



Plumes of smoke rise from the frontline Donbas city of Bakhmut, Ukraine, after a Russian strike during a 36-hour ceasefire over Orthodox Christmas, declared by Russian President Vladimir Putin, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

KILLING OF OFFICIAL Iran hangs 2 protesters

AFP, Paris

Iran yesterday executed two men for killing a paramilitary force member during unprecedented protests sparked by the death in custody of a young woman.

The latest hangings double the number of executions to four over the nationwide protests, which escalated since mid-September into calls for an end to Iran's clerical regime.

Two men were put to death in December, sparking global outrage and new sanctions against Iran.

Judicial news agency Mizan Online reported "Mohammad Mahdi Karami and Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini, the main perpetrators of the crime that led to the martyrdom of Ruhollah Ajamian, were hanged this morning."

Prosecutors said the 27-year-old member of Basij paramilitary force was stripped naked and killed by a group of mourners who had been paying tribute to a slain protester, Hadis Najafi.

The executions come in defiance of a campaign by international rights groups for the lives of the two men to be spared.

Authorities have arrested thousands of people in the wave of demonstrations that began with the September death in custody of Mahsa Amini, 22. The Iranian Kurdish woman had been arrested by morality police for allegedly breaching the regime's strict dress code for women.

He died in Karaj, west of Tehran, on November 3 after being attacked with "knives, stones, fists, kicks" and dragged along a street, a judiciary spokesman said at the time.

SURGE IN COVID CASES China's 'great migration' kicks-off

REUTERS, Shanghai

China yesterday marked the first day of "chun yun", the 40-day period of Lunar New Year travel known pre-pandemic as the world's largest annual migration of people, bracing for a huge increase in travellers and the spread of Covid-19 infections.

This Lunar New Year public holiday, which officially runs from Jan 21, will be the first since 2020 without domestic travel restrictions.

Over the last month, China has seen the dramatic dismantling of its "zero-Covid" regime following historic protests against a policy that included frequent testing, restricted movement, mass lockdowns and heavy damage to the world's No.2 economy.

Investors are hoping that the reopening will eventually reinvigorate a \$17-trillion economy suffering its lowest growth in nearly half a century.

But the abrupt changes have exposed many of China's 1.4 billion population to the virus for the first time, triggering a wave of infections that is overwhelming some hospitals, emptying pharmacy shelves of medicines and causing long lines to form at crematoriums.

The Ministry of Transport said on Friday that it expects more than 2 billion passengers to take trips over the next 40 days, an increase of 99.5 percent year-on-year and reaching 70.3 percent of trip numbers in 2019.

There was mixed reaction online to that news, with some comments hailing the freedom to return to hometowns and celebrate the Lunar New Year with family for the first time in years.

Many others, however, said they would not travel this year, with worry of infecting elderly



relatives a common theme.

"I dare not go back to my hometown, for fear of bringing the poison back," said one such comment on the Twitter-like Weibo.

There are widespread concerns that the great migration of workers in cities to their hometowns will cause a surge in infections in smaller towns and rural areas that are less well-equipped with ICU beds and ventilators to deal with them.

Authorities say they are boosting grassroots medical services, opening more rural fever clinics and instituting a "green channel" for high risk patients, especially elderly people with underlying health conditions, to be transferred from villages directly to higher level hospitals.

Some analysts are now saying the current wave of infections may have already peaked.

Ernan Cui, an analyst at Gavekal Dragonomics in Beijing, cited several online surveys as indicating that rural areas were already more widely exposed to Covid infections than initially thought, with an infection peak already reached in most regions, noting there was "not much difference between urban and rural areas."

China's surge in cases has caused concern internationally and more than a dozen countries are now demanding Covid tests from travellers from China. The World Health Organisation said on Wednesday that China's Covid data underrepresents the number of hospitalisations and deaths from the disease.

Chinese officials and state media have defended the handling of the outbreak, playing down the severity of the surge and denouncing foreign travel requirements for its residents.

Boy, 6, held after shooting teacher in US

AFP, Washington

A six-year-old boy opened fire in an elementary school classroom in the eastern US state of Virginia on Friday, seriously injuring a teacher, police said.

No students were hurt in the incident at Richneck Elementary School in the coastal city of Newport News.

"The individual is a six-year-old student. He is right now in police custody," local police chief Steve Drew told a news conference, adding that "this was not an accidental shooting."

Police said that the victim was a teacher in her 30s and her injuries were believed to be life-threatening.

"I'm in shock, and I'm disheartened," said the city's superintendent of schools, George Parker.

"We need the community's support to make sure that guns are not available to youth."

