



Children dressed as Santa Claus gesture during Christmas celebrations at a school in Amritsar, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Taliban slap NGO ban on women

AGENCIES

Afghanistan's Taliban-run administration yesterday ordered all local and foreign non-governmental organisations (NGO) to stop female employees from coming to work, according to an economy ministry letter, in the latest crackdown on women's freedoms.

The letter, confirmed by economy ministry spokesperson Abdulrahman Habib, said the female employees were not allowed to work until further notice because some had not adhered to the administration's interpretation of Islamic dresscode for women.

"There have been serious complaints regarding the non-observance of the Islamic hijab and other rules and regulations pertaining to the work of females in national and international organisations," said a notification sent to all NGOs, a copy of which was obtained by AFP and confirmed by a ministry spokesman.

"The ministry of economy ... instructs all organisations to stop females working until further notice," the notification said.

It comes days after the Taliban-run administration ordered universities to close to women, prompting strong global condemnation and sparking some protests and heavy criticism inside Afghanistan.

It was not immediately clear how the order would affect United Nations agencies, which have a large presence in Afghanistan delivering services amid the country's humanitarian crisis.

When asked whether the rules included UN agencies, Habib said the letter applied to organisations under Afghanistan's coordinating body for humanitarian organisations, known as ACBAR. That body does not include the United Nations, but includes over 180 local and international NGOs.

Since the hardline Islamists seized power in August last year, they have imposed harsh restrictions on women -- effectively squeezing them out of public life.



## Ukraine war 'will not end easily'

Says Turkey

AFP, Ankara

Turkey yesterday conceded that Russia's war on Ukraine "will not end easily", despite Ankara's repeated efforts to arrange peace talks between Kyiv and Moscow.

Nato member Turkey, which has friendly relations with both of its Black Sea neighbours, has positioned itself as a neutral player and tried to broker a truce.

But the continuing war, which entered its 10th month, is dashing Ankara's hopes.

"It appears that this war will not end easily," Defence Minister Hulusi Akar told journalists during a year-end briefing in the capital Ankara.

He pointed to Western support for Ukraine and Russia's statements that it would not give up on his reasoning.

"It would not be wrong to say that despite all our goodwill and call for a ceasefire, this war is likely to continue in 2023," Akar said.

Turkey, which helped broker a deal with the United Nations for the export of Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea this summer, is seeking to bring together Russian and Ukrainian leaders for negotiations to end the war.

It already hosted a meeting between the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers during the early stages of the war in March and held other talks between the two warring parties in Istanbul.

"As Turkey, we call for a ceasefire, at least a humanitarian ceasefire. Then a permanent ceasefire and then peace talks," Akar said.

Turkey has however shied away from Western sanctions against Russia with which it has boosted trade while supplying Ukraine with combat drones.

NEW US DEFENCE ACT

## Taiwan cheers as China vents 'resolute opposition'

REUTERS, Shanghai/Taipei

China expressed yesterday anger at a new US defence authorisation law that boosts military assistance for Taiwan, while Taipei cheered it for helping boost the island's security.

China, which considers democratically governed Taiwan its own territory, expressed "strong dissatisfaction and resolute opposition" regarding the US National Defense Authorization Act, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

It said the \$858 billion military spending measure, which authorises up to \$10 billion in security assistance and fast-tracked weapons procurement for Taiwan, contained provisions that "cause serious damage to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait".

China has never renounced using force to bring Taiwan under its control. Taiwan strongly disputes China's sovereignty claims, saying only the island's 23 million people can decide their future.

Taiwan's Defence Ministry expressed its thanks for the US legislation, saying it showed the importance Washington attached to Taiwan-US ties and strengthening the island's security.

Taipei will discuss the details of the act with Washington and "gradually push forward the budget formulation and actual disbursement of the various Taiwan-friendly provisions", the ministry said, without elaborating.

The United States is Taiwan's most important international backer and arms supplier, despite the absence of formal diplomatic ties. US arms sales to Taiwan are a constant irritant in Beijing's relations with Washington.

Taiwan's military is dwarfed by that of its huge

neighbour China. Its air force in particular has come under strain from having to scramble repeatedly to see off Chinese incursions near the island over the past three years or so.

The defence law contained an amendment restricting US government purchases of products using computer chips made by a group of Chinese companies.

"The case ignores the facts to exaggerate a 'China threat', wantonly interferes in China's internal affairs and attacks and smears the Chinese Communist Party, which are serious political provocations to China," China's foreign ministry said.

