

GULF OF OMAN Iran seizes tanker with Iraqi crude oil

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran seized a tanker with Iraqi crude oil destined for Turkey yesterday in what appeared to be a retaliation for the seizure last year of the same vessel by Tehran's arch foe the United States, Iranian media reported.

The Marshall Islands-flagged tanker St Nikolas, which last year was confiscated by the US for carrying Iranian oil, was boarded by armed intruders as it sailed close to the Omani city of Sohar, according to British maritime security firm Ambrey, and its AIS tracking system was turned off as it headed in the direction of the Iranian port of Bandar-e-Jask.

"The Navy of Iran's Army has announced the seizure of an American oil tanker in the Gulf of Oman with a judicial order," Iranian state media cited a statement by the Army as saying yesterday.



Palestinian Red Crescent personnel check a destroyed ambulance in Deir el-Balah in the central Gaza Strip, yesterday, amid the Israeli strikes across the Palestinian enclave.

PHOTO: AFP

Magnitude 6.4 quake rattles Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

An earthquake hit northeastern Afghanistan yesterday, shaking buildings from the capital Kabul to Islamabad in neighbouring Pakistan.

There were no reports of casualties or serious damage as of several hours after the quake.

The epicentre of the 6.4 magnitude earthquake was in Jurm district in the Afghan province of Badakhshan in the remote Hindu Kush region, according to the US Geological Survey.

"This afternoon, Badakhshan was jolted by a strong earthquake," Moezuddin Ahmadi, the provincial director of information and culture, told AFP over the phone.

"Based on initial information, we don't have any reports of casualties but we are checking in the areas near the epicentre of the earthquake and we will share the final information once we have it."

The quake struck at a depth of around 200 kilometres, just before 2:00 pm and was felt in the capital Kabul.

Qari Inam, a resident of Sooch in Jurm district, said the earthquake "shook the village" and "walls of a number of houses were cracked".

Gaza conditions 'INDESCRIBABLE'

Says WHO, urges Israel to allow UN agencies access to deliver aid within the Palestinian enclave

AGENCIES

The World Health Organization pleaded with Israel to allow the WHO and other UN agencies access to deliver aid within the Gaza Strip, branding the humanitarian situation "indescribable".

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said its teams have had to cancel six planned missions to northern Gaza since December 26 "because our requests were rejected and assurances of safe passage were not provided", while a mission planned for Wednesday was also called off.

"Delivering humanitarian aid in Gaza continues to face nearly insurmountable challenges," he told a press conference on Wednesday evening.

"Intense bombardment, restrictions on movement, fuel shortages, and interrupted communications make it impossible for WHO and our partners to reach those in need."

"We have the supplies, the teams and the plans in place. What we don't have is access."

"We call on Israel to approve requests by WHO and other partners to deliver humanitarian aid."

Tedros said only 15 hospitals in the Palestinian territory were functioning even partially, while the lack of clean water and sanitation, and overcrowded living conditions in the coastal



strip were creating the ideal environment for diseases to spread, reports AFP.

"People are standing in line for hours for a small amount of water, which may not be clean, or bread, which alone is not sufficiently nutritious," he said.

Mike Ryan, WHO emergencies director, said it would be a "gargantuan" task to restore the public health system in Gaza even with a ceasefire.

On Wednesday, Al Jazeera correspondents reported explosions in front of the Al Aqsa Hospital in central Gaza. The area around the compound has come under intense fire in recent days.

Sean Casey, WHO emergency medical teams coordinator in Gaza, warned on Tuesday that

Gaza cannot afford to lose more medical infrastructure.

"We cannot lose these health facilities. They absolutely must be protected. This is the last line of secondary and tertiary healthcare that Gaza has - from the north to the south, it's been dropping, hospital after hospital," he said.

At least 23,357 people have been killed and more than 59,410 wounded in Israeli attacks on Gaza since October 7, according to Palestinian authorities.

Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO's infectious disease epidemiologist expert, said the organisation detected a number of indicators - including respiratory illnesses and diarrhoea - that point to the spread of infectious diseases in Gaza.

Pakistan ex- PM Sharif to launch polls campaign next week

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, whose party is considered a front-runner to win general elections in February, will kick off his campaign next week, aides said, days after the Supreme Court cleared him to run for a fourth term.

The campaign for the February 8 poll, delayed since November, looks set to fire up a lacklustre race in an uncertain political environment after Sharif's main rival and former premier Imran Khan, was jailed and disqualified from contesting.

"We will, God willing, start our mass campaign on January 15," Pervaiz Rashid, a close Sharif aide told Reuters, adding that the former premier would speak at a rally two days later.

