

Stakes 'never been higher'
Says IPCC head as nearly 200 nations meet to finalise report on climate impacts

AFP, Paris

The stakes in the fight against global warming are higher than ever, the UN's climate science chief said yesterday as nearly 200 nations met to finalise what is sure to be a harrowing report on climate impacts.

"The need for the Working Group 2 report has never been greater because the stakes have never been higher," Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Chair Hoesung Lee said in a live videocast.

Species extinction, ecosystem collapse, mosquito-borne disease, deadly heat, water shortages and reduced crop yields are already measurably worse due to rising temperatures.

Just in the last year, the world has seen a cascade of unprecedented floods, heatwaves and wildfires across four continents.

All these impacts will accelerate in the coming decades even if the carbon pollution driving climate change is rapidly brought to heel, the IPCC report is likely to warn.

A crucial, 40-page Summary for Policy-makers -- distilling underlying chapters totalling thousands of pages, and reviewed line-by-line -- is to be made public on February 28.

"This is a real moment of reckoning," said Rachel Cleetus, climate and energy policy director at the Union of Concerned Scientists.



Soldiers walk in front of Howitzers of the German armed forces Bundeswehr as they are prepared for loading to Lithuania at the Bundeswehr military base in Munster, Germany yesterday. A German military aircraft carrying troop reinforcements landed at Lithuania's Kaunas airport yesterday, the first of several planned deployments amid fears in the region over a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine.

PHOTO: AFP

Solution still possible

Russia sees 'chance' for agreement with West over Ukraine, says some of its military drills 'ending'

AFP, Moscow

Russia said yesterday that a diplomatic solution to Moscow's standoff with the West was still possible and that some of its military drills were ending, after tensions over Ukraine reached fever pitch.

The comments came after German Chancellor Olaf Scholz landed in Kyiv for crisis talks ahead of a visit to Moscow to head off what Berlin said was the "very critical" threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

During a televised meeting with President Vladimir Putin, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said "there is always a chance" to reach an agreement with Western countries over the standoff.

He told Putin that dialogue with leaders in European capitals and Washington should continue and that "opportunities

are far from exhausted" for a resolution. "I would suggest continuing" talks, Lavrov said.

On his arrival in Ukraine, the German leader headed directly to see President Volodymyr Zelensky, whose government has demanded an urgent meeting with Russia to explain why it has deployed more than 100,000 soldiers to Ukraine's borders.

European leaders warn that the troop build-up is the worst threat to the continent's security since the Cold War, as Putin demands a rollback of Western influence in eastern Europe and a ban on Ukraine joining Nato.

Western allies have prepared what they warn would be a crippling package of economic sanctions in response.

Earlier, a German government source had said: "We assess the situation as very critical, very dangerous."

Western alarm over Ukraine has been

fuelled by recent Russian military exercises, including Belarus, where the US said Moscow had dispatched 30,000 troops for more than a week of drills.

Russia's Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu told Putin in a meeting yesterday that some of the drills were "ending" and some would end "in the near future".

In Kyiv, Ukraine's Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov hailed "positive" talks with his Belarusian counterpart. He said he had been assured "there are no threats to Ukraine from Belarus".

US intelligence officials worry that weeks of crisis talks have given Russia the time to prepare a major offensive should Putin make the ultimate decision to attack Ukraine.

"We are digging trenches that Ukrainian soldiers could quickly jump into and defend in case the Russians attack," 15-year-old Mykhailo Anopa told AFP.

CRITICISM OF GOVT Gunmen attack Lanka TV journo

AFP, Colombo

Armed men stormed the home of a high-profile Sri Lankan television journalist critical of the government yesterday, police said, sparking condemnation by local media rights groups. Chamuditha Samarakkrama, who had criticised the powerful ruling Rajapaksa family and their allies in recent broadcasts, including on YouTube, was shaken but unhurt after the pre-dawn raid, police said. "They carried weapons to intimidate the guard and gained access to the housing compound," a police official said adding that forensic experts had been called in to launch an investigation. "There were at least three armed men and they travelled in a white van," Samarakkrama told AFP. "I heard shots fired. They smashed my windows and threw faeces at the house. It was captured on CCTV. I don't know who is behind this attack, but I want to tell them that they can't silence me." Local media rights organisations denounced the attack on Samarakkrama.

