

Biden eyes AI dangers

REUTERS, WASHINGTON

US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday it remains to be seen whether artificial intelligence (AI) is dangerous, but underscored that technology companies had a responsibility to ensure their products were safe before making them public.

Biden told science and technology advisers that AI could help in addressing disease and climate change, but it was also important to address potential risks to society, national security and the economy.

"Tech companies have a responsibility, in my view, to make sure their products are safe before making them public," he said at the start of a meeting of the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST).

When asked if AI was dangerous, he said, "It remains to be seen. It could be."



Israeli security forces remove Palestinian Muslim worshippers sitting on the grounds of the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem, early yesterday, during the holy month of Ramadan. PHOTO: AFP

UKRAINE PEACE

China has 'major role' to play: Macron

AFP, Beijing

French President Emmanuel Macron said yesterday that China had a "major role" to play in finding a path to peace in Ukraine, as he kicked off a three-day visit to Beijing.

Speaking at a gathering of the French community in Beijing ahead of a meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping today, Macron said France would seek to work with China "in this shared responsibility for peace and stability" in Ukraine.

"China, with its close relationship with Russia, which has been reaffirmed in recent days, can play a major role," he said, noting Beijing's stated opposition to the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine as well as its proposal for peace between Kyiv and Moscow.

The French president's first trip to China in four years is set to be dominated by the conflict in Ukraine, with an official from his office telling reporters he would seek to stand firm in talks with Xi.

Macron's aims also include preserving and rebalancing China's trade ties with Europe. "We must not disassociate ourselves, separate ourselves from China," Macron told Beijing's French community.

AL-AQSA MOSQUE COMPOUND

Israeli police attack worshippers

More than 350 arrested; Arab League condemns; cross-border rockets fired from Gaza

REUTERS, GAZA/JERUSALEM

Israeli police entered Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque in force before dawn yesterday and clashed with worshippers, drawing condemnation from Arab countries and a furious reaction in the occupied West Bank and crossborder strikes in Gaza.

The incident, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and on the eve of the Jewish Passover, came amid fears that tensions built up during a year of escalating Israeli Palestinian violence could be unleashed at the Al-Aqsa mosque, known to Jews as the Temple Mount.

Palestinian militants fired at least nine rockets from Gaza into Israel overnight, prompting air strikes from Israel which hit what it said were weapon production sites for the Islamist group Hamas, which controls the blockaded coastal enclave.

Hamas did not claim responsibility for the rocket attacks but said these were in response to the Israeli raid on Al-Aqsa, where clashes in 2021 set off a 10-day war with Gaza.

As ground-shaking explosions from the airstrikes rocked Gaza, witnesses said Israeli tanks also shelled Hamas positions. "We are not interested in an escalation, but we are ready for any scenario," IDF

spokesman Daniel Hagari said.

As day broke, with international efforts underway to de-escalate the situation, tensions appeared to have calmed in Al-Aqsa, where large crowds of worshippers spent the night as is common during Ramadan.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said 12 Palestinians had sustained wounds during the raid, including from rubber-tipped bullets and beatings, in clashes with



police. It added that Israeli forces had prevented its medics from reaching the area.

Israeli police said in a statement that security units were forced to enter the compound after what it called masked agitators locked themselves inside the mosque with fireworks, sticks and stones.

It said more than 350 people who had barricaded themselves inside were arrested and removed.

Thousands of worshippers spent the night in the mosque

compound, amid fears of possible clashes with Jewish visitors to the site, which they revere as the Temple Mount, the site of Judaism's two ancient Temples.

Under the longstanding "status quo" arrangement governing the area, which Israel says it maintains, non-Muslims can visit but only Muslims are allowed to worship in the mosque compound. Jewish visitors have increasingly prayed more or less openly at the site in defiance of the rules.

The Waqf, the Jordanian-appointed Islamic organisation that manages the complex, considered the third holiest site in the Muslim world, described the police actions as a "flagrant assault on the identity and the function of the mosque as a place of worship for Muslims alone".

The incident drew a sharp reaction from Arab countries. Jordan and Egypt, both involved in recent US-backed efforts to de-escalate tensions between Israel and the Palestinians, issued separate statements strongly condemning the incident, while Saudi Arabia, with whom Israel hopes to normalise ties, said Israel's "storming" of Al-Aqsa undermined peace efforts.

The Palestinian Authority leadership said Israel's crossing of "red lines" at the holy sites risked an "explosion".

YEMEN CONFLICT

Iran welcomes US call to back peace process

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday welcomed a US call to help end the long-running conflict in Yemen by backing a peace process, one year after a United Nations brokered truce dramatically reduced fighting.

Diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict have multiplied since the Yemeni government's main foreign backer Saudi Arabia signed a Chinese brokered deal to restore relations with Iran last month.

US special envoy for Yemen Timothy Lenderking said Tuesday that Washington "would like to see the Iranians show support for the political process that we hope is coming".

