

Israeli raid in West Bank kills three

AFP, Ramallah

Israeli forces killed three Palestinians in a raid in Jenin in the occupied West Bank yesterday, the Palestinian health ministry said.

There were “three martyrs from occupation (Israeli) bullets in Jenin,” a ministry statement said, while the Israeli army said that “security forces are currently operating in the Jenin refugee camp”.

On Wednesday, Israeli security forces killed a man suspected of planting a roadside bomb that injured a man near the occupied West Bank this week, the military said, adding that the suspect appeared to have been planning other attacks.

On Monday, an Israeli motorist was seriously hurt in an explosion on a road near the occupied West Bank, where Palestinian militant attacks have intensified in recent months.

Armenia fears Karabakh ‘genocide’ Seeks UN help

AFP, Yerevan

Armenia said yesterday it would appeal to the international community to help prevent “genocide” in Nagorno-Karabakh after criticising the role of Russian peacekeepers in the breakaway region in Azerbaijan.

The Caucasus-region arch foes have fought two wars for control of the mountainous Karabakh region since the 1990s, with both Moscow and the West playing mediation roles.

Yerevan has said that an Azerbaijani blockade of the only land link between the separatist stronghold and Armenia has spurred a humanitarian crisis there.

Baku has denied the accusations. “Azerbaijan’s political-military leadership is preparing an ethnic cleansing, a genocide in Karabakh,” Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan told a meeting of his cabinet.

“Russian peacekeepers are the guarantors of the security of the population of Karabakh and if they can’t ensure it, they must turn to the UN Security Council to prevent genocide,” he said. Pashinyan added that he had instructed his foreign ministry to “launch mechanisms on preventing genocide.”

DEMOGRAPHIC WOES South Korea hits record-low weddings: data

AFP, Seoul

The number of South Koreans who tied the knot last year hit a record low, figures showed yesterday, compounding looming demographic woes in a country with the world’s lowest birth rate.

Some 192,000 couples got married last year, according to the data released by Statistics Korea yesterday, down by more than 40 percent from a decade earlier in 2012, when 327,000 couples had wed.

This is the lowest number of marriages in a year since records began in 1970.

The average age for men getting married for the first time was 33.7 years old, a record high, the data showed, while the age for brides also hit a record high of 31.3 years old for marriage.

They represent an increase of 1.6 years for men and 1.9 for women for first-time marriage from a decade earlier.

Nearly 80 percent of couples who got married last year were doing so for the first time.

The new data comes as South Korea is grappling with a chronic decline in its birth rate, with the lowest ever number of babies – 249,000 – born last year, breaking a previous record low in 2021.

South Korea had long ago passed the so-called replacement rate after which a population begins to shrink with a record-low 0.78 births per woman last year. The government has spent 280 trillion won since 2006 in an effort to boost birth rates but population is projected to fall from 52 million to 39 million by 2067.



An elderly woman stands near a burning building following shelling in Kostyantynivka, Donetsk region, on Wednesday, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. PHOTO: AFP

BID TO TACKLE REGIONAL THREATS Japan, S Korea thaw ties

North Korea fires long range missile ahead of talks

AFP, Tokyo

Japan and South Korea announced the end of tit-for-tat trade measures and pledged renewed diplomacy as leaders of the two countries met in Tokyo Thursday for a summit to thaw long-frozen ties.

The neighbours, both key US partners in the region, have for years been locked in a bitter dispute over Japan’s use of wartime forced labour.

Relations deteriorated after South Korea’s Supreme Court in 2018 ordered Japanese firms to compensate victims of forced labour, but this month Seoul announced a plan to pay those affected without Tokyo’s involvement.

President Yoon Suk Yeol has been keen to end the spat and form a united front against regional challenges including North Korea, which launched a long-range missile just hours before Yoon’s arrival in Tokyo.

After talks, he and Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced the resumption of “shuttle diplomacy,” with the leaders agreeing to regular reciprocal visits to build confidence.

Japanese media said this could include Kishida inviting Yoon to the G7 summit in Hiroshima in May, and then visiting Seoul.

“Strengthening Japan-South Korea ties in the current strategic environment is urgent,” Kishida told reporters at a joint press conference with Yoon after talks.

“I hope this visit will nurture trust and friendship and significantly elevate Japan-South Korea relations.”

Tokyo’s trade ministry said earlier on Thursday it would end restrictions on exports to South Korea of key industrial materials needed for semiconductors, and Seoul said it would withdraw a complaint filed with the World Trade Organization.

Kishida said both countries wanted stronger deterrence capacities, and that suspended security and ministerial talks would now resume, along with

trilateral meetings with China.

And Yoon said the nations would revive a military intelligence agreement that Seoul paused when relations nosedived.

