



A handout picture made available by the Iranian Army official website yesterday shows Iranian, Russia and Chinese warships during a joint military drill in the Indian ocean. The three-day drills began yesterday in the Indian Ocean, seeking to reinforce "common security", an Iranian naval official said.

PHOTO: AFP

100 seconds to midnight

Doomsday Clock highlights world's existential crisis

AFP, Washington

The "Doomsday Clock," representing the judgment of leading science and security experts about perils to human existence, remains at 100 seconds to midnight this year, with advances like Covid-19 vaccines balanced by rising misinformation and other threats.

Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists president Rachel Bronson declared Thursday the world was no safer this year than two years ago, when the clock's hands were moved to their current position.

"If humanity is to avoid an existential catastrophe, one that would dwarf anything it has yet seen, national leaders must do a far better job of countering disinformation, heeding science and cooperating," she told reporters on the 75th anniversary of the clock's initial unveiling.

The fact that it hasn't shifted closer to midnight does not imply threats have stabilized, the group said in a full statement. "On the contrary, the Clock remains the closest it has ever been to civilization-ending apocalypse because the world remains stuck in an extremely dangerous moment."

The Bulletin was founded in 1945 by Albert Einstein, J Robert Oppenheimer and other scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project which produced the first nuclear weapons.

The idea of the clock symbolizing global vulnerability to catastrophe. Its time is set by the organization's board, with the support of its board of sponsors, which includes 11 Nobel laureates.

In its statement, the Bulletin noted hopeful developments at the start of 2021, including the renewal of the New START arms control agreement between the United States and Russia.

But international tensions continue to loom ominously, including most recently over Ukraine. The United States, Russia and China meanwhile continue their march to develop hypersonic weapons.

No country meanwhile remains immune to threats to democracy, the Bulletin said. On climate, COP26 in Glasgow offered positive rhetoric but relatively little action.



US to respond to Russian demands

Amid war of words, top diplomats agree for more diplomacy on Ukraine crisis



AFP, Geneva

Washington and Moscow's top diplomats agreed at high-stakes talks on Friday to keep working to ease tensions over Ukraine, with the United States promising a written response to Russian security demands next week.

As fears grow that Russia could invade its pro-Western neighbour, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov sat down for 90 minutes of hastily-arranged talks in Geneva.

Russia has massed tens of thousands of troops on the Ukrainian border, denying it plans to invade but demanding security guarantees, including a permanent ban on the country joining Nato.

Blinken said after the talks that Washington will share written ideas with Russia next week, voicing hope for more diplomacy.

"We didn't expect any major breakthroughs to happen today, but I believe we are now on a clear path in terms of understanding each other's concerns and each other's positions," Blinken told reporters.

"We ended up with an agreement that we will receive written responses to all our proposals next week," Lavrov said in a separate press conference.

"Antony Blinken agreed that we need to have a reasonable dialogue, and I hope emotions will decrease," Lavrov said.

"I cannot say whether or not we are on the right track. We will know when we get an answer," Lavrov said. He added that another meeting could be held between the two, but that it was "premature" to start talking about a summit between Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin.

Biden bluntly assessed on Wednesday that Putin is likely to "move in" on Ukraine and warned of a "disaster for Russia". German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and British PM Boris Johnson yesterday warned that Russia would pay a "considerable and serious price" if it invades Ukraine.

Russia yesterday reiterated demands for the "withdrawal of foreign forces, hardware and arms" from countries that were not Nato members before 1997, this time singling out Bulgaria and Romania, two countries that joined Nato in 2004.

Meanwhile, lawmakers in Russia's parliament have presented a bill that would ask Putin to recognise the independence of two pro-Moscow separatist territories in Ukraine, Donetsk and Lugansk. Ukraine's intelligence service yesterday accused Russia of sending fresh arms and equipment to the rebels.

Yemen raids kill at least 60

REUTERS, Saada

Three children and more than 60 adults are reported to have been killed in air strikes in Yemen on Friday, Save the Children said, after a Reuters witness said several people including African migrants were killed in a raid in Saada province.

Rescue workers were still pulling bodies out of the rubble around midday following the dawn strike on the temporary detention centre in Saada in north Yemen, but it was not immediately clear how many people had been killed.

