

US Navy ship shoots down drone from Yemen

REUTERS, Washington

A US Navy warship shot down a drone in the Red Sea that emanated from Yemen, two US officials told Reuters on Wednesday, in what appeared to be only the second time the United States has brought down projectiles near its warships since the Israel-Hamas conflict began.

Washington is on heightened alert for activity by Iran-backed groups as regional tensions soar during the conflict and has been trying to ensure that it does not spread in the region.

The officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the Thomas Hudner, an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, took down the drone early morning local time.

The officials did not say whether the drone was armed or how close it came to the ship before being shot down.

Myanmar military shells town seized by rebels

AGENCIES

Myanmar's military shelled a town in western Rakhine state and used helicopters to attack fighters from an ethnic minority there yesterday, residents and local media said.

Arakan Army (AA) fighters have launched attacks on security forces across Rakhine this week, opening another front as the military battles opponents in the north and east.

AA fighters had taken "complete control" of the town of Pauktaw, 25 kilometres (16 miles) east of the state capital Sittwe, a resident told AFP after requesting anonymity for security reasons.

The military was shelling the town and helicopters were shooting at its police station, which was now occupied by AA fighters.

The resident reported hearing almost continuous gunfire and artillery shelling and said many in the town had fled.

Meanwhile, military rulers have ordered all government staff and those with military experience to prepare to serve in case of emergency, an official said.

Junta spokesperson Zaw Min Tun said the military was facing "heavy assaults from a significant number of armed rebel soldiers".

Stop torture programme

Top UN court orders Syria

AFP, The Hague

The UN's top court yesterday ruled that Syria must stop its torture programme that investigators say killed tens of thousands, in the first international case over the brutal civil war that began in 2011.

The International Court of Justice said Syria must "take all measures within its power to prevent acts of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment".

The court also ruled that Syria must "prevent the destruction and ensure the preservation of any evidence" relating to torture.

Canada and the Netherlands had called on the ICJ to "urgently" order a halt to torture in Syrian jails, arguing that "every day counts" for those still in detention.

The ruling comes after France issued an international arrest warrant for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, accused of complicity in crimes against humanity over chemical attacks in 2013.

In October, judges at the ICJ in The Hague heard searing testimony from Syrian detainees describing gang rape, mutilation and punishment involving torturing people into a cat's eye and beating them.

The court was asked to issue "provisional measures" to stop torture and arbitrary detention in Syria, open prisons to outside inspectors and provide information to families about the fate of their loved ones.

Torture in Syria is "pervasive and entrenched... and continues today", Canada and the Netherlands wrote in their submission to the ICJ. "Tens of thousands have died, or are presumed dead, as a result of torture," the two countries said.



Smoke rises following an airstrike in Gaza, as seen from southern Israel, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian group Hamas yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

UN 'fears worst' if war expands beyond Gaza

AFP, Geneva

The UN humanitarian chief said Wednesday he and Iran's top diplomat had discussed fears of what an expansion of the Gaza war might entail, and had agreed it "would not be good".

At a Geneva press briefing, United Nations humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths voiced deep concern Israel's war against Hamas could expand beyond Gaza, "into the north".

"If there is to be a war in the north with Hezbollah and Israel, then I fear the worst," Griffiths said.

"We can easily imagine the worst because it will be a war that makes even Gaza with its awful horrors of daily struggle look like just a beginning."

He said he had discussed these concerns with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, whose country supports Hamas and Hezbollah groups in neighbouring Lebanon who have been involved in growing hostile exchanges with Israel.

"Naturally, the worry about expansion was the topic I discussed mainly with him," Griffiths said.

"And of course, he agreed with me that such expansion would not be a good thing."

"It would be a regional war, which would affect so many parts," Griffiths said, pointing out that impacts have already been seen in Syria and Yemen.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza says Israel's ensuing aerial bombardment and ground offensive has killed more than



11,500 people, mostly civilians, including thousands of children.

During Wednesday's meeting, Amir-Abdollahian had called on the UN to do more to get desperately needed aid into war-battered Gaza.

"The amount of humanitarian aid sent to Gaza is very small and almost zero, and it is necessary for the United Nations to take immediate and serious action in this regard," he said, according to a readout from Iran's foreign ministry.

He called for "strong and urgent management by the UN to remove the blockage at the Rafah border crossing and get humanitarian aid into Gaza".

Griffiths insisted the UN had 460 aid trucks ready to go, calling for more border crossings to be opened and appealing for cooperation from all parties to ensure the aid can get in and be distributed throughout Gaza.

A Palestinian ambassador told UN member states yesterday that

countries must "wake up" to the massive violations that Israel is committing in Gaza, insisting it was a "genocide".

"You should wake up in this room. This is a massacre, this is genocide, and we're seeing it on TV. It cannot continue," Palestinian ambassador Ibrahim Khraishi told a gathering of UN member states in Geneva.

The UN human rights chief yesterday decried serious allegations of international law violations in the Israel-Hamas war and suggested an international investigation was needed.

Volker Türk said "extremely serious allegations of multiple and profound breaches of international humanitarian law, whoever commits them, demand rigorous investigation and full accountability". Türk was speaking after a visit last week to the Middle East, where he warned that both sides were committing war crimes in the deadly conflict.

EAST UKRAINE

Russia steps up attacks on Avdiivka

AFP, Kyiv

Russia has stepped up attacks on the shattered eastern Ukrainian frontline town of Avdiivka, its mayor said yesterday.

The industrial town near the Russian-held regional stronghold of Donetsk has faced a fierce onslaught for more than a month.

"It is very hot. Indeed, in the last few days, the enemy has become more active," Vitaliy Barabash said on national television.

Russian troops are using armoured vehicles, targeting the industrial zone and hitting positions in the town "around the clock" to strike high-rise buildings, Barabash said.

Under fire since 2014, the town has been largely destroyed by shelling.

There are 1,431 people left in the town out of a pre-war population of around 30,000, he said.

General Oleksandr Tarnavskiy, who is leading the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the south, said: "Our soldiers are firmly holding the defence in the direction of Avdiivka".

The British defence ministry in an intelligence report yesterday said Russia "is almost certainly attempting a pincer movement to encircle the town".

US ignores Israeli 'war crimes' for domestic politics

Says ex-official of State Dept

AFP, Washington

Domestic policy concerns are leading US officials willfully to ignore Israeli "war crimes" -- and to stifle dissent over arming the country -- a former senior State Department staffer who quit in protest told AFP Wednesday. Josh Paul caused a stir in Washington when he resigned last month, one of the more high profile protests at US policy from within the State Department. In an interview, he said that while many officials are disturbed by the actions of the Israeli military as it responds to Hamas's October 7 surprise attack, they turn a blind eye to rules governing arms transfers, which demand consideration of whether US weapons will be used to violate international law. As the former director of congressional and public affairs at the State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, Paul helped oversee arms transfers to US allies like Israel for 11 years. "It is my opinion that Israel is committing war crimes in its actions in Gaza right now. And it's not just my opinion. I've actually heard from officials across government, including elected officials at a very senior level, who share that opinion but aren't willing to say it in public," he said. Yet the United States keeps supplying weapons "where it was clear -- and as we have seen -- that they were going to be used to kill so many civilians," he said.

INDIA TUNNEL COLLAPSE

Renewed drilling begins to rescue 40 trapped men

REUTERS, Uttarkashi

Rescue workers yesterday renewed efforts to reach 40 men trapped inside a collapsed highway tunnel in India for the fifth day, making slow progress as they began drilling through rock and soil debris. Authorities said they were confident an advanced drilling machine flown in from New Delhi will speed up the rescue at the site in the northern state of Uttarakhand. The plan is to drill and create space for a pipe that can be used by the trapped men to crawl to safety. Drilling had

penetrated about 3 metres (10 ft) of debris by yesterday morning, officials said, adding that they had to cover a total distance of about 60 metres.

The machine can drill through about 2.5 metres of rock per hour, Ranjit Singh, the state's top disaster management officer, said. Two of the trapped construction workers were treated for nausea and

headache as they endured a fifth day confined to a small space behind the rubble, officials said. "There is electricity, water and we are sending food. The new machine which is more powerful and speedy, is deployed," V K Singh, federal deputy minister for road transport and highways, told reporters at the site. "Our priority is to save them all. The morale of people trapped inside is high. We are very optimistic of bringing them out," he said. Asked about media reports which said India had consulted Thai experts involved in the 2018 rescue of 12 boys trapped in a cave complex, Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami said: "Technical experts who have dealt with such situations in foreign countries have also been consulted."



Newly arrived Rohingya refugees are stranded on a boat as the nearby community decided not to allow them to land after providing water and food in Pineung, Aceh province, Indonesia yesterday.

Madagascar votes amid opposition boycott

AFP, Antananarivo

Madagascar's President Andry Rajoelina yesterday urged people to vote in a highly contested presidential election in which he is seeking a new term, and slammed an opposition call to boycott the polls.

Rajoelina is one of 13 candidates on the ballot but 10 of the others have called on voters to shun the elections, complaining of an "institutional coup" in favour of the incumbent.

Following a night-time curfew and weeks of protests, voting got calmly under way early yesterday, according to AFP journalists, with voters emerging from rudimentary polling centres, their thumbs stained with green and indelible ink.

Polls are scheduled to stay open until 05:00 pm (1400 GMT).