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani described the envoy's call as "gratifying", stressing that Tehran had been "striving for a peace process since the beginning of the war".

Sunday marked the first anniversary of the UN-brokered truce between the Yemeni government and the Iran-backed rebels.

UN Yemen envoy Hans Grundberg described it as a "moment of hope" as the truce was largely holding despite lapsing in October.

NEW ZEALAND PARLIAMENT

Ardern delivers final speech

AFP, Wellington

Former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern bowed out of parliament yesterday, making an impassioned plea during her tearful final speech to "please take the politics out of climate change".

Ardern shocked New Zealand earlier this year when she announced she was stepping down as prime minister and retiring from politics, saying she no longer had "enough in the tank".

Draped in a korowai – a traditional Maori feather cloak – Ardern recalled her humble beginnings in a working class family, and how she never expected to lead the country.

"It was a cross between a sense of duty to steer a moving freight train... and being hit by one," she quipped during her valedictory address.

"And that's probably because my internal reluctance to lead was matched only by a huge sense of responsibility."

Ardern steered New Zealand through natural disasters, the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2019 Christchurch mosque massacre – in which a white supremacist gunman killed 51 Muslim worshippers.

But she singled out the climate crisis as the defining issue of her time in politics.

"Climate change is a crisis. It is upon us," she said.

"And so one of the very few things I will ask of this house on my departure is that you please take the politics out of climate change."

The 42-year-old, once the youngest woman leader in the world, choked up at several points during the speech, which she started and finished in the Maori language.

FISHING BOAT OFF MALTA

440 migrants rescued: MSF

AFP, Rome

More than 400 migrants have been rescued from a boat off Malta after an 11-hour operation, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said yesterday after its ship responded to a distress alert. While heading to shelter in the Mediterranean due to bad weather, MSF's rescue ship the Geo Barents received the distress signal, the charity tweeted. The Geo Barents finally reached the boat at 4:00 am Tuesday "after more than 10 hours of navigation in a stormy sea", MSF said. "Unfortunately, the weather did not allow our team to directly perform the rescue, which could have endangered the lives of the people and those of the MSF team," it said.

US House speaker meets Taiwan leader

AFP, Los Angeles



US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy was set to sit down with Taiwan's president yesterday for a highly symbolic meeting in California that has already prompted outrage and dire warnings from China. The meeting outside Los Angeles comes on what is technically a stopover for President

Tsai Ing-wen, after her two-country trip in Latin America to visit Taiwan's few remaining official allies. A pro-China demonstration also gathered nearby chanting "One China", as Tsai arrived Tuesday evening, following her Central American tour. Beijing claims Taiwan as its own territory and balks at any official contact Taipei has with other countries. This week, it warned McCarthy, a Republican and California native who is second in line to the US presidency, that he was "playing with fire" by meeting Tsai. "China is strongly opposed to the US arranging for Tsai Ing-wen to transit through its territory..." foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning told reporters.

Japan to fund overseas defence projects

REUTERS, TOKYO

Japan yesterday said it plans to offer countries financial assistance to help them bolster their defences, marking its first unambiguous departure from rules that forbid the use of international aid for military purposes.

Japan's Overseas Security Assistance (OSA) will be managed separately from the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) programme that for decades has funded roads, dams and other civilian infrastructure, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said at a regular news conference.

"By enhancing their security and deterrence capabilities, OSA aims to deepen our security cooperation with the countries, to create a desirable security environment for Japan," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement.

The change comes as Japan undertakes its biggest military build-up since World War Two in a marked shift away from the pacifism that is set out in its constitution and has dominated its political discourse for decades.

Any aid under the new arrangement will not be used to buy lethal weapons that recipients could use in conflicts with other countries in accordance with three principles that govern arms exports, the foreign ministry said.

Specific projects are expected to include satellite communication and radio systems for maritime surveillance, and preparations are underway for the first aid to be finalised within this fiscal year, the ministry said. The first recipients will likely be the Philippines, Malaysia, Bangladesh, or Fiji.



Police remove activists of the environmental group "Last Generation" (Letzte Generation) sitting on the ground to block a street in front of a banner reading "More democracy: Society Council now", during a protest for climate change in Berlin's Charlottenburg district, Germany yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

US, S Korea hold air drills

AFP, Seoul

South Korea and the United States yesterday staged joint air drills involving at least one US nuclear-capable B-52H strategic bomber, Seoul's military said.

North Korea views such exercises as rehearsals for invasion, and has responded to other recent drills with a spate of increasingly provocative banned weapons tests.

In recent weeks it has tested what state media described as an underwater nuclear-capable drone, and carried out the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile.

Officials in Seoul and Washington have warned since early 2022 that North Korea may conduct its seventh nuclear test.

The United States and South, have ramped up defence cooperation in light of the growing threats.