

INTERNATIONAL

Cops comb fire-charred LA for bodies

AFP, Los Angeles

Sheriff's deputies on horseback fanned out through charred brush on Friday, hunting for the remains of people who perished when huge wildfires raced through Los Angeles.

At least 27 people are known to have died in the two massive blazes, with dozens still missing.

Ten days after flames erupted, frustration was growing among the tens of thousands who remain in limbo, unable to return even to homes that were spared by the flames, because of unseen dangers like toxic pollution or the risk of landslides.

Nina Madok, who lost her home in the Palisades Fire, told AFP an information meeting for evacuees had been "worthless."

"We need local leaders from the Palisades to answer our questions now."

An emotional Los Angeles Assistant Fire Chief Joe Everett told those present: "It's extremely, extremely hard for me to look you in the eye knowing that, quite honestly, I feel like I failed you in some respect."

Officials said Thursday it would be at least a week until anyone could go home.

Los Angeles City Mayor Karen Bass, under pressure over her handling of the disaster, announced the appointment of a chief recovery officer.

Steve Soboroff, a former police commissioner, said he was devising an action plan for the path forward.

"There is an A to Z for each one of us, and A is today," he told a press conference. "We're going to get there step by step."

But with dangerous rubble strewn over a large swath and the final death toll still unknown, the area remained in emergency mode.

Urban search teams using cadaver dogs continued their painstaking trawl through Altadena, where whole blocks of homes were incinerated.

In the countryside above Malibu, Los Angeles County Sheriff's deputies on horseback were also looking for the dead.



A relative mourns over the bodies of four members of the Palestinian al-Qadra family killed in an Israeli strike in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

SAUDI ARABIA'S DILEMMA Recognise Israel before a Palestinian state?

AFP, Dubai

With a pending Gaza ceasefire and Donald Trump returning as US president, Saudi Arabia's de facto leader must now decide whether to recognise Israel before a Palestinian state is created.

For Trump, normalisation of Israeli-Saudi ties would be the deal of all deals. But Riyadh has insisted a Palestinian state must be established before such a historic move can be agreed.

The announcement of a Gaza ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, due to begin the day before Trump takes the oath of office on Monday, only increases the pressure on Riyadh to edge towards a deal.

Saudi Arabia hailed the Gaza truce but insists on the "complete withdrawal of the Israeli occupation forces" from the devastated Palestinian territory.

Riyadh paused tentative talks on normalising ties with Israel early in the Gaza conflict and hardened its rhetoric as the war continued.

Trump's commitment to Israel was made clear during his first term when he moved the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

But his administration also brokered the Abraham Accords in 2020, which saw Israel establish relations with the United Arab Emirates, Morocco and Bahrain.



That raised hopes of a similar deal with Saudi Arabia, the Arab world's richest economy and guardian of Islam's two holiest sites.

Firas Maksad, of the Washington-based Middle East Institute, said Trump is focused on the deal that he likes to call the deal of the century.

Trump has cultivated close ties with "MBS" -- Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince and de facto ruler.

According to Saudi researcher Aziz Alghashashian, after Trump is sworn in on Monday, he and the US pro-normalisation lobby "are just going to really focus their efforts, not only just speaking to Saudi Arabia, but in particular MBS."

Israel remains opposed to the internationally backed two-state solution of Israel and a Palestinian state co-existing.

Saudi Arabia does not recognise Israel, but since 2020 has been negotiating rapprochement in exchange for a US defence pact and Washington's help on a civilian nuclear programme.

The major obstacle for Riyadh would be turning the page on Gaza.

Anna Jacobs, non-resident fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, says the Saudi people are strongly pro-Palestinian.

Two judges shot dead at Iran's SC

AFP, Tehran

Two judges were killed in a shooting attack yesterday at the Supreme Court building in Tehran, state media reported.

"This morning, a gunman infiltrated the Supreme Court in a planned act of assassination of two brave and experienced judges. The two judges were martyred in the act," the judiciary's Mizan Online website reported.

Mizan said the assailant "killed himself" after the shooting.

State news agency IRNA also reported that one other person was injured in the attack.

