

Sri Lanka joins US-led naval patrols against Huthis

AFP, Colombo

Cash-strapped Sri Lanka's navy said yesterday it was joining a US-led maritime taskforce to protect international shipping against attacks by Yemen's Huthi rebels.

"We will be joining 'Operation Prosperity Guardian' led by the US Navy," naval spokesman Gayan Wickramasuriya said, with the deployment of a patrol vessel crewed by more than 100 people.

Huthi fighters have launched more than 100 drone and missile attacks on targets in Israel and the Red Sea, disrupting traffic in the key shipping route that carries up to 12 percent of global trade.

The Iran-backed Huthis say they are targeting Israel and Israeli-linked vessels to push for a stop to the offensive in the Gaza Strip, where Israel has been battling Hamas since October 7.



Palestinian children transport water on a wheelchair at a market in Rafah refugee camp in the Gaza Strip yesterday, as Israel presses on with its offensive in the Palestinian enclave.

PHOTO: AFP

Pak bomb blast kills 5 guard police

TTP claims responsibility

REUTERS, Peshawar

A bomb blast in northwest Pakistan near the Afghan border killed five police on polio vaccination guard duty and wounded more than 20 yesterday, the latest in a series of attacks by militants ahead of the February 8 elections.

The Pakistan Taliban, an umbrella group of militants also known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), claimed responsibility in a statement sent to Reuters.

The blast hit a truck full of police on their way to guard a polio vaccination drive in the Bajur tribal district, police official Kashif Zulfikar said.

Militants in Pakistan often target polio vaccination teams, believing the immunisation effort is a Western tool to spy on them and make Muslims infertile.

The TTP has been waging a war against the state for years, seeking to overthrow the government and replace it with Islamic rule.

The militants have ramped up their attacks since they revoked a ceasefire with the government last year.

Political analysts have voiced concern, with some politicians calling for a delay in the elections in the northwest.

Patients, staff forced to leave Al-Aqsa Hospital

Say WHO, UN as Israel carries out strikes across Gaza; officials say patients arrive every few minutes in the hospital operating with 30pc of staff

AGENCIES

Hundreds of patients and staff are reported to be missing from Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in central Gaza, which is struggling to cope amid intense air strikes across the enclave.

The majority of medical staff, as well as around 600 patients, have been forced to leave the complex to unknown locations with no information of their whereabouts, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) reported yesterday.

The two institutions note chaotic scenes as the remaining staff at the hospital continues to try to cope with an influx of injured people as "heavy Israeli bombardment from air, land, and sea intensified across much of the Gaza Strip".

Staff from the WHO and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) visited the only functioning hospital in the governorate of Deir el-Balah in central Gaza on Sunday. They noted that intense bombing had driven many to seek medical help at Al-Aqsa.

The Ministry of Health in Gaza reports that 225 Palestinians were killed and 296 people injured due to Israeli attacks on January 5-7.

The officials said that large numbers of wounded were being treated by very few staff at

the facility and called for more protection for medical centres.

The director of the hospital reported that because of increasing hostilities and ongoing evacuation orders, most local health workers and about 600 patients have been forced to leave the facility to unknown locations.

WHO official Sean Casey said

left," Casey said.

"This hospital is currently operating with about 30 percent of the staff that it had just a few days ago. They are seeing, in some cases, hundreds of casualties every day in a small emergency department."

Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) and the International



that new patients were arriving at the hospital every few minutes, adding that due to evacuation orders and the dangerous situation, there were only five doctors left to oversee hundreds of emergency cases and casualties.

"It is really a chaotic scene. The hospital director just spoke to us, and he said his one request is that this hospital be protected, even though many of his staff have

Rescue Committee (IRC) stated that their emergency medical team had been forced to cease activities at the hospital and leave the facility," reports Al Jazeera online.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that his staff had witnessed "sickening scenes of people of all ages being treated on blood-streaked floors and in chaotic corridors".

MALDIVES ROW

Indian agency suspends flight bookings to islands

REUTERS, New Delhi

One of India's largest travel platforms suspended flight bookings to the tourism-dependent Maldives yesterday after disparaging social media posts against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi embittered relations between the South Asian neighbours.

India and Russia send the largest number of visitors to the Maldives, a chain of sun-kissed islands in the Indian Ocean that is home to many luxury resorts. Tourism accounts for almost one-third of its economy, according to the World Bank.

EaseMyTrip EASMSNS co-founder and Executive Director Prashant Pitti said bookings to the Maldives were suspended "indefinitely".

Even though New Delhi and Male have traditionally had close ties, relations have been tense since President Mohamed Muizzu came to power in November winning the election on an 'India Out' campaign.

The controversy over comments by three Maldivian now-suspended-ministers about Modi comes just as Muizzu embarked for China on his first state visit yesterday.

