

## Millions could face acute hunger if ME war drags on UN warns

AFP, Geneva

An extra 45 million people could face acute hunger if the Mideast war carried on through June, swelling the number worldwide to a "terrible" high, the United Nations warned yesterday.

The war, now in its third week, has killed hundreds and seen Iran launch retaliatory strikes against Israel and Gulf nations, as well as a front opening in Lebanon with Israel battling Hezbollah.

"If the Middle East conflict continues through June, an additional 45 million people could be pushed into acute hunger by price rises," Carl Skau, the deputy executive director of the UN's World Food Programme, told a press conference in Geneva.

"This would take global hunger levels to an all-time



Israeli rescuers and firefighters cordon off an area damaged by a strike over Holon, on the outskirts of Tel Aviv, yesterday. A series of distant blasts were heard from Jerusalem after sirens sounded in northern Israel following a warning that Iran had fired missiles. PHOTO: AFP

## AIR STRIKES ON GULF ALLIES

# Trump warned of likely Iranian retaliation

Sources say citing US intelligence; Democrats report no imminent threat justifying the war

REUTERS, Washington

President Donald Trump was warned that attacking Iran could trigger retaliation against US Gulf allies despite his claims on Monday that Tehran's reaction came as a surprise, said a US official and two sources familiar with US intelligence reports.

Pre-war intelligence assessments did not say that Iran's response was "a guarantee, but it certainly was on the list of potential outcomes," said one source, who like the other two requested anonymity to discuss the issue.

The president twice on Monday said that Iran's retaliatory strikes against Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Kuwait were a surprise, the first time at a Kennedy Center board meeting in the White House.

"They (Iran) weren't supposed to go after all these other countries in the Middle East," he said. "Nobody expected that. We were shocked."

Trump's assertion followed other administration claims that have not been backed by US intelligence reporting, such as that Iran would soon have a missile capable of hitting the US homeland and that it would need two to four weeks to make a nuclear bomb and would then use it.

Those allegations and an imminent threat posed by Iran to the US and its forces in the region have been among varying reasons that Trump and some top aides have given to justify his decision to join Israel in launching their air war against Iran on February 28.

French troops, civilian structures, including hotels, airports, and energy facilities.

Iran has also halted almost all shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 percent of oil supplies move, causing global energy prices to spike.



Trump was also briefed ahead of the operation that Tehran would likely seek to close the economically vital Strait of Hormuz, according to two other sources familiar with the matter.

Over the past two weeks, Iranian drones and missiles have struck targets in the Gulf states that have included US military bases and an Emirates base hosting

Democratic lawmakers emerged from administration briefings on the war last week saying they heard of no imminent threat that required the US and Israel to launch the war. The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence declined to comment.

## Israeli strike kills three in Gaza

12 others injured

REUTERS, Cairo

An Israeli airstrike killed at least three people including a child in the Gaza Strip yesterday, local health authorities said, the latest violence jeopardising the ceasefire which has been under strain during the Israeli-US war against Iran.

Medics said the airstrike targeted a vehicle in the western area of Khan Younis, south of the enclave, killing three people, including a child, and wounding 12 other people. There was no immediate Israeli comment.

Israel's military has continued to strike Gaza during the regional war with Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. On Sunday it killed 12 people in Gaza, including nine police officers in one strike that Israel said targeted a Hamas cell. The military has cited threats or fire from Hamas as the reason for its attacks.

Israel's assault has since killed more than 72,000 Palestinians, Gaza's health authorities say, including more than 670 since a ceasefire was reached last October.

## Philippine battles fuel crunch with cash aid, fare hikes

AFP, Manila

Hundreds of Philippine tricycle drivers lined up in Manila yesterday for cash handouts they hope will provide temporary relief from a war-driven surge in fuel prices that has left the country scrambling for short-term answers.

Sri Lanka announced a shorter work week to conserve its scarce fuel reserves as it prepares for a prolonged war in the Middle East, officials said.

