

Russia, China accuse US of stoking ME tensions

AFP, United Nations

Russia and China accused the United States during a UN Security Council meeting on Monday of stoking already high tensions in the Middle East with its recent retaliatory strikes on Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria.

The US military struck dozens of targets in Syria and Iraq overnight on Friday into Saturday.

"It's clear that American airstrikes are specifically, deliberately aimed to stoke the conflict," said Russian ambassador Vasily Nebenzia.

China's ambassador Jun Zhang similarly claimed that the "US actions will certainly exacerbate the vicious cycle of tit-for-tat violence in the Middle East."

NORTHERN STATE BJP pushes polarising common civil law

AFP, Dehradun

India's ruling party yesterday introduced contentious legislation to create a common civil code in a northern state, including for marriage, reigniting a polarising debate weeks before national elections.

The move comes weeks after Modi's consecration of a grand temple in Ayodhya at the site where a Mughal-era mosque was demolished by Hindu zealots.



Displaced Palestinians, who fled their houses due to Israeli strikes, shelter in a cemetery in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. The family are among dozens camping in the cemetery, a sandy expanse with a view of the Mediterranean Sea on the horizon, because they feel less at risk there from Israeli bombardments.

PHOTO: REUTERS

8,000 displaced evacuated from Gaza hospital: Red Cross

AFP, Geneva

Around 8,000 displaced people have been evacuated from a besieged hospital in Gaza's main southern city of Khan Yunis where they had sought refuge, the Red Cross said yesterday.

"The humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip is beyond catastrophic," Tommaso Della Longa, spokesman for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), told reporters in Geneva.

He said the ICRC was told the Al-Amal hospital, run by the Palestinian Red Crescent (PRCS), had been largely emptied following a lengthy siege by Israeli forces.

"Eight thousand internally displaced people who sought refuge in our Palestinian Red Crescent hospital in Khan Yunis... left the

hospital yesterday", he explained.

He said Al-Amal had been under siege for more than two weeks, surrounded by heavy shelling and fighting. It was hit several times, including on Friday, when a PRCS volunteer was killed.

Around 100 elderly, wounded and disabled patients remained there, with about 100 staff and volunteers, the ICRC said.

Even before the evacuation, Al-Amal had faced immense challenges, including dire shortages of medicines, food and water, Della Longa said.

"Replenishing stocks was almost impossible", as was access for ambulances.

The PCRS said yesterday: "Continuous violent bombardment and gunfire in the vicinity of the association's Al-Amal hospital (continued), resulting in shrapnel flying at the hospital." The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza said circumstances at nearby Nasser hospital were also alarming.

"The Israeli occupation is tightening its siege on Nasser medical complex and targeting its perimeter intensively," said spokesman Ashraf al-Qudra.

He said there were 450 wounded people, 300 medical staff and 10,000 displaced people on the premises.



PAKISTAN ELECTIONS Despite crises, polls dominated by personalities

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan goes to the polls tomorrow with the jailing of popular former prime minister Imran Khan, the winner of the last national election, dominating headlines despite an economic crisis and other woes threatening the nuclear-armed country.

The South Asian nation of 241 million people is reeling from decades-high inflation and an economy that has come to a grinding halt as it navigates a tough International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout programme.

Islamist militancy is on the rise and relations with three neighbours - India, Afghanistan and Iran - are frayed. But these matters have been mostly absent from the election fray, in which the parties of Khan and Nawaz Sharif, another former prime minister, are the main rivals.

"This election cycle has had little discussion of issues," said Husain Haqqani, a former Pakistani ambassador to the US, currently a scholar at Washington's Hudson Institute. "It has been a campaign dominated by personalities."

Millions of supporters of the jailed Khan are looking to rally behind him despite what they call



There seems to be a clash of victimhood. Nawaz Sharif having been victimized from 2017 until 2022 and Imran Khan claiming victimhood after that.

Husain Haqqani
a former Pakistani ambassador to US

a military-backed crackdown on him and his party.

The military wields enormous power in Pakistan but maintains it does not interfere in politics. Analysts say Sharif is being backed by the generals this time, after they preferred Khan at the last election in 2018.

Both former prime ministers say they were ousted at the behest of the military, which it denies. "There seems to be a clash of victimhood," said Haqqani. "Nawaz Sharif having been victimized from 2017 until 2022 and Imran Khan claiming victimhood after that."

Sharif's party ran the full page advertisements on front pages of major newspapers hours before campaigning ended declaring him "the PM".



A girl kisses her father as they visit a cemetery for people killed by last year's earthquake, in Hatay, Turkey yesterday. The magnitude 7.8 tremor that struck in the early hours of February 6, 2023, levelled towns and city swathes in the country's southeast. It killed more than 53,000 people in Turkey and nearly 6,000 in neighbouring Syria and left millions homeless.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Chinese vessel in Maldives being used for research: Beijing

REUTERS, Beijing

Research being carried out by a Chinese vessel calling at a port in the Maldives is exclusively for peaceful purposes and enhancing scientific understanding, the Chinese foreign ministry said yesterday as the research vessel is set to arrive in the island nation.

The Xiang Yang Hong 3 will "make a port call, for rotation of personnel and replenishment", the Maldivian foreign ministry had said in a statement in January.

The presence of the vessel is likely to raise the concern of India, which has previously viewed such vessels close to its shores as problematic.

"The Maldives has always been a welcoming destination for vessels of friendly countries, and continues to host both civilian and military vessels making port calls for peaceful purposes," the Maldivian foreign

ministry said.

Permission to allow the ship to dock could further vex the ties between traditional friends New Delhi and Male, which have soured since President Mohamed Muizzu took office in November promoting an 'India Out' campaign.

Both New Delhi and Beijing vie for influence on the tiny Indian Ocean nation but the new government in Male is pivoting towards China and has asked India to withdraw its nearly 80 troops stationed there.

New Delhi has in the past flagged similar visits by other Chinese research vessels with its neighbour Sri Lanka, which has denied permission for such vessels to dock at its ports since 2022.

China's The Global Times defended ongoing research missions, saying China and regional partners were exploring the natural ecology of the region "without any hidden agenda".

11 dead in India firework factory explosion

AFP, New Delhi

At least 11 people died and 80 were injured yesterday in a giant explosion at a firework factory in India that saw balls of flames soar into the sky, officials said.

Footage on Indian television showed a tower of flame after the explosion at the firecracker plant, with dozens of ambulances sent and army helicopters called in to evacuate the wounded.

Senior district police official Rajeshwari Mahobia told AFP there were "eleven deaths so far and around 80 injured", at the factory in Harda in Madhya Pradesh state, adding that "the death toll is likely to go up".

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