

US Senate passes Ukraine aid bill

Russian strikes kill five across Ukraine

AFP, Kyiv

Russian strikes killed five people across Ukraine yesterday, Ukrainian officials said, as the second anniversary of Moscow's invasion approaches.

Officials said civilians were killed in the northeast, south and central parts of the country.

Meanwhile, the US Senate yesterday approved \$60 billion in funding for Ukraine, in a bill that the House speaker has indicated will go nowhere in his Republican-majority lower chamber.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky welcomed the US Senate vote to support the bill. "American assistance brings just peace in Ukraine closer and restores global stability, resulting in increased security and prosperity for all Americans and all the free world," he said on X.

Moscow-installed occupational authorities in eastern Ukraine, meanwhile, said Ukrainian shelling killed three people yesterday.

The head of the northeastern Kharkiv region, Oleg Synegubov, said three people were killed in his region, which borders Russia and has seen increased attacks in recent months.

Synegubov said a 61-year-old woman was killed when Russian forces shelled the city of Vovchansk that lies seven kilometres (four miles) from the Russian border. "At the time of the shelling, people were at the local market," Synegubov said.

The official said "two civilian men" were also killed earlier in the morning when Russia shelled an "agricultural enterprise" in the village of Kurylivka, near the city of Kupiansk.

Moscow's forces have for months attacked Kupiansk, which fell to Russia in the first days of its invasion in 2022 but was retaken by Ukraine later that same year.

Separately, the head of the southern Kherson region said an elderly woman was killed when Russian forces shelled the village of Love, on the Ukrainian-controlled bank of the Dnipro river.

"An 83-year-old woman received injuries incompatible with life in the yard of her own house," Oleksandr Prokudin, the regional leader, said on social media.

Authorities in the central Dnipropetrovsk region said a 64-year-old man was killed in the city of Nikopol, also on the Dnipro river.

Russia's occupational authorities in eastern Ukraine said Ukrainian shelling killed three people in the small town of Kreminna in the Moscow-held Lugansk region.

"As a result of the Ukrainian army's shelling of Kreminna, three civilians died," the Moscow-installed government of Lugansk said on social media.



Palestinians evacuating from a tent camp ride in a truck with belongings as they flee from Rafah in fear of an Israeli military operation in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Pressure mounts on Israel for Gaza truce

Biden says 'key elements' of a deal are on the table; Israeli tanks shell eastern sector of Rafah city

AGENCIES

Israel faced growing international pressure yesterday to agree to a ceasefire with Hamas, as it prepared for an incursion into the crowded southern Gaza city of Rafah where more than a million Palestinians are trapped.

US, Egyptian, Israeli and Qatari officials were expected to meet in Cairo to seek the truce yesterday. President Joe Biden said the US would do "everything possible" to make a ceasefire happen.

After a meeting with Jordan's King Abdullah II, Biden said that "the key elements of the deal are on the table," but "there are gaps that remain."

Amid growing international concern over the plight of civilians, Israeli tanks shelled the eastern sector of Rafah city overnight, residents said, although the anticipated ground offensive did not appear to have started.

The Israeli military said its forces killed dozens of Palestinian fighters in clashes in the southern and central Gaza Strip over the last 24 hours, including 30 in Khan Younis, a city close to Rafah on the coastal enclave's border with Egypt.

Gaza health officials said an Israeli strike on a house in Nusseirat refugee camp in central Gaza killed 16 Palestinians overnight.

In Khan Younis, Israeli tanks advanced further from the west and the east as

More than a million Palestinians trapped in Rafah

Dozens of Palestinians killed in southern, central Gaza

Death toll in enclave now 28,473

UN opposes the idea of moving civilians in Rafah

bombing continued, residents said.

Much of the densely populated enclave is in ruins, with 28,473 Palestinians killed and 68,146 wounded since October 7, according to Gaza health officials who announced 133 new Palestinian deaths in 24 hours.

Israeli forces ordered displaced people in some shelters to head to Rafah. But the boom of tank shelling east of

Rafah caused waves of panic inside the makeshift tent camps housing the displaced.

With the Israel's offensive in Gaza now in its fifth month, attention is focused on the situation in Rafah. Around half of Gaza's 2.3 million people are now living there in desperate conditions, including many who fled other areas pulverised in Israel's offensive.

Aid officials and foreign governments say there is nowhere for them to go, and Egypt has made clear it will not allow a refugee exodus over its border.

The United Nations on Monday intensified calls for a ceasefire and opposed the idea of moving civilians in Rafah.

UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters, "We will not be party to forced displacement of people. As it is, there is no place that is currently safe in Gaza."

"You can't send people back to areas littered with unexploded ordnance, not to mention a lack of shelter," he said.

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell on Monday suggested that the way to reduce civilian casualties would be to stop arms supplies to Israel.

