



Smoke rises from a Saudi Aramco oil facility in Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coastal city of Jeddah, yesterday, a day after Yemeni rebels attacked it with "drones and missiles". The attack caused a fire in two storage tanks but no casualties. The coalition yesterday said its airstrikes targeted "sources of threat" in the Houthi-controlled capital Sanaa and the Red Sea port city of Hodeidah.

PHOTO: AFP

'This is apartheid'

Top UN expert slams Israel's 55-year-old occupation of Palestinian territories

AFP, Geneva

A top UN rights expert slammed the international community Friday for allowing Israel's decades-long occupation of Palestinian territories to evolve into a system of "apartheid".

Michael Lynk, the UN special rapporteur on the rights situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, joined a growing number of voices describing Israel's separation policy as "apartheid".

Presenting his final report to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, the independent expert said that "the Israeli occupation, now in its 55th year with its end nowhere in sight, has become ever more entrenched and repressive."

"This is apartheid," he said, pointing to "relentless land confiscation, the ever-expanding Jewish-only settlements, the dual legal system, the vast gap in living conditions between Israeli settlers and the Palestinians living among them, the vast separation in political rights."

Israel has controlled the West Bank and east Jerusalem since 1967. Some 700,000 Jewish settlers now live in both areas, in settlements regarded as illegal under international law.

Lynk acknowledged that the Israeli system lacked some of the features of apartheid-era South Africa, like the ban on racial interaction.

But, he said, "there are pitiless features of Israel's 'apartness' rule... that were not practiced in southern Africa, such as segregated highways, high walls and extensive checkpoints."

"With the eyes of the international community wide open, Israel has imposed upon Palestine an apartheid reality in a post-apartheid world."

Lynk spoke after rights groups, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Israeli-based B'Tselem have begun using the "apartheid" label to refer to the Israeli occupation.

He decried "the remarkable unwillingness of the international community to impose any accountability measures on Israel for its forever occupation, which has been conducted both in absolute defiance of international law and with the eyes of the international community wide open."



HINDRANCE TO GIRLS' EDUCATION

US scraps Taliban talks

Girls protest in Kabul demanding reopening of schools



AFP, Washington

The United States cancelled planned talks in Doha with the Taliban after the hardline Islamist rulers of Afghanistan shut girls' secondary schools as about two dozen girls and women protested in the Afghan capital yesterday against the move.

"We have cancelled some of our engagements, including planned meetings in Doha around the Doha Forum, and have made clear that we see this decision as a potential turning point in our engagement," State Department deputy spokeswoman Jalina Porter said on Friday.

The Taliban, which seized power in August and is eager for international recognition, shut down girls' secondary schools this week just hours after reopening them.

The Taliban's decision to keep schools shuttered for girls came after a meeting late Tuesday by senior officials in the southern city of Kandahar, the movement's de facto power center and conservative spiritual heartland.

It followed months of work by the international community to address the issue of supporting teacher stipends, and came just as Afghan girls were eagerly heading back to school for the first time in seven months.

When the Taliban returned to power, they promised a softer rule compared with their first regime from 1996 to 2001, which became notorious for human rights abuses.

They claimed to respect women's rights, in line with their interpretation of Islamic sharia law, and said girls would be allowed to study through to university.

But the Taliban have imposed a slew of restrictions on women, effectively banning them from many government jobs, policing what they wear and preventing them from travelling outside of their cities alone.

In a joint statement Thursday the foreign ministers of Britain, Canada, France, Italy, Norway and the United States, plus the high representative of the European Union, said the Taliban's decision will harm the group's prospects for legitimacy.

"Open the schools! Justice, justice!" chanted protesters yesterday, some carrying school books as they gathered at a city square in Kabul.

They held banners that said: "Education is our fundamental right, not a political plan" as they marched for a short distance and later dispersed as Taliban fighters arrived at the scene. The protest was the first held by women in weeks.

UK Covid-19 cases nearing record highs

AFP, London

Coronavirus levels reached all-time highs in Scotland and Wales and are nearing record levels in England, with around 4.2 million people infected across the UK last week, official figures showed Friday.

