

## IS kills two pro-Iran fighters in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Two pro-Iranian fighters from the Hashed al-Shaabi alliance were killed in an attack in Iraq, the Hashed and an Iraqi security source said yesterday, blaming the Islamic State group (IS).

The two fighters "succumbed after having been wounded while they were confronting an attack" by IS in Salaheddin province north of Baghdad, the Hashed said in a statement reported by the official INA news agency.

A security source, who requested anonymity, confirmed the death toll to AFP and said that IS attacked a Hashed (military) post on Saturday night in the area of al-Zarka in the province's north.

The Hashed al-Shaabi is a coalition of mainly pro-Iranian former paramilitary units, mostly from the Shia branch of Islam.



Relatives of Ukrainian military prisoners of war, specifically captives from the siege of Mariupol, hold placards which read "Free Azovstal defenders" as they demand their release during a rally in Kyiv, Ukraine yesterday, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. PHOTO: AFP

## N Korea vows military strike if any provocation

Fires artillery rounds

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea will launch a military strike immediately in response to any provocation, Kim Yo Jong, the sister and key ally of leader Kim Jong Un, said yesterday, as it fired artillery shells near its border with the South for the third day in a row.

The remarks come after South Korea's military said the North had fired more than 60 artillery rounds on Saturday near their disputed maritime border, following a similar volley of more than 200 the previous day.

North Korea again fired over 90 rounds yesterday, according to the South.

"I make myself clear once again that the safety catch of trigger of the Korean People's Army (KPA) had already been slipped," Kim Yo Jong, one of the most powerful members of Kim Jong Un's regime, said in a statement carried by state news agency KCNA.

"As already declared, the KPA will launch an immediate military strike if the enemy makes even a slight provocation," Kim said, using the official name of the North Korean army.

## 'They are not soldiers'

Wives of mobilised Russians demand return of their husbands from Ukrainian front

AFP, Moscow

Wives of Russians mobilised to fight in Ukraine symbolically laid flowers Saturday at the flame of the unknown soldier right beneath the walls of the Kremlin and demanded the return of their husbands from the front.

Anger has been growing for months among relatives of reservists who President Vladimir Putin mobilised in September 2022, seven months after the initial invasion of Ukraine.

The mobilisation is a sensitive subject for authorities, who have so far refrained from repressing what has become a nascent movement of revolt.

Saturday saw some 15 women brave the winter cold to place red flowers at the site in the heart of the capital.

"We want to draw the authorities' attention and that of the public to our appeal. We have tried several means. We made a written appeal to lawmakers, officials, administrations -- but we were not heard," Maria, a 47-year-old sales manager, whose husband was mobilised in November 2022, told AFP.

"It's not fair. They are civilians, they are not soldiers. Our husbands can't stay there," she added.

Maria Semyonova, a legal assistant, urged authorities to "negotiate peace" in Ukraine at a protest where police did not intervene.

Usually, protests against the conflict are swiftly and resolutely nipped in the bud with the subject a delicate issue for the Kremlin.

Paulina, the mother of a one-year-old child, said the protest is "the only peaceful action that has not yet been banned by law."

"I feel like we're annoying them. But no one will remain silent. We shall carry on every day, every Saturday. We'll lay flowers" to draw attention to the situation, she said.

"At some point, it will be impossible to ignore us," added Paulina, saying she was determined to get back her husband.

Russian state media have to date largely ignored the women's protest, with the Kremlin keen to project an image of national unity ahead of presidential elections later this year where Putin expects to secure another term.



According to Putin, 244,000 Russians have been mobilised to fight in Ukraine in a total force 617,000 strong.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday that Russia's attack on Ukraine can be defeated, adding that the situation on the battlefield at this time remains relatively stable.

"Even Russia can be brought back within the framework of international law. Its aggression can be defeated," Zelensky told a conference in Sweden via video link.

The war in Ukraine has shown that Europe must develop joint weapons production to ensure that the continent can "preserve itself" under any global situation that might arise, the Ukrainian president said.

"Two years of this war have proven that Europe needs its own sufficient arsenal for the defence of freedom, its own capabilities to ensure defence," he said.

Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa pledged Japan's continued support for Ukraine as she visited Kyiv yesterday in the midst of the country's invasion by Russia.

"Japan is determined to continue to support Ukraine so that peace can return to Ukraine," Kamikawa said through an interpreter at a joint news conference with Ukrainian minister Dmytro Kuleba.

Kamikawa arrived in Kyiv on an unannounced visit and was forced to hold a news conference in a shelter due an air alert.

## Bhutan to vote as economic strife hits 'nat'l happiness'

AFP, Thimpu

The picturesque Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan holds general elections today with serious economic challenges calling into question its longstanding policy of prioritising "Gross National Happiness" over growth.

Both parties contesting the vote are committed to a constitutionally enshrined philosophy of a government that measures its success by the "happiness and well-being of the people".

Some voters are expected to trek for days to cast their ballots in the landlocked and sparsely populated country, similar in size to Switzerland.

Foremost in the minds of many are the struggles facing the kingdom's younger generation, with chronic youth unemployment and a brain drain of migration abroad.

