

200 killed in 243 Myanmar military attacks since quake: UN

AFP, Geneva

The United Nations yesterday decried continuing deadly attacks by Myanmar's military despite a ceasefire declared following a devastating earthquake that killed nearly 3,800 people.

"The unremitting violence inflicted on civilians, despite a ceasefire nominally declared in the wake of the devastating earthquake on 28 March, underscores the need for the parties to commit to, and implement, a genuine and permanent nationwide halt to hostilities and return to civilian rule," UN rights chief Volker Turk said.

Turk also said that since the quake and up to April 29, "the military has reportedly launched at least 243 attacks, including 171 air strikes, with over 200 civilians reportedly killed".



Pakistani citizen Ruwa Talib cries as her Indian husband, Mohamad Talib, reaches out to take their one-year-old child, Abdan, an Indian citizen, before she departs for Pakistan at the Attari-Wagah border crossing near Amritsar, India, yesterday. India has suspended visa services for Pakistani nationals with immediate effect following the Pahalgam attack in south Kashmir.

PHOTO: REUTERS

DRUZE VIOLENCE Israel strikes near Syrian presidential palace

REUTERS, Damascus

Israel bombed an area near the presidential palace in Damascus early yesterday in its clearest signal yet of hostility toward the Islamist-led Syrian authorities and a preparedness to ramp up military action in the name of Syria's Druze minority.

Israel has escalated operations in Syria since rebels ousted Bashar al-Assad in December, with bombings across the country and ground forces entering southwest, while calling for Syria to remain decentralised and isolated.

It has framed its stance around its suspicion toward interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa, who once headed a branch of al-Qaeda, and the desire to protect the Druze, a minority sect that is an offshoot of Islam with followers in Syria, Lebanon and Israel.

Early yesterday, Israel's military said it struck an area "adjacent" to Sharaa's palace in Damascus, without further details on the target. There was no immediate comment from Syrian authorities, and no immediate reports of casualties. A Syrian official told Reuters the target was about 100 metres (330 feet) east of the palace's perimeter.

UN eyes major overhaul amid funding crisis

Reveals an internal memo prepared by senior officials

REUTERS, Geneva

The United Nations is considering a massive overhaul that would merge major departments and shift resources across the globe, according to an internal memo prepared by senior officials tasked with reforming the world body.

The high-level review comes as UN agencies scramble to cope with the fallout from US foreign aid cuts under President Donald Trump that have gutted humanitarian agencies.

The six-page document, marked "strictly confidential" and reviewed by Reuters, contains a list of what it terms "suggestions" that would consolidate dozens of UN agencies into four primary departments: peace and security, humanitarian affairs, sustainable development, and human rights.

Under one option, for example, operational aspects of the World Food Programme, the UN children's agency, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN refugee agency would be merged into a single humanitarian entity, it said.

The memo contains a range of suggestions, some large, some small, some speculative, which, if all adopted, would represent the most sweeping reforms in decades.

It suggests merging the UN AIDS agency into the WHO, and reducing the need for up to six translators at meetings. Another suggestion proposes merging the World Trade Organization -

- Global body roiled by cuts from donors, including US
- Task force suggests merging UN agencies to improve efficiency
- UN document refers to 'duplication', bloating of senior management

which is not a UN entity - with UN development agencies.

One official familiar with the memo called it a starting point.

But the language of the internal self-assessment appears to confirm what both supporters and critics of the global body have long said: that the UN needs streamlining. In a series of observations, the memo refers to "overlapping mandates", "inefficient use of resources", "fragmentation and duplication" and notes a bloating of senior positions. It describes "systemic challenges" the UN faces, problems exacerbated as the General Assembly continues to add missions and programs. "Increased mandates, often without clear exit strategies, and complexities have led to significant overlaps, inefficiencies and increased costs," the document said.

The memo was prepared by a

task force appointed in March by Secretary General António Guterres, who said at the time the body needed to make itself more cost-effective.

The task force, considering long-term structural changes, is in addition to shorter-term cost-cutting efforts. Some diplomats have described the effort as a proactive step to help forestall deeper US cuts.

"The memo is the result of an exercise to generate ideas and thoughts from senior officials on how to achieve the Secretary General's vision," said Guterres' spokesman, Stéphane Dujarric.

During a meeting with Trump in 2017, the Guterres told the US President that the world body was saddled with "fragmented structures, byzantine procedures, endless red tape."

But it is now facing one of the greatest financial crises in its 80-year history. At the start of the year, the US was already about \$1.5 billion in arrears in mandatory payments for regular budget and \$1.2 billion in arrears for peacekeeping.

Since Trump took office in January, he has cut billions of dollars more in foreign assistance as part of his "America First" foreign policy.

The task force memo does not mention any country by name, but notes starkly that "geopolitical shifts and substantial reductions in foreign aid budget are challenging the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Organization."

Israel downs missiles fired from Yemen

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's army said yesterday it intercepted two missiles fired towards its territory from Yemen within 12 hours, with at least one attack claimed by the Arabian Peninsula country's Houthi rebels.

An explosion was heard over Jerusalem as the military said it was intercepting the second projectile.