The steep rise in infections is due to Omicron BA.2, a more transmissible variant of Omicron, said the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

Around one in 16 people in England were likely to have had the disease in the week to March 19, the third consecutive weekly rise, said the country's official statistical body.

Around 4.26 million people were believed to have been infected across the whole UK last week, just shy of the 4.3 million record set in the first week of 2022.

Despite the number of infections, the New Year wave resulted in far fewer deaths than previous bouts due to Omicron's relatively mild symptoms.

The number of people admitted to hospital in England and Wales is also on the rise, although the number of people in high-dependency units is still low.

Scotland's hospitals are currently treating 2,326 patients, a new record.

Britain has been one of the countries hardest hit by the pandemic, recording 164,454 deaths.



Nuclear talks: EU envoy to visit Iran

AFP, Tehran

The European Union's coordinator for talks to restore the Iran nuclear deal, Enrique Mora, said he was hoping to close gaps in the negotiations ahead of his expected arrival in Tehran. The EU diplomat, who coordinates talks between Iran and the US, is due to arrive in Tehran later in the night, state news agency IRNA reported. He is scheduled to meet Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri today. Concerned parties have signalled for weeks that the negotiations are close to an agreement, but that "political decisions" are required from Tehran and Washington.

Russia's war kills 136 children so far: Ukraine

REUTERS, Lviv

The war in Ukraine has killed 136 children in the 31 days since the start of the Russian invasion, Ukraine's office of the prosecutor general said on Saturday in a message on the Telegram app.

Of the total, 64 children have been killed in the Kyiv region, the office said. A further 50 children have died in the Donetsk region, it said. Additionally, 199 children have been wounded. Reuters was not able to immediately verify the report. Putin had sent troops into Ukraine on February 24, vowing to destroy the country's military and topple pro-Western President Volodymyr Zelensky.



I believe we are entering a Third World War, not a conventional conflict but an information war. It is like radiation -- you don't feel it, you don't touch it, but it affects you.

Ukrainian Deputy FM **Emine Dzhamalova** slams Russia's misinformation war

TEST OF NEW ICBM

N Korea has 'likely more in store': US

AFP, Seoul

North Korea likely has "more in store" after successfully test-firing its largest-ever intercontinental ballistic missile, a top US official said Friday, as Washington called for tougher international sanctions at the UN Security Council.

Thursday's launch was the first time Pyongyang has fired Kim Jong Un's most powerful missiles at full range since 2017.

It was conducted under Kim's "direct guidance", and ensures his country is ready for "long-standing confrontation" with the United States, state media outlet KCNA reported Friday.

"We see this as part of a pattern of testing and provocation from North Korea... we think there is likely more in store," White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters travelling on board Air Force One with President Joe Biden.

The missile appears to have travelled higher and further than any previous ICBM tested by the nuclear-armed country -- including one designed to strike anywhere on the US mainland.

At the UN Security Council on Friday, the United States called for a "resolution to update and strengthen the sanctions regime" against Pyongyang.



This combination of photographs show the landmark Tokyo Tower before and with its lights switched off during Earth Hour in Tokyo, Japan, yesterday. From Singapore to Buenos Aires, cities around the world turned off their lights yesterday to mark Earth Hour. This year's event invite people around the globe to unite in a moment of reflection on our relationship with each other and our collective home.

PHOTO: AFP

1,351 Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine

AFP, Moscow

The Russian army on Friday updated its losses in Ukraine to 1,351 soldiers, while saying that it had evacuated more than 400,000 civilians and condemning Western supplies of weapons to Kyiv.

At a Moscow briefing, senior military officials gave the first update on Russian deaths in weeks, adding that 3,825 soldiers had been wounded.

A senior representative of the General Staff, Sergei Rudskoi, said that Russia was carrying out an operation "on the whole territory of Ukraine".

He claimed that Ukraine had lost 14,000 troops while 16,000 were wounded.