



Vehicles move along a highway in Louisville, Kentucky, under freezing temperatures. A fearsome winter storm continued to pummel parts of the United States with blizzard conditions Saturday evening after powerful Arctic winds left over a million customers without power earlier in the day and caused Christmas travel nightmares. At least 17 weather-related deaths have been confirmed across eight states.

PHOTO: AFP

CHRISTMAS MESSAGE Pope laments 'famine of peace'

REUTERS, Vatican City

Pope Francis called for an end to the war in Ukraine and other conflicts in his Christmas message yesterday, saying the world was suffering from a "famine of peace".

Delivering the 10th Christmas "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and the world) blessing and message of his pontificate, he also urged people to look beyond the "shallow holiday glitter" and help the homeless, immigrants, refugees and the poor in their midst seeking comfort, warmth and food. "Let us see the faces of all those children who, everywhere in the world, long for peace," he said, speaking from the central balcony of St. Peter Basilica.

"Let us also see the faces of our Ukrainian brothers and sisters who are experiencing this Christmas in the dark and cold, far from their homes due to the devastation caused by ten months of war," he said, speaking to tens of thousands of people in the square below.

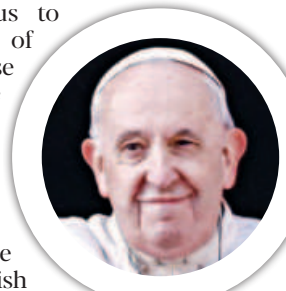
"May the Lord inspire us to offer concrete gestures of solidarity to assist all those who are suffering, and may he enlighten the minds of those who have the power to silence the thunder of weapons and put an immediate end to this senseless war!" Francis said.

The Ukraine conflict, he said, should not diminish concern for people whose lives have been devastated by other conflicts or humanitarian crises, naming among others, Syria, Myanmar, Iran, Haiti and the Sahel region of Africa.

"Our time is experiencing a grave famine of peace..." he said.

Francis called for a resumption of dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land, the place of Jesus' birth.

He again condemned the use of food as a weapon of war, saying the war in Ukraine had put millions at risk of famine, mentioning Afghanistan and countries in the Horn of Africa.



China defends its stance on Ukraine war

Aims to deepen ties with Russia in years to come

AGENCIES

Foreign Minister Wang Yi has defended China's stance on the war in Ukraine and suggested that it would deepen ties with Russia in the year ahead, as he hailed the "historic strides forward" in Chinese-Arab relations.

Speaking by video to a conference in the Chinese capital, Wang yesterday also blamed the United States for the deterioration in relations between the world's two largest economies, saying that Beijing has "firmly rejected" Washington's "erroneous China policy".

China has pushed back against Western pressure on trade, technology, human rights and its claims to a broad swath of the Western Pacific, accusing the US of bullying.

Its refusal to condemn the invasion of Ukraine and join others in imposing sanctions on Russia has further frayed ties and fuelled an emerging divide with much of Europe.

"With regard to the Ukraine crisis, we have consistently upheld the fundamental principles of objectivity and impartiality, without favouring one side or the other, or adding fuel to the fire, still less seeking selfish gains from the situation," Wang said, according to an official text of his remarks.



He added China would "deepen strategic mutual trust and mutually beneficial cooperation" with Russia. Warships from the two countries held joint naval drills in the East China Sea last week.

Wang said bilateral trade between the two countries is approaching the \$200bn target "at a faster pace", adding that major investment projects are well under way.

Citing the recent trip by President Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia, where he attended the first China-Arab States Summit and the China-Gulf Cooperation Summit, Wang said China and Arab countries "have reached consensus on building a closer China-Arab community with a shared future".

During the visit, Xi signed several strategic and economic

partnership deals and said China would continue to import large quantities of oil from Gulf countries and expand imports of liquefied natural gas.

Xi is pushing Chinese industry to become more self-sufficient, but Wang acknowledged in his speech that experience has shown "that China and the United States cannot decouple or sever supply chains".

He said China would strive to bring relations with the US back on course, saying they had plunged because "the United States has stubbornly continued to see China as its primary competitor and engage in blatant blockade, suppression and provocation against China".

Wang and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken talked by phone late last week.

The State Department said Blinken discussed the need to manage the US-China relationship responsibly and raised concerns about Russia's war against Ukraine and the threats it poses to global security and economic stability.

Wang accused the US of "unilateral bullying" and said China would continue to play a constructive role in resolving the Ukraine crisis in its own way, a Chinese foreign ministry statement said.

