



Hindu devotees arrive to take a holy dip in the waters of Sangam, the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and Saraswati rivers during Magh Mela festival, amidst the spread of the coronavirus disease in Prayagraj, India yesterday. Officials expect around three million people to attend the festival's final day. They have also warned that the mela could prove to be a "superspreader" event.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Unfreeze Afghan funds UN chief urges US, World Bank

AFP, Kabul

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has urged the United States and the World Bank to unfreeze Afghan funds, locked since the Taliban's return to power, to prevent "the nightmare unfolding in Afghanistan" from getting worse.

The Taliban yesterday urged Washington to heed the UN chief's call.

"The United States must respond positively to the international voice and release Afghan capital," the Taliban government's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said on Twitter.

Washington has taken control of nearly \$9.5 billion in assets belonging to the Afghan central bank. The IMF and World Bank have suspended activities in Afghanistan, withholding aid as well as \$340 million in new reserves issued by the IMF in August.

"We must... rapidly inject liquidity into the economy and avoid a meltdown that would lead to poverty, hunger and destitution for millions," Guterres told reporters in New York on Thursday.

After the Taliban hardline Islamist movement seized power in mid-August as the United States ended its 20-year war in Afghanistan, the country has found itself on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe.

Aid agencies and the UN have estimated that more than half of the nation's 38 million population is expected to face hunger this winter. An estimated 4.7 million people will suffer from acute malnutrition in 2022, including 1.1 million children with severe acute malnutrition, according to aid agencies.

Speaking to reporters two days after the UN said it needs \$5 billion in aid for Afghanistan in 2022, Guterres called on Washington to take the lead in helping the country avoid a meltdown "because the major part of the world financial system works in dollars."

"I hope the remaining resources - more than \$1.2 billion" from the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) "will become available to help Afghanistan's people survive the winter," Guterres told journalists.

Many Western nations have also largely suspended their assistance to Afghanistan, one of the world's poorest countries.



'The drumbeat of war sounding loud'

Russia moves more troops to Ukraine border; EU, US warn Moscow after massive cyberattack



AGENCIES

Ukraine was hit by a massive cyberattack warning its citizens to "be afraid and expect the worst", and Russia, which has massed more than 100,000 troops on its neighbour's frontier, released TV pictures yesterday of more forces deploying in a drill.

The developments unfolded hours after talks wrapped up with no breakthrough between Russia and Western states.

"The drumbeat of war is sounding loud," Michael Carpenter, US Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), said at the close of talks on Thursday.

Russia denies plans to attack Ukraine but says it could take unspecified military action unless demands are met, including a promise by the Nato alliance never to admit Kyiv.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday said Russia hoped security talks with the United States would resume, but this would depend on Washington's response to Moscow's proposals.

"We categorically will not accept the appearance of Nato right on our borders,

especially so given the current course of the Ukrainian leadership," he said.

Asked what Moscow meant by threatening this week to take "military-technical action" if talks fail, Lavrov said: "Measures to deploy military hardware, that is obvious. When we take decisions with military hardware we understand what we mean and what we are preparing for."

Ukrainian officials were investigating the huge cyberattack, which they said hit around 70 internet sites of government bodies including the ministry of foreign affairs, cabinet of ministers, and security and defence council. Though they avoided directly accusing Moscow, they made clear Russia was suspected.

EU foreign ministers yesterday warned Russia of a "robust" response, fearing that a cyberattack against Ukraine could prepare the ground for military action by Moscow against its neighbour.

The standoff with Russia "is serious, more serious than anything we've seen in recent years", Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg told reporters at a meeting of the bloc's top diplomats in the French city of Brest.

"Some say the cyberattack could be the prelude for other activities, military activities," he said.

NEW PARTYGATE SCANDAL PM Johnson's office apologises to Queen

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's office apologised to Queen Elizabeth yesterday after it emerged that staff had partied late into the night in Downing Street on the eve of Prince Philip's funeral, at a time when mixing indoors was banned.

Johnson is facing the gravest crisis of his premiership after almost daily revelations about a series of social gatherings during Covid-19 lockdowns, some held when ordinary people could not bid farewell in person to dying relatives.