A Saudi-led military coalition has intensified air strikes on what it says are Houthi military targets after the Iran-aligned movement conducted an unprecedented assault on coalition member the United Arab Emirates on Monday and further cross-border missile and drones launches at Saudi cities.

Houthi-run Al Masirah television channel said tens of people had been killed and injured in the strike in Saada. It showed footage of men trying to clear rubble using their hands to reach those trapped and of wounded at al-Jamhuri hospital.

The conflict, in which the coalition intervened in March 2015 after the Houthis ousted the internationally recognised government from Sanaa, has killed tens of thousands of people, displaced millions and pushed Yemen to the verge of famine.

United Nations envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, on Friday voiced grave concern over the military escalation and called on both sides to "exercise maximum restraint".

Biden's approval rating drops to 43pc

REUTERS, Washington

US President Joe Biden's public approval rating fell to the lowest level of his presidency this week as Americans appeared exhausted by the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic toll, according to the latest Reuters/Ipsos opinion poll. The national poll, conducted Jan. 19-20, found that 43 percent of US adults approved of Biden's performance in office, while 52% disapproved and the rest were not sure. The prior week's poll had put Biden at a 45 percent approval rating and 50 percent disapproval.

China, Russia block N Korea sanctions

AFP, United Nations

China and Russia on Thursday blocked a US push to impose United Nations sanctions on five North Koreans in response to recent missile launches by Pyongyang, diplomats told AFP. Along with Beijing, Moscow has long held a line against increasing pressure on North Korea, even asking for relief from international sanctions for humanitarian reasons. Last week, Washington levied sanctions on five North Koreans linked to the country's ballistic missile program.

UN adopts resolution on Holocaust denial

AFP, United Nations

The UN General Assembly on Thursday adopted a non-binding resolution calling on all member states to fight against Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism, especially on social media. The Israeli-proposed text was developed with the help of Germany and co-sponsored by several dozen of the 193 states that make up the United Nations. Iran, however, expressed opposition to the resolution. The Holocaust saw the genocide of six million European Jews between 1939 and 1945 by the Nazis and their supporters.

ISLAMIC STATE ATTACKS

Dozens killed in Iraq, Syria

AGENCIES

The Islamic State group on Friday attacked a Syria prison housing fellow jihadists and a military base in Iraq in near simultaneous deadly operations that revived fears of a IS resurgence.

The jihadist group has yet to comment on the attacks and there is no indication that they are coordinated but, according to analysts, they strongly suggest IS is trying to boost its ranks and arsenal in an attempt to reorganise across both countries.

In Syria, an ongoing IS attack on a northeast Syria detention facility holding the largest number of IS suspects killed at least 20 Kurdish security forces and set several IS fighters free, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The prison break that began late Thursday was one of the group's most significant attacks since its "caliphate" was declared defeated in the war-torn country nearly three years ago.

As IS operatives launched their bid to free some of the estimated 3,500 fellow fighters jailed at Ghwayran prison in the Syrian city of Hasakeh, the jihadists killed 11 soldiers in an attack on an army base in the east of neighbouring Iraq. The attack marked the jihadists' deadliest operation in Iraq this year.



Former Congress president Rahul Gandhi (R) and Congress party general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra (L) pose with party's manifesto for the youth of Uttar Pradesh ahead of the assembly elections during a press conference in New Delhi, India, yesterday. Legislative Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh are scheduled to be held in Uttar Pradesh from 10 February to 7 March 2022 in seven phases.

PHOTO: AFP

UYGHUR 'GENOCIDE' China slams France move

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday condemned a French parliament resolution that accuses Beijing of carrying out a genocide against its Uyghur Muslim population, a move that has strained ties two weeks before the Winter Olympics.

The resolution have criticised Beijing for placing around one million Uyghurs in forced labour camps, terming "the violence perpetrated by the People's Republic of China against the Uyghurs as constituting crimes against humanity and genocide".

France's National Assembly joins Canada, the Netherlands, Britain and Belgium in having parliaments where lawmakers have passed similar motions.



The secretary-general of the UN has no power. We can have influence. I can persuade. I can mediate, but I have no power.

Antonio Guterres as he starts his second term as UN chief