

## INTERNATIONAL

## Israel kills '10 militants' in West Bank

AFP, Tulkarem

The Israeli army yesterday said troops had killed 10 militants in an ongoing raid around Nur Shams, a refugee camp in the north of the occupied West Bank.

AFP journalists heard gunshots and saw houses hit by blasts as Israeli drones flew overhead and armoured vehicles moved through the camp.

The army said that over more than 40 hours it had "eliminated 10 terrorists" and made eight arrests around Nur Shams. It said eight soldiers and a police officer were wounded.

The Palestinian health ministry said it had confirmed 11 wounded in the Israeli raid, seven of them "wounded by live gunshots". It said a paramedic shot while trying to get to the wounded was among them.

Since the start of Gaza war, over 480 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli troops or settlers in the West Bank.



A Palestinian woman and her children check the rubble of a building hit by an overnight Israeli bombing in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

## China unveils new cyber force

AFP, Beijing

China announced the creation of a new military cyber corps on Friday, saying it would bolster Beijing's capacity to "fight and win" wars.

The Information Support Force will act as a "key support for coordinated development and application of network information systems", defence ministry spokesman Wu Qian said.

China has ploughed billions of dollars into modernising its armed forces in recent years as tensions with the United States and other regional powers have escalated.

President Xi Jinping has also sought to bring the military more firmly under his control since rising to power a decade ago.

The new cyber force represents "a strategic step to establish a new system of services and arms and improve (China's) modern military force structure", Wu said. He did not give details about its role but said the corps "bears great responsibility in promoting high-quality development and the ability to fight and win in modern warfare".

Xi "extended warm congratulations" on the force's establishment at a grand ceremony in Beijing on Friday.

## IRAN-ISRAEL WARFARE IN MIDEAST

## US military strategy tested

REUTERS, Washington

The US military's success helping Israel stop a massive wave of Iranian missiles and drones last weekend might suggest Washington is well prepared militarily for whatever comes next as Iran and Israel move from shadow warfare to direct confrontation.

But current and former US officials say US forces are not positioned for a major, sustained Middle East conflict and the Pentagon may have to revisit assumptions about military needs in the region if the crisis deepens.

"I don't think we have all the forces that we would want to support Israel if there was a direct war between them and Iran," said Michael Mulroy, a former deputy assistant secretary of defence for the Middle East under the Trump administration.

Though Tehran has indicated it had no plans to retaliate for an apparent Israeli strike on Friday, the tit-for-tat attacks have raised fears of an unpredictable regional war that the United States has sought to prevent.

In the months since an attack by Hamas militants on Israel triggered a war in Gaza that has ignited unrest throughout the Middle East, the United States has rushed thousands of US service members to a region that had seen a steadily declining US presence over years.

But many of those new US troops are on warships and aircraft that move in and out of the region, and are only temporarily deployed. That US strategy to rely on surge forces could be tested now Iran and Israel have broken the taboo of open military strikes against each other.

"What it means for the US military is that I think we have to revisit this idea of what are the necessary, sustainable (military) capabilities that we have to maintain in the region," said Joseph Votel, a retired four star Army general who led US troops in the Middle East.

Votel and other former officials said the US



military's success in downing Iran's drones and missiles last Saturday was presumably aided by detailed US intelligence that allowed the Pentagon to anticipate the timing and targets of Iran's attack.

"I think the bigger concern is our ability to be responsive over a sustained period of time," Votel said.

US officials say Iran does not appear to want an all-out war with Israel, and Tehran has played down Friday's strike. Still, experts warn the situation is unpredictable, particularly as long as the Israel-Hamas conflict rages.

US Army General Michael "Erik" Kurilla, the current head of Central Command, told lawmakers last month that he had requested more troops than the Pentagon had sent to his region, which President Joe Biden's administration has said is a lower priority than the challenge from China, for example.

However, sending more US troops to the Middle East and bolstering intelligence assets longer-term could prove difficult, officials say.

Another official said it was still unclear

whether the US military was prepared to pull forces from Asia or Europe, despite the increase in tensions.

Prior to October, the last time the United States surged thousands of troops into the Middle East was under former President Donald Trump, during a series of escalatory actions that culminated in the US killing of Iran's top general and a retaliatory missile attack by Tehran on a US base in Iraq.

The first US official noted that the surge of troops in 2019 and 2020 was possible because, unlike today, Washington did not have to dedicate so many personnel and resources to Europe -- a new reality following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Mulroy said the United States should strengthen its position in the Middle East without abandoning its China-first focus.

"We need to deploy forces based on the current threat environment. And the current trend ... is obviously a potential for a broader nation-on-nation conflict in the Middle East," Mulroy said.

## US House passes \$95b Ukraine, Israel aid package

REUTERS, Washington

The US House of Representatives on Saturday with broad bipartisan support passed a \$95 billion legislative package providing security assistance to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, over bitter objections from Republican hardliners.

