

West Bank sees 'unmatched surge' in Israeli settlements

AFP, Jerusalem

The West Bank has experienced an "unmatched surge" in the number of new Israeli settlements since the start of the war in Gaza, an Israel-based NGO has said.

The Israeli group Peace Now said in a report that nine outposts had appeared in the West Bank since the start of the Israeli offensive in Gaza.

The West Bank, a territory occupied by the Israeli army since 1967, has seen a sharp increase in violence since the start of the Israeli offensive in Gaza on October 7.

Peace Now said in the report published on Thursday there had been an increase in the activities of some settlers who are "marginalizing" the Palestinians in the territory, noting a "record" number of new settlements since the outbreak of fighting.



This picture taken from Rafah yesterday shows smoke billowing over Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip during Israeli bombardment. The UN has warned the besieged Palestinian territory has been rendered "uninhabitable" by three months of offensive.

PHOTO: AFP

ANNEXED CRIMEA Russian forces down four Ukrainian missiles

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday announced its forces shot down four Ukrainian missiles over Moscow-annexed Crimea overnight.

The attack came a day after Russia said it repelled a Ukrainian drone attack on Crimea, downing 36 of them over the peninsula.

"Air defence on duty intercepted and destroyed four Ukrainian missiles over the Crimea peninsula," the Russian defence ministry said.

Kyiv said it had hit the Saki airbase in western Crimea. "Saki airfield! All targets have been shot!" Mykola Oleshchuk, the commander of Ukraine's air force, said on social media.

Ukraine has targeted Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014, since the start of Moscow's full-scale offensive. Kyiv said Friday that it had targeted a command post near Sevastopol on Thursday.

Both sides have escalated attacks in recent days. Meanwhile, Russian officials in the southern border city of Belgorod offered to evacuate worried residents on Friday, an unprecedented announcement that follows waves of fatal Ukrainian attacks.

Israel blocking medical aid, water purifiers

Says Egyptian Red Crescent as IDF inspections aim to stop items useful for Hamas

REUTERS, Gaza

Water purifiers, medical supplies and tent poles are among items Israel has blocked from entering Gaza on aid trucks, according to an Egyptian Red Crescent document seen by Reuters and sources in Gaza, but Israel denied blocking any such items.

Under a policy that long predates the October 7 Israeli offensive in Gaza, Israel Defence Force (IDF) inspects trucks bound for the Palestinian enclave to stop any items it considers to have potential "dual use" - civilian or military.

But the issue of which items do or don't get through has become more urgent and contested as the war has unfolded. The conflict has displaced most of Gaza's population and caused acute shortages of food, water, medicines and other basic necessities.

The Egyptian Red Crescent document, which dates back to mid-December, said 1,200 water purifiers, 100 oxygen cylinders, one oxygen generator, 1,000 solar-powered items, 24 power generators and 418 medical supplies had been blocked since the offensive started.

COGAT, an Israeli Defence Ministry (IDF) agency that coordinates aid deliveries with the United Nations and humanitarian groups, said this was not true.

"We are not refusing anything that is underneath four headlines:

food, water, medical supplies and shelters. All of those are entering every day," said Colonel Elad Goren of COGAT during a news briefing on Friday.

COGAT said 11,220 tonnes of medical supplies, including X-ray machines, CT machines and oxygen generators for hospitals had entered Gaza, as well as filters for use in a water desalination

an international aid group, who did not wish to be named due to the sensitivity of the subject, said they were aware that certain types of medical equipment, including x-ray machines, "cause problems".

Kobi Michael, a former adviser to the Israeli government on Palestinian affairs, said it was likely that inspections had been toughened up since the start of



plant and mobile desalination filters.

But hospital doctors in Gaza said equipment such as oxygen cylinders and x-ray machines were not getting through, even though they were desperately needed. They attributed the problem to Israeli inspections, without specifying how they knew that.

A humanitarian worker from

the offensive, compared with the pre-offensive regime which had become less strict over the years.

"What I think most concerns Israeli inspectors now is what equipment might allow Hamas to extend their time in the tunnels," said Michael, who is now a senior researcher at Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies.

N Korea fires more than 60 coastal artillery rounds: South

AFP, Seoul

North Korea's military fired over 60 artillery rounds near Yeonpyeong Island yesterday, Seoul's military said, a day after both sides staged live-fire drills in the same area near their contested maritime border.

"North Korean forces conducted artillery fire with over 60 rounds" northwest of Yeonpyeong Island yesterday afternoon, Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement.

