



Bharatiya Janata Party supporters celebrate as they lead in Delhi legislative assembly polls, at BJP state headquarters in New Delhi yesterday. BJP has not controlled the local legislature in the capital Delhi since 1998.

PHOTO: STAR

Jihadist attack kills 32 in Mali

AFP, Dakar

A suspected jihadist attack on a convoy escorted by Malian soldiers and Russia's Wagner mercenaries has killed 32 people in northern Mali, officials said yesterday.

The attack took place on Friday between the northern cities of Gao and Ansongo, they said.

The death toll was initially put at 10 but soon rose to 32.

"We have more than 30 bodies from the scene," said a hospital source in Gao.

The jihadists ambushed a civilian convoy escorted by Malian soldiers and Wagner mercenaries, a local official told AFP, requesting anonymity.

"There are civilians and soldiers among the dead."

A source from a transport trade union said: "According to a transporter who managed to escape, jihadists ambushed the convoy's escort and opened fire on everyone at random to cause the largest number of victims."

Another local official told AFP: "The Malian soldiers and Wagner (mercenaries) were in around 10 vehicles protecting a convoy of 22 minibuses with civilian passengers, six large buses and eight lorries."

IS has not claimed responsibility for the attack.

## Hamas, Israel complete fifth hostage-prisoner swap

Three hostages freed; 183 Palestinian prisoners released; US approves sale of \$7.4b in bombs, missiles to Israel

AFP, Deir El-Balah

Israel and Hamas completed their fifth hostage-prisoner swap under a fragile Gaza ceasefire deal yesterday, with the frail, disoriented appearance of the three freed Israelis sparking dismay among their relatives.

Out of the 183 inmates released by Israel in return, the Palestinian Prisoners' Club advocacy group said seven required hospitalisation, decrying "brutality" and mistreatment in jail.

The fifth exchange since the truce took effect last month comes as negotiations are set to begin on the next phase of the ceasefire, which should pave the way for a permanent end to the war.

Yesterday's swap also follows remarks by President Donald Trump suggesting the United States should take over the Gaza Strip and clear out its inhabitants, sparking global outrage.

But the joy at their release was quickly overtaken by concern for their condition, with all three Israelis appearing thin and pale.

The choreographed handover included forced statements from the three on stage, in which they stated support for finalising the next phases of the Israel-Hamas truce.

The "disturbing images" from Gaza show that "we must get them all out", said

the Hostages and Missing Families Forum campaign group.

The office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose dejected-looking portrait appeared on a banner at the Deir el-Balah handover site, said the images out of Gaza were "shocking".

In the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah, seat of the Palestinian Authority, relatives and supporters gathered to welcome inmates released by Israel, embracing them and cheering as they stepped off the bus that brought them from nearby Ofer prison.

Israel's prison service said that "183 terrorists... were released" to the West Bank, annexed east Jerusalem and Gaza.

Gaza militants have so far freed 21 hostages in exchange for hundreds of mostly Palestinian prisoners released from Israeli jails.

The ceasefire, mediated by Qatar, Egypt and the United States, aims to secure the release of 12 more hostages during its first 42-day phase.

Negotiations on the second stage of the ceasefire were set to begin on Monday, but there have been no details on the status of the talks.

Netanyahu's office said that after Saturday's swap, an Israeli delegation would head to Doha for further talks.

Since October 7, 2023, Israel's offensive

has killed at least 48,181 people in Gaza, the majority civilians, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry. The United Nations considers the figures reliable.

Meanwhile, the United States on Friday announced the approval of the sale of more than \$7.4 billion in bombs, missiles and related equipment to Israel, which has used American-made weapons to devastating effect during the war in Gaza.

The State Department has signed off on the sale of \$6.75 billion in bombs, guidance kits and fuses, in addition to \$660 million in Hellfire missiles, according to the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA).

The proposed sale of the bombs "improves Israel's capability to meet current and future threats, strengthens its homeland defense, and serves as a deterrent to regional threats," DSCA said in a statement.

And the missile sale would "improve Israel's capability to meet current and future threats by improving the ability of the Israeli Air Force to defend Israel's borders, vital infrastructure, and population centers," it said.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu gave Trump a golden pager during their meeting at the White House this week, in a symbolic gesture marking Israel's shocking attack on Hezbollah last year.

The gift symbolises "a turning point in the war" against Hezbollah, when Israel carried out a deadly operation against the Lebanese group using exploding pagers in September 2024.

"This strategic operation showcases Israel's strength, technological superiority, and ingenuity against its enemies," it said on Thursday.

