

## INTERNATIONAL

## UN 'disturbed' by Israeli calls for Gazans' emigration

AFP, Geneva

UN human rights chief Volker Turk said yesterday he was "very disturbed" after comments by senior Israeli officials calling for Palestinians to leave Gaza.

Israel's National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir on Monday called for promoting "a solution to encourage the emigration of Gaza's residents" and the re-establishment of Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip.

His comments came the day after far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich also called for the return of settlers to Gaza, adding that Israel should "encourage" the territory's approximately 2.4 million Palestinians to leave.

"Very disturbed by high-level Israeli officials' statements on plans to transfer civilians from Gaza to third countries," Turk wrote on X, formerly Twitter.

## SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW 2 Chinese vessels shadow US, Philippines ships

REUTERS, Manila

Two Chinese navy vessels shadowed Philippines and US ships conducting joint patrols in the South China Sea, the Philippine military said yesterday, as tensions flare in the region over disputed territorial claims.

"We confirm the presence of two PLA-N (People's Liberation Army Navy) vessels from a distance shadowing the participants of the Maritime Cooperative Activity," said Xerxes Trinidad, chief of the Philippine military's public affairs office.

The two-day maritime exercises involving Manila and Washington, which ended as planned yesterday, were the second in less than two months in the West Philippine Sea - what Manila calls the waters in the South China Sea that fall within its 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

The activities followed Beijing's warning to the Philippines that any miscalculation in their escalating dispute in the South China Sea would bring a resolute response.

"We are hoping that China and other foreign countries will respect our sovereignty and right to conduct the activity that is following international law," Trinidad said.

China's embassy in Manila did not immediately comment.

The joint patrols were underway when China's military said it would conduct routine patrols with its naval and air forces in the South China Sea but did not say where exactly the patrols would be held.



Palestinians queue as they wait to collect water, amid shortages of drinking water, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday, as Israeli offensive in the Palestinian enclave continues. PHOTO: REUTERS

## 'US strike' in Baghdad kills sr commander

Says Iraq's pro-Iran Hashed force; Israeli strikes kill 4 Hezbollah fighters in south Lebanon

AFP, Baghdad

A "US strike" in Baghdad yesterday killed a military commander of the Hashed al-Shaabi, the ex-paramilitary force said, with an Iraq security official reporting two deaths in a drone attack.

"A drone targeted the logistical support headquarters of Hashed al-Shaabi," mainly pro-Iranian former paramilitary units integrated into the Iraqi armed forces, said the security official.

The strike killed "two members and wounded seven others," said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

A Hashed source, also asking not to be named, confirmed the death toll and charged that the United States was behind the attack.

In a separate incident, four Hezbollah fighters were killed overnight in southern Lebanon, the Iran-backed movement announced yesterday, in what Lebanese state media said were Israeli strikes on the border town of Naqura.

The deaths, which according to a source close to the powerful group include a local Hezbollah leader, follow a strike on Beirut this week that killed a senior Hamas leader, raising regional tensions as conflict rages in Gaza.

The group did not elaborate, but a



source close to Hezbollah told AFP that the four were killed in Naqura near the Israeli border, adding that one of them was the movement's local leader.

Lebanon's official National News Agency said Israeli aircraft "carried out raids on the centre of Naqura, which destroyed a home and damaged surrounding houses".

Hezbollah said in a statement the four fighters had been killed "on the road to Jerusalem" - a phrase it has been using to announce deaths of its members due to Israeli fire since the Israel-Hamas fighting started on October 7.

The Lebanese group on Wednesday announced deaths of five other fighters in southern Lebanon.

In Iraq, Harakat al-Nujaba, one of the Hashed's factions, said in a statement that

"the deputy commander of operations for Baghdad, Mushtaq Talib al-Saidi" had been "martyred in a US strike".

There was no immediate comment from US officials, whose forces in Iraq and neighbouring Syria have faced a surge in attacks since the start of Israel's offensive in Gaza on October 7.

Videos shared on a Telegram channel linked to the Hashed showed columns of smoke rising above the area of strike on Baghdad's Palestine street.

Washington has counted more than 100 attacks against US targets in Syria and Iraq since mid-October.

Many have been claimed by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a loose alliance of Iran-linked armed groups that oppose US support for Israel in the Gaza war.

