



A general view of a building on fire at the South African Parliament precinct in Cape Town, yesterday. The fire caused the roof of the old National Assembly building to collapse as the blaze continued to rage after eight hours. No casualties had been reported and the cause of the blaze was not yet known.

PHOTO: AFP

Nowhere to hide

Abused Afghan women find shelter dwindling

AFP, Kabul

Married off at seven to a man old enough to be her great-grandfather, Fatema endured rapes, beatings and starvation until she could take no more and tried to kill herself. Through tears she recalls the beatings she received — like the time, aged 10, she was flung against a wall and “my head crashed against a nail... I almost died”.

Today the 22-year-old is living in one of the few shelters for battered women still open in Afghanistan since the Taliban's August return to power, but is fearful she could lose her place at any time.

If the refuge closes, Fatema will have nowhere to go. She has lost touch with her own family, while in-laws have vowed to kill her for dishonouring their name.

Fatema's plight is shared by millions in Afghanistan, where patriarchal tradition, poverty and a lack of education have held back women's rights for decades.

According to the United Nations, 87 percent of Afghan women have experienced some form of physical, sexual or psychological violence.

Despite this, the country of 38 million had only 24 shelters dedicated to their care before the Taliban's return — almost all financed by the international community and frowned upon by many locals.

Some NGOs running shelters stepped up their work long before the Taliban takeover.

The director of one organisation told AFP she began moving women away from shelters in unstable provinces in advance of the US troop withdrawal.

Some were sent back to their blood relatives in the hope they would be offered protection from vengeful in-laws. Others were sent to shelters in bigger provincial capitals.

The Taliban insist their strict interpretation of the Quran provides women with rights and protection, but the reality is very different and they are slowly being squeezed out of public life. Most secondary schools for girls are shut, women are barred from government employment apart from select specialised areas, and this week new guidelines stated they cannot undertake long journeys unless accompanied by a male relative.

There has been some glimmer of light. Earlier this month supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada denounced forced marriage, while Suhail Shaheen — the Taliban's would-be ambassador to the UN — told Amnesty International that women could go to court if they were victims of violence. The regime has not made any formal pronouncement on the future of shelters, although the refugees have not escaped their notice.

Europe tops 100m cases

France to ease Covid rules; England says curbs 'last resort' as nations eye to save economy



AFP, Paris

Europe has recorded over 100 million coronavirus cases, more than a third of all infections worldwide, since the start of the pandemic, as governments face tough choices between controlling the virus and keeping economies open.

The continent has once again become the pandemic's epicentre in recent months, and is battling an upsurge of cases spurred on by the highly transmissible Omicron strain of the virus.

The European region, including 52 countries and territories from the Atlantic coast to Azerbaijan and Russia, has recorded 100,074,753 infections of Covid-19 over the past two years, an AFP tally of official figures showed at 1845 GMT.

Of the European infections, more than 4.9 million have been reported over the past seven days alone, with 17 out of 52 countries or territories beating their previous record of most cases in a single week.

However, governments in Europe are showing no signs of imposing the life-halting restrictions that they imposed when the earlier coronavirus waves hit the continent.

France announced an easing of Covid restrictions from today and Britain's health

minister said curbs were an “absolute last resort”.

Fully vaccinated people in France who test positive will only have to isolate for seven days, and can leave quarantine after five days if they show a negative test.

Some studies have sparked hope that Omicron does not cause Covid as severe as the Delta variant, with some governments factoring that into their decisions to ease curbs.

But the World Health Organization has warned of trying times ahead, saying Omicron could lead to “a tsunami of cases” because of its high transmissibility.

The virus surges dampened New Year's celebrations around the world, with events cancelled and tens of millions spending the holidays under some form of restrictions.

The British government, which is responsible for health policies in England only, has put in place some precautions but so far refused to curb socialising and large events despite record case numbers last week. It has pointed to the less dramatic rise in hospitalisations compared with case numbers as justification.

Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have all rolled out new rules since Christmas limiting gatherings.

