



Medical professionals hold posters amid a nationwide strike by doctors to condemn the rape and murder of a young medic from Kolkata, at a hospital in Bengaluru yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

DROUGHT IN AFRICA Nearly 68m suffering

REUTERS, Harare

About 68 million people in Southern Africa are suffering the effects of an El Nino-induced drought which has wiped out crops across the region, the regional bloc SADC said yesterday.

The drought, which started in early 2024, has hit crop and livestock production, causing food shortages and damaging the wider economies.

Heads of state from the 16-nation Southern African Development Community (SADC) were meeting in Zimbabwe's capital Harare to discuss regional issues including food security.

Some 68 million people, or 17 percent of the region's population, are in need of aid, said Elias Magosi, SADC executive secretary.

"The 2024 rainy season has been a challenging one with most parts of the region experiencing negative effects of the El Nino phenomenon characterised by the late onset of rains," he said.

It is Southern Africa's worst drought in years, owing to a combination of naturally occurring El Nino - when abnormal warming of the waters in the eastern Pacific changes world weather patterns - and higher average temperatures produced by greenhouse gas emissions.

Ukraine 'strengthening' positions in Russia

Says Zelensky; Germany to cut Ukraine military aid in 2025 budget

AFP, Kyiv

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky yesterday said his forces were "strengthening" their positions in Russia's Kursk region, where Kyiv has been mounting a major ground offensive for more than 11 days.

His comments came a day after Moscow accused Ukraine of destroying a key bridge over a river in the border region, as Kyiv seeks to disrupt supply routes and the movement of Moscow's troops in the area.

Ukrainian army chief Oleksandr Syrsky "reported on the strengthening of the positions of our forces in the Kursk region and the expansion of stabilised territory", Zelensky said in a post on Telegram.

"As of this morning, we have replenished the exchange fund for our country," Zelensky said, referring to Russian soldiers Ukraine has captured to be used in future prisoner swaps.

"I thank all the soldiers and commanders who are taking Russian soldiers prisoner and thus bringing the release of our soldiers and civilians held by Russia closer," Zelensky said.

Kyiv claims to have taken control of more than 80 settlements in the lightning incursion, which caught the



Kremlin off guard almost two and a half years into its full scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Russian defence ministry said on Saturday it had pushed back Ukrainian forces near three settlements in the Kursk region, and was searching for "mobile enemy groups" trying to pierce deeper into the country.

Russian officials on Friday accused Ukraine of striking a strategically important bridge just a couple dozen kilometres away from fighting in the Kursk region.

The region's governor, Alexei Smirnov, said on Friday evening

the bridge was in the Glushkovsky district, some 11 kilometres (seven miles) away from the border.

An aerial video published by Ukrainian air force commander Mykola Oleshchuk appeared to show the bridge being hit by a projectile at high speed before collapsing in a cloud of smoke.

"Ukrainian pilots are conducting precision strikes on enemy strongholds, equipment concentrations, as well as on enemy logistics centres and supply routes," he said on Telegram.

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova

said the bridge was "completely destroyed" and that "volunteers providing assistance to the evacuated civilian population were killed".

"All those responsible for these inhumane acts will be severely punished," she said.

Russia yesterday also accused Ukraine of dropping an explosive charge on a road near the occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in southern Ukraine.

The plant, which was seized by Russia's forces early in the war, has come under repeated attacks that both sides have accused each other of carrying out.

Russia meanwhile attacked at least four Ukrainian regions yesterday, according to officials, including the northeastern region of Kharkiv, where prosecutors said shelling killed a 49-year-old woman.

While the incursion has delivered a major morale boost to Kyiv, it appears to have had little impact on the larger battles raging in Russian-occupied parts of eastern Ukraine.

Zelensky yesterday said there had been "dozens of Russian assaults" on Ukrainian positions near the towns of Pokrovsk and Toretsk, where Moscow has made a string of advances in recent weeks.

POST-COUP MYANMAR US pledges to expand support to opposition

REUTERS, Washington

US officials met virtually with members of Myanmar's opposition movement on Friday and pledged to expand direct support to help a transition to civilian government and agreeing on the need to maintain pressure on the military junta, the State Department said.

News of the meeting came after Washington's regional rival China urged neighbouring countries to help war-torn Myanmar advance its peace and reconciliation process when its foreign minister met counterparts from Laos, Myanmar and Thailand.

A US statement said Friday's meeting involved State Department Counselor Tom Sullivan, USAID Assistant Administrator Michael Schiffer and leading members of Myanmar's pro-democracy National Unity Government, the National Unity Consultative Council, and key resistance organisations, the Karen National Union, Karenni National Progressive Party, and the Chin National Front.

Myanmar's state media said on Thursday that China had promised technical support to conduct a census, followed by an election, signalling Beijing's backing to a junta cornered by an armed rebellion and steadily losing ground.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since 2021 when the military ousted an elected civilian government in a coup, abruptly ending the impoverished country's tentative steps towards becoming a full-fledged democracy.

Thai ex-PM Thaksin gets royal pardon

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thailand's billionaire former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra received a royal pardon shortening his parole by two weeks, his lawyer said yesterday, a day after his daughter was elected premier by parliament.



Thaksin has been at the heart of a two-decade power struggle between the Shinawatra family and its allies on the one hand, and, on the other, a nexus of royalists, generals and old-money families that have long wielded influence over Thai governments and institutions.

After a dramatic return last August from self-exile to avoid jail time in the wake of his overthrow in a 2006 military coup, Thaksin served six months in hospital detention, due to health reasons, before being released on parole in February.

After his return, he was sentenced to eight years in prison for abuse of power and conflicts of interest during his time in office from 2001 to 2006. His sentence was commuted to one year by King Maha Vajiralongkorn last September.

"Thaksin is among the prisoners that received the royal pardon" for prisoners in honour of the king's birthday last month, his lawyer, Winyat Chartmontri, told Reuters. "It will take effect on Sunday."

Parole, granted in February, was due to end at the end of the month, but was shortened to Sunday as part of the royal pardon, Winyat said.

Thaksin's daughter Paetongtarn Shinawatra, 37, was elected on Friday as Thailand's second female prime minister and the third Shinawatra to hold the office, winning with nearly two-thirds of the Thai parliament.

US PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Rivals to hold rallies in key state

AFP, Wilkes-Barre

Donald Trump and Kamala Harris are holding duelling campaign stops in the crucial battleground state of Pennsylvania this weekend, as new polling shows the US vice president making major gains ahead of her big moment at next week's Democratic National Convention.

Trump will hold a rally in the small town of Wilkes-Barre on Saturday, while Harris is taking her tour bus on several stops around Pittsburgh on Sunday before heading to the convention in Chicago.

The momentum in the White House race has shifted dramatically since President Joe Biden abruptly pulled out on July 21, with Harris's whirlwind entry energizing the Democratic Party base.

A survey by the New York Times and Siena College published Saturday had Harris storming back into contention in four critical battleground states that Trump had looked set to win comfortably against Biden.

The Republican has struggled to find an effective counter to the Harris surge, and the new poll will likely trigger further consternation in his campaign team, with the vice president now ahead in Arizona and North Carolina, and getting closer in Nevada and Georgia.

The stakes will be high for Trump to find some fresh impetus at Saturday's public rally, after a series of distinctly low-energy events held at his Florida resort home and a golf club he owns in New Jersey.



People look at animated kites soaring over the sky on the third day of the Tamil Nadu International Kite Festival on the outskirts of Chennai yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP