

MIGRANT CRISIS Coastguard rescues 52 off Greece

AFP, Athens

Greek coastguard were searching yesterday for a missing child off the island of Farmakonisi after rescuing 52 migrants in two separate incidents in the Aegean Sea, local media reported.

They found 13 migrants who had arrived on the small, uninhabited island, but one boy was reported missing from the group.

Another 39 migrants were found on board an inflatable boat off Crete, according to the same source. They were taken to the village of Kaloi Limenes in Crete. No details about their nationality were provided.

Two coastguard vessels and an airforce helicopter were deployed for the operation off Farmakonisi.

Many migrants try to reach the Greek islands from Turkey or Libya as a way of entering the European Union.

Five killed in Nigeria mosque blast 35 hurt; cops probe suicide bomber

AFP, Maiduguri

Nigeria police said yesterday that they suspected a suicide bomber was behind the blast that killed several worshippers in a mosque on Christmas eve in the country's northeastern Borno state.

A police spokesman put the death toll at five, with 35 wounded. A witness on Wednesday told AFP that eight people were killed.

The bomb went off inside the crowded Al-Adum Juma'at Mosque at Gamboru market in the capital city of Maiduguri, as Muslim faithful gathered for evening prayers around 6:00 pm, according to witnesses and the police.

"An unknown individual, whom we suspect to be a member of a terrorist group, entered inside the mosque, and while prayer was ongoing, we recorded an explosion," police spokesman Nahum Daso told journalists.

Daso said in a statement late on Wednesday that the "incident may have been a suicide bombing, based on the recovery of fragments of a suspected suicide vest and witness statements."

Police officials have been deployed to markets, worship centres and other public places in the wake of the blast.



This handout photograph, taken and released by the Ukrainian Emergency Service yesterday, shows rescuers working to extinguish a fire following a reported Russian drone strike in Ukraine's Chernihiv region.

PHOTO: AFP

Israeli strike hits vehicle near Syria border

Says Lebanon; two killed; deadline nears to disarm Hezbollah in the country's south

AFP, Beirut

Lebanon said an Israeli strike near the border with Syria killed two people yesterday, as a deadline nears for Lebanon's army to disarm Hezbollah in the country's south.

Despite a November 2024 ceasefire that was supposed to end more than a year of hostilities between Israel and the Iran-backed Hezbollah, Israel has kept up strikes on Lebanon and has also maintained troops in five southern areas it deems strategic.

"An Israeli enemy strike today on a vehicle in the town of Hawsh al-Sayyed Ali in the Hermel district killed two people," the health ministry said, with the state-run National News Agency saying the raid targeted a van.

The NNA also reported that a man wounded in an Israeli strike last week near Beirut had died of his injuries.

It identified him as a member of Lebanon's General Security agency and said "he happened to be passing at the time of the strike as he returned from service" in Beirut.

The health ministry had said that strike targeted a vehicle on the Shouf district's Jadra-Siblin road, around 30 kilometres (19 miles) south of the capital, killing one person and wounding five others, while an AFP photographer had seen a



damaged goods truck.

On Tuesday, Lebanon's army said a soldier was among those killed in an Israeli strike a day earlier and denied the Israeli military's accusation that he was a Hezbollah operative.

Under heavy US pressure and fears of expanded Israeli strikes, Lebanon has committed to disarming Hezbollah, starting with the south.

The army plans to complete the group's disarmament south of the Litani River -- about 30 kilometres (19 miles) from the border with Israel -- by year's end.

Lebanese army chief Rodolphe Haykal told a military meeting on Tuesday "the army is in the process of finishing the first phase of its plan".

More than 340 people have been killed by Israeli fire in Lebanon since the ceasefire, according to an AFP tally of Lebanese health ministry reports.

Meanwhile, Syrian authorities yesterday said they killed a senior leader in the Islamic State group in coordination with the US-led coalition, hours after the arrest near Damascus of another leader.

Syrian security and intelligence forces, working in coordination with the international coalition, conducted what the interior ministry described as a "precise security operation".

A December 13 attack killed two US soldiers and an American civilian. Washington blamed the attack on a lone IS gunman in Syria's Palmyra.

Iran Guards seize foreign-crewed tanker in Gulf

AFP, Tehran

Iran's Revolutionary Guards on Wednesday seized an oil tanker in the Gulf carrying more than a dozen foreign crew members, state media reported.

The vessel "was carrying 4 million litres of smuggled fuel with 16 non-Iranian crew members on board," state television quoted navy commander General Abbas Gholamshahi as saying.

Forces from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) "boarded the ship ... as it was leaving Iranian territorial waters," he added.

It was not immediately clear which flag the ship was flying.

Iranian forces regularly announce the interception of ships it says are illegally transporting fuel in the Gulf.