HYDROELECTRICITY  
Nepal signs energy export deal with India

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal yesterday signed a deal with India for the Himalayan republic to export 10,000 megawatts of hydroelectricity over the next decade to its energy-hungry neighbour. More than four in five Nepalis did not have access to electricity in 2000, according to the International Energy Agency, but a dam building spree in the years since has helped connect nearly all of its 30 million people to the grid. It currently has installed capacity of over 2,600 megawatts from over 150 projects, with another over 200 projects under construction. Nepali foreign ministry spokesman Amrit Bahadur Rai confirmed the "long-term power trade" deal to AFP, signed during a visit of Indian foreign minister S. Jaishankar to Kathmandu. Independent Power Producers' Association of Nepal president Ganesh Karki said the deal was "historic". "Now the government must focus on creating laws and a conducive environment to support production of that scale," he added.

## Russian strikes kill two in central, eastern Ukraine 11 hurt; residential buildings, power line damaged

AFP, Kyiv

Russian strikes killed two people in Ukraine after several days of deadly attacks that claimed dozens of lives, officials said yesterday. Faced with renewed aerial assaults from Russia, Kyiv said it had enough ammunition to withstand a few powerful attacks but would soon need more aid. A strike in the central Kirovograd region, far from the front, yesterday killed one person at an industrial facility and injured eight others, regional governor Andriy Raykovych said. Eleven villages in the eastern Donetsk region, which has seen some of the heaviest fighting in the war, faced multiple attacks on Wednesday. "One person was killed and three others were injured as a result," the interior ministry said, adding that residential buildings, cars, a pipeline and power line were damaged. The ministry also published images of partially burned buildings after five missiles struck the city of Kurakhove. Meanwhile, Ukrainian police yesterday announced the arrest of two people in Moldova helping men to dodge being drafted into the army to fight invading Russians. The arrests come amid a national debate on further mobilisation to boost the Ukrainian army, which has been fighting Russian troops for almost two years. As Kyiv urges faster deliveries of air defences after mounting Russian strikes, ambassadors from Nato and Ukraine will hold a special meeting next week, the alliance said yesterday.

## Be objective in evaluation of polls outcome

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those undermining the democratic elections will be denied US visas.

In his speech at the briefing, CEC Habibul told more than 50 foreign envoys that over the last 22 months, the EC conducted about 1,200 polls at various levels and those were fairly well and generally peaceful.

He added that certain opposition political parties have boycotted the election demanding that it be held under some kind of non-political government, but the EC is mandated to hold the polls as per the law.

The CEC said one major political party in alliance with certain other parties is not contesting. Had they contested, the election might have been more inclusive and peaceful. However, 28 political parties and scores of independents are in the race.

"Voters' right to cast ballots freely may be obstructed at certain polling centres sporadically. Unscrupulous people may try to resort to unfair practices," he said.

CEC Habibul said all measures have been taken to prevent polls rigging, malpractices and the use of muscle power inside polling stations.

Some foreign envoys questioned if the government or the EC was putting pressure on the voters to go to the polling centres.

"We said there is no question that the EC will put pressure. We encourage them [voters] to exercise their voting rights freely. It is awareness, not pressure."

There were also questions about the time of the election results. In response, Habibul said the EC developed a smart election

management app and anyone can access certain information from each constituency. This app will ensure credibility, he said.

Talking to journalists after the briefing, Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen said the diplomats did not express any concern at the briefing or pose many questions because they are already quite updated.

He said as of yesterday, 60 foreign observers out of 127 arrived in the country. Besides, 73 journalists are scheduled to come and as of yesterday, 17 foreign journalists reached Dhaka.

He said the foreign observers will be visiting polling stations in Dhaka and its peripheries, and if some want to go outside, they can go, especially to the places where air travel can be made. The route plan is being finalised, he added.

## IS claims Iran twin blasts

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nuclear scientists which it blamed on arch foe Israel.

Iranian authorities have also labelled the blasts a "terrorist attack"

Before the IS claim, Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi spoke to ISNA news agency about bolstering security over its porous borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan, which

has long been a key access point for militant groups, drug smugglers and irregular migrants.

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Wednesday blamed "evil and criminal enemies" of the Islamic republic, without naming them, and vowed a "harsh response".

President Ebrahim Raisi's deputy

chief of staff for political affairs, Mohammad Jamshidi, charged on social media platform X that "the responsibility for this crime lies with the US and Zionist (Israeli) regimes, and terrorism is just a tool".

The United States rejected any suggestion that it or its ally Israel were behind the bombings, while Israel declined to comment.

## Israel focuses assault

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had landed near tents erected in the area by displaced people, he said.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said its headquarters in Khan Younis was hit, killing one person and wounding others.

The Israeli military reported several clashes in Khan Younis, where it has said previously that it is trying to flush out Hamas leaders hiding there.

In its daily briefing, it said Israeli warplanes killed three Hamas

members who had tried to detonate explosive next to ground troops, and Israeli soldiers killed two more.

A warplane also struck a launch post from which Hamas fighters had fired an anti-tank missile at Israeli troops, it said. They also hit various weapons storage sites.

