

UK's Sunak faces call for polls date betting probe

AFP, London

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak yesterday faced calls to launch an inquiry after a member of his security detail was arrested for allegedly betting on the timing of the general election.

London's Metropolitan Police said it was told by the Gambling Commission that a close protection officer was being investigated over the alleged bets.

The regulator had already been looking into claims that Conservative party candidate Craig Williams, who served as Sunak's ministerial aide, placed a bet on when the election would be held.

A second candidate from Sunak's party, Laura Saunders, is now also under investigation about an alleged bet on the date of the poll, the BBC reported on Wednesday evening.

Saunders is married to the Tories' director of campaigns, it added.

MYANMAR CRISIS Ethnic armed groups accuse junta of breaking truce

AFP, Yangon

An alliance of Myanmar ethnic armed groups have accused the junta of repeatedly violating a China-brokered ceasefire in the north of the country this month and causing civilian casualties.

Beijing brokered a truce between the junta and the so-called "Three Brotherhood Alliance" in January after months of fighting that displaced more than half a million people near China's southern border.

The ceasefire allowed the alliance — made up of the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Arakan Army (AA) to hold swathes of territory it had seized in northern Shan state.

Junta troops on Wednesday launched an air strike on territory the TNLA holds near the ruby and gem mining hub of Mogoke, the group said.

"In this incident, one civilian was killed and 3 wounded including a 10-year-old child," the TNLA said in a statement posted to the alliance's Telegram channel on Wednesday.



Palestinians ride in the back of a pick-up truck in a displacement area of al-Mawasi in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday, as Israel continues bombardment and ground assault in the Palestinian enclave. PHOTO: AFP

Nowhere in Israel will be spared in case of war

Lebanon's Hezbollah chief warns; Israel army spokesman says Hamas can't be eliminated

AFP, Beirut

Fears of a regional war rose yesterday after Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah movement said none of Israel would be spared in a full-blown conflict, and Israel said it had approved plans for a Lebanon offensive.

Experts are divided on the prospect of wider war, almost nine months into Israel's vow to eradicate Hamas, the Palestinian group in the Gaza Strip.

On Wednesday Israel's top army spokesman said Hamas, as an ideology, cannot be eliminated. Others, including US Secretary



Hezbollah chief also threatened Cyprus if it opened its airports to Israel "to target Lebanon".

of State Antony Blinken, have also pointed to the difficulty of destroying the group.

In a televised address, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah said "no place" in Israel would "be spared our rockets" if war began.

Nasrallah's Iran-backed group has exchanged near-daily fire with Israel since Israel began offensive in Gaza on October 7, but the fire from Hezbollah rockets, Israeli warplanes and other weapons has escalated in the past few weeks.

The Hezbollah chief also threatened the nearby island nation of Cyprus if it opened its airports or bases to Israel "to target Lebanon".

Cyprus, a European Union member, is home to two British bases, including an airbase, but they are in sovereign British territory and not controlled by the Cypriot government.

Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides denied his country's involvement in the offensive and said it was "part of the solution". He pointed to its role in a maritime humanitarian corridor to Gaza.

Warplanes from the British airbase in Cyprus have, along with United States forces, carried out reprisal strikes against Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels who

have for months been attacking shipping in nearby waterways.

On Wednesday, US military said its forces destroyed two Houthi sites in Yemen. The Houthis and Hezbollah both say they are acting in response to Israel's actions in Gaza. On Tuesday Israel's military announced that "operational plans for an offensive in Lebanon were approved and validated", and Foreign Minister Israel Katz warned of Hezbollah's destruction in a "total war".

US envoy Amos Hochstein called for "urgent" de-escalation.

On Tuesday Hezbollah published a more than nine-minute video showing drone footage purportedly taken by the movement over northern Israel, including parts of the city and port of Haifa.

4 in 5 people want more climate action

UN survey finds

AFP, United Nations

Four in every five people want their country to strengthen its commitments to addressing climate change, according to a global poll of 75,000 participants published yesterday.

The survey by the UN Development Program, Oxford University and GeoPoll posed 15 questions by randomised telephone calls to people in 77 countries representing 87 percent of the world's population.

The key finding was that 80 percent of respondents want their governments to increase efforts to fight against global warming.

Poorer countries beat this drum the loudest, with 89 percent in favour, though appetite is also high in G20 nations (76 percent), according to the survey.

China (73 percent) and the United States (66 percent) — the world's biggest greenhouse gas emitters — also saw a majority of respondents in favour of climate action.

"As world leaders decide on the next round of pledges under the Paris Agreement by 2025, these results are undeniable evidence that people everywhere support bold climate action," said Cassie Flynn, UNDP global climate director.