Commissioner-General of Essential Services Prabath Chandrakerthi said state institutions will operate only four days a week starting today. Sri Lanka cabinet has approved an emergency purchase of 300,000 tonnes coal from an Indian company named Taranjot Resources Pvt Ltd, a cabinet statement said.

Since US-Israeli strikes on Iran triggered the Middle East war last month, Philippines has implemented a four-day work week for civil servants, seen ferry schedules reduced in some areas, and begun eyeing the possibility of Russian oil imports.

As the drivers awaited their handouts yesterday, officials unveiled a series of price hikes across a range of local transportation, including the ubiquitous smoke-belching jeepneys millions of Filipinos rely on to get to work each day.

But the increases did not extend to the country's hundreds of thousands of tricycle drivers, who earn money by carrying passengers down narrow, winding alleys on small motorbikes and carriages.



Philippines has implemented a four-day work week for civil servants

Sri Lanka announced a shorter work week to conserve its fuel reserves

"These are the highest fuel prices I've ever experienced," said Romeo Cipriano, who has driven a tricycle for four decades.

The subsidy of 5,000 pesos (\$84) would be "better than nothing", the 60-year-old said, describing how he had arrived at 6:00 am to avoid standing in the tropical heat, something his high blood pressure would not allow.

Al de Ocampo said his daily earnings had been halved from 1,000 to just 500 pesos in recent weeks.

The handout he received would last no more than a week, he told AFP.

"The price of fuel rose again today, but the fare is still the same," with customers unable to afford to pay any more, de Ocampo said.

"They must remove the fuel tax if possible... If they can't remove the tax entirely, then reduce it 50 percent. That would be a great help until the end of the war."

The Senate was expected to vote later in the day to grant President Ferdinand Marcos, who was on hand for the subsidy dispersal, the authority to temporarily suspend or reduce excise taxes on oil.

At a press briefing yesterday, Vigor Mendoza, chair of the country's transportation regulator, announced fare hikes that he said were "proof of... genuine concern" for both commuters and the embattled sector.

## Trump vows to 'take' Cuba

The communist island reels from oil embargo imposed by US

AFP, Havana

US President Donald Trump vowed Monday to "take" Cuba as the communist island plunged into darkness under a total power blackout linked to a crippling oil embargo imposed by Washington.

After nearly seven decades defying the United States, Havana's communist authorities are under massive pressure from a Trump administration determined to make history.

"You know, all my life I've been hearing about the United States and Cuba. When will the United States do it?" Trump told reporters at the White House.

"I do believe I'll be...having the honor of taking Cuba," Trump said. "Whether I free it, take it -- think I could do anything I want with it, you want to know the truth. They're a very weakened nation right now."

It was one of Trump's most explicit threats and came as the Caribbean island of 9.6 million people grappled with yet another major power cut.

The blackout resulted from a "complete shutdown of the national grid," Union Nacional Electrica de Cuba (UNE) said in a statement, adding that work had begun to restore electricity flow. Cuba's aging electricity generation system is in shambles, with daily power outages of up to 20 hours the norm in parts of the island.

But since the US ouster of Cuba's top ally, Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela, on January 3, the island's economy has been hammered further as Trump maintains a de facto oil blockade.



Police bomb squad members work at the site of a postal distribution centre belonging to Nova Post, hit by a Russian missile in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

## Nigeria suicide attacks kill 23 Wound over 100

AFP, Maiduguri

Multiple explosions staged by suspected suicide bombers rocked the northeastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri, killing at least 23 people and wounding more than 100 others, police said yesterday.

"Preliminary investigation reveals the incidents were carried out by suspected suicide bombers," police spokesman Nahum Kenneth Daso said in a statement. "Regrettably, a total of twenty three persons lost their lives, while one hundred and eight others sustained varying degrees of injuries," he added.

The blasts, which struck on Monday evening, came after an attack on a military post overnight Sunday, which authorities blamed on jihadists. Fighters from Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have recently stepped up attacks in northeastern Nigeria.