



Stop exploiting Africa, Pope tells Europeans

Leaving war behind, Syrian refugees embrace new life in UK

Page 7

Page 7



GAZA: An explosion is seen in northern Gaza City after an airstrike by Israeli forces yesterday. Israeli fighter jets hit 25 targets in the Gaza Strip yesterday in response to rocket fire from the Palestinian territory. — AFP

Israeli warplanes hit 25 targets in Gaza

Israel pounds Hamas in response to rocket fire

GAZA: Israeli warplanes pounded Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip yesterday in a new flare-up of hostilities that saw dozens of rockets and mortar shells fired from the Palestinian enclave, the army said. A military spokesman said all targets belonged to Hamas's military wing, the Ezzedine Al-Qassam Brigades, and the strikes were more intense than in previous sorties.

"We struck at a greater intensity, with the intended message for Hamas to understand that we will not allow this situation to continue," spokesman Jonathan Conricus told reporters. The latest spike in tensions follows weeks of deadly protests and clashes along the Gaza-Israel border as well as the worst military escalation last month since a 2014 war.

It comes as US President Donald Trump's special envoy Jason Greenblatt and adviser Jared Kushner visit the region to discuss issues including the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Israeli planes initially targeted three Hamas military positions overnight in Gaza in response to kites and balloons carrying incendiary and explosive devices launched into Israel from the Palestinian territory, the army said.

"They may look like toys but I can assure they are not

toys, they are weapons intended to kill and to inflict damage," Conricus said. He said that so far Israel had sought to warn off those launching the airborne devices but that could change. "We have warned verbally, we have fired various munitions in close proximity to (them), we have fired various munitions on various related supporting infrastructure and equipment, vehicles etcetera, related to efforts to launch kites - that may not remain the situation," Conricus said in English.

"Hamas and other terrorists, but mainly Hamas" hit back after the first air raids with more than 45 rockets and mortar rounds fired from Gaza towards Israel, seven of which were intercepted by the Iron Dome missile defense system, he added. Three more landed inside the Jewish state, he said, but did not account for the remainder. In response, Israeli planes carried out more raids against 25 "terror objectives" including an underground training compound, according to the army. Gaza medical sources said that five people were lightly injured in the strikes. Conricus said that more than 200,000 Israeli civilians live within range of the short-range rockets fired from Gaza.

"Most if not all of those spent the night in bomb shelters,"

he said. Tensions have soared in Gaza since mass protests and clashes broke out along the border on March 30. At least 132 Palestinians have been killed. There have been no Israeli fatalities. Palestinians are demanding the right to return to the homes their families fled or were expelled from during the 1948 war surrounding the creation of Israel.

Deteriorating path

The Gaza Strip is controlled by Hamas which Israel considers its bitter enemy. Israel maintains the use of live ammunition is necessary to defend its borders and stop infiltrations. It accuses Hamas of seeking to use the protests as cover for attacks. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has warned that Gaza is close to the brink of war. The most serious military escalation since the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas last month raised fears of yet another full-blown conflict in the Palestinian enclave. Israel said in late May it targeted some 65 militant sites in the Gaza Strip. It also said around 100 rockets and mortars fired from Gaza either exploded in Israel or were intercepted by air defenses.

Israel and Hamas have fought three wars since 2008 and observe a tense ceasefire that is regularly shaken by hostile acts. Peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians have been stalled since 2014. On Tuesday Greenblatt and Kushner met with Jordan's King Abdullah II in Amman to discuss the Palestinian-Israeli peace process during a regional tour that will also take them to Israel, Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.



New flare-up of hostilities

Germany foiled bio attack with Tunisian arrest

BERLIN: A Tunisian man arrested in Germany in possession of the deadly poison ricin and bomb-making material was planning a biological attack, the national police chief said yesterday. "Very concrete preparations had been made for an act with a ... biological bomb, which is a first for Germany," Holger Muench, head of the Federal Criminal Police Office, told public broadcaster ARD. German police commandos on June 12 stormed the Cologne apartment of the 29-year-old Tunisian migrant identified only as Sief Allah H. and discovered "toxic substances" that turned out to be ricin.

Produced by processing castor beans, ricin is 6,000 times more lethal than cyanide and has no known antidote. German news weekly Der Spiegel has reported the man was thought to have been following instructions disseminated by the Islamic State group on how to build a bomb containing ricin.

Prosecutors have charged that he was "strongly suspected of intentionally manufacturing biological weapons" but it remained unclear whether he was actively plotting an attack. Muench said "we became aware of this person a few months ago, and then evidence emerged pointing to links to the so-called Islamic State".