Balukhali rocked by sounds

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The situation along the border in Palangkhali Union was more or less calm yesterday, except for some sounds of gunshots from far away inside Myanmar, said Gafur Chowdhury, chairman of the union.

He added that black smoke was seen inside Myanmar around noon.

"Out of fear, farmers did not tend to their fields and fishermen did not go out to fish," he said.

Meanwhile, the situation in Tumburu and Ghumdhum border was calm, said Shafiqul Islam, a member of Ghumdhum Union Parishad in Naikhongchhari of Bandarban.

"We heard gunshots far away inside Myanmar," he added.

Over the last few weeks, fierce fighting just across the border left the people of Ghumdhum, Palangkhali, and Whykong in panic. Many had to take shelter elsewhere leaving their homes.

There have also been numerous instances of mortar shells and bullets landing in Bangladesh.

On February 5, a woman and a Rohingya man were killed and a child was injured after a mortar shell from across the border exploded in Ghumdhum.

At least 330 members of the Myanmar army and border police and customs fled the conflict and took refuge in Bangladesh.

308 rivers lost

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Katakhal, Borni, Samarchar Mora, Jalkirail Bajuka Dair, Adashimuha, Chartaljanga, Kurikhai and Nali.

Chowdhury said the total number of rivers in Bangladesh is 1,008, according to the book titled "River of Bangladesh: Definition and Number" published by the National River Conservation Commission under the shipping ministry.

If there are updates from the deputy commissioner and the WDB, those will be added to the book. The process is ongoing, he said.

Govt plans to collect tolls on 4 highways

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"So, we will turn the important highways into toll roads once the ongoing expansion works on those highways are complete," he told The Daily Star last night.

The first to begin toll collection would be the Dhaka-Rangpur Highway, whose ongoing expansion works are scheduled for completion this year, said Zikrul Hassan, superintendent engineer (maintenance circle) of RHD.

Spots for setting up toll booths have already been identified.

Toll booths and other infrastructure for collecting tolls will be established under a separate package of the Elega-Rangpur expansion project, he told The Daily Star yesterday.

The RHD is implementing a Tk 18,678.62 crore project for turning the 190km road from Tangail's Elega to Rangpur into a four-lane highway with service lanes.

It has already completed the expansion of a 70km road from Gazipur's Joydebpur to Elega into a four-lane road with service lanes.

The RHD is also implementing two separate projects for turning the Dhaka Sylhet and the Sylhet-Tamabil highways into four-lane roads with service lanes.

The deadline for the Tk 16,918.59 crore Dhaka Sylhet highway project is December 2026, while the deadline for the Tk 3,583.25 crore Sylhet-Tamabil highway is June 2025.

The road authority is currently carrying out maintenance works on the Dhaka-Chattoagram Highway and a study to determine whether the most important highway should be six or eight lanes wide.

Besides, tolls would be introduced on the Bhanga-Benapole and Bhanga-Barishal highways and the Dhaka Bypass Road after completion of their expansion works, reads the meeting minutes.

Meanwhile, the road transport and bridges ministry has taken the initiative to amend the Toll Policy 2014 so that the toll rates for the highways, bridges and expressways can be adjusted every year in line with inflation like in the other neighbouring countries.

As per the existing policy, the toll

rate can be adjusted after every three years.

The draft of the Toll Policy-2024 prepared by the RTHD has been uploaded on its website for public opinion.

The RHD has also sent a proposal to the RTHD for carrying out a study to prepare a complete tolling guideline.

The Asian Development Bank is expected to fund the study as a grant under the Dhaka Sylhet highway expansion project, according to AK Mohammad Fazlul Karim, the project director.

As per the proposal, the study will identify which roads should be turned into toll roads, determine the structures needed for toll collections and some other issues, he said.

"We are working on how to implement the prime minister's directive to collect tolls from important highways gradually," RHD Chief Engineer Syed Moinul Hasan told The Daily Star yesterday.

In September 2019, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, at an Ecnec meeting, instructed the authorities concerned to collect tolls from long-haul vehicles on the national highways.

The planned move to impose tolls, however, is not welcomed by a passenger welfare organisation.

"People are already suffering because of the high price of essentials, and the imposition of tolls on vehicles will make people's sufferings worse as it would increase transport costs," said Mozammel Hoque Chowdhury, secretary general of Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity.

Besides, thousands of people are getting killed every year to due unsafe roads and the imposition of tolls without making the roads safer will be a double blow, he added.

The Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association is yet to be notified formally about the move, said Khandaker Enayet Ullah, its secretary general.

"We will give our opinion if sought. However, as per the practice, if a toll is imposed, it would be adjusted with the fare of the transport," he added.

Under the 22,476 kilometre

Saraswati Puja today

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In most places, the puja will begin in the morning and will be followed by the offering of "anjali" (a divine offering). Then, the children will be imparted "hatekhori" (introduction to learning of children) and later, prashad (food devoted to the Goddess) will be distributed among devotees.