School shootings plague the United States, with recent tragedies including the killing last May of 19 children and two teachers in Uvalde, Texas, by an 18-year-old gunman.

There were an estimated 44,000 gun-related deaths in the US last year, about half of them murder cases, accidents and self-defense, and half of them suicides, according to the Gun Violence Archive database.

AMAZON DEFORESTATION Brazil sees 150pc rise in December

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon rose 150 percent in December from the previous year, according to government figures released Friday, a final bleak report for far-right ex-president Jair Bolsonaro in his last month in office.

Satellite monitoring detected 218.4 square kilometers of forest cover destroyed in Brazil's share of the world's biggest rainforest last month, according to the national space agency's DETER surveillance program.

The area -- nearly four times the size of Manhattan -- was up more than 150 percent from the 87.2 square kilometers destroyed in December 2021, according to the agency, INPE. Under Bolsonaro, an agribusiness ally, average annual deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon rose by 75.5 percent from the previous decade. Deforestation in 2022 was also at or near record highs during the crucial dry-season months of August, September and October, when clear-cutting and fires often surge because of drier weather.



MYANMAR JAIL RIOT Prisoner killed, dozens wounded

AFP, Yangon

A prisoner was killed and more than 60 wounded after a riot broke out at a Myanmar prison west of Yangon, the junta said yesterday. The riot at the prison in Patheingyi started after guards confiscated a mobile phone from an inmate on Thursday night and took disciplinary action, the junta said in a statement. About 70 prisoners escaped from their cells and damaged property on Friday morning. Prisoners used sticks, bricks and pieces of cement to attack security forces, the junta said. Authorities tried to bring the situation under control but negotiations failed and they resorted to force. "The authorities fired guns to break up the crowd and bring the riot under control," the statement said. The junta said one prisoner was killed "amid fighting" and 63 inmates were wounded along with two police and nine guards. The junta flagged the launch of an investigation into the incident.

Jack Ma to cede control of Ant Group

AFP, Beijing

Jack Ma will cede control of Chinese fintech giant Ant Group, the company announced yesterday, following a Communist Party crackdown on the nation's tech sector that targeted the charismatic billionaire. Ma has retreated from public view since Beijing torched Ant's planned initial public offering in Hong Kong in 2020 following his barbed comments about government regulators. His company said in a statement on Saturday it was adjusting its ownership structure so that "no shareholder, alone or jointly with other parties, will have control over Ant Group". Laying out the firm's previous complex structure, the announcement showed Ma indirectly controlled 53.46 percent of Ant's shares and deemed him the company's "control person". He will hold just 6.2 percent of the voting rights following the adjustment, based on information in the statement.



'Our town is sinking' Locals urge for help as land subsidence threatens Indian Himalayan town

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian authorities have ordered immediate evacuation of nearly 600 families from their houses in the Himalayan town of Joshimath, an official said yesterday, after hundreds of buildings in the area popular with pilgrims and tourists developed cracks due to shifting soil.

Locals and experts fear the town in Uttarakhand faces a serious threat of land subsidence reportedly due to unplanned infrastructure development in an environmentally-fragile area.

"Saving the lives is our first priority. Officials have been asked to shift around 600 families living in endangered houses in Joshimath to safe locations," Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami told reporters on Friday after reviewing the situation in the sinking town with officials via video conference.

"We are also working on short and long-term plans to address the situation in Joshimath," he said.

The Indian government on Friday set up a committee to conduct a "rapid study" of the land subsidence and its impact in Joshimath which has huge religious, tourism and strategic significance. The committee will submit

a report in three days, he added.

For years, experts have warned that large-scale construction work, including hydro power projects, in and around Joshimath could lead to land subsidence - the sinking or settling of the ground surface.

ANI yesterday reported that the Joshimath-Malari border road, connecting the India-China border, has developed cracks at several places due to landslides. A temple collapsed in the Singdhar ward of Uttarakhand's Joshimath on Friday evening, sparking more anxiety among residents there living under the constant fear of a major disaster.

Joshimath is the gateway to the famous pilgrimage sites like Badrinath, Hemkund Sahib and the internationally famous skiing destination Auli and is not far from the border with China.

Atul Sati, the convener of the Joshimath Bachao Sangharsh Samiti that has been protesting government inaction to stop land subsidence, said local residents had been flagging the issue for months.

"The administration woke up from its slumber when the situation started getting grave and now they started relief efforts," Sati said, "Our town is sinking and we need to save it."



Tokyo Skytree (R) and Mount Fuji (back L) are seen from the I-link Town observatory during the evening hour in Ichikawa city, Chiba prefecture, east of Tokyo, Japan, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP