

Yemen rebels threaten Israel-bound Red Sea ships

AFP, Sanaa

Yemen's Iran backed Huthi rebels threatened to attack any vessels heading to Israeli ports unless food and medicine were allowed into the besieged Gaza Strip.

The latest warning comes amid heightened tensions in the Red Sea and surrounding waters following a series of maritime attacks by Huthi rebels since the start of the Israel-Hamas war on October 7.

In a statement posted on social media later on Saturday, the Huthis said they "will prevent the passage of ships heading to the Zionist entity" if humanitarian aid is not allowed into Hamas ruled Gaza.

The Huthis have recently attacked ships they claim have direct links to Israel, but their latest threat expands the scope of their targets.

UN position hit in south Lebanon

AFP, Beirut

A United Nations peacekeeping position in southern Lebanon was hit on Saturday without causing casualties, the UN force said, adding it was seeking to verify the source of the fire.

Lebanon's National News Agency (NNA) reported that an "Israeli Merkava tank" targeted the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) position near the border across from Metula in northern Israel.

An Israeli army spokeswoman said: "We did not aim at UNIFIL, we did not hit a UNIFIL position".

UNIFIL spokesman Andrea Tenenti said the force was "verifying" the source of the fire, and said the incident caused "no casualties" but damaged a watchtower at the base.

Since the Israel-Hamas war began on October 7, the frontier between Lebanon and Israel has seen intensifying exchanges of fire, mainly between the Israeli army and Shia Muslim movement Hezbollah, raising fears of a broader conflagration.

More than 120 people have been killed on the Lebanese side since October, mostly Hezbollah fighters but also including more than a dozen civilians.



Palestinians flee Khan Yunis in southern Gaza Strip further south toward Rafah, along the Salah Al-Din road yesterday, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. PHOTO: AFP

Israel trying to force Gazans into Egypt

UN agency chief warns; estimated 1.9m of territory's 2.4m people displaced by war

AFP, Washington

The head of the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees has accused Israel of laying the groundwork for the mass expulsion of Gazans across the territory's border into Egypt.

In an opinion piece published on Saturday in the Los Angeles Times, UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini pointed to the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the increasing concentration near the border of displaced civilians who fled the fighting, first in the north and then further south.

"The United Nations and several member states, including the US, have firmly rejected forcibly displacing Gazans out of the Gaza Strip," Lazzarini said.

"But the developments we are witnessing point to attempts to move Palestinians into Egypt, regardless of whether they stay there or are resettled elsewhere."

The widespread destruction in the Palestinian territory's north and the resulting displacements were "the first stage of such a scenario", he added, while forcing civilians from the southern city of Khan Yunis closer to the border was the next.

"If this path continues, leading to what many are already calling a second Nakba, Gaza will not be a land for Palestinians anymore," Lazzarini said, using the Arabic term for the exodus or forced displacement of 760,000 Palestinians during the war that coincided with Israel's creation in 1948.

A spokesperson for the Israeli defence ministry office responsible for Palestinian civilian affairs did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Lazzarini's accusation.

When asked about the possibility of evacuating people into Egypt last week, a government spokesman said Israel was "focusing on getting civilians out of

harm's way inside the Gaza Strip".

A small number of Gazans have been allowed to cross into Egypt for medical treatment, and some foreign nationals trapped in the territory at the outset of the war were also allowed to evacuate by way of the Rafah crossing -- Gaza's only border not under Israeli control.

But other Palestinians are currently blocked from leaving, with the territory's estimated 1.9 million displaced people, out of a population of 2.4 million, turning the border town of Rafah into a vast camp.

Aid groups have sounded the alarm on the "apocalyptic" humanitarian situation in the narrow territory, warning it is close to being overwhelmed by disease and starvation.

Jordan's foreign minister, Ayman Safadi, yesterday said that Israel was implementing a policy of pushing Palestinians out of Gaza through a war that he said meets the "legal definition of genocide".

Safadi, whose country borders the West Bank and absorbed the bulk of Palestinians after the creation of Israel in 1948, also said that Israel had created hatred that would haunt the region and define generations to come.

"What we are seeing in Gaza is not just simply the killing of innocent people and the destruction of their livelihoods (by Israel) but a systematic effort to empty Gaza of its people," Safadi said at a conference in Doha.

"We have not seen the world yet come to the place we should come to ... an unequivocal demand for ending this war; a war that is within the legal definition of genocide," Safadi said.

Asked to respond, Israeli government spokesperson Eylon Levy said: "These are, of course, outrageous and false accusations."



Iran unveils drones armed with air-to-air missiles

AFP, Tehran

Iran has reinforced its air defence capabilities by adding combat drones equipped with air-to-air missiles to its arsenal, state media reported yesterday.

"Dozens of Karrar drones armed with air-to-air missiles have been added for air defence in all border areas of the country," the official IRNA news agency said.

The drones, with an operational range of up to 1,000 kilometres (620 miles), were exhibited yesterday morning during a televised ceremony organised at a military academy in Tehran.

"The enemies will now have to rethink their strategies" because the Iranian forces have "become more powerful", IRNA quoted the commander-in-chief of Iran's army, General Abdolrahman Mousavi, as saying.

