

Pope Francis’s funeral today

AFP, Vatican City

Tens of thousands of people flocked to the Vatican yesterday for a last glimpse of Pope Francis’s open coffin, as world leaders and other guests began arriving for his funeral.

Around 150,000 people had paid their last respects to the Argentine pontiff by midday, seven hours before the end of three days of lying in state at St Peter’s Basilica, the Vatican said.

More than 50 heads of state and 10 monarchs are expected to attend today’s funeral, alongside around 200,000 mourners.

Italian and Vatican authorities have placed the area around St Peter’s under tight security with drones blocked, snipers on roofs and fighter jets on standby.

Further checkpoints will be activated on Friday night, police said.

The Catholic Church’s first Latin American pope died on Monday aged 88, less than a month after spending weeks in hospital fighting severe pneumonia.

The Argentine pontiff, who had long suffered failing health, defied doctors’ orders by making a public appearance on Easter Sunday, the most important moment in the Catholic calendar.

Condolences have flooded in from around the world for the Jesuit, an energetic reformer who championed those on the fringes of society in his 12 years as head of the world’s 1.4 billion Catholics.



Faithful queue to enter St Peter’s Basilica to pay respects as Pope Francis lies in state, as seen from Rome, Italy, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Russia, Iran bolster ties with gas deal

AFP, Moscow

Russia and Iran further strengthened their alliance Friday with a new gas deal that will see Moscow ship 55 billion cubic meters of gas to Tehran per year.

Iran has emerged as one of Russia’s main allies during the Ukraine offensive. Both Moscow and Tehran are under massive Western sanctions.

Iranian Petroleum Minister Mohsen Paknejad was on a visit to Moscow and signed the gas deal with his Russian counterpart Sergei Tsivilev.

Paknejad announced signing an agreement “that entails, in the first part, 55 billion cubic meters of gas a year.”

He said the gas will be shipped through Azerbaijan – which separates the two countries.

Russia’s Tsivilev added that prices have not yet been decided but that shipments will start this year.

Russia and Iran have signed a strategic partnership this year.

The gas agreement comes as the United States has put pressure on Iran to abandon its nuclear programme.

The Iranian minister was in Moscow on the same day US envoy Steve Witkoff met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin.

Kyiv and Western countries say Iran is sending weapons to Moscow for its Ukraine offensive.



UKRAINE CEASEFIRE TALKS US envoy meets Putin in Russia

AFP, Moscow

US envoy Steve Witkoff met Vladimir Putin yesterday in the Kremlin to tout Washington’s plan to settle the Ukraine conflict, a day after Donald Trump issued a direct appeal to the Russian president to halt his offensive.

Trump has been trying to broker a truce between Moscow and Kyiv to end three years of fighting, but has failed to extract any major concessions from the Kremlin despite several rounds of negotiation.

Russia launched its full-scale offensive on Ukraine in 2022, hoping to take the country in days, but has since become embroiled in a huge, bloody conflict that has killed tens of thousands.

Video published by Russian state media showed Witkoff meeting Putin at the Kremlin, with the two smiling, shaking hands before beginning talks.

The billionaire real estate investor is playing a key role in Washington’s peace efforts and had already met Putin on three previous occasions since Trump returned to the White House in January. Trump has threatened to walk away from talks if he does not see progress towards a ceasefire.

Russia, which has warned against rushing into a peace settlement, said Thursday it was “ready to reach a deal” but needed certain issues addressed first. The US has not revealed the details of its peace plan, but has suggested freezing the front line and accepting Russian control of Crimea – a peninsula annexed by the Kremlin in 2014 – in exchange for peace.

POSSIBLE ATTACK ON IRAN

US will ‘lead the pack’ if no nuclear deal: Trump

The US president, however, remains hopeful of a deal

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump said the United States will “lead the pack” in attacking Iran if talks over Tehran’s nuclear program do not result in a new deal, according to a Time Magazine interview.

The US president – in the interview conducted April 22 and published Friday – nonetheless expressed hope that such a deal could be reached, while also saying he was open to meeting Iran’s supreme leader or president face-to-face.

“It’s possible we’ll have to attack because Iran will not have a nuclear weapon,” Trump told Time.

The renewed threat comes as Washington and Tehran continue talks over the clerical state’s nuclear program, with a third round slated for Saturday in Oman.

Both sides expressed optimism at the end of the last meeting in Rome, without providing any details.