The deceased judges worked on cases "fighting crimes against national security, espionage and terrorism".

The motive behind their killing were not immediately clear. Authorities said an investigation into the incident was launched.

Russian attack kills 3 in Kyiv

AFP, Kyiv

A Russian missile strike on the Ukrainian capital killed three people yesterday, Ukrainian leaders said, branding it a "heinous" attack, while Moscow called it "retaliation" for bombardments on its territory.

Russia frequently targets Kyiv with aerial attacks, but deadly strikes there are rare, as the capital is heavily protected by air defences and better able to fend off attacks than elsewhere in the country.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky called on the world to up its pressure on the Kremlin to force it to end the nearly three year invasion.

Russia's defence ministry said the strike had hit a rocket maker based in the Ukrainian capital.

It called the attack "retaliation" for Ukraine's use of US-supplied ATACMS missiles in strikes on Russian territory.

At least three people were killed and three wounded, Zelensky said, revising down an earlier toll of four. City officials said the victims were two men, aged 43 and 25, and a 41-year-old woman.

Ukraine's air force said it had downed two Iskander ballistic missiles as well as 24 Russian attack drones overnight.

It said the downed missiles "fell" on Kyiv's central Shevchenkivsky district, damaging an industrial building, a subway to the metro and residential buildings, and temporarily knocking out local water supplies.

Ten people were also wounded in a Russian strike on the southern city of Zaporizhzhia, officials said.



Trump admin plans mass immigrant raids

AFP, Washington

US immigration authorities will carry out mass arrests of undocumented immigrants across the country on Tuesday, a top border official in the incoming administration of Donald Trump has said.

The move would be among the first by Republican Trump, who returns to the White House on Monday, to uphold a campaign pledge to deport millions of undocumented immigrants from the United States.

The remarks on Friday by Trump's incoming "border czar" Tom Homan to Fox News came in response to reports in the Wall Street Journal and other US outlets that Trump's new administration planned to carry out an "immigration raid" in Chicago beginning Tuesday.

No action taken based

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"There is no widespread discussion too -- it remains a big question to me," he added.

Regarding the current economic situation, Bhattacharya criticised the interim government for "inconsiderately" increasing value-added tax.

If the government intends to collect taxes effectively, it should gradually shift its focus to direct taxes.

"We have not seen any plan to collect direct taxes. Raising the VAT indicates a preference for indirect taxes over direct taxes, which is concerning," said Bhattacharya, also a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Meanwhile, the country's growth rate is slowing and the energy situation is expected to worsen.

Although the interim government has undertaken several initiatives in the banking and energy sectors, the efforts are ad hoc and lack coordination, Bhattacharya said.

Corruption in Aman paddy collection remains unchanged, with farmers still not receiving fair prices.

Food stock is not increasing in government warehouses even though the government has identified it as a means to tame inflation.

"While the government may increase allocations for education and healthcare, it remains unclear how these funds will be utilised or who will benefit from them," Bhattacharya added.

Commerce Adviser Sk. Bashir Uddin defended the interim government's decision to increase VAT, stating that VAT is crucial in an unregulated market where tax evasion is prevalent.

Relying on direct taxes may be effective for developed economies. However, for an unregulated market like ours, indirect taxes are critically important."

Regarding the family card programme under the Trading

Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB), Bashir said digitisation uncovered about 37 lakh fake cardholders.

He suggested discussing whether the government should raise the prices of TCB products to expand its beneficiaries.

Commenting on the high interest rates, he said most banks reported substantial profits in 2024 due to higher interest income.

"It is clearly unethical to earn such high profits while businesses are struggling," he added.

Dissecting the notion of the fastest-growing economy, Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist at the World Bank's Dhaka office, said GDP growth estimates averaged 4.2 percent annually between fiscal 2008-09 and 2018-19 and not 7 percent as officially reported.

During her tenure, institutional degradation was rampant. The interim government must take steps to restore institutional integrity.

"We do not want the white paper to be ignored in policymaking," he added.

While it is possible to recover the siphoned funds, the process is challenging, said Mustafizur Rahman, distinguished fellow at CPD.