Analysts believe the South Asian nation's powerful military has thrown its backing to Sharif, 74, after it was locked in a standoff with former cricket star Khan, 71.

That gives Sharif an edge in a country where army generals mostly decide on making or breaking governments.

Ceasefire would only benefit Moscow

Says Ukraine's Zelensky; 11 hurt as Russian missiles hit hotel in Kharkiv

REUTERS, Vilnius

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday that a ceasefire in Russia's war against Ukraine would not lead to political dialogue, and would only benefit Moscow. Speaking to reporters in the Estonian capital Tallinn during a wider tour of the Baltic region, Zelensky said any pause would risk allowing Russia to re-group and boost its supply of munitions "and we will not risk". "The pause would not lead to an end of the war, it would not lead to political dialogue with Russia or someone else... And thank god this is all decided in Ukraine and there will be no pauses to benefit Russia," he said. Meanwhile, two Russian missiles struck a hotel late on Wednesday in the centre of Ukraine's second largest city, Kharkiv, injuring 11 people, one person seriously, the regional governor said. Pictures posted online showed many of the windows blown out and balconies destroyed with large piles of rubble in the street below. Emergency teams made their way through gaping holes in facade to sift through rubble inside. Kharkiv Governor Oleh Synehubov, writing on Telegram, said the strike at about 10.30 pm involved S-300 missiles in the city's Kyiv district.

Mamata rejects 'one nation, one election' idea

NDTV ONLINE

Mamata Banerjee, chief minister of India's West Bengal state, yesterday hit out at the controversial 'one nation, one election' idea, labelling it "a design to subvert the basic structure of the Constitution" and create a system to allow "autocracy (in) a democratic garb to enter the national public arena". "I am against autocracy and, hence, am against your design," Banerjee asserted. The Trinamool Congress boss - a fierce critic of the Narendra Modi government, which she has accused of subverting the country's federal structure - red-flagged that concern once again, declaring sarcastically, "You seem to be conveying

some sort of a unilateral top-down 'decision' already taken by the central government - to impose a structure that is against the spirit of a truly democratic and federal (nation)".

In a detailed letter to Dr Niten Chandra, the Secretary of a high-level committee led by former President Ram Nath Kovind - that has called for suggestions for implementation of the idea, she said she had "basic conceptual difficulties with the principle", as also "difficulties with your methodological approach".

The two conceptual issues she raised were "the constitutional and structural implication of the term 'one nation'" and, crucially, questions over the timing of parliamentary and Assembly elections, particularly when there is a significant gap in existing poll cycles. Banerjee also pointed out potential ruptures in the 'one nation, one election' idea if either the Lok Sabha or a state Assembly "is subject to untimely dissolution", and warned, "Instability of a government at the centre should not destabilise state legislatures..."



Brunei's prince marries commoner

THE STRAITS TIMES ONLINE

Brunei's polo-playing Prince Abdul Mateen, one of Asia's most eligible bachelors, married his commoner fiancée yesterday as part of a lavish 10-day celebration in the oil-rich sultanate.

An Islamic marriage ceremony for the 32-year-old Prince and Yang Mulia Anisha Rosnah, 29, was held at a gold-domed mosque in the capital Bandar Seri Begawan.

Prince Mateen is the 10th child of Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah - the world's longest-reigning monarch and once the richest man on the planet - and is well down the succession pecking order.

His bride - the granddaughter of one of his father's key advisers - reportedly has a fashion brand and co-owns a tourism business.

Prince Mateen, wearing a traditional white outfit decorated with diamond-shaped motifs and a matching headpiece, was driven to the mosque in a luxury saloon.

He sat on an elevated yellow cushion in front of an imam who presided over the male-only ceremony attended by the Sultan and other relatives and guests.



This aerial view shows homes are surrounded by flood waters in Hampton, New Hampshire, US on Wednesday. Hampton police said they declared emergency "as a result of extremely high seas and flooding." A storm packing high winds and heavy rain was sweeping through the northeast of US on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

16 killed in Papua New Guinea rioting PM declares emergency

REUTERS, Sydney

Papua New Guinea's prime minister declared a state of emergency yesterday, suspending government and police officials after 16 people were killed in rioting in the Pacific island nation.

A police and public sector protest on Wednesday over a pay cut that officials blamed on an administrative glitch descended into lawlessness.

Television footage showed thousands of people in the streets of the capital Port Moresby, many of them carrying what appeared to be looted merchandise as black smoke billowed over the city.

Nine people were killed in the rioting in Port Moresby and seven were killed in Lae, in the north of the gold and copper-mining country, Australian state broadcaster ABC reported yesterday.