The negotiations have thus far excluded Iran’s arch-foe Israel, though Trump on Tuesday said after a call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that “we are on the same side of every issue.”

Trump, asked by Time about reports he had blocked Israel from conducting a unilateral attack

against Iran, replied: “That’s not right.”

“I didn’t stop them. But I didn’t make it comfortable for them, because I think we can make a deal without the attack,” he said.

“Ultimately I was going to leave that choice to them, but I said I would much prefer a deal than bombs being dropped.”

Trump denied that he was worried about Netanyahu dragging the United States into war with Iran, saying: “He may go into a war. But we’re not getting dragged in.”

However, Trump added he “may go in very willingly if we can’t get a deal.”

“If we don’t make a deal, I’ll be leading the pack,” Trump told Time.

Trump in 2018 tore up a nuclear deal with Iran negotiated under president Barack Obama and reimposed sweeping sanctions on Teheran.

Western powers and Israel, considered by experts the only nuclear-armed state in the Middle East, have long accused Tehran of

seeking nuclear weapons.

Iran has always denied the charge, insisting its nuclear program is for civilian purposes only.

Asked if he would be willing to meet with Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei or President Masoud Pezeshkian, Trump replied: “Sure.”

The last known face-to-face negotiations between the two countries took place under former US president Barack Obama during diplomacy that led to the 2015 nuclear accord.

Western powers accuse Iran of harbouring a clandestine agenda to develop nuclear weapons capability by enriching uranium to a high level of fissile purity, above what they say is justifiable for a civilian atomic energy programme.

Tehran says its nuclear programme is wholly peaceful. The 2015 deal curbed its uranium enrichment activity in exchange for relief from international sanctions, but Iran resumed and accelerated enrichment after the Trump walkout in 2018.



Trump claims Xi called him on tariffs

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump has insisted Chinese leader Xi Jinping called him despite Beijing denials of any contact between the two countries over their bitter trade dispute.

In an interview conducted on April 22 with TIME Magazine and published Friday, the US president did not say when the call took place or specify what was discussed.

“He’s called,” Trump said. “And I don’t think that’s a sign of weakness on his behalf.”

Chinese Commerce Ministry spokesman He Yadong told reporters Thursday that “I would like to emphasize that there are currently no economic and trade negotiations between China and the US.”

The world’s two biggest economies are locked in an escalating tit-for-tat trade battle triggered by Trump’s levies on Chinese goods, which have reached 145 percent on many products.

Trump suggested he will announce deals with US trading partners in the next few weeks.

“I would say, over the next three to four weeks, and we’re finished, by the way,” he said.

“There’s a number at which they will feel comfortable,” Trump told the magazine, referring to China. “But you can’t let them make a trillion dollars on us.”

Yesterday, China exempted some US imports from its steep tariffs in a sign that the trade war between the two countries could be easing.

Business groups said China has allowed some US-made pharmaceuticals to enter the country without paying the 125% duties that Beijing imposed earlier this month in response to Trump’s 145% tariffs on US imports.

Also, a list of 131 product categories said to be under consideration for exemptions was circulating among some businesses and trade groups. Reuters could not verify the list, which includes vaccines, chemicals and jet engines, and China has not yet communicated publicly on the issue.



Indian security force personnel patrol in a boat in the waters of Dal Lake as tourists ride boats, following a suspected militant attack near south Kashmir’s Pahalgam, in Srinagar yesterday. Inset, Indian citizen Zakiya Firdous breaks down as she bids goodbye to her recently married husband and a Pakistani citizen, Sahibzada Munadi Ahmad, as he prepares to leave India through the Attari-Wagah border crossing near Amritsar, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Ecuador quake kills one

Buildings destroyed

AFP, Ecuador

A shallow 6.3-magnitude earthquake left at least one person injured, dozens of buildings damaged and knocked out power in the Ecuadoran port city of Esmeraldas yesterday.

According to Ecuador’s emergency response services, one person suffered head wounds in the shake, which was felt as far away as the capital Quito.

The authorities said 30 homes and a health center had been damaged, while the facade of a military building partially collapsed.

The US Geological Survey and local monitors said the quake struck just off the coast at a depth of about 35 kilometers shortly before 7:00am local time.

Ecuador sits on one of the most geologically active zones on Earth, and the fault between the Nazca and South American plates runs along its coast.

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