

Israeli tanks pound north Gaza Strip
Dozens killed; displaced residents say they have nowhere to flee

REUTERS, *Cairo*

Israeli forces widened their raid into northern Gaza, and tanks reached the north edge of Gaza City, pounding some districts of the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood and forcing many families to leave their homes.

Residents said Israeli forces had effectively isolated Beit Hanoun, Jabalia and Beit Lahiya in far north of enclave from Gaza City, blocking access between the two areas except upon their permission for families willing to heed evacuation orders and leave three towns.

Nine days into a major Israeli operation in northern Gaza, the Hamas-run Gaza government media office said Israeli strikes had killed around



300 Palestinians there. It said Israel's bombardment of civilian houses and displacement shelters was intended to force residents to leave Gaza once and for all, which Israel denies.

Gaza's health ministry said dozens of people have been confirmed killed in the assaults on northern areas, with many dozens of others feared dead on roads and under the rubble of houses beyond the reach of medical teams.

Many Jabalia residents posted on social media platforms: "We will not leave, we die, and we don't leave."

The northern part of Gaza, home to well over half the territory's 2.3 million people, was bombed to rubble in the first phase of Israel's assault on the territory a year ago.

More than 42,227 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli offensive on Gaza since October 7, 2023, the Gaza health ministry said yesterday. The toll includes 52 deaths in the previous 24 hours.

After a year of Israeli assaults, hundreds of thousands of residents have come back to ruined northern areas. Israel sent troops back more than a week ago to root out fighters it said were regrouping for more attacks. Hamas denies fighters operate among civilians.

Asean urges immediate halt to Myanmar fighting

REUTERS, *Bangkok*

Southeast Asian leaders yesterday called for swift agreement on a code of conduct for the South China Sea based on international law, while demanding an immediate halt to fighting in Myanmar and inclusive peace talks to end its civil war.

The Asean chairman's statement represents the consensus from meetings ended on Friday of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Laos, which included diplomats from the United States, Russia, China, Japan, India and South Korea.

Confrontations have been rising in disputed waters of the South China Sea between China, which claims sovereignty over almost all the vital waterway, and Asean members including Philippines and more recently Vietnam.

The rows have raised risks of an escalation that could eventually involve the United States, which is bound by treaty to defend the Philippines if it is attacked.

The sea, where \$3 trillion worth of trade passes annually, was been a major point of contention at the Asean meetings, particularly with Russia and China objecting to a reference to the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, a US official said.

The Asean statement called for confidence-building measures that could "reduce tensions and the risk of accidents, misunderstandings and miscalculation" in the South China Sea.

It cited "positive momentum" in talks on a maritime code that could help settle disputes. China and Asean agreed on this in 2002, but the formal process of creating one did not start until 2017.



Smoke rises from the site of an Israeli airstrike that targeted the southern Lebanese village of Kham yesterday, amid the continuing war between Hezbollah and Israel. PHOTO: AFP

Let it play out

Analysts say US, caught between competing goals in Lebanon, stays on sidelines amid Israel-Hezbollah conflict

REUTERS, *Washington*

After weeks of intensive diplomacy aimed at securing a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah fighters, the United States has settled on an altogether different approach: let the unfolding conflict in Lebanon play out.

Just two weeks ago, the United States and France were demanding an immediate 21-day ceasefire to ward off an Israeli invasion of Lebanon. That effort was derailed by Israel's assassination of Hezbollah leader Syed Hassan Nasrallah, the October 1 launch of Israeli ground operations in southern Lebanon and Israeli airstrikes that have wiped out much of the group's

» **US drops calls for immediate ceasefire in Lebanon**

» **New strategy risks fuelling broader war: analysts**

leadership.

Now, US officials have dropped their calls for a ceasefire, arguing that circumstances have changed.

"We do support Israel launching these incursions to degrade Hezbollah's infrastructure so ultimately we can get a diplomatic resolution," State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller told a press briefing earlier this week.

The course change reflects conflicting US goals - containing



the ever-growing Middle East conflict while also severely weakening Iran-backed Hezbollah. The new approach is both practical and risky.

The US and Israel would benefit from the defeat of a common enemy - Hezbollah, which Tehran uses to threaten Israel's northern border - but encouraging Israel's widening military campaign risks a conflict that spins out of control.

Jon Alterman, a former State Department official, said the US wants to see Hezbollah weakened but must weigh that against the risk of "creating a vacuum" in Lebanon or provoking a regional war.

Washington's approach, he said, seems to be: "If you can't change the Israeli approach, you might as well try to channel it in a constructive way."

Israel's latest fight with Hezbollah started when the group fired missiles at Israeli positions immediately after the October 7, 2023 offensive in Gaza. Hezbollah and Israel have been exchanging fire ever since.

As months of indirect ceasefire talks between Israel and Hamas went nowhere, Israel in September began ramping up its bombardment of Hezbollah and landed painful blows on the group, including remotely detonating Hezbollah pagers and radios, wounding thousands of the group's members.

After Nasrallah's death - which the US called "a measure of justice" - US President Joe Biden called again for a ceasefire along the Israel-Lebanon border.

'No red lines' in defending the country
Says Iran FM ahead of Israel's expected strikes

AFP, *Baghdad*

Iran's top diplomat yesterday vowed that there would be "no red lines" for the country in defending its people and interests, ahead of Israel's expected retaliation for Iran's recent missile attack.

"While we have made tremendous efforts in recent days to contain an all-out war in our region, I say it clearly that we have no red lines in defending our people and interests," Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi wrote on X.

Iran fired 200 missiles at Israel on October 1 in what it said was retaliation for the killing of Tehran-aligned leaders in the region and a general in Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant has vowed Israel's response will be "deadly and surprising".

Araghchi was in Baghdad to discuss the wars in Gaza and Lebanon with Iraqi officials, according to the ministry.

Ali al-Moussawi, political advisor to the Iraqi prime minister, said Araghchi's visit was part of a diplomatic effort "to silence weapons and violence... to establish security and stability in the region".

Taiwan on alert as China carrier group detected

AFP, *Taipei*

Taiwan said it was "on alert" as it detected a Chinese aircraft carrier group to its south yesterday, days after the United States warned Beijing against taking "provocative" actions on the self-ruled island.

US State Secretary Antony Blinken warned China on Friday against taking action in response to a speech by Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te during the island's National Day celebrations.

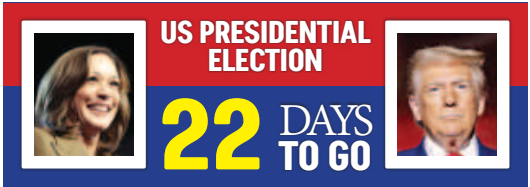
China has ramped up military activity around Taiwan in recent years, sending in warplanes and other military aircraft while Chinese ships maintain a near-constant presence around its waters.

Taiwan's defence ministry said yesterday that a Chinese Liaoning aircraft carrier group had entered the Bashi Channel, a waterway that separates the island from the Philippines, "and is likely to proceed into the western Pacific".

"The Taiwanese military is employing joint intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems to closely monitor related activities and remains on alert, prepared to respond as necessary," it said in a statement.

China's military meanwhile released a video yesterday saying it was "prepared for battle", with a small map of Taiwan included in its title.

The video, posted on the People's Liberation Army Eastern Theater Command's social media channels, shows missiles, jets, helicopters, and warships. China's military was "ready for battle at any time" the post added.



Trump at Coachella rally threatens to withhold wildfire aid

AGENCIES

Donald Trump has warned California Governor Gavin Newsom that the state could lose vital federal funding for wildfire relief unless action is taken to address ongoing water shortages and a controversial environmental policy.

Speaking at a rally in Coachella on Saturday evening, the former president criticised the state's water management, claiming that policies intended to protect the endangered delta smelt fish were hurting farmers and leading to widespread drought conditions.

Trump described California's water crisis in stark terms, suggesting that vast swathes of land had become "barren" due to the rerouting of water into the Pacific Ocean to protect the fish, reports TOL.

"Millions and millions of gallons of water... gets pumped right into the Pacific Ocean," Trump said, lamenting the waste of water while farmers suffered from drought. He argued that, if elected, he would demand that Newsom reverse these policies, or risk losing federal assistance for the state's frequent wildfires.

Trump's comments were delivered during a high-profile campaign stop in Coachella, a city in southern California, which he used as a platform to further criticise California's Democratic leadership.

He also made a thinly veiled threat to Newsom, saying, "We're not going to give you any of that fire money that we send you all the time for all the forest fires that you have" unless changes were made.

The former president's remarks targeted what he described as a "mismanagement" of California's resources, blaming both state and federal policies for exacerbating the water shortage.



People protest as they demand lower housing rental prices and better living conditions in Madrid, Spain yesterday. Twelve thousand people took to the streets, according to the Spanish government. PHOTO: REUTERS

N-W PAKISTAN 16 killed in sectarian clash

AFP, *Islamabad*

At least 16 people, including three women and two children, were killed in a fresh sectarian clash in Pakistan's northwest, officials said.

Sunni and Shia Muslim tribes have been engaged in intermittent fighting for several months in the Kurram district of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Kurram, formerly a semi-autonomous area, has a history of bloody confrontations between tribes belonging to the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam that have claimed hundreds of lives over the years.

A convoy of Sunnis was travelling under the protection of paramilitary soldiers on Saturday when they came under attack, a senior Kurram administration official told AFP on the condition of anonymity.