On Friday, North Korea fired more than 200 rounds of artillery shells near Yeonpyeong and Baengnyeong, two sparsely populated islands situated just south of a defacto maritime border between the two sides.

Residents of the two islands were ordered to evacuate to shelters and ferries were suspended during one of the most serious military escalations on the peninsula since Pyongyang fired shells at one of the islands in 2010.

Both Friday and Saturday, North Korea's shells landed in a buffer zone created under a 2018 tension-reducing deal, which fell apart in November after the North launched a spy satellite.

MYANMAR CRISIS

Rebels take control of key town near China

REUTERS

A Myanmar rebel alliance has gained control of a key town along the country's volatile northern border with China after weeks of fierce fighting with junta troops, the alliance and the junta said.

The Three Brotherhood Alliance, as the group is known, said on Friday evening it had taken control over Laukkai town after the military's regional headquarters located there surrendered.

The fall of Laukkai is the rebels' latest victory in a sweeping offensive that began in October and has become the most significant threat to Myanmar's military government since it seized power in a 2021 coup.

"All Kokang (Laukkai) region has become a land with no Myanmar Military Council anymore," the rebels said in a statement.

Junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun told local media Popular News yesterday that the military had decided to surrender after "great consideration."

The alliance comprises three groups with extensive fighting experience - the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the Arakan Army.

They were accompanied by people from the loosely organised People's Defence Force, supported by Myanmar's parallel National Unity Government, suggesting that the rebellion is taking on an increased level of coordination and planning.

India's Aditya-L1 solar mission enters final orbit

REUTERS, Bengaluru

The Indian Space Research Organisation's inaugural solar mission, Aditya-L1, has reached its destination within the anticipated four-month timeframe, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said yesterday.

Launched on September 2, the spacecraft positioned itself at Lagrange Point 1, from where it will undertake a comprehensive study of the sun, focusing on the solar corona and its influence on space weather. "India creates yet another landmark. It is a testament to the relentless dedication of our scientists in realising among the most complex and intricate space missions," Modi said in a post on social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter. The satellite covered approximately 1.5 million kilometers (930,000 miles) over the span of four months, just a fraction of the Earth-sun distance of 150 million kilometers. The Lagrange Point, where the satellite is stationed, benefits from gravitational forces that allow objects to remain relatively stationary, reducing fuel consumption for the spacecraft. Equipped with seven payloads, Aditya-L1 is slated to conduct remote sensing of the sun and in-situ observations for an estimated five years. Named after the Hindi word for the sun, this mission follows India's recent achievement of being the first country to successfully land on the moon's south pole, surpassing Russia's failed Luna-25 with the Chandrayaan-3 mission. Scientists involved in the project aim to gain insights into the impact of solar radiation on the increasing number of satellites in orbit, with a particular focus on phenomena affecting ventures like Elon Musk's Starlink communications network.



Rare bird flaunts male and female feathers in Colombia

AFP, Villamaria

On the right side of its body, the bird flaunted the typical blue plumage and black head of the male Green Honeycreeper. On the left, it was a beautiful grass green.

According to experts, the specimen spotted in Colombia was a rare example of "bilateral gynandromorphy" - a condition in which one side of an animal exhibits male characteristics and the other female.

Amateur photographer John Murillo said he first spotted the unique bird through his camera lens when it landed on a feeder to enjoy a meal of bananas and grapes at a nature reserve in Villamaria in Colombia's west in late 2019. It was then observed by Murillo and experts for more than a year, but never captured.

In an article published last month in the Journal of Field Ornithology, Murillo and a group of bird scientists report the first recorded observation of gynandromorphy in a living Green Honeycreeper (*Chlorophanes spiza*).

"In birds, the phenomenon is thought to arise as a result of an error during egg meiosis (a type of cell division), with subsequent double fertilization by separate sperm," they wrote.



South Korean marines walk past a shelter sign in a village of Yeonpyeong island, near the 'northern limit line' sea boundary with North Korea, yesterday, a day after North Korea's shelling.

PHOTO: AFP

US cop jailed for 14 months over death of Black man

AFP, Los Angeles

A white US police officer was sentenced to 14 months in prison Friday over the 2019 death of a young Black man who was put in a police chokehold and injected with ketamine.

The death of Elijah McClain in the western United States occurred months before the high-profile killing of George Floyd, but drew renewed attention soon after as protests against police brutality swelled.

A special investigation was launched in 2020, and Randy Roedema was convicted of manslaughter in October, while two other police officers were acquitted.

Sentencing Roedema in a Colorado court Friday, judge Mark Werner said he was "shocked by what appeared to be, really, indifference to Elijah McClain's suffering."