

2023 worst year for Israeli settler violence

Says watchdog

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli settlers killed at least 10 Palestinians and torched dozens of homes in the occupied West Bank in 2023, making it the "most violent" year on record for settler attacks, an Israeli watchdog said yesterday.

Numerous West Bank attacks were carried out by a large group of Israeli settlers, and the violence spiked after Israel's October 7 offensive in Gaza Strip, said Yesh Din, a human rights group.

"At least 10 Palestinians were killed by settlers and dozens of homes and vehicles were set on fire" last year, it said.

The West Bank has been under Israeli military occupation since the 1967 Six-Day War, and tensions have escalated since the outbreak of fighting between Israel and the Gaza Strip's Hamas rulers.



Palestinians walk past the rubble of a house destroyed by an Israeli strike in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip yesterday. Israel says the offensive in Gaza, which has reduced much of the territory to rubble, killing thousands and plunging its 2.3 million people into a humanitarian disaster, has many months to go.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Armed conflict becoming reality because of US: N Korea

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un told the country's military commanders the most powerful means must be mobilized to destroy the United States and South Korea if they choose military confrontation, state media reported yesterday.

Kim said the danger of an armed confrontation on the Korean peninsula is fast becoming a reality because of hostile manoeuvres by the enemies including the United States, requiring the country to "sharpen the treasured sword" to protect itself.

"If the enemy opt for military confrontation ... our army should deal a deadly blow to thoroughly annihilate them by mobilizing all the toughest means and potentialities without moment's hesitation," KCNA quoted Kim as saying.

Kim made the comments as he hosted senior military leaders on Sunday at the ruling Workers' Party (WPK) headquarters to congratulate them on the accomplishments made in 2023, the state news agency said.

North Korea in 2023 tested its largest ballistic missiles and launched its first military reconnaissance satellite.

'Willing to take direct action' against Huthis

UK defence secretary says after Red Sea attacks; Iranian warship enters the vital shipping lane

AGENCIES

British Defence Secretary Grant Shapps said yesterday that Britain is "willing to take direct action" against Iran-backed Huthi rebels in Yemen who have repeatedly attacked vessels in the Red Sea.

London's warning comes amid escalating tensions in the vital shipping lane, with US Navy helicopters firing Sunday on Huthi rebels who attempted to board a cargo ship.

The rebels, who seized Yemen's capital Sanaa in 2014 and control much of country including its Red Sea coastline, have reported 10 fighters dead or missing.

The Huthis -- who say they are acting in solidarity with Palestinians in the Israel's offensive in Gaza -- have repeatedly fired drones and missiles at passing ships in the seaway through which 12 percent of global trade passes.

Hours after the latest incident, Shapps said Britain could step up its own military interventions. A British destroyer shot down a suspected Huthi attack drone in the Red Sea in mid-December, reports AFP.

"We are willing to take direct action, and we won't hesitate to take further action to deter threats to freedom of navigation in the Red Sea," he wrote in the Daily Telegraph newspaper.

The Huthis "should be under no misunderstanding: we are committed to holding malign actors accountable for unlawful seizures and attacks".

Shapps described the situation in the region

as "a test for the international community" which had implications for other potentially contested waterways around the world.

"If we do not protect the Red Sea, it risks emboldening those looking to threaten elsewhere including in the South China Sea and Crimea," he added.

"We need to stand firm with our allies, stand firm for our beliefs and stand firm for innocent people caught up in these events."

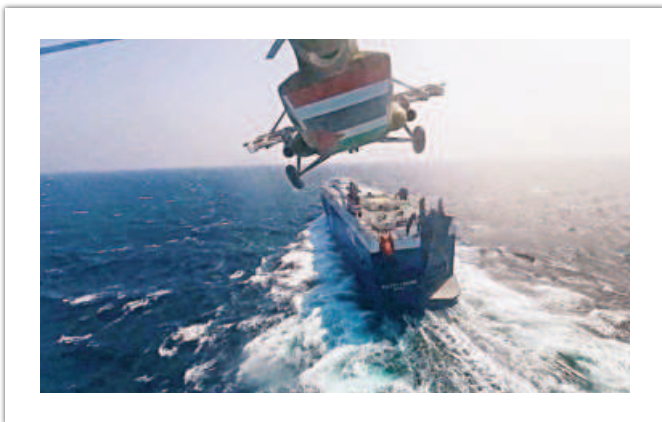
The Telegraph said London is drawing up plans with Washington for potential military strikes against the Huthis, and reported that a joint statement giving the rebels a final warning to stop their attacks was imminent.

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron said Sunday he had spoken to his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian about Red Sea tensions.

"I made clear that Iran shares responsibility for preventing these attacks," he said on social media, noting Tehran's "long-standing support" for the Huthis.

Meanwhile, Iran's Alborz warship has entered the Red Sea, the semi-official Tasnim news agency reported yesterday, at a time of soaring tensions on the key shipping route, reports Reuters.

Tasnim did not give details of the Alborz's mission but said Iranian warships had been operating in open waters to secure shipping routes, combat piracy and carry out other tasks since 2009.



MIGRANT CRISIS 30,000 crossed the Channel to UK last year

AFP, London

Nearly 30,000 migrants crossed the Channel to Britain from mainland Europe in small boats in 2023, an annual drop of more than a third, government figures released yesterday showed.

