

MYANMAR CRISIS

Ethnic fighters battling way into key town

AFP, Mandalay

Myanmar ethnic minority fighters were battling their way into a town housing a regional military command, one of their leaders yesterday.

Soldiers were "surrounding" the northern Shan state town of Lashio, home to the junta's northeastern command, General Tar Bhone Kyaw of the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) told AFP.

Clashes first broke out on Wednesday as the ethnic fighters moved into the area.

A member of a local group of volunteers helping to treat the injured and bury the dead told AFP yesterday that at least 16 civilians had been killed since fighting broke out in Lashio.

"There has been very strong fighting around the town," the rescuer said.

SOUTH CHINA SEA

China anchors 'monster ship'

Says Philippine coast guard

REUTERS, Manila

The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) said yesterday that China's largest coast guard vessel has anchored in Manila's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea, and is meant to intimidate its smaller Asian neighbour.

The China coastguard's 165-metre 'monster ship' entered Manila's 200-nautical mile EEZ on July 2, spokesperson for the PCG Jay Tarrila told a news forum.

The PCG warned the Chinese vessel it was in the Philippine's EEZ and asked about their intentions, he said.

"It's an intimidation on the part of the China Coast Guard," Tarrila said. "We're not going to pull out and we're not going to be intimidated."

The Chinese ship, which has also deployed a small boat, was anchored 800 yards away from the PCG's vessel, Tarrila said.

China's embassy in Manila and the Chinese foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment. China's coast guard has no publicly available contact information.



Palestinians assess the damage following an Israeli strike in the Nuseirat refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip yesterday. The health ministry in Gaza said yesterday that at least 38,098 people have been killed in Gaza since Oct 7.

PHOTO: AFP

GAZA OFFENSIVE

Strikes in Gaza as Israel commits to talks

AFP, Palestinian Territories

Israel carried out deadly airstrikes in Gaza yesterday and engaged in combat with Hamas fighters, while to the north it exchanged fire with Hezbollah fighters across the Lebanese border.

The fighting raged as diplomatic efforts to halt the war, which will enter its tenth month today, continued with Israel saying on Friday it would send a delegation next week to continue talks with Qatari mediators.

There has been no truce since a one-week pause in November during which 80 Israeli hostages were freed in return for 240 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons. The war continued unabated yesterday, with Israel's military saying it had conducted operations across much of the Gaza Strip, including Shujaia in the north, Deir al-Balah in central Gaza and Rafah in the south.

Shujaia is among the areas the military had previously declared to be cleared of Hamas, but where fighting is again taking place.

Israel has carried out a military offensive that has killed at least 38,098 people in Gaza, also mostly civilians, since Oct 7 according to the health ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory.

The health ministry in the Hamas run territory said at least 87 people had been killed in the past

48 hours, and paramedics yesterday reported 10 deaths in an air strike on a house in Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza.

The Hamas press office and paramedics said four journalists working for local media outlets were killed in strikes overnight, and the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, said two of its employees had been killed.

According to UNRWA, which coordinated much of the aid delivered to Gaza, 194 of its employees have been killed in the war.

The United States, which has mediated talks alongside Qatar and Egypt, has talked up the prospects of a deal saying there is a "pretty significant opening" for both sides.

US President Joe Biden announced a pathway to a truce deal in May that he said had been proposed by Israel.

This included an initial six-week truce, Israeli withdrawal from Gaza population centres and the freeing of hostages by Palestinian fighters.

Talks subsequently stalled, but a US official said on Thursday that a new proposal from Hamas "moves the process forward and may provide the basis for closing the deal".

Senior Hamas official Osama Hamdan told AFP that new ideas from the group had been "conveyed by the mediators to the American side, which welcomed them and

passed them on to the Israeli side. Now the ball is in the Israeli court."

The war has uprooted 90 percent of Gaza's population, destroyed much of its housing and other infrastructure, and left almost 500,000 people enduring "catastrophic" hunger, UN agencies say.

Netanyahu demands the release of the hostages but also insists the war will not end until Israel has destroyed Hamas's ability to make war or govern.

Cross-border fire between Israel and Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah movement has occurred almost daily since the Gaza war began, but has escalated notably over the past month.