Goddess Saraswati represents power, creativity and inspiration, and presents herself when the weather is pleasant and nature is in its full grandeur.

Depicted as a graceful woman with a crescent moon adorning her brow, she is shown riding a swan or a peacock, or is seated on a lotus flower.

Saraswati Puja will be organised on the premises of Jagannath Hall of Dhaka University, where devotees are expected to perform rituals and visit the pandals.

Pujas will also be arranged at the Dhakeshwari National Temple, Ram Krishna Mission, Jagannath University, Siddheswari temple, Supreme Court premises, Farashgani, Shakhari Bazar, Tanti Bazar and different other places in old Dhaka, Banani, Dhaka College, Eden Girls' College, BUET, Ramna Kali Mandir and Maa Anandamayi Ashram, Tejaon College, Stamford University, and different educational institutions in the city.

Pick projects with quick returns

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would meet with other secretaries of the ministries concerned, whose projects are nearing completion.

"The meeting identified issues [regarding projects] and those would be conveyed to the planning commission. If further issues, regarding money disbursement and more, come up, then the finance ministry..."

Hasina gave the instructions at a time when projects are being persistently delayed, causing cost overruns while also lowering the expected benefits.

Satyajit also said the PM instructed the principal secretary of the Prime Minister's Office to take steps to release the money promised by the development partners to tackle the climate change impacts in Bangladesh.

"The premier stressed on taking concerted steps so that foreign loans and grants are disbursed without any hassle."

He added that the French government has already committed to provide \$1 billion support to Bangladesh for tackling climate change impacts alongside the commitments from other development partners like the World Bank and the ADB.

Hasina gave the instructions

when unused foreign loans surged to \$48.44 billion in November from \$44.7 billion in June 2023.

Satyajit added that the PM also gave directions to the authorities concerned to use products of local industries for development projects.

The ECNEC meeting approved nine projects, with an overall estimated cost of Tk 3,354 crore.

21 personalities

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Shibli Mohammad was awarded for dance, while Dolly Zahur and Alamgir were awarded for acting. For recitation, Shimul Mustapha and Rupa Chakraborty were awarded; for fine arts, Shahjahan Ahmed Bikash; for production and archiving of Liberation War-related documentaries, Kaoser Chowdhury; in social services, Md Ziaul Haque and Rafiq Ahamed; in language and literature, Muhammad Samad, Lutfur Rahman Riton, Minar Mansur, and Rudra Mohammad Shahidullah (posthumously); and in education, Professor Jinabodhi Bhikkhu.

Each recipient will be handed over a gold medal, a one-time monetary reward, and a certificate of honour.

The date of the award programme will be announced soon.

KHULNA RAPE

Police yet to arrest anyone

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Police are yet to arrest anyone in connection with the rape of a woman in Khulna's Paikgachha on Monday. She was reportedly gang-raped by criminals who spread glue on her eyes to prevent her from identifying them.

The 42-year-old homemaker and mother of two is now undergoing treatment at Khulna Medical College Hospital (KMCH).

Contacted yesterday, Obaidur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Paikgachha Police Station, said the victim's husband will file a case against unknown accused. "Meanwhile, we are also trying to identify and arrest the criminals," he added.

Take strict action against teen gangs

JP lawmaker Chunnu tells House

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Opposition Chief Whip Mujibur Haque Chunnu yesterday in parliament demanded that the government takes strict action against teen gangs and their patronisers.

He made this demand while speaking on a point of order.

During an unscheduled discussion, Chunnu cited a report published in a Bangla daily titled "21 councillors of Dhaka encourage teen gangs".

While reading out some portion of the news, Chunnu, also a Jatiyo Party MP, suggested "drastic action" against those involved in these activities, be it the government party or the police.

Eriko, Imran split custody of children

STAR DIGITAL REPORT

The High Court yesterday directed that Japanese citizen Nakano Eriko will get the custody of the eldest and youngest daughters while their Bangladesh-born US citizen father Imran Sharif will get custody of the middle child.

Delivering the verdict on a petition, the HC said Eriko can live in Bangladesh or any other country with her two daughters but she must allow Imran to visit the children.

At the same time, Imran must ensure Eriko's access to their middle child, the HC bench of Justice Mamnoon Rahman said in the verdict.

1,300 dead or missing off Tunisia in 2023: NGO

AFP, Tunis

More than 1,300 irregular migrants died at sea or went missing trying to reach Europe from Tunisia last year, a Tunisian rights group said yesterday.

Islem Ghaarbi, a migration expert at the Tunisian Forum for Social and Economic Rights, told a press conference that "1,313 people died or disappeared off the Tunisian coast, a figure never reached in Tunisia".

Ghaarbi said at least two thirds came from sub-Saharan Africa, adding that the toll was "equivalent to approximately half of the deaths and missing in the Mediterranean" in 2023.