They regularly target tankers that Tehran accuses of being part of the illicit trade in the Strait of Hormuz, a key chokepoint for global oil and liquefied natural gas shipments.

Wednesday's seizure is the latest in a series of similar incidents in recent weeks.

Earlier in December authorities seized a tanker in the Gulf of Oman with 18 crew members from India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh on board.

CHRISTMAS HOMILY

Pope condemns 'open wounds' of war

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Leo XIV condemned the "senselessness" of war and the "open wounds" it leaves behind, as he delivered his first Christmas message yesterday after a year marked by conflict but also hopes for peace in Gaza and Ukraine.

Pope Leo, who was elected in May after the death of his predecessor Pope Francis, spoke of Gaza during a mass in St Peter's Basilica, saying: "How... can we not think of the tents in Gaza, exposed for weeks to rain, wind and cold".

"Fragile is the flesh of defenceless populations, tried by so many wars, ongoing or concluded, leaving behind rubble and open wounds," the Pope said at the mass.

"Fragile are the minds and lives of young people forced to take up arms, who on the front lines feel the senselessness of what is asked of them and the falsehoods that fill the pompous speeches of those who send them to their deaths," he said.

"Let us pray in a particular way for the tormented people of Ukraine," Pope said.

"May the parties involved, with the support and commitment of the international community, find the courage to engage in sincere, direct and respectful dialogue," he added. Later yesterday, Pope was set to deliver a twice-yearly "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and the world) message and blessing, which usually addresses global conflicts.

DISPUTED ELECTION

Trump-backed Asfura wins Honduras presidency

REUTERS, Tegucigalpa

Nasry Asfura, the conservative candidate for Honduran president backed by US President Donald Trump, was declared the winner on Wednesday more than three weeks after the November 30 election, which was beset by delays, technical problems and allegations of fraud.

The Honduras electoral authority, known as the CNE, said Asfura won 40.3 percent of the vote, edging out center-right Liberal Party candidate Salvador Nasralla who garnered 39.5 percent. The candidate of the ruling LIBRE party, Rixi Moncada, came in a distant third.



Asfura ran on a broad pro-business platform saying private investment was necessary to move the country forward, while his political agenda focused on jobs, education and security.

He has also signaled he may swap Honduras' allegiance to Taiwan, and away from Beijing.

The results were so close and the ballot processing system so chaotic that around 15 percent of the tally sheets, comprising hundreds of thousands of ballots, had to be counted by hand to determine the winner.

In the weeks following the vote, LIBRE repeatedly called for protests against what they denounced as an "electoral coup."

The protests interrupted the manual count, blocking officials from accessing the building where tally sheets were being stored.

China accuses US of hindering China-India ties

REUTERS, Beijing

China yesterday accused the US of distorting its defence policy in an effort to thwart an improvement in China-India ties.

Foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian was responding to a question at a press briefing on whether China might exploit a recent easing of tensions with India over disputed border areas to keep ties between the United States and India from deepening.

China views its ties with India from a strategic and long-term perspective, Lin said, adding that the border issue was a matter between China and India and "we object to any country passing judgment about this issue".

The Pentagon said in a report on Tuesday that China "probably seeks to capitalize on decreased tension ... to stabilize bilateral relations and prevent the deepening of US-India ties".

China on Tuesday urged the United States to fulfil its nuclear disarmament responsibilities after the draft Pentagon report said China was likely to have loaded more than 100 intercontinental ballistic missiles in sites near the Mongolian border and showed no desire for arms control talks.

"As a super nuclear power with the largest nuclear arsenal, the most urgent task for the US is to earnestly fulfil the special and priority responsibility for nuclear disarmament," Lin Jian, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, said at a regular press conference in Beijing.

The US should "substantially reduce its nuclear arsenal to create conditions for other nuclear-weapon states to join the nuclear disarmament process," Lin added.



An armed man watches as Syrian scouts perform music in the streets during Christmas celebrations in the old city of Damascus. Syrian authorities said they killed a senior leader in the Islamic State group in coordination with the US-led coalition, hours after the arrest near Damascus of another leader.

PHOTO: AFP

Indian forces kill Maoist rebel leader

AFP, Bhubaneswar

Indian security forces killed a senior Maoist rebel commander and three other fighters including two women in a raid yesterday, police said, as authorities push a major offensive against the guerrillas.

New Delhi has launched an all-out campaign against the insurgents and vowed to end the Maoist rebellion by March 2026.

Police in the eastern state of Odisha said they had killed Maoist commander Ganesh Uike in a gunfight in Kandhamal district, after security forces received a tip-off about his location.

Uike, 69, the leader of the Maoist rebels in the coastal state, had a bounty of more than \$120,000 on his head.

"Four dead bodies of Maoists" were recovered following the gunfight, top state police officer Yogesh Bahadur Khurania said, identifying one of them as Uike.