

Tensions remain high in West Bank

Arrests after Palestinian group claims killing of settler guard

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli security forces reinforced their presence in the occupied West Bank yesterday and made arrests after the killing of a guard at a Jewish settlement.

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, one of the main militant groups present in the West Bank, claimed responsibility for the murder which — along with the killing of a Palestinian, brought a deadly conclusion to a Friday marked by clashes at Jerusalem's flashpoint Al-Aqsa mosque.

The army said the guard was on duty at the entrance to Ariel settlement on Friday night when attackers opened fire. Emergency services confirmed that the man, in his 20s, had died from his wounds.

Soldiers yesterday stepped up their presence particularly at the entrance to the neighbouring Palestinian community of Salfi, an army statement said.

It added that security forces had made arrests and seized weapons at Bruqin, also nearby, and at the Balata refugee camp.

Late Friday the Palestinian health ministry said a Palestinian in his 20s had been shot and killed during an Israeli army operation in the northern West Bank town of Azzun. Forty-two people had earlier been hurt in clashes between Palestinians and Israeli police, according to the Palestinian Red Crescent, at the Al-Aqsa site venerated by Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem's old city.

The unrest occurred on the last Friday in the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan, and brought to nearly 300 the number of Palestinians hurt over a two-week period in clashes there.



People carrying a religious flag walk along the banks of Sangam, the confluence of the rivers Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati, on a summer afternoon in Allahabad, India, yesterday. Power outages compounded the misery of millions of people wilting in a heatwave across India and Pakistan, with experts blaming climate change for an early onset of roasting summer temperatures.

PHOTO: AFP

Iran-Saudi tensions near end: Iraq PM

AFP, Baghdad

An end to years of tension between regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia is near, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhemi said in an interview published yesterday.

Iraq, a neighbour to both countries, has hosted five rounds of talks over the past year aimed at restoring ties between Sunni Muslim Saudi Arabia, and Shia-majority Iran.

Following the latest round in Baghdad, Iraqi officials have sounded increasingly optimistic, talking of an imminent sixth session and even going so far as to raise the prospect of a resumption in diplomatic relations severed in 2016.

Iran and the Saudi kingdom support rival sides in several conflict zones across the region, including in Yemen where the Huthi rebels are backed by Tehran, and Riyadh leads a military coalition supporting the government.

In 2016, Iranian protesters attacked Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran after the kingdom executed Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr.

Riyadh responded by cutting ties with Tehran.

"We are convinced that reconciliation is near," which would benefit regional stability, said Kadhemi, who Iraqi diplomats say attended the most recent meeting.

RUSSIA'S UKRAINE QUAGMIRE

Tough lessons for China



REUTERS

From countering a Western "information war" during a Taiwan conflict to using "shock and awe" to swiftly subdue the island's forces, Chinese strategists are soaking up lessons from Russia's Ukrainian quagmire, diplomats, scholars and analysts say.

Chinese military experts are discussing the conflict in private chat groups, offering their takes on Western involvement in Ukraine and Russia's perceived failings, say two scholars and four Asian and Western diplomats who are in touch with Chinese strategists.

Although their conclusions have yet to surface in official military journals or state media, Russia's failure to quickly crush the Ukrainian military is a key topic — as are fears about how well China's untested forces would perform.

"Many Chinese experts are monitoring this war as if they are imagining how this would unfold if it happened between China

and the West," said Beijing-based security scholar Zhao Tong of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Russia's approach in the early stages of the war did not subdue Ukrainian forces, which emboldened the international community to intervene with intelligence sharing, military equipment and the economic isolation of Russia.

"China probably should think about conducting a much stronger and much more comprehensive operation at the very beginning to shock and awe the Taiwanese forces to secure a major advantage," Zhao said, referring to observations from Chinese strategists.

They believe securing that advantage would "deter enemy forces from being willing to intervene", he said.

Chinese strategists also worry about how Russia is contending with indirect Western military assistance, a factor China would also face in a Taiwan scenario, say two scholars and four diplomats. Chinese experts are privately

arguing about the need for Beijing to better compete in the so-called information war, which has complicated Russia's position on the battlefield, Zhao said.

Besides isolating Russia economically, Western diplomatic efforts — and reporting on atrocities in the war zone — have made it easier to provide aid for Ukraine and harder for Russia to find outside support.

Zhao said that to Chinese strategists, one of the most important parts of the current conflict was how Western nations "are able to manipulate, from their perspective, international opinion and decisively change the international response to the war."

Some Chinese strategists believe that the control of information has created a much worse impression of Russian performance than is warranted.

China's military leaders also have for decades looked to Moscow for not just weapons but also structural and command doctrine.

Crisis-hit Sri Lanka hikes medicine prices

AFP, Colombo

Cash-strapped Sri Lanka announced a 40 percent price hike for dozens of commonly used medicines yesterday as the island nation labours through its worst economic crisis in decades.

Months of lengthy blackouts and acute shortages of food, fuel and pharmaceuticals have sparked widespread protests calling for the government's resignation.

Hospitals have already cancelled routine surgeries after running out of anaesthetics, and yesterday's directive applies to 60 medicines in short supply.

