



An aerial view shows damaged buildings in the aftermath of Hurricane Melissa in Lewis Town, St Elizabeth, Jamaica on Friday. At least 19 people in Jamaica have died as a result of Hurricane Melissa which devastated the island nation when it roared ashore this week, a government minister told news outlets late October 31.

PHOTO: AFP

Israel says latest Gaza remains not hostages

Hamas reports strikes amid shaky ceasefire

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday said that three bodies it received from Gaza the night before were not hostages held in the Palestinian territory, as a Hamas security source reported fresh strikes in the south.

Despite occasional flare-ups, a fragile truce has been holding in Gaza since October 10, based on a US brokered deal centred on the return of all Israeli hostages, both living and dead.

Israel's military told AFP that a forensic analysis revealed that three bodies it received via the Red Cross on Friday were not those of any of the deceased captives still to be handed over as part of the ceasefire deal.

Hamas's armed wing said Saturday that it had handed over bodies it had not positively identified, alleging Israel had declined its offer to provide samples for testing and "demanded the bodies for examination".

"We handed them over to preempt any enemy claims," the Ezzedine Al Qassam Brigades said.

After the start of the truce, Hamas returned the 20 surviving hostages still in its custody and began the process of returning the remains of the dead.

Of the 17 bodies returned since the start of the ceasefire, 15 were Israelis, one was Thai and one was Nepalese.



Hamas has also returned another unidentified body that had not been listed among the 28 missing, as well as the partial remains of a deceased Israeli hostage who had already been recovered early in the war.

That incident drew outrage in Israel, which said the group had violated the agreement by returning the partial remains rather than the body of another hostage.

Israel has accused Hamas of not returning the dead hostages quickly enough, but the Palestinian group says it will take time to locate remains buried in Gaza's ruins.

In its statement Saturday, the Al-Qassam Brigades called on mediators and the Red

Cross to provide the "necessary equipment and personnel to work on recovering all the bodies simultaneously".

Hamas and Israel, meanwhile, have traded accusations of breaking the ceasefire.

A Hamas security source told AFP on Saturday that Israel had carried out several air strikes in the south at dawn, and that "warships opened fire toward the shores of Khan Yunis".

Earlier in the week, the Israeli military launched its deadliest night of bombing since the truce after one of its soldiers was killed in south Gaza, with the territory's civil defence agency reporting more than 100 people killed.

Hamas denied it had anything to do with the attack, and Israel

later said it had begun "renewed enforcement of the ceasefire".

Father-of-five Hisham al-Bardai, who recently returned to his home in north Gaza's Jabalia camp, told AFP yesterday that he had heard "gunfire several times from the occupation forces" during the night.

"The truce has begun, but the war hasn't ended, and (Israel's) policy of starvation continues," he said, referring to Israel's strict blockade on the entry of supplies into Gaza, which it eased after the ceasefire went into effect.

Like many Gazans who moved back to neighbourhoods previously under evacuation orders, Bardai found a collapsed building where his home once stood.

"Despite the widespread destruction in Jabalia camp, people are starting to return, even though the situation is dangerous," the 37-year-old said.

The implementation of the later stages of US President Donald Trump's ceasefire plan has yet to be agreed, particularly as it concerns disarming Hamas, establishing a transitional authority and deploying an international stabilisation force.

The force is expected to be drawn from a coalition of mainly Arab and Muslim nations, and would train and support vetted Palestinian police, with backing from Egypt and Jordan, as well as secure border areas and prevent weapons smuggling.

South Korea hosts Xi

AFP, Gyeongju

South Korean President Lee Jae Myung hosted Xi Jinping for their first meeting yesterday as the Chinese head of state took centre stage and reformed old ties at an Asian summit from which US leader Donald Trump was largely absent.

The talks on the sidelines of the APEC gathering came on the final day of Xi's first trip to South Korea in more than a decade and a day after his meeting with Canada's premier reset damaged ties.

Lee welcomed Xi at a grand opening ceremony complete with soldiers wearing traditional garb.

The visit was the Chinese leader's first since 2014 and comes after years of strained ties over everything from trade to cultural disputes.

Lee told Xi he had "long looked forward to meeting you in person" and framed his trip as a reset in relations.

Xi, in turn, described China and South Korea as "important neighbours that cannot be moved and also partners that cannot be separated".

He told Lee that the two countries should "respect each other's societal differences and development paths... (and) resolve contradictions and disagreements through friendly consultation", according to Chinese state broadcaster CCTV.

