



Smoke rises after an attack by Russian army in Odessa, Ukraine, yesterday. Air strikes rocked Ukraine's strategic Black Sea port Odessa early yesterday morning, according to an interior ministry official, after Kyiv had warned that Russia was trying to consolidate its troops in the south.

PHOTO: AFP

WAR IN UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

AFP, Kyiv

RUSSIAN 'WAR CRIMES'

Ukraine accuses Russian troops of war crimes after the discovery of mass graves and civilians apparently "executed" in the streets of Bucha, near the capital Kyiv. AFP reporters see at least 20 bodies, all in civilian clothing, strewn across a single street. UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss calls for "indiscriminate" Russian attacks in Bucha and elsewhere to "be investigated as war crimes". Germany's vice chancellor Robert Habeck says a "terrible war crime" has been carried out. EU chief Charles Michel pledges further sanctions on Moscow as he condemns "atrocities" near Kyiv.

AIR STRIKES HIT ODESSA

Air strikes rock Ukraine's strategic Black Sea port Odessa yesterday morning, but the army says there were no casualties. "High-precision sea and air-based missiles destroyed an oil refinery and three storage facilities for fuel and lubricants near the city of Odessa," the Russian defence ministry says.

11 UKRAINIAN MAYORS HELD BY RUSSIANS

Ukraine's deputy prime minister Iryna Vereshchuk says 11 local community leaders in the Kyiv, Kherson, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv and Donetsk regions are "in captivity".

TOO SOON FOR PEACE SUMMIT

Russia's chief negotiator Vladimir Medinsky says it is too early for a top-level meeting between Zelensky and Putin on ending the conflict. He says Ukraine has become "more realistic" in its approach to issues related to the neutral and non-nuclear status of Ukraine but a draft agreement for submission to a summit meeting is not ready.

MINES AND BOOBY TRAPS

Ukraine President Zelensky accuses Russian soldiers of planting mines and other booby traps as they withdraw from northern Ukraine.

NEARLY 4.2M REFUGEES

Nearly 4.2 million Ukrainians have fled their country since Russia's invasion began on February 24, with almost 40,000 pouring into neighbouring countries in the past 24 hours, UN numbers show. The United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, yesterday said that 4,176,401 Ukrainians had fled in just over five weeks, up 38,559 from the figure given a day earlier. Women and children account for 90 percent of those who have left Ukraine.



POPPY CULTIVATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Taliban chief orders ban



AFP, Kabul

The Taliban's supreme leader yesterday ordered a ban on poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, warning that the hardline Islamist government would crack down on farmers planting the crop.

Afghanistan is the world's biggest producer of poppies, the source of sap that is refined into heroin, and in recent years its production and exports have only boomed.

"All Afghans are informed that from now on cultivation of poppy has been strictly prohibited across the country," said a decree issued by Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada.

The decree was read out by government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid at a gathering of reporters, foreign diplomats and Taliban officials.

"If anyone violates the decree the crop will be destroyed immediately and the violator will be treated according to the sharia law," it added.

It is not the first time the fundamentalist group has vowed to outlaw the trade. Production was banned in 2000, just before the group was overthrown by US-led forces in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

During their 20-year insurgency against foreign forces, the Taliban heavily taxed farmers cultivating the crop in areas under their control.

It became a key resource for the group to generate funds.

The United States and Nato forces tried to curb poppy cultivation during their two decades in Afghanistan by paying farmers to grow alternative crops such as wheat or saffron. But their attempts were thwarted by the Taliban who controlled the main poppy-growing regions and derived hundreds of millions of dollars from the trade, experts say.

Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi rejected claims the Taliban helped fuel poppy cultivation during their insurgency.

"How come it was exported all over the world when they (US-led forces) had full control over Afghanistan," Hanafi said yesterday.

Afghan media reports say production has increased in two southern provinces, Kandahar and Helmand, since the Taliban seized power in August, although data is not available.

Afghanistan has a near monopoly on opium and heroin, accounting for 80 to 90 percent of global output, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

The amount of land planted with poppies hit a record high in 2017 and has averaged around 250,000 hectares in recent years, roughly four times the level of the mid-1990s, UN figures show.

More transmissible Covid-19 variant found in UK: WHO

NDTV ONLINE

A new Covid variant has been found in the UK, the World Health Organisation said in its latest report. The new mutant, called XE, may be more transmissible than any strain of Covid-19, the health body said.



XE is a "recombinant" which is a mutation of BA.1 and BA.2 Omicron strains. Recombinant mutations emerge when a patient is infected by multiple variants of Covid. The variants mix up their genetic material during replication and form a new mutation, UK experts said in a paper published in British Medical Journal.

The World Health Organisation said that the new mutation XE appears to be 10 per cent more transmissible than the BA.2 sub-variant of Omicron.

"Early-day estimates indicate a community growth rate advantage of 10 percent as compared to BA.2, however, this finding requires further confirmation," the global health body added.

Britain's health agency said that XE was first detected on January 19 and 637 cases of the new variant have been reported yet.

Hungary vote goes to wire as Orban seeks fourth term

AFP, Budapest

Nationalist Hungarian PM Viktor Orban faced a tough challenge with a united opposition in an unpredictable general election yesterday, after a campaign dominated by Russia's invasion of neighbouring Ukraine. The six main opposition parties are for the first time fielding a joint list, determined to roll back the "illiberal" revolution Orban's Fidesz party has pursued during 12 consecutive years in office. That has involved repeated confrontations with EU institutions, including over the neutering of the press and judiciary, and measures targeting the LGBT community. By early afternoon turnout stood at 40 percent, down slightly from the record participation seen at the last national polls in 2018.

N Korea threatens South over minister's 'reckless' remarks

AFP, Seoul

North Korea blasted the South Korean defence minister yesterday for "reckless" remarks about Seoul's ability to strike Pyongyang, warning of retaliation after conducting a record number of weapons tests this year. South Korean defence minister Suh Wook had said Friday that his



army had missiles with "the ability to accurately and quickly hit any target in North Korea".

The comments drew condemnation from Kim Yo Jong, the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and a key policy adviser.

"His reckless and intemperate rhetoric about the 'preemptive strike' has further worsened the inter-Korean relations and

the military tension on the Korean Peninsula," she said according to official North Korean news agency KCNA. "South Korea may face a serious threat owing to the reckless remarks made by its Defence Minister... South Korea should discipline itself if it wants to stave off disaster," Kim added.

Vienna nuke talks nearing deal: Iran

AFP, Tehran

Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian yesterday said an agreement is "close" in paused negotiations to restore the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers.

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

"We are close to an agreement in the negotiations," Amir-Abdollahian said during a phone conversation with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, according to a statement by the ministry.

"We have passed on our proposals on the remaining issues to the American side through the EU senior negotiator, and now the ball is in US court," Iran's top diplomat added.

Nearly a year of negotiations brought the parties close to renewing the landmark 2015 accord.

But the talks were halted last month, after Russia demanded guarantees that Western sanctions imposed following its invasion of Ukraine would not damage its trade with Iran.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov later said Moscow had received the necessary guarantees from Washington on trade with Iran.



Activists of ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) stand on shipping containers and shout slogans during a protest in front of the National Assembly in Islamabad yesterday, after Pakistan's president dissolved the National Assembly on the advice of Prime Minister Imran Khan.

PHOTO: AFP

Flash floods, landslides kill 14 in Brazil

AFP, RIO DE JANEIRO

Torrential downpours triggered flash floods and landslides across Brazil's Rio de Janeiro state, killing at least 14 people including eight children, and leaving five missing, authorities said Saturday.

Two days of heavy rain have battered a broad swathe of the southeastern state's Atlantic coast, the latest in a series of deadly storms in Brazil that experts say are being aggravated by climate change.

More rain is forecast for the region in the coming days.

The victims included a mother and six of her children, who were buried when a landslide swept away their home, officials said.



Shocked by haunting images of atrocities committed by Russian army in Kyiv liberated region #BuchaMassacre. ... Further EU sanctions & support are on their way.

EU chief
Charles Michel

