

Bono, Messi, get highest US civilian honour

AFP, Washington

Joe Biden was set to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to 19 honourees, bestowing the highest civilian honour in the United States to entertainers, sports stars, politicians and diplomats.

Among those to receive honours from the outgoing US president are singer and activist Bono, basketball legend Earvin "Magic" Johnson, longtime fashion editor Anna Wintour, soccer superstar Lionel Messi, actors Denzel Washington and Michael J Fox, and fashion designer Ralph Lauren.

The honourees "are great leaders because they are good people who have made extraordinary contributions to their country and the world," the White House said in a statement.

Others honoured in this year's crop are chef Jose Andres, founder of the World Central Kitchen NGO, and primate researcher Jane Goodall, a leading environmentalist voice.

Some of the recipients selected by the 82 year-old Democrat have a more political profile, such as billionaire financier and left-wing philanthropist George Soros -- a boogeyman of sorts for Republicans -- and Hillary Clinton, the former first lady, senator and US secretary of state who unsuccessfully ran against Donald Trump for the presidency in 2016.

Soros was honoured because he "has supported organisations, and projects across the world that strengthen democracy, human rights, education and social justice," according to a White House statement.

Clinton, meanwhile, "made history many times over decades in public service," including being the first woman nominated by a major party for a US presidential election.

Biden also chose to posthumously award a Presidential Medal of Freedom to Robert Francis Kennedy, better known as "Bobby" Kennedy or his initials, "RFK."

On Thursday, in another slight to Trump, Biden awarded a Presidential Citizens Medal to Liz Cheney, a former Republican congresswoman from Wyoming who sat on the house panel investigating the January 6, 2021 insurrection on the US Capitol.



Relatives celebrate with a released prisoner (C) outside Insein prison on Myanmar's Independence Day in Yangon yesterday. Myanmar's embattled junta government said it would release almost 6,000 prisoners as part of an annual amnesty to mark the country's independence day.

PHOTO: AFP

FAILED ATTEMPT TO ARREST SOUTH KOREA PRESIDENT

Rival protests rock Seoul

AFP, Seoul

Thousands of rival South Korean protesters rallied in the capital yesterday, a day after a failed attempt to arrest suspended President Yoon Suk Yeol for imposing a short-lived martial law decree that led to his impeachment.

The country has been plunged into political chaos since last month, with Yoon defiantly holed up in the presidential residence, surrounded by hundreds of loyal security officers who have so far resisted efforts by prosecutors to arrest him.

Thousands of protesters, both for and against Yoon, gathered in front of the residence and along major roads in Seoul yesterday -- either demanding his arrest or calling for his impeachment to be declared invalid.

Supporter Kim Chul-hong, 60, said Yoon's arrest could undermine South Korea's security alliance with the US and Japan.

"Protecting President Yoon means safeguarding our country's security against



threats from North Korea," he told AFP.

Members of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, South Korea's largest umbrella union, attempted to march to Yoon's residence to protest against him but were blocked by police.

It said two of its members were arrested, and several others were injured in clashes.

Yoon faces criminal charges of insurrection, one of a few crimes not subject to presidential immunity, meaning he could be sentenced to prison or, at worst, the death penalty.

If the warrant is executed, Yoon would

become the first sitting South Korean president to be arrested.

Investigators have asked Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok, who was installed as acting president a week ago, to back the warrant by ordering the presidential security service to cooperate.

In scenes of high drama on Friday, Yoon's guards and military troops shielded him from investigators who eventually called off the arrest attempt citing safety concerns.

The showdown -- which reportedly included shoving but no shots fired -- left the warrant in limbo, with the court order set to expire on Monday.

CIO officials could make another bid to arrest him before then. But if the warrant lapses, they may apply for another.

The Constitutional Court slated January 14 for the start of Yoon's impeachment trial, which if he does not attend would continue in his absence.

Former presidents Roh Moo-hyun and Park Geun-hye never appeared for their impeachment trials.

China vegetable market fire kills 8

AFP, Beijing

A fire at a vegetable market in north China killed eight people and injured 15 yesterday, local authorities reported.