The Karrar interceptor drone, the first version of which was unveiled in 2010, has been equipped with a "Majid" thermal missile with a range of eight kilometres (five miles) "made entirely in Iran", added the agency.

It "succeeded in its operational tests" during military exercises held in October, Mousavi said.

Iranians will prevail against rulers

Says Nobel Peace Prize winner Narges Mohammadi

REUTERS, Oslo

The Iranian people will ultimately overcome authoritarianism imposed by a government that has lost legitimacy and public support, Nobel Peace Prize winner Narges Mohammadi said from prison in a speech read by her children yesterday.

The Norwegian Nobel committee in October awarded the prize to Mohammadi, 51, for her non-violent fight "against oppression of women in Iran" and the promotion of human rights for all, in a rebuke to Tehran's theocratic leaders.

Her 17-year-old twins Kiana and Ali Rahmani collected the prize, a gold medal and diploma, at a ceremony in Oslo's City Hall attended by several hundred guests. The prize includes a cheque for 11 million Swedish crowns (about \$1 million).

In her speech, sent from Iran's notorious Evin prison, Mohammadi said continued resistance and non-violence were the best strategies to bring about change.

"The Iranian people, with perseverance, will overcome repression and authoritarianism. Have no doubt, this is certain," she said in her speech read in French.

The women's rights advocate is serving multiple sentences on charges including spreading propaganda against the Islamic Republic after her last arrest in November 2021.

"I write this message from behind the high, cold walls of a prison," Mohammadi said, adding that her life and lives of many activists in Iran had been a constant struggle "to stay alive".

Hong Kong holds first 'patriots only' local elections

AFP, Hong Kong

Polls opened in Hong Kong's first "patriots only" district council election yesterday, with officials dismissing concerns of potentially low turnout in a race that has shut out all opposition candidates after a national security crackdown. The previous election was held at the peak of the huge, democracy protests in 2019, and recorded a historic high 71 percent turnout -- delivering a landslide victory for the pro-democracy camp. As part of widespread clampdown on political opposition -- aided by a security law imposed in 2020 by Beijing -- city authorities overhauled councils' composition earlier this year.

Egyptians voting in election likely to give Sisi third term

AFP, Cairo

Polling stations opened yesterday for Egyptians to vote in a presidential election overshadowed by war in neighbouring Gaza and with little doubt the incumbent Abdel Fattah al-Sisi will secure a third term. In a country gripped by the most severe financial crisis in its recent history -- inflation has hovered near 40 percent after the currency lost half its value and drove up the cost of imports -- the economy is the crux of Egyptians' concerns. Even before the current crisis, about two-thirds of the country's nearly 106 million people were living on or below the poverty line. Before polls opened at 09:00 am, dozens of voters had already crowded in front of a polling station in a central Cairo school amidst heavy security. Voting will take place until tomorrow, between 9:00 am and 09:00 pm each day, with official results announced on December 18. In front of the Cairo polling station, posters bore messages to "get out and participate" while a DJ played nationalist songs.

Ask Ukraine Says Russia's Lavrov when asked about peace talks

REUTERS, Moscow

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday said that the West was trying to exhaust Russia in Ukraine and that if peace talks were to take place then Kyiv would have to change its own presidential decree.

"It is up to the Ukrainians to recognise how deep they are in the hole where the Americans put them," Lavrov said of the war.

When asked what the chances were of diplomacy to bring about a ceasefire or peace, he said: "You'll have to call Mr (President Volodymyr) Zelensky because a year and half ago he signed a decree prohibiting any negotiations with (Russian President Vladimir) Putin."

Meanwhile, Ukrainian officials pressed on with a campaign to remove Soviet-era monuments on Saturday as authorities in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv dismantled a statue of a Red Army commander from a central boulevard.

Ukraine has doubled down on efforts to erase all traces of Russian rule amid a full-scale invasion by Kremlin troops, now nearing its two-year mark.

Municipal workers on Saturday carefully hoisted the hulking statue of Mykola Shchors, a Soviet field commander during Russian Civil War, off its pedestal.

The structure had occupied a prominent spot on a central artery named after Ukraine's national poet.

Onlookers stopped to watch and photograph as a giant crane lowered the horse-riding Shchors onto a flatbed truck.

"We need to educate our youth so that they know our history," said Zoya Kobylukova, 82, who described communism as a "utopia" that led to many people being killed.



Demonstrators throw egg shells with red paint at an artwork depicting Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., US President Joe Biden and Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte at a protest to mark the 75th International Human Rights Day in Manila, Philippines yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Tornadoes kill six in US state of Tennessee

AFP, Washington

Tornadoes tore through the US state of Tennessee on Saturday, leaving at least six people dead, damaging homes and causing blackouts, authorities said.

Three people died in a suburb of Nashville, the southeastern state's capital, while photos posted by the city's Office of Emergency Management showed downed trees and collapsed homes.

"Unfortunately we can confirm there are 3 fatalities as a result of the severe weather on Nesbitt Lane," the office wrote on X.

In the city of Clarksville about 40 miles (65 kilometers) away, two adults and one child were killed by a tornado, according to a statement from the Montgomery County government.

"Additionally, 23 people have been treated at the hospital," it said.

First responders were "still in the search and rescue phase of this disaster," it added.