



A community worker sits in a crater after Russian missiles strike Kharkiv yesterday. Two Russian strikes on Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, killed eight civilians and injured at least 10 early yesterday and in the afternoon, regional officials said.

PHOTO: AFP

US POLICY CHANGE ON ISRAEL

Is Biden's rebuke enough?

AFP, Washington

President Joe Biden has stood firmly by Israel amid months of mounting domestic and international outcry over the humanitarian toll in Gaza, but the killing of seven aid workers in an Israeli strike seems to have brought him the closest yet to a breaking point.

"Obviously the World Central Kitchen fiasco has turned the political pressure up," James Ryan of the Middle East Research and Information Project told AFP, referring to the US-based aid group employing the seven workers.

"This turn of events has made it clear... that Israel is not really putting a lot of effort into discriminating between combatants and civilians, to say the least," he said.

Before the deaths of the workers, Washington already had growing concern over plans by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government for a ground offensive in overcrowded Rafah, fearing that the civilian death toll in Gaza could soar.

At the end of February, after deadly chaos erupted at a food aid distribution in northern Gaza, the Biden administration upped the pressure on Israel to increase the flow of aid and began its own series of humanitarian air drops.

But it wasn't until Thursday that Biden finally opened the door to conditioning US aid for Israel.

In a tense 30-minute call with Netanyahu, Biden discussed "the need for Israel to announce and implement a series of specific, concrete, and measurable steps to address civilian harm, humanitarian suffering, and the safety of aid workers," the White House said afterwards.

It added that Biden "made clear that US policy with respect to Gaza will be determined by our assessment of Israel's immediate action."

For David Makovsky, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the



call shows "Washington is no longer willing to maintain its current policy of comprehensive support without rapid changes."

The White House, no doubt aware of its limited room to manoeuvre, was careful Thursday not to detail what would change if it deemed Israel's actions insufficient.

Nonetheless, the Israeli government announced hours later that it would allow the "temporary" opening of an extra border crossing for aid deliveries at Erez — something it had opposed since October 7.

On Friday, Israel announced that two officers would be fired after finding a series of "grave mistakes" that led to the drone strikes that killed the aid workers.

Biden, who was asked as he left the White House on Friday whether he had threatened to stop military aid to Israel, replied: "I asked them to do what they're doing."

If Washington ultimately views Israel's response as insufficient, Ryan said, it may result in "some conditions or revocations of arms transfers."

The United States provides billions of

dollars in military aid to Israel, and while the Biden administration may consider some conditioning, there is little doubt it would threaten a full stop.

However, in a sign of the rising anger among many in Biden's party, more than 30 Democratic members of the US House of Representatives called in a letter Friday for a full halt to the transfer of offensive weapons.

"In light of the recent strike against aid workers and the ever-worsening humanitarian crisis, we believe it is unjustifiable to approve these weapons transfers," said the letter, which was signed by several party leaders, including former House speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Ryan also noted that the Biden administration could react with "more political pressure — especially at the UN, where the issue of Palestinian membership is going to be before the Security Council within a month or so."

The Palestinians this week officially relaunched their bid to become a full UN member state, hoping for a Security Council vote this month.

Enemy to 'regret' Guards killings in Syria: Iran

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday again threatened retaliation for the deaths of seven Revolutionary Guards in a strike on Damascus, with the army chief saying his country's enemies will "regret" the killings.

Tehran has vowed to avenge Monday's air strike on the Syrian capital it blamed on its arch-enemy Israel, which has not commented.

The attack levelled the Iranian embassy's consular annex in Damascus, killing seven Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps members.

Iran's response "will be carried out at the right time, with the necessary precision and planning, and with maximum damage to the enemy so that they regret their action," chief of staff Mohammad Bagheri said yesterday.

He was speaking at a ceremony in the central city of Isfahan to commemorate Mohammad Reza Zahedi, one of the two dead brigadier generals from the Quds Force, the IRGC's foreign operations arm.

Zahedi, 63, was Quds Force commander of the Palestinian Territories, Syria and Lebanon, according to a source.

SOUTH CHINA SEA

Philippines, US, Australia, Japan to hold joint drills

AFP, Manila

The United States, Australia, Japan and the Philippines will hold joint naval and air drills in the disputed South China Sea today, their defence chiefs said in a statement, as they deepen ties to counter China's growing assertiveness in the region.

