

## SYRIA WAR

## More than 4,360 people dead in 2023

AFP, Beirut

More than 4,360 people, including combatants and civilians, were killed in Syria's civil war in 2023, in the thirteenth year since fighting began, a war monitor said yesterday.

The figure was an increase on 2022, when 3,825 people were killed.

That was the lowest annual death toll since the conflict began in 2011 with the government's brutal crackdown on peaceful pro-democracy protests, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

This year's count included 1,889 civilians, 241 of them women and 307 children, according to the UK-based Observatory.

Syrian government forces accounted for almost 900 of the dead this year, with other fighters including from Syrian Democratic Forces, pro-Iran groups, Islamic State group jihadists.



Fireworks are seen over the Sydney Opera House and Harbour Bridge during New Year's Eve celebrations in Sydney, Australia today. The world's 8.1 billion people have begun ushering in 2024 and bidding farewell to a turbulent 12 months marked by Israeli offensive in Gaza, war in Europe, stinging price rises and the deaths of American diplomat Henry Kissinger and football hero Bobby Charlton. PHOTO: STAR

## Prepare for possible 'war'

## North Korea's Kim orders military

AFP, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un wrapped up the year with fresh threats of a nuclear attack on Seoul and orders for a military arsenal build-up to prepare for a war that can "break out any time" on the peninsula, state media reported yesterday.

Kim lambasted the United States during a lengthy speech at the end of five days of year-end party meetings that set his country's military, political and economic policy decisions for 2024.

The meeting announced plans for further military development in the coming year, including launching three more spy satellites, building unmanned drones and developing electronic warfare capabilities, as well as strengthening nuclear and missile forces, according to the state media agency KCNA.

This year, Pyongyang successfully launched a reconnaissance satellite, enshrined its status as a nuclear power in its constitution and test-fired the most advanced intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in its arsenal.

Kim accused the United States of posing "various forms of military threat" and ordered his armed forces to maintain the "overwhelming war response capability", according to KCNA's account of the meeting that ended on Saturday.

## 'Life is difficult and humiliating'

## Palestinians face dire conditions in increasingly cramped southern Gaza

CNN ONLINE

Palestinians displaced inside Gaza as Israel pushes on with its ground offensive describe cramped living conditions, sky-high prices for food, children going hungry and poor sanitation, amid severe limits on food and supplies entering the coastal strip.

CNN spoke by phone with several people trying to survive in the southern city of Rafah, where tens of thousands have fled to despite it already being the most densely populated part of Gaza.

"The way I am getting by is by begging here and there and taking help from anyone," said Abu Misbah, a 51-year-old building worker trying to support a family of 10. Vegetables and fruit were unaffordable, he said. His children asked for oranges, but he was not able to buy them.

"We never [been] through this situation before; we were a middle-class family," he said. "Now since the war we are buying dates which we used to find everywhere for free. We want a solution to our miserable suffering."

He, like most others in blockaded Gaza, face what aid groups warn is a looming famine. The entire population of Gaza has already been classified in a state of crisis, according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC).

This week Israel expanded its operation further into southern Khan Younis, warning residents to leave. But the United Nations says Gazans have nowhere safe to go.

Umm Omar, 50, is also displaced in Rafah, and lives in a tent with her family. During the truce, they had briefly returned home only to find all the windows and solar panels broken, and the kitchen destroyed.

"We are nine people in a tent of two meters by one meter," she said. "We have bought this camping tent ourselves; no-one helped us or provided it."

Omar said they were getting by on canned food and estimated that most foods were at least four times as expensive as before the war. Medication is also hard to find.

"Life is difficult and humiliating; the word humiliating is not even close to describing it," she told CNN. Mahmoud Harara used to make a living selling produce from a cart. Now the 47-year old, from Al-Shujaiya, is also in Rafah, living with eight family members in the streets, including five school-age children.

"My house was destroyed and two of my sons injured from a strike of our home," he said.

Like thousands of others, the family live in a makeshift tent made of nylon and roam the streets for food. They left home without any belongings and had no mattresses for the tent. Harara said his family was receiving no help, and the price of food was "beyond imagination...Your child asks you for a piece of bread and you can't provide that for them. What kind of life is this?"

Harara said he walks three kilometers to a hospital to be able to use toilets. The lack of sanitation for the displaced now packed into parts of southern Gaza has led to the spread of contagious and respiratory diseases.

It was also extremely difficult to access drinking water and his children were cold at nights, he said. None of the family had been able to take a shower in several weeks.

The UN has warned that the volume of aid entering the enclave "remains woefully inadequate."

'Reunification' with Taiwan is inevitable  
Says China's Xi

REUTERS, Beijing

China's "reunification" with Taiwan is inevitable, President Xi Jinping said in his New Year's address yesterday, striking a stronger tone than he did last year with less than two weeks to go before the Chinese-claimed island elects a new leader.

The January 13 presidential and parliamentary elections are happening at a time of fraught relations between Beijing and Taipei.

China has been ramping up military pressure to assert its sovereignty claims over democratically governed Taiwan.

China considers Taiwan to be its "sacred territory" and has never renounced the use of force to bring it under Chinese control, though Xi made no mention of military threats in his speech carried on state television.

"The reunification of the motherland is a historical inevitability," Xi said, though the official English translation of his remarks published by the Xinhua news agency used a more simple phrase: "China will surely be reunified."

"Compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait should be bound by a common sense of purpose and share in the glory of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," he added.

The official English translation wrote "all Chinese" rather than "compatriots".

