, adding all employees had been dismissed.

Police said 200 officers searched the Stand News office and three men and four women, aged 34-73, were arrested on suspicion of "conspiracy to publish seditious publications".

Steve Li, head of the police national security department, said police seized assets worth HK\$61 million (\$7.82 million) as well as computers, phones and journalistic materials, and that he did not rule out further arrests.

Police did not identify them but media said four former members of the Stand News board were arrested - former democratic legislator Margaret Ng, pop singer Denise Ho, Chow Tat-chi and Christine Fang - as well as former chief editor Chung Pui-kuen and acting chief editor Patrick Lam.

উত্তরা-মতিঝিল

১৫৬ তম

সোনারগাঁও জনপথ রোড শাখা
সোনারগাঁও জনপথ রোড
উত্তরা, ঢাকা

এবার যাত্রা
পরিকল্পিত নগরী উত্তরায়

গ্রাহক সন্তুষ্টি নিশ্চিত করার লক্ষ্যে আধুনিক ব্যাংকিং সেবা নিয়ে আজ ৩০ ডিসেম্বর ২০২১, বৃহস্পতিবার
যমুনা ব্যাংক লিমিটেড এর ১৫৬ তম শাখা যাত্রা শুরু করছে ঢাকার উত্তরায়।

দেশের আর্থ সামাজিক উন্নয়নে এবং যেকোন ব্যাংকিং প্রয়োজনে আমরা আছি আপনারদের পাশে।

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