"We don't need more new roads or bridges," farmer Kinley Wangchuk, 46, told AFP. "What we really need is more jobs for young people."

Bhutan's youth unemployment rate stands at 29 percent, according to the World Bank, while economic growth has sputtered along at an average of 1.7 percent over the past five years.

## Maldives suspends three ministers for insulting India PM

REUTERS, Male

The Maldives government has suspended three deputy ministers for disparaging India's prime minister, an official said yesterday, during a dip in ties with its powerful neighbour.

Malsha Shareef, Mariyam Shiuna and Abdulla Mahzoo Majid all worked for the archipelago's Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Information and Arts and were disciplined for their comments on social media, the senior government official told Reuters.

The three had variously labelled Indian PM Narendra Modi a "clown", "terrorist" and "puppet of Israel" on social media platform X, in response to a video of him visiting the Indian islands of Lakshadweep to promote local tourism.

Some viewed his visit as trying to draw tourists away from the globally popular Maldives, whose 1,192 islands in the Indian Ocean are dotted with luxury resorts.

The controversy comes ahead of a visit by President Mohamed Muizzu to China on January 8-12. Muizzu won election last year with a pledge to end the Maldives' "India first" policy in a region where New Delhi and Beijing compete for influence.

Muizzu also pledged to remove a small contingent of 75 Indian military personnel from the nation of just over half a million people.

Some prominent Indians, including actor Akshay Kumar and cricketer Hardik Pandya, expressed dismay at the comments by the now suspended Maldivian officials.

Neither of the three were immediately available for comment.

## FUND SCANDAL

### Japan ruling party MP arrested

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese prosecutors yesterday made the first arrests in a funding scandal that forced Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to replace four ministers last month, local reports said. Ruling party lawmaker Yoshitaka Ikeda, 57, was held on suspicion of violating the political funds control law, Japanese media outlets, including Jiji Press, reported. Ikeda, whose 45-year-old secretary was also arrested, is suspected of receiving kickbacks of around 48 million yen (\$330,000), the reports said. Kishida last month sacked the top government spokesman, the trade minister and two other ministers over a failure to report political funds as required by law.

## RIOT ANNIVERSARY

### Trump rallies supporters in Iowa

AFP, Newton



Donald Trump hit the campaign trail Saturday in the first-in-the-nation presidential nominating state of Iowa, vowing to win "for the third time" as Americans marked the anniversary of the deadly assault on the US Capitol by a mob of his supporters. Many watched in horror three years ago on January 6, 2021, as rioters -- egged on by the ex-president and fueled by his false claims of voter fraud -- stormed the seat of US democracy in a bid to halt the transfer of power. In a rambling, two-hour speech Saturday to supporters in Newton, Iowa, Trump did not delve into the events of that day, but described those jailed over their roles in the assault as "hostages." He has said that if elected, he will pardon many. Trump mocked President Joe Biden, his putative rival in November's election.

## HEAVY RAINFALL

### Five trapped in Slovenia cave

REUTERS, Sarajevo

Five people have been trapped in a cave in southwestern Slovenia since Saturday afternoon after heavy rainfall raised the water levels, making it impossible for rescuers to take them out safely, local media reported yesterday.

The group, including a family of three and two tourist guides were reported to be sheltered in a safe place in the 8.2-kilometre-long Krizna jama cave, which can only be visited by boat.

On Saturday evening, rescuers managed to reach the group briefly and delivered food, water and a heated tent, civil protection officials from the area told journalists yesterday.

But since the group was located more than two kilometres away from the entrance to the cave, it will take a new team of divers three to four hours to get to them, officials said, adding that the final rescue will depend on when the water levels fall, STA reported.

That may be overnight, but could also take a couple of days. Krizna jama, a chain of underground lakes with emerald green water, is the fourth largest known cave ecosystem in the world in terms of biodiversity.

Last November, Indian rescuers safely brought out all 41 workers from a collapsed Himalayan road tunnel where they were trapped after a marathon 17-day engineering operation.

Relatives outside celebrated, after previous hopes of reaching the men were repeatedly dashed by falling debris and the breakdown of multiple drilling machines, in a rescue operation the government said took place in "challenging Himalayan terrain".



Migrant children, traveling with their families and seeking asylum in the United States, receive gifts from a religious group belonging to the Church Salmo 100 outside a shelter during the celebration of Epiphany Day, near the border between Mexico and the United States, in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico on Saturday. PHOTO: REUTERS

## IS claims bus blast that killed two in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for a blast that killed two people and wounded 14 others on a bus in a mostly Shia neighbourhood in Kabul on Saturday.

Kabul police spokesman Khalid Zadran said the explosion occurred in the capital's Dasht-e-Barchi neighbourhood -- an enclave of the historically oppressed Shia Hazara community.

"According to initial information, unfortunately, two civilians in the bus were killed and 14 others were injured," Zadran said in a statement.

"The injured were rushed to hospitals and police are investigating the incident."

The regional chapter of IS claimed on Telegram that it was behind the explosion, the latest to hit the area in recent months.