In an extraordinary twist to a saga, the Daily Telegraph said drinks parties were held inside Downing Street on April 16, 2021, the day before Prince Philip's funeral.

"It is deeply regrettable this took place at a time of national mourning and No. 10 (Downing Street) has apologised to the Palace," Johnson's spokesman told reporters. Johnson was at his Chequers country residence that day and was not invited to any gathering, his spokesman said.

Opponents have called for Johnson, 57, to resign, casting him as a charlatan who demanded the British people follow some of the most onerous rules in peacetime history while his own staff partied at the heart of the British state.



A Palestinian protester flashes the victory sign amid clashes with Israeli security forces, following a demonstration against the expropriation of land by Israel in the village of Kfar Qaddum near the Jewish settlement of Kedumim in the occupied West Bank, yesterday.

N Korea fires two ballistic missiles

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea fired at least two ballistic missiles yesterday, its third test in less than two weeks, just hours after criticising a US push for new sanctions over the previous launches as a "provocation" and warning of a strong reaction. South Korea's National Security Council held an emergency meeting and expressed "strong regret" over the test and called on Pyongyang to return to talks. Japan's coast guard also said the North fired what could be a ballistic missile. The missiles appeared to have landed in the sea outside Japan's exclusive economic zone, broadcaster NHK said, citing an unnamed Japanese defence ministry official. The two missiles travelled about 430 km to a maximum altitude of 36 km.

Prince Andrew stripped of royal, military links

REUTERS, London

The Royal Family removed Prince Andrew's military links and royal patronages on Thursday and said he will no longer be known as "His Royal Highness", as the son of Queen Elizabeth fights a US lawsuit in which he is accused of sex abuse. Andrew, 61, the Duke of York, was forced to step down from public duties in 2019 because of his connections to convicted US sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. Thursday's move by the royal family means he will now lose all his royal connections. On Wednesday, Andrew's lawyers failed to persuade a US judge to dismiss a civil lawsuit in which Virginia Giuffre accuses him of sexually abusing her when she was a teenager.

Bomb found at Delhi market

AFP, New Delhi

Indian bomb disposal experts cordoned off a busy flower market in the capital New Delhi yesterday after finding an improvised explosive device left in an abandoned bag, police said. Police commissioner Rakesh Asthana told the NDTV news channel the bag was left behind by a customer who visited a shop to buy flowers at the Ghazipur wholesale flower market. Media reports said police carried out a controlled explosion. The market in eastern Delhi gets thousands of small farmers, horticulturists and shopkeepers early in the morning. India is in a heightened state of security ahead of Republic Day celebrations on January 26, when a military parade is due to take place in the heart of the capital.

US Capitol riot: Social media giants subpoenaed

AFP, Washington

The congressional committee investigating the January 6, 2021 storming of the US Capitol on Thursday subpoenaed records from YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Reddit that would detail the use of social media in the attack. The records could help explain "how the spread of misinformation and violent extremism contributed to the violent attack on our democracy," said Bennie Thompson, chairman of the House Select January 6 Committee. Thompson said the companies had not responded adequately to requests for information to help in its investigation of the violent attack a year ago on the Capitol by supporters of then-president Donald Trump.

\$3.36 million for a comic book page!

AFP, Los Angeles

A single page of original artwork from an acclaimed 1984 comic featuring Spider-Man sold for a record \$3.36 million in the United States on Thursday, making the webslinger the world's mightiest auction superhero.

The page features the first appearance of Spidey's black symbiote suit that would later lead to the creation of anti-hero Venom in artwork by Mike Zeck from Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars no. 8.

The previous record for a single page of artwork from the interior of an American comic book was a frame showing the first image of Wolverine in a 1974 issue of "The Incredible Hulk". The page sold for \$657,250.

In the coming days, Nato and Ukraine will sign an agreement on enhanced cyber cooperation, including Ukrainian access to Nato's malware information sharing platform.

Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, after a massive cyberattack hit Ukraine amid Russia tensions