

Russia launches 28 drones, 3 missiles at Ukraine

Kyiv downs 21 of the drones; 12 injured; Putin vows to back soldiers who 'defend' Russia

REUTERS

Russia launched 28 attack drones and three cruise missile at Ukraine overnight, Ukraine's air force said yesterday, adding that its air defence systems destroyed 21 of the drones.

The air force said on its Telegram messaging channel that Russia targeted mainly the south and east of Ukraine, and did not say what happened to the three cruise missiles.

"The enemy is shifting the focus of attack to the frontline territories - Kherson and Dnipropetrovsk regions were attacked by drones," Air Force spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat told national television.

Reuters could not independently verify the report. There was no immediate comment from Russia.

Dnipropetrovsk regional authorities said on Telegram that 12 people were injured in a drone attack in Dnipro city.

They also said an educational institution and its dormitory, two multi-apartment buildings and one administrative building

were damaged.

Ihnat said drones were predominantly destroyed by mobile teams, saving "scarce" air defence missiles.

He said Ukrainian forces used some missiles to repel two recent major Russian attacks and "processes are under way to continue to provide Ukraine with the number of missiles needed to repel air attacks".

Russia deployed almost 300 missiles and more than 200 drones in attacks in the last days of 2023 and the first days of 2024.

Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin vowed on the eve of Orthodox Christmas to back soldiers who "with arms in hands" defend Russia's interests, ordering his government greater support of those who fight and calling on his people to be merciful and just.

"Many of our men, our courageous, heroic guys, Russian warriors, even now, on this holiday, defend the interests of our country with arms in hand," Putin said at a late Saturday meeting with families of Russian soldiers who have died in Ukraine.



Displaced Palestinians, who fled their houses due to Israeli strikes, walk near the border with Egypt, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. The Israeli offensive has displaced most of Gaza's 2.3 million population, with many homes and civilian infrastructure left in ruins amid acute shortages of food, water and medicine. PHOTO: REUTERS

Air strike on Myanmar village kills 15: report 20 injured

AFP, Bangkok

At least 15 people, including children, have been killed in an air strike on a village in northwestern Myanmar, local media said yesterday.

The country has been engulfed by increasingly vicious fighting, with the junta battling opponents in the north and the east.

The strike hit a village in Khampat Township, Tamu district, at around 10:15 am (0415 GMT).

Local media outlets put the death toll at 15 people, including children, with 20 wounded.

But two witnesses -- a man and a woman who asked to remain anonymous for safety -- told AFP the toll was higher.

"19 people were killed, including eight children," said the man, who said he saw a junta jet fighter overhead during the attack.

He said the first bombs targeted two churches in the village, and a second attack came as people fled the buildings.

"Most of them were killed outside the church area as they were running to escape," he said.

Women and children were among those killed in the attack, which was made more deadly because of the crowds, he said.

In total the jet dropped six bombs, he said.

"They targeted the two churches, but bombs hit outside the two churches, and hit some houses," he said.

US warship shoots down drone over Red Sea

CENTCOM blames Huthi rebels in Yemen for the launch of the unmanned aerial vehicle

AGENCIES

US military forces shot down a drone Saturday over the Red Sea in international waters near several commercial vessels, the Pentagon said.

The incident came just days after a 12-nation group led by the US warned Huthi rebels in Yemen against continuing their attacks on Red Sea shipping.

The US Central Command said in a social media post Saturday that "an unmanned aerial vehicle launched from Iranian-backed Huthi-controlled areas of Yemen was shot down in self-defense" by the USS Laboon, an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer.

It said no one was hurt. The incident occurred in the southern Red Sea "in the vicinity of multiple commercial vessels," it said.

The Laboon, part of a carrier strike group deployed to the region shortly after the Israel's offensive in Gaza broke out, previously downed drones believed fired by the Huthi rebels, reports AFP.

The rebels have launched more than 100 drone and missile strikes toward targets in the Red Sea and Israel since the war erupted on October 7, according to Pentagon figures.

The Huthis say they are targeting Israel and Israeli-linked vessels to push for a stop to the offensive in the Gaza Strip.

The attacks are endangering a transit route that carries up to 12 percent of global trade, prompting the United States to set up a multinational naval task force to protect Red Sea shipping.

On Wednesday, the US-led group jointly warned the Huthi rebels of unspecified consequences unless they immediately

halt their sea attacks.

But Danish shipping giant Maersk, citing the highly volatile situation, said Friday that it would divert all vessels around Africa instead of using the Red Sea and Suez Canal for the "foreseeable future."

Meanwhile, France's foreign minister said on Saturday that she had told her Iranian counterpart that the risk of a Middle East regional conflagration had never been greater and that Tehran and its proxies needed to end their destabilising activities.



"Iran and its associates must immediately stop their destabilising actions," Catherine Colonna said on social media platform X after speaking with Hossein Amirabdollahian.

"No one would gain from escalation," Amirabdollahian said the only way to quell conflict was to resolve the root causes, Iran's state media reported.