"The injured have been sent to hospital for treatment and are currently not in life-threatening danger," the Qiaoxi District People's Government said after the blaze in Zhangjiakou city, northwest of Beijing.

The fire at the Liguang market broke out at around 8:40am (0040 and was extinguished after 10:00am, the district government said.

The cause of the blaze was under investigation.

World's oldest person dies at 116

AFP, Tokyo

The world's oldest person, Japanese woman Tomiko Itooka, has died aged 116.

Itooka, who had four children and five grandchildren, died on December 29 at a nursing home where she resided since 2019, the southern city's mayor said in a statement.

She was born on May 23, 1908 in the commercial hub of Osaka, near Ashiya -- four months before the Ford Model T was launched in the United States.

Itooka was recognised as the oldest person in the world after the August 2024 death of Spain's Maria Branyas Morera at age 117.



Gunmen ambush Pak aid convoy

AFP, Peshawar

Gunmen ambushed a Pakistan convoy travelling to bring aid to a region besieged by sectarian fighting yesterday, local government said, wounding several officials despite a ceasefire announced three days ago.

The Kurram region of northwest Pakistan has been wracked by Sunni-Shia violence for decades, but around 140 people have been killed since a fresh bout of fighting broke out in November.

As feuding tribes have battled with machine guns and heavy weapons, the remote and mountainous region bordering Afghanistan has been largely cut off from the outside world.

After a truce was called on January 1, the convoy was attacked as it travelled to collect the first aid delivery of food and medicine sent by road since November, officials said.

US announces \$8b arms sale to Israel

AFP, Washington

The administration of US President Joe Biden has notified Congress of a planned \$8 billion arms sale to Israel, a source familiar with the plan said on Saturday.

The State Department "has informally notified Congress of an \$8 billion proposed sale of munitions to support Israel's long-term security by resupplying stocks of critical munitions and air defense capabilities," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The preliminary notification gives congressional committees an opportunity to scrutinize the proposed sale, ahead of a formal notification to Congress.

The weapons package includes medium-range air-to-air missiles to defend against aerial threats; Hellfire AGM-114 missiles; 155mm projectile artillery shells for long-range targeting; and 500-pound warheads, the official said.

The Biden administration has provided Israel with billions in arms aid since Israeli forces launched a massive attack on Hamas militants in Gaza response to their deadly October 7 surprise attack in southern Israel.

The outgoing US president has repeatedly vowed "ironclad" support for Israel.

But against the backdrop of a

rising Palestinian death toll -- now over 45,700, according to the Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza -- and the increasingly dire conditions facing civilians, the US support has become a sensitive political issue.

Many Arab and Muslim Americans, joined by some progressives, vowed not to vote for Biden in the November presidential election unless he halted the weapons aid to Israel. Students on dozens of US campuses protested the aid.

But the official said Saturday that "the president has made clear Israel has a right to defend its citizens, consistent with international law and international humanitarian law, and to deter aggression from Iran and its proxy organizations. We will continue to provide the capabilities necessary for Israel's defense."

Donald Trump, an outspoken supporter of Israel, said during the US presidential campaign that if elected he would quickly end the Gaza war, although he did not explain how.

United Nations officials say as many as 70 percent of those killed in the Gaza hostilities have been women or children, and aid agencies have described harrowing conditions facing civilians.

The Biden administration has urged Israel to increase humanitarian aid, but after threatening to curb arms shipments if the aid situation did not improve, it declined in November to do so.

More than 3.5m displaced in Myanmar: UN

AFP, United Nations

More than 3.5 million people have been displaced by armed conflict in Myanmar, an increase of 1.5 million from last year, the United Nations said Friday, warning that the country's humanitarian crisis could worsen.

Since the military seized power in a 2021 coup, Myanmar has been rocked by fighting between numerous ethnic rebel groups and the army.

Those groups have battled the military since independence for autonomy and control of lucrative natural resources.

Sacked major Zia

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Sarwar said he had yet to get a response from the ministries.

"We have so far come to know about seven cases. Of the cases, Zia was awarded the death penalty in three, and four others are under trial."

He added that Zia contacted him on social media to make the requests on his behalf. "I have no idea about Zia's whereabouts."

Contacted, Kazi Mohammad Saiful Islam, joint secretary (political 2) of home ministry's Public Security Division, said his office had not received the applications.

On February 16, 2021, an Anti-Terrorism Special Tribunal sentenced Zia and four others to death.

Writer Avijit was hacked to death while he and his wife were walking out of Amar Ekushey Boi Mela in February 2015.

Students

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draft should the government seek its input.

Nasiruddin Patwary, convener of the citizens' platform, warned of tougher programmes unless the government showed visible progress by a few days.

Nasiruddin said he thought an election for a constituent assembly was necessary to enshrine the people's rights.

"Both parliamentary election and a constituent assembly election can take place simultaneously."

The press conference was moderated by Abdul Hannan Masud, chief organiser of the student platform.

Santal woman assaulted

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Islam, 40, and four of the chairman's men yesterday.

Bulbul said he heard that there was a land dispute and a Santal woman was slapped in the ear by the chairman, but no one saw who set the house on fire at night.

British Soren, another son of Filimona, told The Daily Star that Rafiqul and his men started filling a piece of empty and low-lying land in their village, Rajabirat, around 10am on Friday. He claimed it was a piece of the Santals' ancestral land, but Bengalees occupied it by showing false documents.

He said Rafiqul's men beat his cousin Nicholas Murmu when the Santals protested against the filling of the land.

"When I visited him and protested against the incident, the chairman brought a bamboo stick to beat me as well. He slapped my mother in the ear when she tried to grab his stick. My

mother fell to the ground and blood started coming out of her ear," said British Soren.

The Santal man said his brothers took Filimona to the upazila health complex around 11:30am. She was later sent to the Bogura hospital.

British Soren said while accompanying his mother at the Bogura hospital around 11:00pm, they heard that the chairman's men set fire to their house. Fire Service and Civil Defence officials came to extinguish the fire, but the house was burnt down, British Soren added.

He also said although Filomona was released by the doctors, she still had pain in her ear.

Locals who spoke to this newspaper corroborated Soren's claims, but UP Chairman Rafiqul denied the allegations and told The Daily Star that he had bought a 16 decimal piece of land from a local Bengalee owner 10-12 years ago.

"I have the land documents. The

land is also registered in my name," he said.

He also claimed Soren and some other "drunk" Santal youths stopped him and his men from filling the land. "I did not beat his mother," the chairman added.

When asked about the arson attack, Rafiqul said, "I do not know who set the house on fire. I was at the police station to meet the OC [officer-in-charge] at that time."

Filimon Baske, a Santal activist working for their land rights, told The Daily Star that they would hold a protest rally against the beating of the Santal woman and the arson attack on her house.

Filimon, president of the Sahebganj Bagda Farm Bhumi Uddhar Sangram Committee, alleged many Santal families moved to other places from Rajabirat village after about 250 bighas of their land were occupied by local Bengalees since independence.



Fighters affiliated with the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army faction, patrol through a road in the northeastern Manbij region, in Aleppo province yesterday, amid ongoing battles between Turkey-backed groups and Kurdish-led forces near the Tishreen Dam.

PHOTO: AFP

59 more killed in Gaza

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The army has not yet responded to the accusation.

United Nations rights experts said on Monday that the north Gaza "siege" appears to be part of an effort "to permanently displace the local population as a precursor to Gaza's annexation".

Rescuers said strikes elsewhere in Gaza killed 10 other people, including a child and two other members of the same family, when their house was bombed in Khan Yunis.

AFP images showed Palestine

Red Crescent paramedics in Gaza City moving the body of one of their colleagues, his green jacket laid over the blanket that covered his corpse.

The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said a total of 136 people had been killed over the previous 48 hours.

Since October 7, 2023, Israel's retaliatory military campaign has killed at least 45,717 people in Gaza, the majority of them civilians, according to figures from the Gaza health ministry which the United Nations considers reliable.