Antibiotics, non-prescription painkillers and medications for heart conditions and diabetes will all be subject to the price rise, health minister Channa Jayasumana said. It is the second time in six weeks that pharmaceutical prices have been raised. In mid-March a 30 percent increase was imposed.

Industry officials said the latest hike was necessary to offset the impact of fuel prices, which have doubled since December.

Official figures released Friday showed Sri Lanka's inflation rate at nearly 30 percent in April. Sri Lanka has run out of foreign currency to import sorely needed essential goods.

Dozens missing or trapped after China building collapse

AFP, Beijing

At least 23 people were trapped under a building that collapsed in central China, officials said Saturday, as rescuers pulled apart the rubble brick by brick in an effort to reach survivors. The building, which housed a hotel, apartments and a cinema, caved in on Friday afternoon in Changsha city, Hunan province, leaving a gaping hole in a densely built street front. Another 39 people were uncontactable after the incident, the mayor of Changsha told reporters. City authorities are yet to release details of casualties but said five people were rescued from the structure overnight. No cause for the disaster has yet been given by authorities, although speculation turned to possible overwork on the property.

Pak PM's son takes charge of Punjab

AFP, Islamabad

The son of Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif took charge of Punjab province yesterday, the country's most politically important region, further bolstering the dynasty's grip on power. Nepotism and cronyism are deeply entrenched in the Muslim-majority nation of more than 220 million people, with

power mostly shared between two families — the Sharifs and the Bhuttos — for much of Pakistan's history. It comes weeks after cricket superstar turned politician Imran Khan was ousted from power in a no-confidence vote when the usually feuding families formed an opposition coalition. Hamza Shehbaz, 47, Sharif took over as chief minister of Punjab — the country's richest, most populous and politically influential province — after weeks of deadlock. The region's governor and a Khan loyalist refused to swear in the new chief, elected by the provincial assembly, forcing Lahore High Court to step in.

And it is this mental agility for which the prime minister was wont to letting him vacate the post of the finance minister even in his 80s.

"I have survived for two reasons: one is the confidence of the prime minister in me and the other is my age. This is also true that the combined experience of the cabinet is less than my experience. I can eloquently say what happened in 1972, 1975, the 80s, the 90s, 2000s and what is happening now. In cabinet meetings, my main role is to remind others about the traditions of the past. This is where I am now," he told The Daily Star in 2017.

Born in Sylhet in 1934, Muhith, an academic achiever, joined the Pakistan Civil Service in 1956.

As the chief and deputy secretary of the Pakistan Planning Commission, he made a report on the discrimination between East and West Pakistan and that was the first submitted report on that issue to Pakistan National Congress.

He was the first diplomat of the Washington Embassy who showed his consent in favour of Bangladesh, giving up the side of Pakistan during the Independence War of 1971.

"In my student life, I had no dream of doing any government job. I wanted to be a barrister. However, my mind changed in 1955 when I was in jail where I talked to many high officials and realised that I can serve people equally well by joining public service. Then, I joined the Pakistan Civil Service. I liked it. There is enormous scope for public service if you want. This way, I never had to sacrifice the spirit of public service in me."

And yesterday, that life of meaning and service came to an end, and with it, an institution of Bangladesh's history slammed shut.



Sri Lankan protesters take part in an anti-government demonstration in Colombo, yesterday, demanding President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's resignation over the country's crippling economic crisis.

PHOTO: AFP

Farewell to architect of our economy's golden era

FROM PAGE 1

Jovial but direct, compelling but earnest, it was difficult for development partners to turn him down. As a result, foreign aid commitments came in thick and fast.

In his ten years, he managed \$80.4 billion in foreign aid commitment. In the previous ten years, the country got about \$17.5 billion.

Such impressive statistics became a consonant of his tenure. Poverty came down from 31 percent of the population to 20 percent.

"For a finance minister of Bangladesh, the only option is the reduction of poverty. If you reduce poverty, you will be successful," he told The Daily Star in 2020.

But his legacy, if one must pick just one, would be the steering the coming of age of the Bangladesh economy, which was growing at less than 6

percent before he took oath as the finance minister three weeks shy of his 75th birthday. In his final year in office, GDP growth exceeded the 8 percent mark for the first time since 1974.

He greased the accelerating wheels of the economy lavishly but judiciously.

Before Muhith, the national budget would be about Tk 1 lakh crore. His last budget, which was his twelfth, was about Tk 4.8 lakh crore.

"I consider the growth of the economy as my proudest achievement," he told us when we met him on a Friday morning at his home in Banani in January 2020.

That appointment took a fortnight to schedule.

When many would resort to taking it easy, Muhith's days were chock-a-block with engagements and writing sessions, punctuated with playtime with grandchildren and

music recitals.

Even at retirement, he stuck feverishly to discipline and his calendar, a habit that had served him well through his professional life. Rarely would he stall on signing off on any document; and if he couldn't do it while in office, he would take it home to pore through the pages.

Hale and hearty, he was most excited about the book he was working on titled "History of Human Civilisation". So determined he was in getting the book out of the gates that he would put in dual shifts a day jotting down his train of thoughts.

He did finish that book, which is now awaiting publication by the United Press Limited.

That book is an assemblage of his encyclopaedic knowledge and experiences, which he remembered ever so vividly until the end.