On Friday, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told US Secretary of State Antony Blinken that the United States must stop suppressing China's development and should

not continue the "old routine of unilateral bullying".

In the latest phone correspondence between the two leaders, Wang said the United States must pay attention to China's legitimate concerns, stop curbing and suppressing its development, and not constantly challenge China's red line in a "salami-slicing" way. He was referring to the tactic of using a series of small actions to achieve a much larger result that would be difficult to achieve

with a single large action.

The remarks by Wang underscored President Xi Jinping's meeting with US President Joe Biden at the G20 summit in Bali last month where they discussed a number of hot-button issues, including Taiwan. It was their first in-person talks since 2017.

In the phone call with Blinken, Wang stressed that the two sides should focus on translating the Bali consensus of the two heads of state into practical policies and concrete actions, according to a statement from the Chinese foreign ministry on Friday.



## Rahul Gandhi's long march reaches Delhi

REUTERS, New Delhi

A cross-country march led by Indian opposition leader Rahul Gandhi reached the capital New Delhi yesterday, hoping to regain some of the popularity it lost to the ruling Hindu nationalist party. More than 1,000 people joined Gandhi's march against "hate and division", which aims to turn the Congress party's fortunes around after its drubbing by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in a 2019 election. The parade, which has received a better public response than expected, will take a nine-day break in Delhi before starting its final leg on Jan. 3 towards Srinagar in the northernmost Himalayan region of Kashmir. The Nehru-Gandhi dynasty has controlled the Congress party for decades but has also overseen its recent decline. Rahul Gandhi resigned as Congress president after the last election. The next one is due by 2024. The "Unite India Rally" march began in September in the coastal town of Kanyakumari on the southern tip of India. It plans to cover more than 3,500 km (2,200 miles) to reach Srinagar in about 150 days.

## Canada polar bears disappearing fast

AFP, Ottawa

Polar bears are disappearing fast from the Western part of Hudson Bay, on the southern tip of the Canadian Arctic, according to a new government survey. The number of female bears and cubs in particular has seen a dramatic decline. Researchers have flown over the region -- which includes the town of Churchill, a tourist destination touted as the "polar bear capital of the world" -- every five years to count the number of bears and extrapolate population trends. During the last survey in late August and early September 2021, the results of which were released earlier this month, they spotted 194 bears and, based on that count, estimated a total population of 618 bears, down from 842 five years earlier. The bears' sea-ice habitat has been disappearing at an alarming rate, with the far north warming up to four times faster than the rest of the world. Since the 1980s, the ice pack in the bay has decreased by nearly 50 percent in summer, according to the US National Snow and Ice Data Center.

## ATTACK ON KURDISH CENTRE Kurds clash with police in Paris

REUTERS, Paris



Renewed clashes broke out in Paris yesterday between police and members of the Kurdish community angry at the killing on Friday of three members of their community. Several cars were overturned and small fires set alight near Republic Square, the traditional venue for demonstrations in the city where Kurds earlier held a peaceful protest. A gunman carried out the killings at a Kurdish cultural centre and nearby cafe on Friday in a busy part of Paris' 10th district, stunning a community preparing to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the unresolved murder of three activists. Police arrested a 69-year-old man who the authorities said had recently been freed from detention while awaiting trial for a sabre attack on a migrant camp in Paris a year ago. Following questioning of the suspect, investigators had added a suspected racist motive to initial accusations of murder and violence with weapons, the prosecutor's office said yesterday.

## 22 killed in Russia nursing home fire

AFP, Moscow

A fire erupted overnight in a private illegal nursing home in the Siberian city of Kemerovo, killing 22 people, Russia's investigative committee said yesterday.

"A fire broke out overnight in a private property used as an illegal nursing home," the investigative committee said on Telegram, adding that "the death toll has risen to 22."

An earlier statement said 20 people had died.

"Six more were injured, two of them were hospitalised and are in serious condition with burns" the Telegram statement added.

The fire spread over 180 square metres in a two-storey wooden building, the Russian state-run news agency TASS reported.

Images released by emergency services showed the building later completely burned out.



A man walks along Chicago's Michigan Avenue as he braves the freezing weather ahead of the Christmas Holiday, on Friday. A historic and brutal winter storm put some 240 million Americans under weather warnings Friday as the United States faced holiday travel chaos, with thousands of flights canceled and major highways closed.

PHOTO: AFP