

WEST BANK

Israelis revive flashpoint settlement

AFP, Burqah

Israelis started reviving a flashpoint outpost settlement in the occupied West Bank on Monday, AFP journalists said, constructing a building at the site which has drawn international attention.

Using a truck, diggers and an earth roller, work got underway to erect a portable building at the northern West Bank site.

AFP journalists saw Israeli soldiers guarding around 20 people carrying out construction work at the Homesh site, which Israel evacuated nearly two decades ago.

Meanwhile, an Israeli civilian was shot dead at the entrance to a Jewish settlement in West Bank yesterday, medics said. The 32-year-old was identified as Meir Tamari by the Shomron Regional Council, the Israeli body which administers settlements in the northern West Bank.



PHOTO: REUTERS

A firefighter walks near cars damaged during a massive Russian drone strike, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Kyiv yesterday.

Differences on Ukraine won't hurt ties with India: US

REUTERS, New Delhi

The friendship between the United States and India has never been stronger and disagreements over Russia's invasion of Ukraine won't hinder ties between the two, Washington's new ambassador to New Delhi said yesterday.

Eric Garcetti said India had helped to keep the price cap on Russian oil imposed by the Group of Seven economies, the European Union and Australia late last year to try to deprive Moscow of funds to fight its Ukraine war.

"We won't stop speaking about the unprovoked war of aggression by Russia against Ukraine," Garcetti told news channel CNN-News 18, weeks before Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to the United States from June 21-24.

"At the same time, where we don't agree 100 percent of the time, we are not going to stop the momentum in this relationship," he said. "We know that we can continue doing things together."

New Delhi has refused to condemn its old ally Russia for the war and has increased its trade with Moscow to record levels, driven largely by imports of Russian oil.

SUDAN CONFLICT

Fighting subsides after truce extended

UN says 13.6m children in urgent need of humanitarian support

REUTERS, Dubai

Clashes subsided in Sudan's capital yesterday though fighting could be heard in some areas, residents said, after military factions battling for more than six weeks agreed to extend a ceasefire aimed at allowing aid to reach civilians.

The army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) agreed to extend a week-long ceasefire deal by five days just before it was due to expire late on Monday.

The truce was brokered and is being remotely monitored by Saudi Arabia and the United States, which say it has been violated by both sides but has still allowed for the delivery of aid to an estimated two million people.

"We hope this truce succeeds even if only to stop the war a little and that we can return to our normal lives. We have hope in the truce and we don't have other options," said Hind Saber, a 53-year-old resident of Khartoum.

Hours before the ceasefire extension was signed, residents reported intensive fighting in all three of the adjoining cities that make up Sudan's greater capital around the confluence of the Nile - Khartoum, Omdurman and Bahri.

The war has caused nearly 1.4 million people to flee their homes,

including more than 350,000 that have crossed into neighbouring countries.

Areas of the capital have been hit by widespread looting and frequent cuts to power and water supplies. Most hospitals have been put out of service.

The conflict erupted on April 15 over internationally backed plans for a transition to elections under a civilian government.



The army and the RSF had held the top positions on Sudan's ruling council since former leader Omar al-Bashir was toppled during a popular uprising in 2019.

They staged a coup in 2021 as they were due to hand leadership of the council to civilians, before falling out over the chain of command and restructuring of the RSF under the planned transition.

UN children's agency Unicef said more than 13.6 million

children in Sudan, a country of 49 million people, were in urgent need of lifesaving humanitarian support.

The UN World Food Programme, which expects up to 2.5 million people in Sudan to slip into hunger in coming months, said that 17,000 tonnes of food had been looted since the conflict began.

WFP said on Monday that it had begun to distribute food in parts of the capital for the first time since the outbreak of fighting.

The situation is particularly dire in Darfur, the vast western region already ravaged by two decades of war and civil strife, where about a quarter of Sudan's population lives, reports AFP.

Activists and observers warn that Darfur civilians continue to be attacked, entire districts have been burned to the ground, and tens of thousands have been forced to flee into neighbouring Chad.

Amid the chaos, the region has been all but cut off from the world, with only sporadic access to power and the internet.

The UN has warned for weeks that fighting in Darfur's major cities between the army and the RSF has also drawn in local militias, tribal fighters and armed civilians.

NUKE ACTIVITIES

Iran 'resolves' one of IAEA's concerns

AFP, Tehran

Iran has "resolved" one of three cases raised by the UN watchdog as possible evidence it had not declared all its past nuclear activities, Iranian media reported yesterday.