"The (Israeli army) has identified the launch of a missile from Yemen toward Israeli territory, aerial defence systems are operating to intercept the threat," the military said about the second attack.

Israeli police reported a "rocket siren" was activated in northern and coastal districts and said they were searching for possible projectile or debris impact sites.

The military said the first missile had been shot down before it entered Israeli airspace.

The Houthi, who control large parts of Yemen, claimed responsibility for the first attack, saying they targeted an air base "east of the occupied area of Haifa" with a "hypersonic ballistic missile".

The group has launched dozens of missile and drone attacks on Israel since the war in Gaza erupted after Hamas's October 7 assault.

Pahalgam terrorists still in south Kashmir Say sources in the Indian probe agency

NDTV ONLINE

The four terrorists who shot and killed 26 people in Pahalgam in south Kashmir on April 22, and who have been on the run since - evading a massive manhunt involving the military and local police - are likely still in the area, sources in the National Investigation Agency (NIA) have told NDTV.

NIA sources said the terrorists may be "self-reliant", i.e., be carrying provisions, and therefore stay hidden in the dense forests, which could explain why they had avoided detection so far.

This would also obviate the need for external logistical support that would most likely be provided by Pakistan, which New Delhi has accused of involvement in the Pahalgam attack.

Anti-terror agency NIA has taken over the investigation into the worst terror attack in India in recent years, certainly since February 2019, when 40 soldiers were killed in J&K's Pulwama.

Initial inquiries indicate the terrorists were present in Baisaran Valley - a picturesque meadow and tourist hotspot near Pahalgam and where the attack took place - at least 48 hours earlier.

NIA sources said OGWs, or Over Ground Workers, or terrorist sympathisers, interrogated after the attack said they reced four other locations. These included the Aru and Betaab valleys.

Next round of Iran-US nuclear talks 'postponed' Oman cites 'logistical reasons' for the delay

AFP, Tehran

Iran said Thursday that the next round of nuclear talks with the United States has been postponed, after mediator Oman cited "logistical reasons" for the delay.

In Washington, State Department spokeswoman Tammy Bruce said a meeting in Rome on Saturday between the United States and Iran had never been confirmed.

"We expect another round of talks that will take place in the near future," Bruce said.

Both Iran and the United States had reported progress in three rounds of talks on consecutive Saturdays since April 12.

"The next round of indirect Iran-US talks, which were scheduled to be held in Rome on Saturday... has been postponed," foreign ministry spokesman Esmail Bagaee said in a statement on Thursday.

He said the decision had been taken "based on the proposal of the Omani minister". Omani Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi cited "logistical reasons" for the delay.

"For logistical reasons, we are rescheduling the US-Iran meeting provisionally planned for Saturday May 3. New dates will be announced when mutually agreed," he said on X.

Meanwhile, Iran said yesterday that continued US sanctions will not alter its policy, after President Donald Trump threatened to impose penalties on countries or individuals trading in Iranian oil. "The continuation of these illegal behaviours will not change Iran's logical, legitimate and international law-based positions," the foreign ministry said.



Trump ousts White House NSA Waltz Replaces him with Rubio

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump ousted his national security adviser Mike Waltz on Thursday and named Secretary of State Marco Rubio as his interim replacement in the first major shakeup of Trump's inner circle since he took office in January.

Rubio will be the first person since Henry Kissinger in the 1970s to hold the positions of secretary of state and national security adviser simultaneously.

Trump, in a social media post, said he would nominate Waltz to be the next US ambassador to the United Nations, adding that "he has worked hard to put our nation's interests first."

Earlier in the day, multiple sources said Trump had decided to remove Waltz from his national security post. The retired Army Green Beret and former Republican lawmaker from Florida had faced criticism inside the White House, particularly after he was caught up in a March scandal involving a Signal chat among top Trump national security aides.

"When I have a problem, I call up Marco. He gets it solved," Trump said at a White House event earlier on Thursday.

A person familiar with the matter said Trump wanted to get to the 100 day mark in his term before firing a cabinet-level official. News of the shake-up on Thursday was so abrupt that State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce learned about it from reporters at a briefing.

The national security adviser is a powerful role that does not require Senate confirmation. Trump had four national security advisers in his first term: Michael Flynn, H.R. McMaster, John Bolton and Robert O'Brien.



Rescuers evacuate a wounded resident from an apartment building damaged in a Russian drone strike in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, early yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Hard right wins local UK polls in blow to PM

AFP, Runcorn

Hard-right upstarts Reform UK snatched a parliamentary seat from Prime Minister Keir Starmer's Labour party yesterday in local elections that dealt a blow to Britain's two establishment parties.

Reform, led by anti-immigrant firebrand Nigel Farage, won the by-election in Runcorn and Helsby in northwest England by just six votes, as it picked up gains in other localities, including one mayoralty.

The group's strong showing - overturning a huge Labour majority in one of the party's safest parliamentary seats - continues momentum seen at last year's general election and appears to confirm a trend that the UK is entering an era of multi-party politics.

Reform also picked up dozens of council seats from both Labour and the Conservatives.