However, the unauthorised arrivals of 29,437 people on the southeast English coast remains the second largest yearly tally since officials began publishing the numbers in 2018.

The perilous journeys across one of the world's busiest shipping lanes have become a huge political problem for the Conservative government, with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak pledging last year to "stop the boats".

One of five key promises he made for 2023, the persistently high number of arrivals could haunt the Tory leader as he bids to win a general election due this year.

Sunak said last month there was no "firm date" for meeting his pledge.

The beleaguered leader will likely point to a 36 percent reduction in small-boat arrivals last year, after a record 45,000 migrants made the journey in 2022.

45 YRS OF DIPLOMATIC TIES

Joe Biden, Xi Jinping exchange greetings

REUTERS, Beijing

China's President Xi Jinping exchanged congratulations with US President Joe Biden on the 45th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two countries, the Chinese foreign ministry said yesterday. Xi, in his message, said both countries have "weathered the storms and moved forward in general", which has enhanced the well-being of their peoples and contributed to world peace, stability and prosperity, according to the ministry statement. Xi called China and US forming ties "a major event" in the history of bilateral relations and in international relations. China-US ties have been frosty but Biden administration officials have visited Beijing and met with their counterparts to rebuild communications and trust in the months leading up to a high-stakes summit between Xi and Biden in San Francisco in November, deemed an opportunity to cool tensions between the world's two largest economies. Xi said the summit has pointed out the direction for both nations' ties, under a future-oriented vision. "I am willing to work with President Biden to continue to steer and navigate the China-US relationship for the benefit of China and the US and the two peoples, and to promote the cause of world peace and development," Xi said. Xi also exchanged New Year's messages with North Korea leader Kim Jong Un.

India launches satellite to study black holes

HINDUSTAN TIMES ONLINE

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) successfully launched India's first X-Ray Polarimeter Satellite, also known as XPoSat, that would offer insights into celestial objects like black holes, onboard a Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle rocket from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota yesterday. The PSLV-C58 rocket, in its 60th mission, successfully deployed payload XPoSat into Low Earth Orbit, said the ISRO.

The PSLV-C58 rocket lifted off at 9:10am from the first launch pad at this spaceport, located about 135 km east of Chennai, on January 1. It is the first dedicated scientific satellite from the ISRO to carry out research in space-based polarisation measurements of X-ray emission from celestial sources. Besides the ISRO, the US-based National Aeronautics Space Agency (Nasa) conducted a similar study -- the Imaging X-Ray Polarimetry Explorer mission in December 2021 on the remnants of supernova explosions, the particle streams emitted by black holes and other cosmic events. While space-based X-ray astronomy has been established in India focusing on imaging, and time domain studies, yesterday's mission marks a major value-addition to the scientific fraternity, the space agency said.

The objective of the PSLV-C58 mission includes measuring polarisation of X-rays in the energy band 8-30 keV emanating from about 50 potential cosmic sources, to carry out long term spectral and temporal studies of cosmic X-ray sources. The X-Ray polarisation serves as a crucial diagnostic tool for examining the radiation mechanism and geometry of celestial sources.



Danes stunned by queen's surprise abdication

AFP, Copenhagen

Danes were slowly coming to terms with Queen Margrethe's surprise announcement that she will abdicate on January 14 in favour of her son after 52 years on the throne.

"Goosebumps, to say the least. It was quite a shock," 30-year-old Stefan Teichert told AFP yesterday, adding that he, like many other Danes, had followed the 83-year-old queen's annual New Year's Eve speech live on television.

The hugely popular, chain-smoking monarch had insisted over the years that she would never step down, repeatedly saying she would "stay on the throne until I drop".

"We were all shocked. We were just like: 'What? Cancel New Year's Eve!'" said Maria Jepsen, 39. "It was like somebody in the family died or something."

Twenty-one year-old Rasmus Eliassen agreed, and chose to see the positive side of the announcement. "It's nice it's not because of death that she's leaving," he said, adding that Denmark was "in good hands" with the future king, Crown Prince Frederik.

Margrethe II has been instrumental in making the Danish monarchy one of the most popular in the world, enjoying the support of more than 80 percent of Danes, according to a recent poll.

A widow since 2018, she underwent extensive back surgery in February. In Sunday's announcement, she said the operation "gave cause to thoughts about the future -- whether now would be an appropriate time to pass on the responsibility to the next generation".



Ukrainian firefighters inspect the destroyed building of the Shukhevych Museum after a drone attack in Bilogorshchete, on the outskirts of Lviv yesterday, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

PHOTO: AFP

KSA executes 170 people in 2023

AFP, Dubai

Saudi Arabia executed 170 people in 2023, including four on New Year's Eve -- an increase on the previous year, according to an AFP tally based on announcements by Saudi authorities.

A total of 147 convicts were executed in 2022 in the Gulf state, routinely criticised by human rights activists who condemn its prolific use of capital punishment.

A record of 187 executions took place in the kingdom in 2019.

The four people executed on Sunday had been convicted of murder, the official Saudi Press Agency reported, citing statements from the interior ministry.

They included two in the north-western city of Tabuk, one in the capital Riyadh and one in Jazan.

Those executed included 33 people accused of terrorism-related crimes.