The reports came just days before the board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency is due to meet to review progress in addressing the watchdog's remaining concerns.

The IAEA had reported the discovery of traces of radioactive material at three sites not declared by Iran as having hosted past nuclear activity in a blow to efforts to restore a landmark 2015 deal between Tehran and major powers.

"With the improvement of interactions between Iran and the IAEA... the case related to one of the agency's alleged sites -- Abadeh -- has been resolved," Iran's Fars news agency reported.

"This concludes the agency's inquiry into one of the three alleged locations raised," it added.

The Marivan site in Abadeh county in the southern province of Fars is the first of the three sites to be addressed under a work plan agreed by Iran and the IAEA in March last year.

AI carries 'risk of extinction' for humans

Say industry chiefs, experts

AFP, Paris

Global leaders should be working to reduce "the risk of extinction" from artificial intelligence technology, a group of industry chiefs and experts warned yesterday.

A one-line statement signed by dozens of specialists, including Sam Altman whose firm OpenAI created the ChatGPT bot, said tackling the risks from AI should be "a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war".

ChatGPT burst into the spotlight late last year, demonstrating an ability to generate essays, poems and conversations from the briefest of prompts -- and sparking billions of dollars of investment into the field.

But critics have raised the alarm over everything from biased algorithms to the possibility of massive job losses as AI-powered automation seeps into daily life.

The latest statement, housed on the website of US-based non-profit Center for AI Safety, gave no detail of the potential existential threat posed by AI.

But several of the signatories, including Geoffrey Hinton, who created some of the technology underlying AI systems and is known as the father of the industry, have made similar warnings in the past.

Biden discusses F-16 sale with Erdogan



REUTERS, Washington

US President Joe Biden said Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan in a call on Monday repeated Ankara's desire to buy F-16 fighter jets from the United States, while Biden told him Washington wanted Ankara to drop its objection to Sweden's joining Nato. The exchange took place when Biden called Erdogan to congratulate him on his victory in Turkey's presidential election on Sunday.

"I spoke to Erdogan. I congratulated Erdogan. He still wants to work on something on the F-16s. I told him we wanted a deal with Sweden, so let's get that done. And so we'll be back in touch with one another," Biden told reporters before departing the White House for Delaware.

WWII WRECKS LOOTING

Malaysia searches Chinese ship

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's coast guard said yesterday authorities were questioning the crew of a Chinese vessel detained on suspicion of looting two British World War II shipwrecks. Officers discovered unexploded shells upon boarding the Chinese-registered vessel, which was detained for illegal anchorage at the weekend, said Nurul Hizam Zakaria, Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency chief in Johor state. "Our investigation is now directed to where these cannon shells originated from. Right now, we have officers from multi-agencies searching the big ship," he told AFP. Hizam said the vessel from the city of Fuzhou had a crew of 32, some of whom were in coast guard custody for questioning.

Off to Turkey to see lifts!

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university -- Farid Ahmed, Ripon Ali and Ziaul Abedin.

Five 10-storey buildings have recently been constructed on the campus spending over Tk 520 crore.

Hossain Construction Pvt Ltd, based in Dhaka, built them and the firm has also been awarded the job for installing 25 lifts.

"No money will be spent from the university fund for this purpose," PD Azizur told The Daily Star. "The visit is necessary to inspect the quality of the product."

Asked, the PD claimed that the visit with the money of a construction firm would not violate any rules.

PUST Vice-Chancellor Prof Hafiza Khatun said, "The provision for a foreign trip was included in the tender. So, it is neither a case of irregularity nor corruption. It is a part of the entire project."

The issue drew huge criticism on social media.

"An enquiry should be conducted to check whether any public fund

"The provision for a foreign trip was included in the tender. So, it is neither a case of irregularity nor corruption. It is a part of the entire project."

Prof Hafiza Khatun
PUST VC

is used for the foreign trip, said Shibojit Nag, president of Pabna District Anti-Corruption Committee, a citizen platform.

"It is a luxurious pleasure trip," said Abdul Matin Khan, president of Pabna district unit Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan).

"The construction company will not spend its own money, rather it will somehow manage the money from the project," he opined.

Railway to sell all

FROM PAGE 5

He said that BR will sell all intercity train tickets in advance online prior to Eid to alleviate public distress.

The authorities will start selling tickets from June 14 at two different time slots to reduce the load on its server. The West Zone will start selling tickets online at 8:00am while the East Zone will start at 12:00 noon, he informed.

