



People feed pigeons on a street in Yangon yesterday, a day before the start of Myanmar's general election. The election will be held in phases and expected to last a month. Myanmar has been hammered by a civil war triggered by a 2021 coup in which the military ousted an elected civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Suu Kyi remains jailed, her hugely popular party dissolved and the poll is being widely criticised by democracy watchdogs as an exercise to rebrand military rule.

PHOTO: REUTERS

ARMS TO TAIWAN
China slaps sanctions on 20 US firms

AFP, Beijing

China has announced fresh sanctions on 20 US defence firms, including a Boeing branch, over Washington's latest arms sales to Taiwan, the island Beijing claims.

The United States has long been Taiwan's biggest arms supplier despite China viewing the democratic island as part of its territory and refusing to rule out using force to bring it under control.

Taipei said this month that Washington had approved \$11 billion in defence sales in what would be one of the largest weapons packages for the island.

China criticised the deal and announced new sanctions on Friday against Boeing's defence manufacturing outpost in St. Louis, aerospace giant Northrop Grumman and others.

The companies appear to have little or no business in China and some have been previously sanctioned by Beijing. Chinese entities will be banned from working with the firms, and their assets in the country will be frozen.

The arms sales "violate the one China principle... seriously damaging China's sovereignty and territorial integrity", Beijing's foreign ministry said.

Russia pummels Kyiv as Zelensky heads to US

Nearly 500 drones, 40 missiles used in overnight assault; hundreds of thousands left without power

AFP, Kyiv

Russia pummelled Ukraine's capital Kyiv with drones and missiles yesterday, killing one woman and knocking out power to hundreds of thousands, ahead of President Volodymyr Zelensky's latest talks with US leader Donald Trump.

Zelensky said the attack showed Russia did not want to end its invasion launched in February 2022 that has left tens of thousands dead.

Ahead of the Ukraine president's talks in Florida with Trump today, Russia said Kyiv and its EU backers were trying to "torpedo" a US brokered plan to stop the fighting.

On top of the fatality, the barrage of drones and missiles wounded dozens and cut power and heating to hundreds of thousands of Kyiv region residents in freezing temperatures, Ukraine authorities said.

Zelensky said some 500 drones and 40 missiles pounded the capital and its surrounding region. He questioned Russia's intentions to end the war.

"Russian representatives

engage in lengthy talks, but in reality, Kinzhals and 'shaheds' speak for them," he said, referring to the Kinzhal ballistic missiles and the Shahed drones used in Russia's daily strikes.

"They do not want to end the war and seek to use every opportunity to cause Ukraine even greater suffering and increase their pressure on others around the world," he added.

AFP reporters heard loud explosions, some accompanied by bright flashes that turned the sky orange, in the attack that lasted for 10 hours.

The Russian army said it had targeted infrastructure and energy facilities "used in the interests of the Armed Forces of Ukraine", as well as military sites, with hypersonic missiles and drones.

Ukraine's Prime Minister Yulia Svyrydenko said the attack left about 600,000 "consumers" without power while authorities said apartment blocks, a university dormitory and a petrol station had been among buildings hit.

Today's meeting to discuss new proposals comes as Trump



intensifies efforts to end Europe's worst conflict since World War Two.

The new 20-point plan would freeze the war on its current front line but possibly require Ukraine to pull back troops from the east, where demilitarised buffer zones could be created, according to details revealed by Zelensky this week.

The new plan formulated with Ukraine's input is Kyiv's most explicit acknowledgement yet of possible territorial concessions. It is very different from an initial 28-point proposal tabled by Washington last month that adhered to many of Russia's core demands.

Trump, speaking to news outlet Politico on Friday, said of Zelensky's plan that "he doesn't have anything until I approve it". He added: "So we'll see what he's got."

Part of the plan includes separate US-Ukraine bilateral agreements on security guarantees, reconstruction and the economy.

"We will discuss these documents, security guarantees," Zelensky said of the meeting.

"As for sensitive issues, we will discuss (the eastern region of) Donbas and the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, and we will certainly discuss other issues," he added.

KSA demands Yemen rebels withdraw forces

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia yesterday warned it would back Yemen's government in any military confrontation with separatist forces and urged them to withdraw "peacefully" from recently seized provinces.

The statements came a day after reported Saudi air strikes on separatist positions in Yemen's Hadramawt province -- and after Washington called for restraint in the rapidly escalating conflict.

Saudi Defence Minister Khalid bin Salman posted on X that troops from the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) should "peacefully hand over" two regional governorates to the government.

The STC had warned on Friday that they were undeterred after strikes blamed on Saudi Arabia hit their positions. No casualties were reported.

In recent weeks, separatists backed by the United Arab Emirates and seeking to revive the formerly independent state of South Yemen have made territorial gains.

