

WAR IN YEMEN

Rivals agree to 2-month truce

Yemen's warring parties were yesterday set to lay down their weapons for the first nationwide truce since 2016 with all eyes on whether the UN-brokered ceasefire will hold.

The Iran-backed Huthi rebels and Saudi-led coalition have both agreed to observe the two-month truce, which is to take effect at 1600 GMT on the first day of Ramadan.

Yemen's intractable war has killed hundreds of thousands directly or indirectly and displaced millions, triggering the world's worst humanitarian crisis, according to the United Nations.

Previous ceasefires have been ineffective. A national truce ahead of peace talks in April 2016 was violated almost immediately, as were other ceasefires that year.

A 2018 agreement to cease hostilities around rebel-held Hodeida port, a lifeline for the Arab world's poorest country, was also largely ignored.

Both the Huthis and Saudi Arabia have welcomed the latest initiative, which follows a surge in attacks but also increasing diplomacy including ongoing talks -- snubbed by the rebels -- in Riyadh. The truce was also welcomed by US President Joe Biden and UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres.

Under the agreement, all ground, air and sea military operations in Yemen and across its borders would stop, UN special envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg said in his announcement. Fuel ships would be allowed into Hodeida port and commercial flights could resume to certain regional destinations from the airport in the Huthi-held capital Sanaa -- both key demands of the insurgents before they consider peace talks.



Protestors hold banners and placards during a demonstration against the surge in prices and shortage of fuel and other essential commodities in Colombo, Sri Lanka, yesterday. Sri Lanka declared a 36-hour nationwide curfew yesterday and deployed troops backed with sweeping new powers under a state of emergency to quell protests against the president, his relatives.

PHOTO: AFP

Israeli forces kill three in West Bank

Israeli security forces killed three gunmen from the Palestinian militant group Islamic Jihad in a shootout in the occupied West Bank yesterday.

"This is a terrorist cell that has been involved in terrorist activity against security forces recently, and was apparently on its way to another attack," the police said.

Four Israeli officers were wounded.

Islamic Jihad claimed the three Palestinians as members.

Tensions have risen over the past week after a string of deadly Arab attacks in Israel. Officials have warned about a potential surge in assaults in the run-up to Saturday's start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, a period during which violence has surged in the past.

On Tuesday, a Palestinian gunman shot dead five people in the Israeli city of Bnei Brak before he was killed by police. The shooting raised to 11 the number of people killed by Arab attackers in Israel within a week.

Israeli forces shot dead three Palestinians in West Bank clashes on Thursday and Friday and a Palestinian stabbed a passenger on an Israeli bus near a Jewish settlement and was shot dead by another passenger.

Nepal PM in India to deepen ties

Countries restore rail links, agree on energy projects



Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba met his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi and inaugurated the Himalayan nation's only railway link with its southern neighbour yesterday in a summit meant to deepen relations.

Nepal has traditionally done a balancing act between New Delhi and Beijing, but analysts believe Indian influence over Kathmandu has been dwindling as China pours heavy investment into the landlocked Himalayan country.

But Nepalese prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba made India his first foreign destination since he returned to power last year.

After the meeting, Deuba and Modi jointly flagged off Nepal's only railway link between Janakpur in Nepal and the border town of Jaynagar in India.

The 35-km (22-mile) railway was reconstructed by India as a grant. It was built by the colonial British Indian government as a narrow-gauge line to transport logs from Nepal.

The two prime ministers also remotely inaugurated an electricity transmission line that will supply hydroelectric power generated in

the Solukhumbu area, where Mount Everest is located, to Nepal's national power grid.

Both countries agreed to speed up the Pancheswar hydroelectric project on their border in west Nepal, which Modi said would be a "game changer" for the development of the region.

"The friendship between India and Nepal and mutual relationship between our people ... cannot be found anywhere in the world," Modi told a news briefing after the meeting. "Threads of our civilization, culture and mutual exchanges have been linked since ancient times."

Deuba said Nepal's ties with India were "highly important" and Kathmandu was "eager to benefit from India's progress through a mutually beneficial economic partnership."