DIRECT PASSENGER FLIGHT

India shuns China's calls to resume service

REUTERS, New Delhi

China is pressing India to restart direct passenger flights after a four-year halt, but New Delhi is resisting as a border dispute continues to weigh on ties between the world's two most populous countries, officials said.

India-China relations have been tense since the biggest military confrontation in decades on their disputed Himalayan border killed 20 Indian and at least four Chinese soldiers in June 2020. Thousands of troops remain mobilised on each side.

Since the clash, India has made it difficult for Chinese companies to invest, banned hundreds of popular apps and severed passenger routes, although direct cargo flights still operate between the Asian giants.

Direct flights would benefit both economies, but the stakes are higher for China, where a recovery in overseas travel after the Covid-19 pandemic is lagging, while India's aviation sector booms.

Several times over the past year or so, China's government and airlines have asked India's civil aviation authorities to re-establish direct air links, two people with direct knowledge of the matter told Reuters, with one saying China considers this a "big issue".

"We hope the Indian side will work with China in the same direction for the early resumption of direct flights," China's Foreign Ministry told Reuters in a statement last week.

India boosts Sri Lanka's maritime monitoring centres

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka launched an upgraded naval monitoring centre yesterday, funded by its powerful neighbour India as New Delhi pushes to counter China's expanding regional influence.

The Maritime Rescue Coordinating Centre — able to track shipping across vast areas — was backed by a \$6 million Indian grant, a statement from President Ranil Wickremesinghe's office said.

Based in Sri Lanka's naval headquarters in Colombo, it also includes seven remote stations along the island's eastern seaboard.

One lies in the far south of Sri Lanka — close to the Chinese-run port of Hambantota — overseeing major international east-to-west shipping routes.

Sri Lanka's maritime rescue region covers an area of 1.77 million square kilometres (683,400 square miles) stretching from India to Indonesia, Australia and the Maldives.

India's Foreign Minister S Jaishankar opened the facility during his first foreign visit since the formation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's new government this month.

Jaishankar said on social media that Colombo was a key part of India's "neighbourhood first" and maritime security policies.

India is suspicious of China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, including in Sri Lanka as well as the Maldives, which signed a military assistance pact with Beijing in March.

That deal came as a garrison of Indian soldiers, who had been stationed in the upscale holiday destination to assist with maritime patrols, was ordered by pro-Beijing President Mohamed Muizzu to leave.



China coast guard personnel a 'band of barbarians'

Says Philippine navy official

REUTERS, Manila

China's coast guard personnel acted like a "band of barbarians" during a Philippine resupply mission to a contested shoal in the South China Sea this week that led to injuries and damage to vessels, a senior navy official said yesterday.

A Philippine sailor suffered serious injury after what its military described as "intentional high speed ramming" by the Chinese Coast Guard, aiming to disrupt a resupply mission for troops stationed on the Second Thomas Shoal.

China's Coast Guard personnel, which Philippine military officials said were carrying knives and spears, looted firearms and "deliberately punctured" Philippine boats involved in the mission.

"We were unprepared for that kind of response," Philippine navy spokesperson Roy Trinidad said in a phone interview yesterday. "We stuck with the rules of engagement. They were not allowed to use guns except for self defence."

Trinidad said China's "illegal, aggressive and deceptive" actions raises the risk of miscalculation at sea.

But China's foreign ministry disputed the Philippines' statement, with a spokesperson saying yesterday that the necessary measures taken were lawful, professional and beyond reproach.

"The Philippine ships not only carry building materials, they also smuggled weapons and equipment and deliberately rammed Chinese ships," said ministry spokesperson Lin Jian.



Students holding placards protest outside the Ministry of Education against the cancellation of the UGC-NET examination in New Delhi, India yesterday. India's opposition parties and the country's students have hit out at the new government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi for irregularities in recent government-run tests for college admissions and government teaching jobs. PHOTO: REUTERS

GRAFT CASE

Delhi CM Kejriwal gets bail

NDTV ONLINE

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has been granted bail in the liquor policy case. Kejriwal's lawyer had argued the Enforcement Directorate (ED) had no evidence against him.

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) chief is likely to come out of jail today, as the bail order has to reach jail first.

His lawyer told the Delhi court that the ED's entire case against the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) chief rested on statements given by those who turned approver in the case.

The court denied the ED's request to allow at least 48 hours to sign the bail bond in order for the central agency to challenge it before the relevant court.

The ED arrested Kejriwal on March 21 over money laundering allegations while framing the Delhi liquor policy for 2021-22, which was later scrapped after the Lt Governor raised red flags.