That has raised fears of a major conflagration between the staunch enemies which could draw in Iran and other powers.

Yesterday morning, sirens blared over northern Israel and the military said it had downed a "suspicious aerial target" and two "hostile aircraft" launched from Lebanon fell in open ground.

The military said earlier it had attacked "a number of Hezbollah terror targets in southern Lebanon" overnight, all near the border.

US officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken, have voiced hope that a ceasefire in Gaza could also lead to an easing of violence on the Israel-Lebanon border.

8 arrested after murder of Indian politician

AFP, New Delhi

Eight people were arrested in India yesterday for the murder of a politician who championed the rights of lower-caste Indians, police said.

K Armstrong, the state boss of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), was hacked to death with machetes and sickles near his home in the southern city of Chennai on Friday night.

Six men travelling on motorbikes attacked Armstrong while he was "chatting with friends and supporters" near his home in the Tamil Nadu state capital, the Indian Express newspaper reported.

The men reportedly escaped before anyone could intervene.

Several of Armstrong's supporters took to the streets later in the evening to protest his assassination and demand justice.

Senior Chennai police officer Asra Garg said eight suspects were being interrogated after a "preliminary investigation".

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin urged police to speedily conclude the investigation.

Biden defiant, but critics are circling

AFP, Washington DC

Joe Biden's presidential reelection bid hung in the balance yesterday, after efforts to put a disastrous debate showing behind him failed to silence voices urging that he quit the White House race.

In what had been billed as a make-or-break TV interview on Friday, Biden's strategy was to flatly deny the falling poll numbers and concerns over his mental and physical fitness triggered by his dismal performance against rival Donald Trump.

He blamed a severe cold for the debate debacle and insisted it was just a "bad night" rather than evidence of increasing frailty and cognitive decline.

And the 81-year-old was adamant that he would not be pressured to end his campaign.

Murmurs of dissent within his own Democratic party have, in the case of five individual House representatives, morphed into direct calls to quit, and a number of key donors have threatened to cut off funding if Biden insists on staying the course.

Biden's campaign team is pushing ahead regardless, with an event planned in Pennsylvania today and visits to other battleground states later in the month.

For Biden and his campaign team, the strategy seems to be to ride it out.



Russia says captured village in east Ukraine

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday said its forces had captured a village in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, as Moscow continues to advance slowly across the battlefield.

The defence ministry said its troops "liberated the village of Sokil", around 30 kilometres northwest of Donetsk city, the capital of the region by the same name that Moscow claimed to have annexed in 2022.

Kyiv says the fiercest fighting across the entire front line is taking place in the Donetsk region, where Russian troops are trying to eject Ukraine's forces.

Elsewhere, Kyiv, EU officials, the United States and NATO hit out at Hungarian leader Viktor Orban, Russia's closest EU ally, on Friday after Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted him in Moscow for talks on the Ukraine conflict.

Speaking to Orban, Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday repeated his demand for Ukraine to totally withdraw from the region, along with three others in the south and east of the country, if it wants peace.

Orban has not received any mandate from the EU Council to visit Moscow, officials have said.

Iran reformist wins presidency

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in the runoff, emphasising the importance of the election.

He said the first round turnout was lower than expected, but added that it was not an act "against the system".

The ballot comes against a backdrop of heightened regional tensions over the Gaza war, a dispute with the West over Iran's nuclear programme, and domestic discontent over the state of Iran's sanctions-hit economy.

In last week's first round, Pezeshkian, who was the only reformist allowed to stand, won the largest number of votes, around 42 percent, while Jalili came second with around 39 percent, according to figures from Iran's elections authority.

Only 40 percent of Iran's 61 million eligible voters took part in the first round, the lowest turnout in any presidential election since the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

The candidacy of Pezeshkian, a relative unknown until recently, has raised the hopes of

Iran's reformists after years of dominance by the conservative and ultraconservative camps.

Iran's main reformist coalition supported Pezeshkian, with endorsements by former presidents Mohammad Khatami and Hassan Rouhani, a moderate.

Pezeshkian, a 69-year-old heart surgeon, has called for "constructive relations" with Western countries to revive the nuclear deal in order to "get Iran out of its isolation".