## Trump may meet Zelensky next week

Russia claims key Ukraine town

AFP, Kyiv

US President Donald Trump said Friday he would "probably" meet Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky next week, as Russia said its forces had seized the key mining town of Toretsk in east Ukraine.

Zelensky said Washington and Kyiv were planning "talks", but did not confirm a meeting between the two leaders.

Russia has been steadily grinding into east Ukraine for over a year, claiming dozens of mostly abandoned towns and villages despite heavy losses.

Toretsk is the biggest settlement Russia claims to have captured since Avdiivka in February 2024. Kyiv denied Russia had full control of the industrial hub.

The capture of Toretsk, which lies on elevated ground, would allow Moscow to further obstruct Ukrainian supply routes, paving the way for it to punch deeper into the northern part of the Donetsk region, according to military analysts.

Once a bustling coal mining centre, Toretsk had about 30,000 people before Russia's 2022 invasion, but by July last year the number of residents had fallen by 90 percent, according to the local administration.

European foreign ministers are to meet in Paris next Wednesday to discuss the conflict and the Politico website said US Secretary of State Marco Rubio could attend the meeting.

Trump said he would "probably" meet Zelensky "next week" in comments to reporters at the White House. Asked if such a meeting would be in Washington, Trump replied it "could be Washington -- well, I'm not going there" to Kyiv.



This aerial view shows a destroyed section of the Great Colonnade and the 13th-century Mamluk-built Fakhr al-Din al-Maani Castle (Tadmur Castle) on the hilltop, at the ancient ruins of Palmyra in central Syria. Palmyra is one of six Syrian sites listed on the UNESCO elite list of world heritage and all of them sustained some level of damage throughout the 13-year civil war.

## US judge blocks Musk's DOGE dept from Treasury data

AFP, Washington

A US judge issued an emergency order early yesterday blocking Elon Musk's government reform team from accessing personal and financial data stored at the Treasury Department, court documents showed.

US District Judge Paul A. Engelmayer's order restricts giving access to Treasury Department payment systems and other data to "all political appointees, special government employees, and government employees detailed from an agency outside the Treasury Department."

The temporary restrictive order, which remains in effect until a February 14 hearing, also says any such person who has accessed data from the Treasury Department's records since Donald Trump was inaugurated as president on January 20 must "immediately destroy any and all copies of material downloaded."

Musk, the world's richest person, is leading Trump's federal cost-cutting efforts under the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).

The case was brought against Trump, the Department of the Treasury and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent on Friday by attorneys general from 19 states. The attorneys general alleged the administration violated the law by expanding access to sensitive Treasury Department data to staff from Musk's DOGE.

Engelmayer's order said the states that sued would "face irreparable harm in the absence of injunctive relief."

## Lebanon's PM names new govt

AFP, Beirut



Lebanon's prime minister named a new government yesterday, the presidency announced, with the weakening of long-dominant Hezbollah bringing to a close a two-year period of rule by caretaker authorities.

Premier Najib Mikati said he hoped to head a "government of reform and salvation", pledging to rebuild trust with the international community after a devastating conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, and years of economic collapse blamed on corruption and mismanagement.

His new government faces the daunting task of implementing reforms needed to unlock funding from international donors after years of economic crisis, overseeing a fragile Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire and rebuilding the country.

President Joseph Aoun signed a decree "to form a government of 24 ministers", the presidency said in a post on X.

It also announced two other decrees, in which the newly appointed president "accepted the resignation of (caretaker) prime minister Najib Mikati's government" and formally appointed "Prime Minister Najib Mikati to form the government".

Lebanon's incoming government includes five women as well as well-known figures like Ghassan Salame, a former United Nations envoy to Libya.

Long the dominant force in Lebanese politics, Hezbollah suffered staggering losses in a war with Israel that saw its leader Hassan Nasrallah killed in a massive air strike in September.

Hezbollah suffered another seismic blow with the ouster on December 8 of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, which it had long used as its weapons lifeline from Iran.

## 30 missing after landslide hits China's Sichuan

AFP, Beijing

More than 30 people are missing after a landslide in China's southwestern Sichuan province yesterday, state broadcaster CCTV reported.

The landslide hit Jinping village in the city of Yibin at around 11:50am.

"Ten houses had been buried and more than 30 people were missing," CCTV said.

China's president Xi Jinping had ordered authorities to do "everything possible to search and rescue missing people, minimise casualties, and properly handle the aftermath", it added.

China's Ministry of Emergency Management said in an online post that two people had been rescued.

Emergency response teams were on site searching for survivors, it added.