Last year, Xi said only that people on either side of the strait are "members of one and the same family" and that he hoped people on both sides will work together to "jointly foster lasting prosperity of the Chinese nation".

China has taken particular exception to current Vice President Lai Ching-te, the presidential candidate for Taiwan's ruling Democratic Party (DPP) and leading in opinion polls by varying margins, saying he is a dangerous separatist.

## RED SEA SHIPPING LINE

## US Navy sinks Huthi vessels that attacked cargo ship

AFP, Washington

The United States said yesterday it destroyed anti-ship missiles and boats operated by Yemen's Huthi rebels after a failed attempt by the Iran-backed group to board a container ship in the Red Sea. Shipping giant Maersk suspended the passage of its vessels through the key Red Sea strait for 48 hours after its ship was targeted, the latest of two dozen attacks by Huthis on international shipping in six weeks. The US Navy had responded to a distress call from the Maersk Hangzhou, a Singapore-flagged, Denmark-owned and operated container ship that reported coming under attack for a second time in 24 hours while transiting the Red Sea, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a statement. Huthis had fired on US helicopters, who "returned fire in self-defense", sinking three of four small boats that had come within 20 meters of the ship, according to the statement. Crews of the three were killed while the fourth boat fled the area, it added. The Maersk, en route from Singapore to Egypt's Port Suez, had made an earlier distress call after it was struck by a Huthi missile. CENTCOM said that assault was the 23rd illegal attack by the Huthis on international shipping since November 19. The vessel appeared to be undamaged in the attack, Maersk said.

## US appeals court allows California to bar guns

REUTERS

A federal appeals court on Saturday cleared the way for a California law that bans the carrying of guns in most public places to take effect at the start of 2024, as the panel put on hold a judge's ruling declaring the measure unconstitutional. The 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals suspended a December 20 injunction issued by a judge who concluded the state's law violated the right of citizens to keep and bear arms under the US Constitution's Second Amendment. The judge panel issued a stay that temporarily put injunction on hold until a different 9th Circuit panel could consider pausing the lower court judge's order for even longer while the litigation plays out.

## London marks 100 years of Big Ben 'bongs'

AFP, London



London's Big Ben yesterday marked the 100th anniversary of its "bongs" to ring in the New Year being broadcast live across the world. Ever since New Year's Eve 1923

when BBC engineer A G Dryland clambered onto a roof opposite the British parliament to record the strikes, live transmission has become an annual tradition. The unmistakable sound of the "nation's timepiece" has long occupied a special place in national life. The bongs are heard twice daily -- at 6:00pm and midnight and three times on Sunday -- on BBC radio, and at the start of the nightly News at Ten on commercial channel ITV. Such is their importance that even during recently-ended five-year restoration programme when they were largely silenced, important exceptions were made. As well as New Year, Big Ben also continued to mark Armistice Day.

## A year shuttling between hope and despair

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was depleting foreign exchange reserves. At one point, the central bank's dollar pile reduced to half of what it was two years ago before edging closer to a relatively comfortable level.

The year saw heightened political tensions, with concerns over fair elections, mass arrests of leaders and activists of the opposition camp, and shrinking democratic space dominating the public discourse.

For the BNP, which was struggling to even gather enough resolve to be on the streets in the first half of 2022, the bygone year was a comeback of sorts. The year also saw a revival of hartal and blockade enforced by the BNP and its like-minded parties.

The party that started the movement in the later part of 2022 over the price hike of fuel and daily essentials, and power outage carried it forward throughout the most part of 2023, holding rallies and demonstrations across the country despite arrests of its leaders and

activists. As the movement was gaining momentum, the BNP wanted to hold a grand rally to stage a massive demonstration on October 28. But the event ended in clashes between the BNP activists and police accompanied by the ruling party men.

Since then, many of their party colleagues have been arrested, jailed, or went into hiding as law enforcers launched a crackdown. BNP and its like-minded parties enforced hartal and blockades to press home their one-point demand of election under a nonpartisan interim government.

As a result, the country entered a spiral of violence which further intensified after the Election Commission on November 15 announced the national polls would be held on January 7, 2024. Although the spectre of hartals and blockades failed to cripple normal life, the unrest put the economy under pressure with the transport sector facing a serious setback.

For the ruling Awami League, the year has been challenging as it had to face opposition movement and the pressure from the international community for holding a free and fair election. The party successfully cornered the opposition after the October 28 rally was foiled and took the country towards the election dismissing the call for dialogue among major parties. The AL started the election campaign to form the next government.

As the BNP boycotted the election, the main challenge of the AL is to make the election competitive. That's why the ruling party allowed its leaders to participate as independents. Violence has already marred the campaign as the incidents of attacks and clashes between the supporters of AL nominees and the so-called AL independents are reported in various parts of the country almost every day.

"2023 was the year of hope and despair at once. The hope was that this

would be the year when the democratic backsliding would be reversed, as people of the country began to break the culture of fear and stand up for their rights," said Ali Riaz, a distinguished professor of political science at Illinois State University.

But it is ending with despair because the ruling regime has "chosen not to heed the people's aspirations. It rather doubled down the path of authoritarianism, the path of coercion", he told this newspaper.

Bangladesh is standing "at the edge of a precipice. The coming days and weeks may not only decide the trajectory of politics, but also the nature of the republic."

As we start 2024, it is likely that Bangladesh will experience a period of economic turbulence. How the country deals with the challenges of balancing economic growth with social development and ensures political stability will determine its future.

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A NATION ON THE RISE

HBL wishes everyone a happy and prosperous 2024!

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