Pezeshkian vowed to ease long-standing internet restrictions and to "fully" oppose police patrols enforcing the mandatory headscarf for women, a high-profile issue since the death in police custody in 2022 of Mahsa Amini which sparked months of nationwide unrest.

Meanwhile, Pezeshkian received congratulations for his victory from around the world, most notably from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Saudi

Arabian King Salman, United Arab Emirates President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and the emirs of Qatar and Kuwait, according to news agencies.

"Looking forward to working closely with you to further strengthen our warm and long-standing bilateral relationship for the benefit of our peoples and the region," Modi wrote on social media platform X.

"I hope that your tenure as president will contribute to a reinforcement of constructive bilateral cooperation between our friendly peoples," Putin said in a message to Pezeshkian.

The two countries, the target of stiff Western sanctions, can "coordinate efforts to resolve international issues in a constructive manner," he said.

"I attach great importance to the development of China-Iran relations and am willing to work with the President to lead the China-Iran comprehensive strategic partnership towards

deeper advancement," state news agency Xinhua reported Xi as saying.

The two countries "have a long history of friendly exchanges, and bilateral relations have maintained healthy and stable development... for over half a century," Xi said, according to Xinhua.

"Faced with complex regional and international situations, China and Iran have always supported each other, worked together and continued to consolidate strategic mutual trust," he added.

"(This) has not only brought benefits to our two countries' peoples, but has also made active contributions to promoting regional and world peace and stability," he said.

In a message published on the Syrian presidency's social media accounts, Assad said: "We are keen to ensure that our relationship remains at its peak".

He added that he wants to work with Pezeshkian "to strengthen the Syrian-Iranian strategic relationship" and that "resistance will remain

the common approach we follow."

King Salman, in a message to Pezeshkian, expressed hope for the "continued development of relations which link our two countries and our two brotherly peoples," according to the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA).

He also expressed his wish for further "coordination and dialogue to strengthen regional and international peace and security," SPA said.

The president of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, wished success to Pezeshkian and said he looks "forward to working together to further strengthen ties between the UAE and Iran for the benefit of our two nations and peoples."

The emirs of Qatar and Kuwait sent cables of congratulations to Pezeshkian, official media reported.

Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Meshal al-Ahmad Al-Sabah wished "more prosperity and development" for the Islamic republic, the official KUNA news agency said.

Top Myanmar general in China for official visit

Says junta

AFP, Yangon

The Myanmar junta's second-in-command arrived in China yesterday for an official visit, the junta's information team said, as clashes with ethnic minority fighters raged in the north of the country despite a Beijing brokered ceasefire.

Vice senior General Soe Win arrived in Qingdao in Shandong province where he will attend a "Green Development Forum" hosted by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the junta's information office said in a statement.

Ties between the junta and Beijing, a major ally and arms supplier, frayed last year over the junta's failure to crack down on online scam compounds in Myanmar's borderlands.

The compounds were staffed by citizens of China and other countries who were often trafficked and forced to work swindling their compatriots in an industry analysts say is worth billions.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing has not visited China since the 2021 coup that plunged the country into turmoil.

The Southeast Asian nation has seen widespread fighting since the military coup ended democratic rule. Soe Win's visit comes following more than a week of fighting in northern Shan state between the military and an ethnic minority armed group that has shattered a ceasefire brokered by China in January. Yesterday the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) told AFP its fighters were "surrounding" the town of Lashio, home to a regional military command. Lashio sits on a major highway that runs from Myanmar's second city of Mandalay to China's Yunnan province.

Sahel junta chiefs divorce from West African bloc

AFP, Niamey

The military regimes of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso marked their divorce from the rest of West Africa yesterday, with Niger's ruling general saying the junta-led countries have "turned their backs on" the regional bloc.

The three country's leaders are taking part in the first summit of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), set up after pulling out of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) earlier this year.

"Our people have irrevocably turned their backs on ECOWAS," Niger's ruling General Abdourahmane Tiani told his fellow Sahel strongmen at the gathering's opening in the Nigerien capital Niamey.

Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger set up the mutual defence pact in September, leaving the wider Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) bloc in January.