Prachanda returns as Nepal's PM

REUTERS, Kathmandu

A former Maoist guerrilla who led a decade-long insurgency against Nepal's Hindu monarchy was on Sunday appointed prime minister for a third time, in alliance with the main opposition after last month's election returned a hung parliament.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who still goes by his nom de guerre Prachanda - meaning "terrible" or "fierce" - will head the new government for the first half of the five-year term with the support of the opposition Communist Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) party and some other smaller groups, party officials said.

"He has been appointed and commands the support of a big majority of parliament," Tika Dhakal, an aide to President Bidhya Devi Bhandari told Reuters.

Prachanda, who replaces Sher Bahadur Deuba of the Nepali Congress party, will step down in 2025, making way for the UML to take over the office, local media reported.

The new coalition comes to power hours after Prachanda, 68, surprisingly walked out of the ruling alliance led by Deuba of the Nepali Congress party. Deuba refused to back Prachanda for the PM's job.

Prachanda's Maoist Centre party won 32 seats in the 275-member House of Representatives. The UML has 78 seats, and the rest, required for the 138 majority, will be controlled by smaller groups.

The Nepali Congress party will be the main opposition controlling 89 seats.

Analysts said Prachanda was unlikely to provide the country with stability due to many coalition partners. He also faces serious economic challenges. Inflation is more than 8%, the highest in six years. Nepal has seen 10 government changes since 2008 when the 239-year-old monarchy was abolished.

Maldives' ex-president Yameen guilty of graft

REUTERS, Male

The criminal court of Maldives yesterday found the country's former president Abdulla Yameen guilty on corruption and money laundering charges related to receiving kickbacks from a private company. The court said it expects to announce the sentence soon. Yameen has denied any wrongdoing. Yameen, who lost power in 2018, was sentenced to five years in jail and fined \$5 million in 2019 for embezzling \$1 million in state funds, which the prosecution said was acquired through the lease of resort development rights. Yameen is the declared presidential candidate for the Progressive Party of the Maldives for an election due in 2023.

Covid-19 cases explode in China

REUTERS, Beijing

China's Zhejiang, a big industrial province near Shanghai, is battling around a million new daily Covid-19 infections, a number expected to double in the days ahead, the provincial government said yesterday. Despite a record surge of cases nationwide, China reported no Covid deaths on the mainland for the five days through Saturday, the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention said yesterday. Citizens and experts have called for more accurate data as infections surged after Beijing made sweeping changes to a zero Covid policy that had put hundreds of millions of its citizens under relentless lockdowns and battered the world's second-largest economy. The World Health Organization has received no data from China on new Covid hospitalisations since Beijing eased its restrictions. The organisation says the data gap might be due to the authorities struggling to tally cases in the world's most populous country.

STRANDED ROHINGYAS AT HIGH SEAS

Finally, their boat lands in Aceh after a month

AFP, Banda Aceh

A broken-down boat carrying 57 Rohingya refugees landed on Indonesia's western coast yesterday after a month at sea, police said.

Thousands of the mostly Rohingyas, heavily persecuted in Myanmar, risk their lives each year on long, expensive sea journeys - often in poor-quality vessels - in an attempt to reach Malaysia or Indonesia.

The wooden vessel with 57 men on board arrived around 08:00am local time (0100 GMT) on a beach in the westernmost Aceh province, local police spokesman Winardy told AFP.

"The boat had a broken engine and it was carried by the wind to a shore in Ladong Village in Aceh Besar (district)," Winardy, who goes by one name, said.

"They said they have been drifting at sea for a month."

Winardy added that police arrived

at the beach after being informed by some locals that the boat had docked there.

He said four of the men on board were sick and had been transported to a hospital.

Telmaizul Syatri, the head of the local immigration office, said the refugees will be temporarily housed at a local government facility.

"We will coordinate with the International Organisation for Migration and the UNHCR so that it can be handled well," Syatri said.

This is the third Rohingya refugee boat to arrive in Muslim-majority Indonesia in recent months.

Two boats carrying a total of 229 Rohingyas landed in Aceh on November 15 and 16, according to the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR).

Yesterday's arrival comes after the UNHCR and Southeast Asian politicians called for the rescue of another vessel carrying as many as 200 Rohingyas, including

women and children, which has been stranded at sea for several weeks.

That boat has been reported in waters close to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and India in the Andaman Sea and the Malacca Strait, one of the world's busiest shipping routes.



The UNHCR said last week that it has been in the water since late November, and it had received reports of at least a dozen people dying on board. Those left on the boat have no access to food or water.



Health workers check a Rohingya refugee who was feeling sick after his arrival by boat in Krueg Raya, Indonesia's Aceh province, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP