

GAZA TRUCE TALKS

Qatar briefs Trump envoy

Israel strikes Yemeni Huthis, warns it will ‘hunt’ its leaders

Mediator Qatar said it briefed US President-elect Donald Trump's Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff on Friday about Gaza ceasefire talks it has been brokering alongside Egypt and the United States.

In their meeting in Doha, Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani discussed with Witkoff “the latest developments in the region, especially the efforts aimed at reaching a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip”, the Qatari foreign ministry said.

Earlier this month, the mediators launched a new push to end the Gaza war and secure the release of dozens of Israeli hostages still held captive in the Palestinian territory.

Diplomatic sources have indicated mounting international pressure on Hamas and Israel to strike a deal in their indirect negotiations.

US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that there had been “real progress” in the talks.

Trump has warned Hamas of “hell to pay” if it does not free the remaining captives before his inauguration on January 20. But several analysts believe that Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu prefers a deal to be finalised under Trump's presidency rather than in the final days of Joe Biden's administration.

“I cannot foresee significant progress until President Trump assumes office,” Kobi Michael, a senior researcher at Israeli think tank the Misgav Institute for National Security and Zionist Strategy, told AFP earlier this week.

On Friday, Israel struck Huthi targets in Yemen, including a power station and coastal ports, in response to missile and drone launches, as it warned it would hunt down the group's leaders.

Israel's latest strikes came after the military intercepted two drones believed to have been launched from Yemen on Thursday.

“A short while ago... fighter jets struck military targets belonging to the Huthi terrorist regime on the western coast and inland Yemen,” the Israeli military said in a statement.



Mourners and colleagues hold a prayer over the body of Palestinian freelance cameraman Saed Abu Nabhan, a day after Israeli forces killed him in the Nuseirat camp in the central Gaza Strip. Nabhan worked for Turkish Anadolu news agency. At least 162 journalists and media workers have been killed since the conflict started on October 7, 2023.

PHOTO: AFP

RUSSIA ENERGY SECTOR

US, UK slap sanctions

AFP, Washington

The United States and Britain on Friday announced sanctions against Russia's energy sector, including oil giant Gazprom Neft, just days before outgoing President Joe Biden leaves office.

The US Treasury Department said it was designating more than 180 ships as well as Russian oil majors Gazprom Neft and Surgutneftegas, fulfilling “the G7 commitment to reduce Russian revenues from energy.”

At the same time, the UK government announced sanctions against the two companies, saying their profits were “lining (Russian President Vladimir) Putin's war chest and facilitating the war” in Ukraine.

“Taking on Russian oil companies will drain Russia's war chest -- and every ruble we take from Putin's hands helps save Ukrainian lives,” UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy said in a statement.

“Putin is in tough shape right now, and I think it's really important that he

not have any breathing room to continue to do the god-awful things he continues to do,” Biden told reporters Friday at the White House.

Gazprom Neft slammed the sanctions as “baseless” and “illegitimate,” Russian state news agencies reported.



“Gazprom Neft considers the decision to include its assets on the sanctions list as baseless, illegitimate and contrary to the principles of free competition,” Russian state news agencies quoted a company

representative as saying.

Oil prices rose on the news, with a barrel of Brent North Sea crude oil for delivery in March up 3.6 percent at \$79.68 at around 4:45 pm in Washington (2145 GMT).

Asked about gasoline prices, Biden conceded costs could rise “as much as three, four cents a gallon,” but stressed that sanctions would have a “more profound impact” on Russia.

Even before the sanctions were officially announced, rumors of fresh designations sparked condemnation from Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, who told reporters that the Biden administration was trying to leave incoming US President Donald Trump “as heavy a legacy as possible.”

In total, the United States announced sanctions against almost 400 people and entities.

These include 183 oil-carrying vessels, along with Russian oil traders and oilfield providers, the two Russian oil majors, and more than two dozen of their subsidiaries, according to the Treasury Department.

US FACT-CHECKING

Biden blasts Meta decision

AFP, Washington

US President Joe Biden blasted Meta Friday for scrapping fact-checking on Facebook and Instagram in the United States, calling the move “really shameful” after a global network warned of real-world harm if the tech giant expands its decision to other countries.

Meta chief Mark Zuckerberg triggered alarm Tuesday when he announced the Palo Alto company was ditching third-party fact-checking in the US and turning over the task of debunking falsehoods to ordinary users under a model known as “Community Notes,” popularised by X.

The decision was widely seen as an attempt to appease president-elect Donald Trump, whose conservative support base has long complained that fact-checking on tech platforms was a way to curtail free speech and censor right-wing content.

The International Fact-Checking Network has warned of devastating consequences if Meta broadens its policy shift beyond US borders to the company's programs covering more than 100 countries.

The UN rights chief insisted that regulating hate speech and harmful content online “is not censorship”. “Allowing hate speech and harmful content online has real world consequences. Regulating such content is not censorship,” Volker Turk said on X.

PRESIDENT'S RESIGNATION

Thousands protest in South Korea

AFP, Seoul

Thousands of South Koreans gathered for rival demonstrations in the capital yesterday, as investigators prepare another attempt to arrest suspended President Yoon Suk Yeol over his short-lived martial law decree.

Yoon resisted arrest in a standoff between his guards and investigators last week after his failed December 3 power grab plunged South Korea into its worst political crisis in decades.

The country has bristled with tension for weeks after Yoon directed soldiers to storm parliament, where they unsuccessfully tried to prevent lawmakers from voting down martial law. Since being impeached, Yoon has battered down the hatches.

Separate from the insurrection probe, Yoon also faces ongoing impeachment proceedings. Lawmakers have already suspended him, but the Constitutional Court will decide whether to uphold this decision or restore him to office.

The court has slated January 14 for the start of Yoon's impeachment trial, which would proceed even in his absence.

Draft law will enable cops

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Presiding over the programme, Shahidul Alam, photographer and co-convenor of Voice for Reform, criticised the government for drafting the new ordinance “without prioritising public interest or human rights”.

“In the past, we witnessed law enforcers repressing citizens, shooting civilians from helicopters, and even burning students alive. Despite these heinous examples, the proposed cyber security ordinance appears to grant more power to them.”

He added that the interim government came to power with the support of the public. “We expect them to view issues through the lens of the public. If they approach it with the mindset of a fascist government, then we would say that we are still not truly independent.”

Journalist Kamal Ahmed, also the head of the Media Reform Commission, said, “There is a loophole in the law [Cyber Protection Ordinance-2024]. It doesn't define whose protection it aims to ensure. If the law doesn't clearly define and explain its provisions, it will inevitably create opportunities for misuse.”

He also said dialogue with citizens is essential when preparing a draft of the ordinance. “Such a draft can't be finalised arbitrarily. Since it hasn't yet

been finalised, it must be rewritten through proper consultation... We won't accept any law without proper consultation.”

E-Arki Editor Simu Nasser, also a co-convenor of Voice for Reform, said there are some alarming and objectionable parts in the ordinance, which grant the police permission to search and arrest based solely on the officer's “reasonable belief”.

“It seems like the government, through this ordinance, is handing them a new tool for public harassment.

“This ordinance is merely a rebranding of the old black law. It's contradictory to the values of the July movement. We demand its immediate repeal, unequivocally and strongly.”

Didarul Islam Bhuiyan, an activist of Rastrachinta, said, “During the previous government's tenure, we demanded the abolishment of the Cyber Security Act [CSA], the dismissal of all cases filed under the CSA and DSA, compensation for the victims in these cases and punishment to those who are involved in filing such cases.

“It seems we can apply the same demands to this interim government, as they too did not meet the demands even after promises.”

Headed, “The interim government has ignored our recommendations

during the consultation process, dropping almost all of them. This cyber security ordinance is a betrayal of the citizens, and we won't tolerate it. We demand it be repealed.”

DSA Victims Network Convener Golam Mahfuz Jowardar said, “The way law enforcers have been empowered, it seems these laws are designed solely to control and suppress citizens. We can't grant such sweeping indemnity to law enforcers.”

Rights activist and researcher Rezaur Rahman Lenin said that the government's legal legitimacy is already in question, and by enacting such laws, it is losing its moral legitimacy as well.

“The enactment of such laws has facilitated crimes against humanity. Is this government trying to uphold a legacy of such crimes?”

DSA victims Ishrat Jahan and Al Amin Hossain urged the government to drop the ordinance or amend it through consultation with relevant stakeholders.

Bangladesh Mobile Phone Consumers' Association President Mohiuddin Ahmed; political activist Syed Hasibuddin Hossain and project manager for rights organisation Voice Promiti Prova Chowdhury also spoke among others. Co-convenor of Voice for Reform Fahim Mashroor moderated the programme.

Khaleda

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in a corruption case.

In April 2019, Khaleda's health deteriorated due to inadequate medical treatment. On March 26, 2020, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, she was released from prison after 776 days.

The government temporarily released her on an executive order, suspending her sentence on the condition that she remain at her Gulshan residence and not leave the country. The term of her release had been extended several times.

In April 2021, she contracted Covid-19 and recovered while under treatment at home. However, as the other health complications surfaced, she was admitted to Evercare Hospital several times.

Two computer traders

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Elephant Road Computer Baboshayee Kallyan Samity, Ehtesamul Haque, general secretary of Multiplan Shop Owners Association, was injured in the attack.

Wahedul said he and Ehteshamul cried for help as the place was full of pedestrians and vehicles. A police outpost and a traffic police box were also nearby, but no one came forward. A video of the incident has gone viral on social media.

Wahedul told The Daily Star yesterday that the attackers stopped their car and shattered the windscreen with machetes before swooping down on them.

Police said that Ehtesamul was

undergoing treatment at a private hospital in Dhaka.

Tariq Latif, assistant commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, said some of the attackers had been identified, and police were looking for them.

Police earlier received complaints regarding disputes among groups of businessmen, he said, adding that officers were also investigating if business disputes or extortion was the motive behind the attack.

The shop owners of Elephant Road held a human chain yesterday afternoon, demanding immediate arrest and exemplary punishment of the attackers.

Engage in politics

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Such actions, he said, damage Bangladesh's image abroad. “You never see Indians doing such things. Why do Indians enjoy various benefits abroad while we do not? Because we are less involved in local politics,” he added.

“Branding is essential, and the way forward is through involvement in local politics.”

Touhid also pointed out that Indians secured influential positions in international media, a goal Bangladeshi NRBs should aspire to achieve.

The foreign adviser urged NRBs to counter false propaganda against Bangladesh in the international arena especially in Indian media, particularly narratives suggesting a war-like situation or minority-targeted violence in the country.

“Some incidents have occurred, but they were not aimed at minorities due to their religious identity. If 10 houses were attacked, eight of them were owned by Muslims.”

He called on expatriates to actively combat misinformation and disinformation about Bangladesh.

Touhid also stressed the importance of reducing migration costs and improving the skills of Bangladeshi workers, including language proficiency.

“We can double our remittance, if we make our workforce more skilled.” He assured that the interim

government is committed to addressing issues at Dhaka airport, including harassment of passengers.

“We are determined to bring those responsible for such harassment to justice.”

Touhid praised Bangladeshi UN peacekeepers for their significant contributions to enhancing the country's image globally.

“We need to enhance our positive image. Our peacekeepers have built a strong image for us in Africa. These are positive images. On the other hand, when we cross the Mediterranean Sea [for illegal migration], our image is tarnished,” he said.

Regarding the foreign investment, he hoped that once the electoral roadmap is in place, investors will feel secure, and investments will follow. “The electoral roadmap will come soon,” he added.

At the conference, Bangladesh Bank Governor Ahsan H Mansur stated that the interim government has addressed many of the past weaknesses.

He highlighted that remittance has increased by an average of 26 percent over the past six months, amounting to \$3 billion during this time.

Besides, he said, exports have reached \$2.5 billion.

Speaker of London's Tower Hamlets Barrister Saif Uddin Khaled said that NRBs in the UK are always by the side of the Bangladeshi people.

LA wildfires

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“completely let us down.”

“I don't think the officials were prepared at all,” said James Brown, a 65-year-old retired lawyer across the city in Altadena.

California Governor Gavin Newsom on Friday ordered a “full independent review,” describing the lack of water supplies during the initial fires as “deeply troubling.”

“We need answers to how that happened,” he wrote in an open letter.

As reports of looting grew, a sunset-to-sunrise curfew was imposed in evacuated areas.

Around two dozen arrests have already been made across Los Angeles, where some residents have organized street patrols and kept armed watch over their own houses.

The National Guard has been deployed to bolster law enforcement.

Five separate fires have so far burned more than 37,000 acres (15,000 hectares), destroying around 12,000 buildings, California's fire agency reported.

The Los Angeles County medical examiner's office confirmed an additional fatality on Friday, bringing the overall death toll so far to 11, though the figure is expected to rise.

4 killed

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facilitate illegal sand extraction from sand quarries at night, according to local sources.

Speaking on the matter, Md Alamin, assistant sub-inspector of Gazaria Naval Police Outpost, said, “The speedboat was not plying on any particular route. Usually, those who go out on the river at night in these speedboats are involved in various illegal activities. However, we're investigating the incident to find out what exactly happened.”

Meanwhile, Abul Hossain Gazi, father of the deceased Mahmud Gazi, said the victims had gone out in a speedboat at night to attend a social occasion.

“My son was previously an expatriate who worked abroad. Currently, he is unemployed. He did not do any sand lifting.”

The bodies of the victims have been sent to Munshiganj General Hospital for autopsies.

Police said they will file a case over this incident.

US, India want

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reports Indian newspaper The Telegraph.

He said they discussed how the US and India could best help Bangladesh and how Bangladesh could hold elections as soon as possible.

“... we all want to see a stable, prosperous, and tolerant Bangladesh,” Garcetti said.

Speaking about Bangladesh, he also said both Biden and the incoming Trump administrations have expressed the importance of protecting minority rights.

Meanwhile, at an event in Washington, DC on Friday, Sullivan described perceptions and allegations of America's role behind the street protests and regime change in