'Populists can be beaten'

Dutch centrist Jetten claims election win

AFP, The Hague

Dutch centrist leader Rob Jetten on Friday claimed victory in a knife-edge election over far-right head Geert Wilders, saying his surprise success showed populist movements could be beaten in Europe.

The 38-year-old head of the D66 centrist party is now on track to become the youngest and first openly gay prime minister of the European Union's fifth-largest economy.

With far-right parties on the march in France, Germany, and Britain, the Dutch vote was seen as a bellwether for the strength of populists in Europe.

Jetten told AFP his positive message of optimism had convinced the Dutch electorate and delivered victory over the anti-Islam, anti-immigration Wilders. "I think we're now shown to the rest of Europe and the world that it is possible to beat the populist movements if you campaign with a positive message for your country," he said.

Dutch news agency ANP, which collates and distributes the vote tally, called the cliffhanger election for Jetten, saying he could not be overhauled.

With the final constituency result arriving Friday evening, only the overseas postal votes are still to be counted.

Expats have historically broken for more centrist and left-wing parties. At the last election in 2023, D66 outscored the PVV by nearly 3,000 postal votes.



Russian missile strikes on Ukraine hit 2.5-year high

AFP, Kyiv

Russia fired more missiles at Ukraine in October than in any month since at least the start of 2023 as it pounded the country's energy grid in night-time attacks, an AFP analysis of Ukrainian data showed.

Russian strikes have caused sweeping blackouts affecting tens of thousands of people, with Moscow targeting Ukraine's power grid for the fourth winter running in what Kyiv and its backers say is a deliberate and cynical strategy to wear down Ukraine's civilian population.

Russia's army fired 270 missiles over October, up 46 percent on the previous month, according to an AFP analysis of daily data published by Ukraine's air force.

That was the highest one-month tally since Kyiv started routinely publishing statistics at the beginning of 2023.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has accused Russia of wanting to sow "chaos" by striking the country's energy grid so intensely.

"Russia's task is to create chaos and apply psychological pressure on the population through strikes on energy facilities and railways," Zelensky told journalists at a briefing last month.

As in previous winters, rolling blackouts have been introduced in every region of the country, including Kyiv, throughout October to deal with shortfalls in power.

US ready to help allies counter 'aggressive' China

Pentagon chief tells Asean summit

REUTERS, KUALA LUMPUR

Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth yesterday took aim at Beijing over an increase in "destabilising actions" in the South China Sea and committed to supporting Southeast Asian countries with technology to help them respond jointly to Chinese threats.

On a second day in Kuala Lumpur packed with meetings that included multilateral talks with allies Australia, Japan and the Philippines, Hegseth proposed to ASEAN defence ministers the building of shared maritime domain awareness and said China had shown a lack of respect and threatened their territorial sovereignty.

"You live it on the threats we all face from China's aggression and course of actions in the South China Sea and elsewhere," he said.

"We need to develop our joint capabilities to respond, and this includes being able to monitor maritime conduct and develop the tools that allow us to respond quickly... ensuring that whoever is on the receiving end of aggression and provocation is then, therefore, by definition, not alone."

"No one can innovate and scale like the United States of America, and we're eager to share those capabilities with allies and partners," Hegseth added.

CHINESE COAST GUARD ARMADA

Hegseth's remarks came a day after the armed forces of Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and the U.S. held a drill in the South China Sea, a patrol that a Chinese military spokesperson said "seriously undermined peace and stability".

Beijing claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea via a line on its maps that overlaps with parts of the exclusive economic zones of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam.

China has deployed an armada of coast guard vessels hundreds of kilometres off its mainland that has repeatedly clashed with vessels of the Philippines and been accused of disrupting energy activities of Malaysia and Vietnam.

Beijing denies acting aggressively and says its coast guard has operated professionally in defending Chinese territory from incursions.

On Friday, its Defence Minister Dong Jun said it was necessary for China and ASEAN to work together to "pool Eastern strength" and safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea.

Hegseth's visit to Southeast Asia came soon after Trump announced on social media that he had asked the US military to "start testing our Nuclear Weapons", after a halt for 33 years, a move that appeared to be a message to China and Russia.



A Long March-2F carrier rocket, carrying the Shenzhou-21 spacecraft and a crew of three astronauts, lifts off from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in the Gobi desert, in northwest China on Friday. The crew took off for China's Tiangong space station, including the country's youngest ever astronaut and four lab mice.

PHOTO: AFP