NEW INTERCITY TRAIN

Currently, BR is operating 52 intercity trains at different destinations. It currently operates Nilsagar Express on the Dhaka-Chilahati route. The new train will leave Chilahati at 6:00am and will reach Dhaka at 3:10pm. It will leave Dhaka at 4:15pm and reach Chilahati at 1:15pm, shows a BR document.

The train will stop at Domar, Nilphamari, Syedpur, Parbatipur, Joypurhat, Shantahar, Ishwardi Bypass and Airport Station in the capital.

EID TICKETS

The minister said tickets for trains on June 24 will be sold on June 14 and tickets for June 25, 26, 27 and 28

will be sold on June 15, 16, 17 and 18.

BR will start selling advance return tickets from June 22. On the first day, they will sell tickets for July 2. Return tickets for July 3, 4, 5 and 6 will be sold on June 23, 24, 25 and 26.

The minister said they will operate eight special trains during the Eid rush.

Two special trains will be operated on Chattogram-Chandpur route while one on Dhaka-Dewanganj route, one on Chattogram-Mymensingh route, one on Bhairab Bazar-Kishoreganj route, one on Mymensingh-Kishoreganj route, one Dhaka Cantonment to Panchagarh route and one on Dhaka Cantonment-Lalmonirhat route.

He said operation of Moitree Express on Dhaka-Kolkata route and Mitali Express on Dhaka-New Jalpaiguri will be off from June 23 to July 3. Bandhan Express on Khulna-Kolkata route will be off on June 29 only, he said.

Some mail trains will operate during Eid on special arrangement, but no intercity train will operate on the day.

To perform hajj or assist hajis?

FROM PAGE 1

State Minister Faridul Haque Khan to "oversee and coordinate hajj-related activities".

Secretaries of the cabinet division, telecommunications ministry, roads and highways, the Prime Minister's Office, and health ministry, a planning commission member, a ruling party lawmaker, and religious affairs secretary of the Awami League are in the team.

Many people who performed hajj in 2019 and before, said they hardly ever found members of such delegations when they needed them in Makkah.

Members of such delegations were almost always busy performing hajj themselves instead of looking after the pilgrims, they added.

The ministry has recently issued show-cause notices upon seven employees and officials of a "hajj administrative team" for not performing their duties at Bangladesh's hajj office in Makkah.

In several similar show-cause notices, the ministry said some of its

delegates had travelled to Taif without informing the authorities.

The ministry said their activities might create a negative impression among pilgrims and tarnish the country's image.

HAJJ ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT TEAM

According to a religious affairs ministry notification, the main responsibilities of the delegation members are to provide assistance at a health clinic, ensure prompt services to patients, assist the hajj technical team, and to find the pilgrims who get lost during hajj.

But a background check of the 218 individuals named on the list reveals that 12 are chauffeurs; three are bodyguards of the state minister, attorney general and a secretary; 15 are personal staff members of different top officials, including the chief whip of parliament, Noor-e-Alam Chowdhury; and 70 are office assistants and administrative officers.

Besides, there are night guards, cooks and cleaners in the team.

A deputy director of the Department of Environment, two deputy

secretaries, four senior assistant secretaries, an assistant police commissioner, a deputy police commissioner, an additional police commissioner, and a personal secretary are also going.

Several officials and staffers from the PMO, the Bangabhaban and different government offices in Jamalpur, which is the constituency of the state minister for religious affairs, are in the delegation.

Several officials of the hajj office, requesting anonymity, said the mid- and senior-level officials who become members of these delegations do not bother to carry out their responsibilities during hajj.

"They either perform hajj themselves or do whatever they want while the expenses are paid with public money," a top official at the Ashkona Hajj Camp said.

HAJJ TECHNICAL TEAM

Only eight of the 31 delegates have technical background.

The team includes an assistant personal secretary and public relations officer

of State Minister Faridul, several personal staff members of Faridul's office and the public relations officer of the religious affairs ministry.

There are personal staffers, a protocol officer and several administrative officials from different ministries and departments in the technical team.

When contacted, Faridul said he did not have the time to comment on the matter while the religious affairs secretary could not be reached over the phone.

T r a n s p a r e n c y

International Bangladesh Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said he wondered whether the individuals in the team had any relevance to the purpose of the delegations.

"Is it merely their link to political and governmental power that have determined their qualifications to be rewarded with the opportunity to travel abroad spending taxpayers' money?" he asked.

He also criticised the questionable expenditure amid "multidimensional economic and financial pressures facing the country".