The legislation now proceeds to the Democratic-majority Senate, which passed a similar measure more than two months ago. US leaders from Democratic President Joe Biden to top Senate Republican Mitch McConnell have been urging embattled Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson to bring it up for a vote.

The Senate is expected to pass the measure next week, sending it to Biden to sign into law.

The unusual four-bill package also includes funds for Israel, security assistance for Taiwan and allies in the Indo-Pacific and a measure that includes sanctions, a threat to ban the Chinese-owned social media app TikTok and the potential transfer of seized Russian assets to Ukraine.

Some hardline Republicans have voiced strong opposition to further Ukraine aid, with some arguing the US can ill afford it given its rising \$34 trillion national debt.

The bills provide \$60.84 billion to address the conflict in Ukraine; \$26 billion for Israel, including \$9.1 billion for humanitarian needs, and \$8.12 billion for the Indo-Pacific.

Moscow yesterday slammed the approval saying "the allocation of US military aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan will exacerbate global crises."

## Fighting flares at Myanmar-Thai border

REUTERS

Fighting raged at Myanmar's eastern frontier with Thailand yesterday, witnesses, media and Thailand's government said, forcing about 200 civilians to flee as rebels pressed to flush out junta troops holed up for days at a bridge border crossing.

Resistance fighters and ethnic minority rebels seized the key trading town of Myawaddy on the Myanmar side of the frontier on April 11, dealing a big blow to a well-equipped military that is struggling to govern and is now facing a critical test of its battlefield credibility.

Three witnesses on the Thai and Myanmar sides of the border said they heard explosions and heavy machine gun fire near a strategic bridge from late on Friday that continued into early yesterday.

Several Thai media outlets said about 200 people had crossed the border to seek temporary refuge in Thailand.

Thai broadcaster NBT in a post on social media platform X said resistance forces used 40 millimetre machine guns and dropped 20 bombs from drones to target an estimated 200 junta soldiers who had retreated from a coordinated rebel assault on Myawaddy and army posts since April 5.

Myanmar's military is facing its biggest challenge since first taking control of the former British colony in 1962, caught up in multiple, low-intensity conflicts and grappling to stabilise an economy that has crumbled since a 2021 coup against Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's government.



## Poll body chalked out 7-phase polls to assist BJP

Claims Mamata; outrage in India after state-run TV channel changes logo colour to orange

AGENCIES

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee yesterday alleged that the Election Commission of India chalked out seven-phase polls to enable Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his cabinet colleagues to carry out extensive campaigning using the nation's resources.

Addressing a public meeting at Gajol in Malda district, Mamata Banerjee, the party supremo, said polls have been scheduled from April 19 to June 1 so that Modi and his cabinet colleagues can travel on special planes across the country before every phase to "overwhelm the opposition".

"On earlier occasions, elections used to be over by May but this year, it has been extended till June 1 to enable Modi to visit various places on military planes, while we are made to arrange for our own transport, including helicopters, which are also being booked by BJP leaders so that we get little space," she alleged.

Mamata alleged that though the Union council of ministers led by Narendra Modi is a caretaker cabinet after the announcement of elections and the EC is in charge of running the administrative machinery, the poll body is "toeing the line dictated by Modi and his party colleagues".

She accused the BJP of conspiring to engineer riots by spreading fake news and videos on social media.

She claimed that poll surveys telecast on TV channels were "BJP inspired", and asserted that the TMC will get a huge number of seats in the polls.

Meanwhile, India's state-run broadcaster, DD News, has changed the colour of its logo from ruby red to saffron, drawing the ire of the opposition political parties as high-stake elections are underway in the country.

The move by broadcaster Prasar Bharati, the parent organisation that runs DD News, has again raised concerns about the country's shrinking press freedom.

The broadcaster officially unveiled the new logo on Tuesday while attempting to downplay the significance of the move, saying "our values remain the same".

The new saffron logo has sparked outrage among opposition political parties which claim it was an attempt at "saffronising" the country and its important institutions.

The saffron colour has been associated with the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which has adopted it as its official colour, using it in party flags, banners, scarfs and attire. The colour also holds religious significance among Hindus.

## Another 29 killed in Afghan floods

AFP, Kabul

Ongoing downpours have killed another 29 people in Afghanistan over the past four days, the government disaster management department said yesterday.

Afghanistan was parched by an unusually dry winter that desiccated the earth, followed by a two-week streak of downpours in most provinces that has caused sporadic flash flooding.

Disaster management department spokesman Janan Sayeq said "29 people lost their lives because of rains" between Wednesday and Saturday, with fatalities spread across ten provinces.

Seven others have been injured over the same period, he said, while 72 houses have been damaged or destroyed, and more than 2,500 acres of agricultural land swept away.

More than 100 people have been killed in flooding this month, according to official figures, whilst more than 25,000 families have required aid as a result of the deluge.



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## Bangladesh Institute of Bank Management (BIBM)

Plot # 4, Main Road # 1, Mirpur -2, Dhaka-1216, Bangladesh  
Phone: 0173339345, 01915929323, email: dsbm@bibm.org.bd