Pak court lifts life election ban on ex-PM Sharif

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's Supreme Court yesterday scrapped lifetime bans on contesting elections for people with criminal convictions, paving the way for Nawaz Sharif to run for prime minister for a fourth time.

Sharif's party, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), is considered a front runner to win elections scheduled for February 8, with his main rival, former prime minister Imran Khan, in jail and barred from contesting for five years.

In his ruling, Chief Justice Qazi Fazl Isa, who headed a seven-member panel of judges, said the life bans "abridge the fundamental right of citizens to contest elections and vote for a candidate of their choice".

The court's decision was six to one in favour of overruling a previous 2018 decision that imposed life bans on politicians convicted under certain provisions of the constitution.

Sharif, 74, was found guilty in 2017 of dishonest practices. While Sharif was not an applicant in the latest case, which was filed by other politicians, the ruling makes him eligible to contest the polls as more than five years have elapsed since 2017.

Khan, 71, whose party won the last elections in 2018, will not benefit from the ruling as it abolishes only life bans, which means the cricketer-turned-politician remains disqualified until 2028.

PML-N leader Azam Nazeer Tarar hailed the ruling, saying the lifetime ban was a "murder of justice".



MANIPUR'S MOREH TOWN

Armed militants ambush Indian security forces

TNN, Imphal

In a fresh gunbattle, armed militants reportedly carried out an ambush against Indian security personnel of the state at Moreh, the town in Manipur's Tengnoupal district bordering Myanmar, after sundown on Sunday. The security personnel also retaliated and there were reports of casualties on both sides but the state home department officials are unwilling to confirm any deaths or injuries on either side. According to the officials, the incident happened at Moreh ward no 9 around 7:20 pm. Unofficial sources said the ambush by the militants started with attacks using four to five bombs followed by intermittent gunfire. The security forces also retaliated and there were reports of casualties but the sources refused to identify the number of victims or their identities. Several attacks on the security forces have taken place in Moreh after the ethnic clashes broke out in Manipur on May 3 last year. Manipur, bordering Myanmar, is among the smallest states in India with a population of 3.2 million people. At least 180 people have died since fierce fighting broke out between members of the majority Meitei and minority Kuki communities in the state in May, following a court order suggesting privileges granted to Kukis also be extended to Meiteis. At least three people were killed and 12, including seven security personnel, seriously injured in the state's Thoubal district on January 1-2. Authorities have re-imposed an indefinite curfew in Thoubal and four other adjoining districts of Imphal East, Imphal West, Kakching and Bishnupur.

INDIA'S LOK SABHA POLLS

Congress, AAP start seat-sharing talks on positive note

TOI, New Delhi

The Congress announced that it will contest the Lok Sabha elections with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) even though the first round of seat sharing talks between the two parties remained inconclusive yesterday.

"We held a meeting on scores of issues for the upcoming elections. Talks will go on and we will meet again and only then we will take a final call on seat share. Everything was discussed in detail. We will fight the elections together and we will give a befitting reply to the BJP," Congress leader Mukul Wasnik said after talks with AAP.

AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sandeep Pathak and Delhi cabinet ministers Atishi and Saurabh Bharadwaj attended the meeting while the Congress side included former Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot, Delhi Congress chief Arvinder Singh Lovely and senior party leaders Salman Khurshid and Mohan Prakash, besides Wasnik.

The two parties are political rivals in the states of Delhi and Punjab where Kejriwal's AAP has governments. The Congress leadership will have to tread a cautious path as the grand old party's state units in both states are strongly opposed to compromising on their political interests.

Congress leader Sandeep Dikshit said, "Our national leadership knows our opinion. Our conflicts with AAP are with respect to the Delhi government. It will be decided later if there will be an alliance, if it happens then who'll contest which seats? Just hope that if an alliance happens then its details should be decided as soon as possible so that we can also prepare for it."



Firefighters search for survivors in snow-covered ruins in the city of Suzu, Ishikawa prefecture, Japan yesterday, a week after a major 7.6 magnitude earthquake struck the Noto region in Ishikawa prefecture on New Year's Day. The death toll from the earthquake rose to 161.

PHOTO: AFP

25 killed in bus, truck crash in Brazil

AFP, Brasilia

At least 25 people have been killed after a tourist bus collided with a truck in Bahia state in northeastern Brazil, state firefighters said yesterday.

"Military firefighters responded to an incident that left 25 dead" near the municipality of Gaviao, about 155 miles (250 kilometers) from the capital of Bahia state, Salvador.

Five people were also injured in the accident Sunday night, according to Brazilian press reports, which also published images of the twisted fuselage of the truck.

The cause of the accident is still unknown. The bodies of the victims have been handed over to police for identification, the firefighters said.

The mayor's office of Jacobina, a city close to the accident, declared three days of official mourning yesterday and is preparing a "collective wake" for the victims.