In a potent reminder of the security challenges that have pushed Seoul and Tokyo closer together, North Korea fired a long-range ballistic missile just hours before Yoon’s arrival.

“As seen from North Korea’s long-range ballistic missile launch this morning before I left for Tokyo, North Korea’s ever-increasing nuclear missile threat poses a great threat to peace and stability,” he said.

“Korea and Japan must closely cooperate in solidarity to wisely deal with these illegal threats.”

The two neighbours are US allies and economically developed democracies, but their relations have long been poisoned by history, particularly atrocities committed during Japan’s 35-year colonial rule, including the use of wartime sex slaves – euphemistically termed “comfort women” – and forced labour.

Japan rejected the 2018 Supreme Court ruling, arguing that colonial era disputes had been settled in 1965, when diplomatic ties were normalised and Tokyo gave Seoul loans and economic aid equivalent to several billion dollars today.

However, Yoon’s election, and growing concerns about North Korean sabre-rattling as well as Chinese military power, have driven momentum for reconciliation.

“South Korea can no longer afford to keep squabbling over specific bilateral issues,” Yuki Asaba, a professor of Korean studies at Doshisha University, told AFP.

Following their summit and press conference, Kishida will host a dinner for Yoon, who reportedly made a specific menu request: omurice, a Western-inspired Japanese comfort food featuring an omelette over rice.



Women clean mud-covered clothes next to tents donated by Turkish Turk Kizilay humanitarian organisation, following floods in Adiyaman, southeastern Turkey yesterday. Flash floods killed at least 10 people living in tents and containers set up across Turkey’s quake-hit southeast, according to media reports. PHOTO: AFP

ARREST WARRANT SUSPENSION Pakistan trial court dismisses Imran’s plea

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistan court declined yesterday to cancel an arrest warrant for former prime minister Imran Khan, one of his lawyers said, as hundreds of his supporters held a vigil at his home and vowed to stop police from detaining him.



Attempts by police this week to arrest the 70-year-old led to pitched battles with his supporters outside his home in the eastern city of Lahore before a court ordered authorities to stand down Wednesday.

Khan was ousted from office by a no-confidence vote last year and has been snarled in dozens of legal cases as he campaigns for early elections and a return to office.

“The court has dismissed our petition to suspend the non-bailable arrest warrant, which means that Khan can be arrested,” lawyer Sher Afzal Marwat told AFP.

It was not immediately clear, however, if police would move against Khan, whose lawyers gave an undertaking to the Islamabad court that he would appear on Saturday.

However, Shibli Faraz, a senior party leader, said he would need “foolproof security” to appear.

This particular case, brought by the Election Commission of Pakistan, centres on accusations Khan did not declare gifts received during his time as premier, or the profit made from selling them.

He denies the allegations.

MINE EXPLOSION Death toll rises to 21 in Colombia

AFP, Bogotá

An explosion at a coal mine in central Colombia has left 21 miners dead after 10 more bodies were found in the pit, President Gustavo Petro said yesterday. “Sadly, 21 people lost their lives in this tragic accident in Sutatausa,” a municipality in Cundinamarca department, the Colombian leader wrote on Twitter. A build-up of methane gas apparently triggered the Tuesday night explosion in the underground complex, according to local officials. Rescuers had found 11 other bodies on Wednesday in the mine, which is some 45 miles north of Bogotá. Cundinamarca Governor Nicolas Garcia announced the search was over yesterday.

US ‘suppressing’ TikTok: China

AFP, Beijing

China urged the United States to stop “unreasonably suppressing” TikTok yesterday, after Washington gave the popular video-sharing app an ultimatum to part ways with its Chinese owners or face a nationwide ban.

The United States and the European Union have been taking an increasingly firm approach to the app, owned by the Chinese firm ByteDance, citing fears that user data could be used or abused by Chinese officials.

The White House was reported on Wednesday to have told the app that it will be banned in the United States if it continues to be owned by the Beijing-based tech firm. A TikTok spokesperson told AFP that “calls for a ban or divestment are unnecessary”.



ANIMAL TRIALS Dengue treatment advances

AFP, Tokyo

A new dengue treatment that could become the first to prevent and treat the virus has proven effective in initial trials in monkeys, according to new research.

Dengue is transmitted by mosquitoes and affects tens of millions each year, producing brutal symptoms that have earned it the moniker “breakbone fever”.

It is endemic in dozens of countries, but no treatment exists.

Two years ago, researchers published work showing a compound could effectively prevent the virus from replicating in cell cultures and mice by preventing the interaction between two proteins. Now the team has refined the compound and tested it in both mice and monkeys, with “very encouraging” results, said Van Loock, lead for emerging pathogens at the Janssen Companies of Johnson & Johnson.