INTERNATIONAL

ROCKET ATTACKS Israel closes crossing to Gazans

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday said it will close its only crossing from the Gaza Strip for workers in response to overnight rocket fire, stopping short of conducting retaliatory strikes in an apparent bid to ease tensions.

The rocket attacks on Friday night and yesterday morning followed days of clashes at Jerusalem's flashpoint Al-Aqsa mosque compound and a month of deadly violence.

The unrest -- which comes as the Jewish festival of Passover overlaps with the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan -- has sparked international fears of a wider conflict, one year after similar violence led to an 11-day war between Israel and Gaza-based militants.

They followed rocket attacks on Wednesday and Thursday. Israel had retaliated against those attacks with air strikes.

Employment in Israel is a lifeline for people in Gaza, where according to a recent World Bank report nearly half of the 2.3 million population is unemployed. There are currently 12,000 Gazans with work permits in Israel, with the government recently announcing its intention to add another 8,000



Firefighters work to extinguish a fire that broke out in a steel warehouse following a strike in Kharkiv, Ukraine, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

EX-PM IMRAN KHAN'S OUSTER

Pak top body rejects US plot

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's National Security Council, a body of top civil and military leaders, has rejected ousted Prime Minister Imran Khan's accusations that United States had conspired to topple his government through a parliamentary vote of confidence.

Khan, 69, who led the nuclear-armed South Asian country of 220 million people for three and a half years, had accused Washington of backing a conspiracy to remove him.

He had said that he visited Moscow against US advice. Washington denies the

Asad Majeed, former Pakistan ambassador to the United States who

had written a cable to Islamabad about Washington's take on Khan's Moscow visit, briefed the civil and military leaders on a forum called National Security Committee (NSC).

The NSC after reviewing the contents of the communication, the assessment received, and the conclusion presented by the security agencies, concludes that there has been no conspiracy," a statement from the office of new Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said on Friday.

It said the country's premier spy agencies informed the NSC that they found no evidence to support any conspiracy theory.

Khan's Pakistan Tehrek-e-Insaf (PTI) party demanded a judicial probe into the

The ousted leader met with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Feb. 24, the day Russian forces invaded neighbouring Ukraine.

Khan initially blocked the no-confidence move, saying the NSC had endorsed the alleged conspiracy.

Opposition parties and analysts have said the military helped Khan win election in 2018, which they both deny, but that the support waned after a falling-out over the appointment of the country's next intelligence chief late last year.

Khan has aired his conspiracy allegations in three huge public rallies he has held since he was ousted. He has demanded snap elections. Read full story

The next parliamentary election is due in 2023.

'So much joy'

Brazil holds first carnival after 2 painful yrs of Covid

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Rio de Janeiro's carnival, a glittering, sequinstudded festival, exploded back to life Friday with the first famed samba school parades since Covid-19 hit Brazil.

Shaking the ground in time to the beat, a sparkling sea of dancers, drummers and multistory floats reclaimed the "Sambadrome," the iconic beach city's carnival parade venue, which had been turned into a drive-through vaccination center at the height of the health crisis.

The all-night parades by the city's top samba schools Friday and Saturday are the first since February 2020, marking a turning point for Brazil, where Covid-19 has claimed more than 660,000 lives -- second only to the United States.

"I'm just so happy. I think a lot of people are going to cry... including me," said geography teacher Ana Vieira,

> glistening white costume to parade for samba school Imperatriz.

48, who was wearing a giant,

You can see the happiness on people's faces after two long years."

There were concerns carnival would be axed again this year. But with more than 75 percent of Brazil's 213 million people now fully vaccinated, the

average weekly Covid-19 death toll has plunged from more than 3,000 a year ago to around 100 -- allowing the show to go on. All participants and the 75,000 attendees expected each night are required to present proof of vaccination.

Carnival should also provide some needed relief for the pandemic-battered economy. Beyond the swirl of floats, feathers and barely covered flesh, carnival is big business, moving an estimated four billion reais (\$800 million) and creating at least 45,000 jobs.



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Le Pen or Macron?

France votes in key polls today



France yesterday prepared to choose between centrist President Emmanuel Macron and far-right challenger Marine Le Pen to rule the country for the next five years after a bitterly contested and polarising election campaign.

Macron is the favourite to win reelection in the run-off ballot today, and there are indications he bolstered his advantage with a combative performance in the one-off election debate against a somewhat defensive Le Pen.

Polls have shown Macron with a lead of some 10 percentage points. But result is predicted to be closer than in 2017, when the same candidates faced off but Macron carried the day with 66 percent to 34 percent.

But the president and his allies have insisted over the last week that nothing is in the bag, with a strong turnout crucial to avoid a shock in France comparable to the 2016 polls that led to Brexit in Britain and Donald Trump's election in the United States.

A Le Pen victory would send shockwaves across Europe. Left-wing EU leaders including German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have pleaded with France to

choose Macron over his rival.

The stakes are huge -- Le Pen would become modern France's first far-right leader and first female president. Macron would be the first French president to win re-election in two decades.

If elected, Macron is expected, in a symbolic gesture, to address supporters on the Champ de Mars in central Paris

at the foot of the Eiffel Tower. Some 48.7 million French are eligible to vote.

Polls in mainland France will open at 0600 GMT and close 12 hours later, immediately followed by projections that usually predict the result with a degree of accuracy.

Macron and Le Pen threw themselves into a final flurry of campaigning Friday, firing off attacks in interviews before last-minute walkabouts and rallies.

Le Pen insisted that opinion polls giving Macron the lead would be proved wrong and took aim at her rival's plan to push back the retirement age to 65 from 62.

Macron for his part said Le Pen was trying to mask an authoritarian "extreme right" platform that stigmatises Muslims with a plan to outlaw headscarves in public.

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