Although the interim government is making efforts to recover the funds, resources must be allocated for special prosecution, forensic audits, staffing and data acquisition.

"These steps are crucial for proving cases in local courts before pursuing them internationally."

Rahman also recommended ensuring the independence and autonomy of the Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation Division to prevent further corruption in ADP projects.

Sayema Haque Bidisha, pro-vice Chancellor of Dhaka University; Ferdous Ara Begum, chief executive officer of Business Initiatives Leading Development; Owais Parray, senior economic adviser at UNDP Bangladesh; and M Masrur Reaz, chairman and CEO of Policy Exchange Bangladesh, also spoke.

While the public is suffering

from high inflation, bureaucrats are continuing to receive dearness allowances, she said, while stressing the need for increased government support for research and development.

In another session, Anu Muhammad, a former economics professor at Jahangirnagar University, said Sheikh Hasina's government received support from bureaucrats, business people and international agencies like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, which propagated the narrative of the country's "development miracle".

"They must take responsibility," he said.

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40 shrines attacked in over 5 months

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17 attacks on shrines was reported in the Dhaka division. Chattogram and Mymensingh divisions saw 10 and seven attacks respectively. Four attacks were carried out on a single shrine in Sherpur under the Mymensingh division.

Legal actions have been taken in all the incidents since the interim government has taken a zero-tolerance policy towards any attacks on shrines, according to the statement.

These actions included the filing of 15 regular cases and 29 general diaries

(GDs) with different police stations on receiving complaints from the aggrieved persons or the police's own volition.

A total of 23 suspects have been arrested in those criminal cases. Charge sheets have already been submitted to the court in two regular cases. Investigations in 13 other regular cases and 29 GDs are currently ongoing.

The statement said all police units were ordered to investigate the cases stringently and arrest all those involved in the attacks.

The government has attached

the highest importance to the safety and security of the shrines, reads the statement. Police have taken all appropriate measures to ensure the safety and security of the shrines. All the aggrieved persons have been requested to file complaints with the police.

The statement said steps were taken to solve the issues locally by arranging peace meetings with the confronting parties. Programmes were also organised with the participation of the people and Islamic leaders through community policing efforts.

Govt will protect investments

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entrepreneurs' struggles and wanted to know what further steps could be taken for the entrepreneurs.

At the meeting, the entrepreneurs suggested increasing the publicity of the Grameen Telecom Trust and Grameen Trust's programmes for young entrepreneurs to promote social business.

They said most people do not know about these initiatives and many poor people will benefit if the publicity is increased.

They also urged Yunus to provide appropriate training to entrepreneurs in addition to investing in them.

The entrepreneurs said many cannot grow their businesses due to lack of skills.

If appropriate workshops can be organised, more skilled and successful entrepreneurs will be developed in each district, they said.

Principal Coordinator for SDGs Affairs Lamiya Morshed, Managing Director of Grameen Trust Tasmina Rahman and Managing Director and CEO of Grameen Telecom Trust Ashraful Hasan were, among others, present.

We'll bin July proclamation

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Rakib said, "If the 15 years of sacrifice, labour, and struggle of Chhatra Dal are not mentioned, it will be thrown into the dustbin."

"In July-August, all political parties united under the leadership of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement. We stand united against fascism."

"But those who seek to monopolise the July-August movement must act responsibly. I'm warning them not to take any actions that might destroy our unity."

Regarding the BCL, the JCD president said, "The administrations of Dhaka University and other universities

are showing no willingness to hold them accountable. The government thinks that a mere nominal ban on Chhatra League will do."

Rakib said that investigation committees were formed at Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University, and other campuses to identify those who attacked students during the July-August uprising.

"However, even after five and a half months, we have not seen any report. We demand a swift investigation report against the Chhatra League. Their student status must be revoked, and they must be brought under the law. The more you delay, the easier it will be for them to be rehabilitated."

awareness among students, urging the introduction of mental health services in schools and colleges. Dr Sayedul Islam of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University highlighted the stigma around failure and advised parents to monitor their children's mental health closely. Aachol Foundation founder Tansen Rose and lawyer Nawfel Zamir called for collective action to address the alarming trend.

65pc of suicide victims