The exercise will take place in the disputed waterway — which Beijing claims almost entirely — days before US President Joe Biden is due to hold the first trilateral summit with the leaders of the Philippines and Japan.

"Our combined defense/armed forces will conduct a Maritime Cooperative Activity within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone on April 7, 2024," they said in a joint statement yesterday.

They said it would demonstrate the allies' "collective commitment to strengthen regional and international cooperation in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific."

The drills named the "Maritime Cooperative Activity" will include naval and air force units from all four countries, the joint statement said.

TAIWAN EARTHQUAKE

Choppers pluck tourists to safety

AFP, Hualien

Taiwan rescue helicopters flew sorties yesterday to pluck tourists to safety after a massive earthquake cut off roads and blocked tunnels, leaving hundreds stranded for days in the mountains.

At least 13 people were killed and more than 1,100 injured by the magnitude 7.4 quake that struck the island on Wednesday, with strict building codes and widespread disaster readiness credited with averting an even bigger catastrophe.

At least six people remain unaccounted for.

The quake caused massive landslides that blocked tunnels and long stretches of winding road that cut across the island from east to west, and also a coastal highway from north to south carved out of steep cliffs.

Hualien, the epicentre around 100 kilometres (60 miles) south of the capital Taipei, has been rolled by over 300 aftershocks, including one of magnitude 5.2 yesterday morning.

Thunberg detained at Dutch protest

AFP, The Hague

Climate activist Greta Thunberg was detained by Dutch police yesterday after she and a group of marchers blocked a main road in The Hague to protest against fossil fuel subsidies.

Thunberg and other protesters of the Extinction Rebellion environmental group were seen sitting in a waiting bus, while police were continuing to make arrests, an AFP correspondent said.

Thunberg earlier joined several hundred protesters as they walked from the Dutch city centre to a field next to the A12 arterial highway leading out of the city.

Activists said that despite majority backing by the Dutch parliament as well as broad popular support to slash fossil fuel subsidies, "the plans will not be implemented before 2030, or even 2035".

The protes was part of a plan to pressure the Dutch government ahead of another planned debate about fossil subsidies in June.



CROSS-BORDER RAIDS

Pakistan denounces India HM's remarks

REUTERS, Karachi

Pakistan yesterday denounced "provocative remarks" made by Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in which he said India would enter Pakistan to kill anyone who escapes over its border after trying to carry out militant attacks.

Singh's comments on Friday came after the Guardian newspaper published a report stating the Indian government had killed about 20 people in Pakistan since 2020 as part of a broader plan to target "terrorists residing on foreign soil".

"India's assertion of its preparedness to extra-judicially execute more civilians, arbitrarily pronounced as 'terrorists', inside Pakistan constitutes a clear admission of culpability," Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement.

Relations between India and Pakistan have worsened since a 2019 suicide bombing of an Indian military convoy in Kashmir was traced to Pakistan-based militants and prompted New Delhi to carry out an airstrike on what it said was a militant base in Pakistan.

Pakistan said earlier this year it had credible evidence linking Indian agents to the killing of two of its citizens on its soil. India said it was "false and malicious" propaganda.

Canada and the United States last year accused India of killing or attempting to kill people in those countries.

Canada said in September that it was pursuing "credible allegations" linking India to the death of a Sikh separatist leader shot dead in June — claims that India said were "absurd and motivated".

A top Canadian official said in January that India was cooperating in the matter and bilateral ties were improving.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath greet his supporters during his roadshow, ahead of the general elections, in Ghaziabad, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

RUSSIA DAM BURST

4,000 people evacuated

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday said it had evacuated 4,000 people in the Orenburg region, in the southern Urals near Kazakhstan, due to flooding after a dam burst.

Emergency services had been working through the night after a dam burst in the city of Orsk, near the border with Kazakhstan.

The press service of the Orenburg governor said "4,208 people, including 1,019 children" had been evacuated and more than 2,500 homes were affected by the flooding after a dam burst on Friday following torrential rain.

Russia opened a criminal case for "negligence and violation of construction safety rules" over the burst dam, which was built in 2014.

Authorities said the situation was difficult throughout the region, warning of a dangerous water level on the Ural river in the main city of Orenburg.