Nepal agreed to use the Indian RuPay card which would strengthen "financial connectivity," and promote Indian tourist flows, India said in a statement. Both sides also signed agreements that include cooperation in railways and sharing technical expertise between the Indian Oil Corporation IOC.NS and Nepal Oil Corporation.

Deuba's journey south comes just days after Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi visited Nepal and India.

Blasts kill 5 in western Afghan city

At least five people were killed and 20 more wounded when two bombs exploded in quick succession in the western Afghan city of Herat on Friday, officials said.

The incident happened in the evening when a group of young men and children had gathered to play at a ground where the bombs were planted.

"Five people have been killed and 20 others have been wounded," Sabit Harwi, spokesman for the intelligence office in Herat, told AFP.

Harwi said the local police defused two other bombs found in the area.

He said the entire area had been demined recently to remove all unexploded ordnances left from the war and the bombs that exploded on Friday appeared to have been planted just before the group came to play.

Ibrahim Mohammadi, head of Herat's ambulance service, confirmed the toll and said the dead included a child.

Herat is the country's third-biggest city, close to the border with Iran, but had remained relatively peaceful for several weeks.

Meanwhile in a separate incident earlier on Friday, five children were killed when an unexploded mortar shell accidentally blew up in the southern province of Helmand, Mohammad Qasim Riaz, an official said.

Pope implicitly criticises Putin on invasion

Pope Francis yesterday said he was considering a trip to Kyiv and implicitly criticised Russian President Vladimir Putin over the invasion of Ukraine, saying a "potentate" was fomenting conflict for nationalist interests.

Francis made the comments, first to reporters on the plane taking him to Malta for a two-day visit, and then in a hard-hitting speech in the island's presidential palace that left little doubt who he was referring to.

"From the east of Europe, from the land of the sunrise, the dark shadows of war have now spread. We had thought that invasions of other countries, savage street fighting and atomic threats were grim memories of a distant past," the pope said.

Moscow denies targeting civilians in the action it launched on Feb. 24, which it dubs a "special military operation" designed not to occupy territory but to demilitarise and "denazify" its neighbour. Francis has already rejected that terminology, calling it a war.

"However, the icy winds of war, which bring only death, destruction and hatred in their wake, have swept down powerfully upon the lives of many people and affected us all," Francis said.

"Once again, some potentate, sadly caught up in anachronistic claims of nationalist interests, is provoking and fomenting conflicts, whereas ordinary people sense the need to build a future that, will either be shared, or not be at all," he said, without mentioning Putin by name.

The pope, who was limping as he walked in the presidential palace of the predominantly Catholic island, has already strongly condemned what he has called an "unjustified aggression" and denounced "atrocities" in the war.



Ukrainian journo killed covering war

Maksim Levin, a photographer and videographer who was working for a Ukrainian news website and was a long-time contributor to Reuters, was killed while covering Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

His body was found in a village north of the Ukrainian capital Kyiv on April 1, the news website LB.ua where he worked said yesterday.

Levin, born in 1981, was a documentary film maker who had contributed to Reuters' coverage of the country since 2013.

The prosecutor general's office in Ukraine said Levin was "killed by servicemen of the Russian Armed Forces with two shots from small arms". This could not be independently verified.



Hindu devotees participate in the 'Pachhare' Chariot festival in Kathmandu, Nepal, yesterday

PHOTO: AFP

DEPORTION OF ROHINGYA WOMAN TO MYANMAR

Rights groups criticises India

The deportation of a 36-year-old Rohingya woman by Indian authorities and fresh detention of Rohingya refugees in Indian-administered Kashmir has been criticised by human rights groups, who called New Delhi's forcible return of refugees a "cruel disregard for human life and international law".

Hasina Begum, 36, who was detained on March 6, 2021, along with more than 100 other Rohingya refugees from Jammu city, was deported to Myanmar on March 22.

Since 2017, India has deported 16 Rohingya refugees back to Myanmar, according to rights groups.

For more than a year, Hasina was separated from her three children, two daughters, age eight and 12, and her 14-year-old son. Now, their hopes for a reunion have been dashed.

India's crackdown came less than two weeks after the United States said Myanmar's military committed genocide and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya, who have long faced persecution in their homeland.