Israel pounds Gaza after rocket attacks

AFP, Gaza City

Israel targeted Hamas positions in southern Gaza late Saturday after rockets were fired from the Palestinian enclave, security sources and the army said.

Palestinian sources told AFP the Israeli army had targeted “a site of the al-Qassam Brigades, west of Khan Yunis” in southern Gaza, referring to the military wing of Hamas, the Islamist movement controlling the territory. There were no report of casualties from the strikes.



The sources also reported Israeli artillery fire on a Hamas observation base in northern Gaza.

The Israeli strike came after two rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip on Saturday morning, falling into the Mediterranean Sea off Tel Aviv.

Israel has maintained a blockade on the impoverished enclave since 2007, the year Hamas took power.

Last year Hamas fired hundreds of homemade rockets towards Israel during an 11-day conflict sparked by tensions in Jerusalem. The conflict saw more than 260 Palestinians killed.

A fragile ceasefire came into force in late May.

Since last year's 11-day war, only five rockets or mortar rounds were fired from Gaza towards Israeli territory, the military had said in an annual report released at the end of December, before the latest launches.

BIPIN RAWAT'S CHOPPER CRASH

Bad weather likely caused accident

NDTV ONLINE

The Air Force's inquiry into the chopper crash that killed CDS General Bipin Rawat, his wife and 11 armed forces personnel is almost complete and will be submitted soon, sources told NDTV yesterday.

Neither the Air Force nor the government has made any statement yet on the probe or its report, but sources indicate that reduced visibility due to bad weather may have contributed to the crash.

There has also been no statement or



explanation so far on whether pilot error was the underlying cause of the accident or whether rules for operating within clouds in hilly areas were disregarded.

Sources said the Court of Inquiry believe the pilot of the MI-17V5 that crashed in Tamil Nadu's Nilgiri hills on December 8 may have been left disoriented by inclement weather and accidentally flown into terrain. Sources also said the inquiry ruled out any possibility of technical errors or mechanical defects.

A report is expected to be submitted to Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari within five days.

Now, South Korean defects to North

REUTERS, Seoul

A South Korean has crossed the heavily fortified border in a rare defection to North Korea, South Korea's military said yesterday.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said it carried out a search operation after detecting the person around 9:20 pm (1220 GMT) on Saturday on the eastern side of the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas.

“We've confirmed that the person crossed the Military Demarcation Line border about 10:40 pm (1340 GMT) and defected to the North,” the JCS said.

The JCS said it could not confirm whether the person was alive, but sent a notice to the North via a military hotline asking for protection.

The border crossing, which is illegal in South Korea, came as North Korea carries out strict anti-coronavirus measures since shutting borders in early 2020, though it has not confirmed any infections.

A public and political uproar emerged after North Korean troops shot dead a South Korean fisheries official who went missing at sea in September 2020, for which Pyongyang blamed anti-virus rules and apologised.

Cross-border relations soured after denuclearisation negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington stalled since a failed summit in 2019.

South Korea and a US-led U.N. force are technically still at war with North Korea since the 1950-1953 Korean War ended in an armistice rather than a peace treaty.

22 injured in southwest China quake

AFP, Beijing

Twenty-two people were injured when a shallow earthquake hit southwestern China yesterday afternoon and shook the popular tourist city of Lijiang, local authorities said.

The quake struck near the border between Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, according to the US Geological Survey (USGS), which put the magnitude at 5.4 and depth at 38 kilometres.

The provincial seismological administration said there were no reports yet of damage to houses, but state news agency Xinhua said a 60-strong search and rescue team had been dispatched to the epicentre.



Curbs on our freedom must be an absolute last resort and the British people rightly expect us to do everything in our power to avert them. ... I've been determined that we must give ourselves the best chance of living alongside the virus.

British Health Secretary Sajid Javid



Sudanese protesters rally in al-Daim neighbourhood in the capital Khartoum yesterday, amid calls for pro-democracy rallies in “memory of the martyrs” killed in recent protests. Sudanese security forces fired tear gas canisters at a rally outside the presidential palace in Khartoum, demanding civilian rule.

PHOTO: AFP