Experts say their successes have embarrassed regional heavyweight Saudi Arabia, the main backer of the internationally-recognised Yemeni government.

'Embarrass them'

Trump urges release of any Epstein files naming Democrats

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump urged the Justice Department Friday to "embarrass" any Democrats who worked with Jeffrey Epstein after it began poring over millions of documents linked to the late sex offender.

The DOJ began releasing records last week from the investigation into Epstein, a wealthy financier who died in a New York jail in 2019 while awaiting trial for trafficking underage girls for sex.

The latest disclosures on Tuesday contain numerous references to Trump including documents detailing flights he took on Epstein's private jet.

Trump was once a friend of Epstein but distanced himself after his crimes came to light.

"Now 1,000,000 more pages on Epstein are found. DOJ is being forced to spend all of its time on this Democrat inspired Hoax," Trump said on his Truth Social platform.

"The Dems are the ones who worked with Epstein, not the Republicans. Release all of their names, embarrass them, and get back to helping our Country!" Trump said.

"The Radical Left doesn't want people talking about TRUMP & REPUBLICAN SUCCESS, only a long ago dead Jeffrey Epstein - Just another Witch Hunt!!!"

The DOJ missed a December 19 deadline to release the files in full despite a law compelling it to do so.

Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche previously blamed the delayed release on a need to painstakingly redact the identities of Epstein's victims.

The DOJ has defended Trump, saying the files contain "untrue and sensationalist claims" against him that were submitted to the FBI before the 2020 election which landed him a second term in office. The department has not specified which allegations are false.

Netanyahu set to meet Trump Gaza truce, Iran, regional issues on agenda

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will depart for the United States today and meet with President Donald Trump in Florida a day later, an Israeli official told AFP.

It will be Netanyahu's fifth visit to see Trump in the United States this year.

His trip comes as the Trump administration and regional mediators push to proceed to the second stage of the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Israeli Yedioth Achronot newspaper on Wednesday reported that a wide range of regional issues was expected to be discussed, including Iran, talks on an Israel-Syria security deal, the ceasefire with Hezbollah in Lebanon and the next stages of the Gaza deal.

Progress in moving to the second phase of October's Gaza ceasefire agreement has so far been slow. The ceasefire also remains fragile.

Under the second stage, Israel is supposed to withdraw from its positions in Gaza, an interim authority is to govern the Palestinian territory instead of Hamas, and an international stabilisation force (ISF) is to be deployed.

It also includes a provision for Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas to lay down its weapons -- a major sticking point.

Axios reported that the meeting between Trump and Netanyahu was key to advancing to the next steps of the deal. Citing White House officials, Axios said that the Trump administration wanted to announce the Palestinian technocratic government for Gaza and the ISF as soon as possible.

It reported that senior Trump officials have grown "increasingly frustrated as Netanyahu has taken steps to undermine the fragile ceasefire and stall the peace process".

Climate disasters cost planet \$122b in 2025

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Climate disasters cost the world more than \$120b (£95b) in 2025, with the true toll is far higher as the deadliest events in poorer countries were largely uninsured and undercounted, a new analysis has found.

The review of extreme weather events this year shows that Asia accounted for four of the six most expensive climate disasters of 2025.

The analysis, carried out by charity Christian Aid, identified 10 climate-related disasters that each caused more than \$1bn in damage, with combined losses exceeding \$122b. Most of the figures are based on insured losses, which tend to be highest in wealthier countries with high property values and more widespread insurance coverage.

In the United States, wildfires in California caused more than \$60b in damage and were linked to more than 400 deaths, making them the single costliest disaster of the year. Asia, however, dominated the list overall.

Cyclones and flooding across south and south-east Asia in November caused

an estimated \$25b in damage and killed more than 1,750 people across Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Malaysia.

Flooding in China caused \$11.7b in losses and killed at least 30 people, while floods and landslides across India and Pakistan killed more than 1,860 people and affected millions.

Typhoons in the Philippines caused more than \$5b in damage and displaced over 1.4 million people.

In many poorer countries, disasters with severe human consequences did not appear in global cost rankings at all. Flooding in Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo killed hundreds of people, while a prolonged drought across Iran and West Asia has left up to 10 million people in Tehran facing the prospect of evacuation because of water shortages.

The findings come after the EU's climate and space agency Copernicus said this month that 2025 is set to be the world's second or third-warmest on record, potentially surpassed only by 2024's record-breaking heat.

According to the World Meteorological Organisation, the last 10 years have been the 10 warmest years since records began.



A woman jumps in the air in Times Square as snow falls during a winter storm in New York City. A winter storm packing a frosty mix of snow and ice bore down on the US Northeast Saturday, disrupting post-holiday weekend airline traffic and prompting officials in New York and New Jersey to issue weather emergency declarations.

PHOTO: REUTERS