"An effective step in ending violence in the region would be to stop the crimes of the Zionist regime (Israel) and the ongoing genocide in Gaza, as well as taking action to stop the killing of civilians, facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid and prevent

forced migration," the minister added.

On Saturday, six small craft approached a merchant vessel about 50 nautical miles from the Yemeni city of Mocha before leaving the area, the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) organization said.

"The vessel and crew were reported safe," UKMTO added in an advisory note on the incident.

The commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards vowed on Saturday to reach "the enemy" far and near as tensions soar on key shipping routes where Tehran's allies have been attacking vessels.

"Today, we are facing an all-out battle with the enemy," said Guards commander Hossein Salami at a ceremony in the southern Gulf port city of Bandar Abbas, where the Guards' navy unveiled a new ship named "Abu Mahdi" and 100 missile launchers.

Salami did not name the enemy, but 22 nations have agreed to participate in a US-led coalition to safeguard commercial traffic in the Red Sea from attacks by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi movement.

The shipping giant Maersk diverted all container vessels from Red Sea routes around Africa's Cape of Good Hope for the foreseeable future, warning customers to prepare for significant disruption, while Hapag Lloyd tallied a big increase in costs of diverting ships.

Shippers across the world are switching away from the Red Sea - and so the shortest route from Asia to Europe via the Suez Canal - after Iranian-backed Houthi rebels stepped up attacks on vessels in the Gulf region to show their support for Palestinian.

Italian FM calls for formation of EU army

REUTERS, Rome

The European Union should form its own combined army that could play a role in peacekeeping and preventing conflict, Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said. In an interview with Italian newspaper La Stampa, Tajani said that closer European cooperation on defence was a priority for the Forza Italia party that he leads. "If we want to be peacekeepers in the world, we need a European military. And this is a fundamental precondition to be able to have an effective European foreign policy," he said in an interview published yesterday.

France to build 'beyond' planned 6 new nuke plants

AFP, Paris

France is set to build eight new nuclear plants on top of six already announced, the energy minister has said, arguing more reactors are needed to hit carbon reduction targets. A draft law set to be presented soon recognises that "we will need nuclear power beyond the six first European Pressurised Reactors" (EPRs) announced by President Emmanuel Macron in early 2022. Agnes Pannier-Runacher told yesterday's edition of weekly newspaper Tribune Dimanche. The bill will include a further eight plants that had until now been discussed as an "option" by the government, Pannier-Runacher said. By contrast, the text would not include any targets for renewable energy generation by 2030, remaining "technologically neutral", she added. France is on the lower end of greenhouse gas emissions in the 27-nation European Union. This is in part thanks to its fleet of 57 nuclear reactors built from the 1970s -- some of which required long and costly repairs in recent years.

Pentagon chief pledges transparency after hospitalisation

REUTERS, Washington

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has been hospitalised since Monday for an unspecified medical matter, the Pentagon said late on Friday, without detailing why he was being treated or why it kept his hospital stay secret all week. Austin, who is 70, sits just below President Joe Biden at the top of the chain of command of the US military and his duties require him being available at a moment's notice to respond in any manner of national security crisis. The Pentagon did not say whether Austin ever lost consciousness before or after he was admitted to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on January 1, or the extent to which his duties were assumed by his deputy, Kathleen Hicks. Those duties include being ready and available to respond to an incoming nuclear attack. The Pentagon said Austin suffered "complications following a recent elective medical procedure," but declined to say what that procedure was or what complications he suffered. "He is recovering well and is expecting to resume his full duties today," Air Force Major General Patrick Ryder, the top Pentagon spokesperson, said in a statement on Friday. Just a day earlier, Ryder held a televised news briefing that conveyed the sense of business as usual at the Pentagon, offering Austin's condolences to ally Japan following its New Year's Day earthquake, for example.



Rescuers conduct searches for survivors as snow hampers rescue operations in the city of Suzu, Ishikawa prefecture in Japan yesterday, after a major 7.6 magnitude earthquake struck the Noto region in Ishikawa prefecture on New Year's Day. The death toll from the devastating earthquake rose to 126. PHOTO: AFP

China sanctions five US firms over Taiwan arms sales

AFP, Shanghai

China yesterday announced sanctions against five US defence firms in response to their involvement in arms sales to self-ruled Taiwan, which Beijing claims as part of its territory.

China has vowed to one day seize Taiwan, while US Congress requires the supply of weapons to the self-governing democracy for its defence.

Last month, the US State Department approved a \$300-million arms package to strengthen Taipei's joint battle command and control system, prompting Beijing to say it would take unspecified "countermeasures" against the companies involved.

China's foreign ministry yesterday named those companies as BAE Systems Land and Armament, Alliant Techsystems Operation, AeroVironment, ViaSat and Data Link Solutions.

"The countermeasures consist of freezing the properties of those companies in China, including their movable and immovable property..." the ministry said.