TMC sweeps West Bengal civic bodies' polls

THE INDIAN EXPRESS ONLINE



The Trinamool Congress yesterday made a clean sweep in the civic polls to four municipal corporations in West Bengal -- Bidhannagar, Siliguri, Chandernagore and Asansol -- as per data available on the State Election Commission's website. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee congratulated the people saying: "The election was held peacefully. The State Election Commission and administration played important roles to ensure people cast their votes. There was no trouble anywhere during polling." Meanwhile, BJP yesterday moved Calcutta High Court demanding Central forces for the remaining Municipalities Polls in West Bengal, scheduled for 27th February. The matter will be heard by the court today.

Hong Kong 'overwhelmed' as Covid cases hit record

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong's health facilities have been overloaded by an "onslaught" of Covid-19 infections, its leader said, even as authorities cling to a "zero-Covid" policy despite an unprecedented rise in cases fuelled by the Omicron variant.

Authorities have adhered to mainland China's policy of stamping out the smallest outbreak with mass quarantine, widespread tracking, and prolonged social distancing measures since the start of the pandemic.

But the extremely contagious Omicron variant breached the Chinese territory's defences in late December, piling up more than 8,000 infections in a few weeks with researchers warning that daily cases could exceed 25,000 by next month.

While the infection rate remains low



Palestinians rally in support of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, outside the International Committee of the Red Cross building in Gaza City yesterday. Israeli forces shot dead a Palestinian during a clash in the occupied West Bank as troops prepared to demolish the home of a man accused of killing an Israeli, the Palestinian health ministry and witnesses said yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Vienna talks 'complicated' Says Iran on restoring 2015 nuclear deal

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday said talks with world powers in Vienna to restore the 2015 nuclear deal are "complicated and difficult" but have not hit an impasse.

"The negotiations are complicated and difficult as they have reached key issues that need serious political decisions especially by Washington," foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh told a news conference.

But "there is no impasse in Vienna", he added.

Iran is engaged in negotiations with Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia directly and with the United States indirectly to revive the deal formally called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The deal offered Tehran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme.

But the US unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 under then-president Donald Trump and reimposed stiff economic sanctions, prompting Tehran to begin rolling back on its commitments.

The drive to salvage the 2015 nuclear deal resumed in late November.

If the US and European parties show real determination", an agreement can be reached very soon in Vienna, Khatibzadeh said yesterday.

"We need objective guarantees to make sure the US does not leave the agreement once again and that it honours its commitments," he added.

The goals of the negotiations are to have the US return to the deal by lifting its anti-Iran sanctions.

Biden order 'atrocity against Afghans'

Says ex-president Karzai on frozen funds; Taliban FM in Qatar in bid to unlock aid

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai has called a White House order to unfreeze \$3.5bn in Afghan assets held in the United States for families of 9/11 victims an atrocity against the Afghan people.

Karzai, at a packed news conference, sought the help of Americans, particularly the families of the thousands killed in the 9/11 attacks, to press President Joe Biden to rescind last week's order.

"The people of Afghanistan share the pain of the American people, share the pain of the families and loved ones of those who died, who lost their lives in the tragedy of September 11," said Karzai.

"We commiserate with them [but]

Afghan people are as much victims as those families who lost their lives. Withholding money or seizing money from the people of Afghanistan in their name is unjust and unfair and an atrocity against Afghan people."

President Biden's order, signed last Friday, freed \$7.1bn in Afghan assets currently held in the US, to be divided between 9/11 victims and humanitarian aid to Afghans.

September 11 attack victims and their families have legal claims against the Taliban and the \$7.1bn in the US banking system.

The \$3.5bn was set aside for a US court to decide whether it can be used to settle claims by families of 9/11 victims.

US courts would also have to sign

off before the release of humanitarian assistance money.

We "ask the US courts to do the opposite, to return the Afghan money back to the Afghan people", said Karzai.

"This money does not belong to any government ... this money belongs to the people of Afghanistan."

Meanwhile, on Sunday, a Taliban delegation arrived in Qatar in a new bid to convince governments to provide humanitarian aid.

The delegation, led by Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, will meet with a European Union delegation in Doha, diplomatic missions and officials from Gulf countries.

The latest bid to unlock aid follows meetings in Oslo late last month between Taliban representatives and

governments that heavily bankrolled Afghanistan's previous government, which imploded in the face of a Taliban military offensive in August last year.

The Taliban government has yet to gain formal recognition from any country and the United Nations said that half of Afghanistan's 38 million people face food shortages.

But while Muttaqi told the AFP news agency earlier this month that the Taliban is inching closer to international recognition, his delegation is again expected to face demands to improve human and women's rights in the Doha talks, that began yesterday.

The UAE was one of only three countries to recognise the previous Taliban rule.