In a new development on the battlefield, an Israeli tank was seen at the entrance to the Al Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza, signalling a new deep incursion which is likely to bring more displacement and more fighting.

## Justice, fair trial

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of the entire judicial process as an illustration of suppressing dissent or an example of political vendetta is "profoundly disconcerting".

Iftekharruzzaman said no individual is above the law as per the constitution. "However, it is imperative to underscore that the state machinery does not possess the authority to make any citizen subject to purposive harassment under the pretext of allegation of violation of the law."

He said ensuring justice must be the top priority.

## AL picks have Tk 7,561cr assets

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Nepotism is also on the rise, with 46 constituencies kept among family members. Members of 17 families are contesting in 35 constituencies while 11 seats went to the children of current and former party leaders, Shujan said.

The difference between the income of the ruling party candidates and other party candidates are also rising, the non-profit said.

"In 2008, there was a narrow difference of 61 percent between the yearly income of Awami League and other party candidates. It was the last participatory election. In 2014, the difference was 225 percent as it was a one-sided election," Badrul said.

In 2018, the difference was 36 percent as all the parties joined the election, but now it stands at 559 percent, breaking all records, he added.

Shujan found the ruling party candidates top the list of both in terms of the yearly income and wealth

accumulation.

Of the top 10 earners among the candidates, four are AL picks, five are independents who are actually AL leaders or sitting MPs running without official party backing, and one from Jatiyo Party.

At least 60 percent of the so-called independents are millionaires.

About the educational qualification, around 33 percent have master's degree, 27 percent completed graduation, 13 percent HSC and 7.7 percent SSC. Also, 12 percent of the candidates are either self-educated or illiterate.

According to the analysis, 58.71 percent candidates are businessmen and 12.19 percent service holders.

Only 1.70 percent candidates identified themselves as politicians in their affidavits.

In the keynote paper, Shujan Central Coordinator Dilip Kumar Sarker said that in real sense, the January 7 election cannot be termed an election.

"An atmosphere of competitiveness

has been created artificially," he said.

Taking a dig at so many AL leaders and incumbent MPs running against their party picks, Supreme Court lawyer Dr Shahdeen Malik said, "The upcoming election is going to be held between Awami League and Independent League."

The way things stand, the next parliament will be occupied by the AL nominated candidates and the party's own "independent" candidates, he said.

He noted that lawmakers take little interest in formulating laws, as the 11th parliament passed 70 percent of the laws without any changes to what was placed by the cabinet.

"Such a practice will increase as the number of businessmen are increasing day by day.... We have turned parliament into the biggest local government institution. Lawmakers are involving themselves in local development activities, which is unconstitutional," he said.

## Criminals being hired to carry out polls violence

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many of those people to book and cases have been filed against them."

Regarding taking steps against those hiring criminals, he said, "Our intelligence teams are working on it. The process is underway to bring such criminals to book."

Acting on a tip-off that criminals were planning to create panic among the people by brandishing sharp weapons, Rab arrested the nine on Wednesday, he said.

Posing as bus or human-hauler drivers, helpers, shop staffers, construction workers, scrap traders, and vegetable vendors, the arrestees were also involved in robberies and mugging in and around Mohammadpur, the Rab official said.

The arrestees are Hayat alias Talka Hayat, 40; Md Sagor, 19; Ismail

Hossain, 19; and Md Sumon, 45, who are all members of a criminal gang - "Kobji Kata group", and Md Sumon alias Biriyan Sumon, 28; Md Badal, 26; Md Akash, 19; Md Rabbi, 28; and Md Rasel, 38; all members of the criminal gang - "Biriyan Sumon Group".

Moin said several general diaries and cases were filed with different police stations over the recent criminal activities in Mohammadpur by some gang members.

Each criminal gangs have 30 to 35 members, he said, adding that they often used to work as hired criminals.

He, however, said the arrestees were not involved in politics.

"During primary interrogation, the arrestees disclosed some names for whom they worked as hired criminals. We are now verifying those names."

## Govt serves Sinohydro show cause notices

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could be more than 1000.

On Saturday, The Daily Star ran a report that said Sinohydro imported equipment, vehicles, and accessories worth about Tk 1,145 crore over nine years using the duty-waiver facility, which restricts the sale or handover of the goods to anyone in Bangladesh without the NBR's permission.

But the company sold and were selling many of the goods.

The government formed a five-member committee on January 1 to probe the alleged illegal sale of construction materials imported duty-free for the Padma Bridge project by Sinohydro.

The NBR's Customs Intelligence and Investigation Directorate made Deputy Director Ayesha Siddiqua the head of the probe body which had been asked to submit its report within 15 working days.