The case was an example of "good cooperation between security authorities, nationally and internationally", he said. Bild daily has reported Germany received a tip-off from the CIA based on the suspect's online purchases.



BOCHUM: In this file photo, a research assistant holds seeds of the castor oil plant (Ricinus communis) containing the deadly poison ricin. A Tunisian man arrested in Germany in possession of the deadly poison ricin and bomb-making material was planning a biological attack, police chief said yesterday. — AFP

During the raid, said Muench, "we found a large number of castor seeds from which to make it (ricin), as well as the utensils you need to make an explosive device". "Which concrete target he had in mind we don't know yet ... and the question of possible accomplices also remains open," said Muench.

Prosecutors say Sief Allah H. started buying the equipment and ingredients to make ricin in mid-May-including an online purchase of "a thousand castor seeds and an electric coffee

grinder". He succeeded in manufacturing the toxin earlier this month.

The case comes less than a month after French authorities said they had foiled a terror attack possibly involving the use of ricin. Two brothers of Egyptian origin were arrested. Germany remains on high alert after several deadly attacks claimed by the IS group, including a 2016 truck rampage through a Berlin Christmas market by Tunisian asylum seeker Anis Amri that claimed 12 lives. — AFP



ISRAEL-GAZA BORDER: An Israeli woman inspects the damage of her car in an Israeli kibbutz in the southern Israeli border with the Gaza Strip, after dozens of rockets fired from the Palestinian enclave hit the area. — AFP

Trump's controversial December decision to recognize the disputed city of Jerusalem as Israel's capital sparked anger across the Arab world and prompted Palestinians to freeze all contacts with US officials. — AFP

Taleban fighters slay 30 Afghan security forces

HEART: Taleban fighters killed around 30 Afghan security forces in multiple attacks in western Afghanistan, officials said yesterday, in the deadliest clashes since the militant group ended its ceasefire. Militants stormed at least two bases belonging to government forces in Badghis province overnight and ambushed a convoy of reinforcements. Officials said the group may have used the three-day truce, that ended Sunday, to plan the attacks.

"More than half of the fatalities came from the ambush and roadside bomb blasts that hit a reinforcement convoy," provincial governor Abdul Qafoor Malikzai said. The other soldiers and police were killed when militants raided their bases, Qafoor added. The Taleban claimed responsibility for the attacks in a WhatsApp message to journalists. Provincial council chief Abdul Aziz Bek confirmed the death toll and accused the Taleban of taking advantage of the suspension in fighting to do reconnaissance in the area.

"During the ceasefire the Taleban had sent informants to collect information about the bases and plan the attack," he told AFP. Badghis governor spokesman Jamshid Shahabi said that 15 Taleban fighters were also killed and 21 wounded in the attacks on two bases in Bala Murghab district. The defense ministry issued a statement saying fighting in the area continued as the Taleban faced "stiff resistance" from Afghan security forces. Further reinforcements had been deployed, the statement said. It

appeared to be the deadliest fighting since the Taleban returned to the battlefield on Monday after refusing a government request to extend their unprecedented three-day ceasefire.

Year-long truce offer

President Ashraf Ghani announced over the weekend that the government's eight-day ceasefire, which had been scheduled to expire on Tuesday, would be prolonged for another 10 days. The first formal nationwide ceasefire since the 2001 US-led invasion had sparked extraordinary scenes of Taleban fighters, security forces and civilians happily celebrating the Eid Al-Fitr holiday together.

But the jubilation appeared to alarm Taleban leaders, who on Sunday ordered their fighters to stay at their posts or in areas under their control. The Taleban hailed the truce as a success and a demonstration of their "full control" over their fighters. The government's move to extend its ceasefire with the Taleban may buy Ghani more time to work out how to keep the momentum going. His February offer of peace talks with the Taleban, considered to be one of the most comprehensive plans ever offered by an Afghan government, was ignored by the militants, who went on to launch their annual spring offensive.

The insurgents have repeatedly demanded direct dialogue with the United States, which Washington has refused, and the withdrawal of foreign troops. Ghani said Tuesday he was prepared to extend the ceasefire to a year "if the Taleban accepts it", according to a video of a meeting between the president and a group of peace marchers who arrived in the capital on Monday. The government's ceasefire does not extend to the Islamic State group, which claimed responsibility for two suicide attacks in the eastern province of Nangarhar over the weekend that marred an otherwise peaceful Eid holiday. — AFP