



US, Japan show united front on China in Biden's first summit

Videos pile pressure on US police over racism, killings



GAZA STRIP: A picture taken in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday shows an explosion following an airstrike by Israel. The Israeli military said it had conducted airstrikes against targets in the Gaza Strip following a rocket attack from the Palestinian enclave, in the second such exchange in as many days. — AFP

Israel strikes Gaza after rocket attack

High seas the new front in Iran-Israel shadow war

JERUSALEM: The Israeli military said yesterday it had conducted airstrikes against targets in the Gaza Strip following a rocket attack from the Palestinian enclave, in the second such exchange in as many days. The strikes hit what the military described as "terror targets" operated by Gaza's Islamist ruling party Hamas. They included a "training facility, an anti-aircraft missile launcher post, a concrete production plant & terror tunnel infrastructure".

Witnesses and security sources said the strikes hit two militant "training sites" in southern Gaza and another target in central Gaza. A Hamas spokesman said that despite the Israeli action, "Gaza still fights and doesn't break."

The strikes came hours after militants in the Gaza Strip fired a rocket into southern Israel. An Israeli army spokesperson said the rocket hit open ground and caused no casualties or damage. It was the second such exchange in recent days.

Late Thursday, Palestinian militants fired a rocket at southern Israel, prompting the army to launch retaliatory air strikes on Gaza that caused no casualties.

Israel imposed a blockade of Gaza's sea and land borders after Hamas seized control in 2007. The two sides have since fought three wars. A fragile truce has endured in recent years despite occasional flareups, with Palestinians firing rockets at Israel and the Jewish state responding with airstrikes on the coastal enclave. Arch-foes Israel and Iran have long fought an undeclared shadow war across the Middle East, landing blows in Lebanon, Syria and inside the Islamic republic itself. More recently, the battle has moved to the high seas, with a series of mysterious attacks and sabotage incidents mainly in the Red and Arabian Seas.

Analysts now fear the tit-for-tat attacks could

escalate, warning that the protagonists are "playing with fire". Israel has vowed to stop Iran, whose leaders have threatened to "wipe it off the map", from acquiring a nuclear bomb—a goal Tehran denies pursuing. The Islamic republic meanwhile has provided arms, training and money to allied militias in a regional "axis of resistance" against the Jewish state and its ally the United States. In the latest attack Iran blamed on Israel, a blast hit Iran's enrichment facility in Natanz Sunday, complicating diplomatic efforts to salvage a tattered 2015 deal on Tehran's nuclear program.

Then on Tuesday, Israeli-operated ship the Hyperion Ray was attacked near the Emirati port of Fujairah, the latest in a string of off-shore attacks.

Spy missions, assassinations
Israel has often fought Tehran's allies, including

Lebanon's Hezbollah, Hamas in the Palestinian enclave of Gaza, and pro-Iran fighters in Syria. The Jewish state has also launched cyberattacks and spy missions, such as a 2018 Mossad operation that netted a treasure trove of Iranian nuclear documents from a Tehran warehouse. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in recent years relished having a White House ally in Donald Trump, who waged a hardline "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran.

Trump in 2018 ripped up the 2015 agreement that had granted Iran sanctions relief in return for limits on its nuclear activities, a deal Israel always rejected as inadequate. Under Trump, the US also killed revered Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in a Baghdad drone strike early last year, a move that brought Tehran and Washington to the brink of war. — AFP

Cuba changes guard, seeks 'respectful' talks with US

HAVANA: The all-powerful Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) opened a historic congress Friday to rubber-stamp the transfer of power to a new generation as outgoing leader Raul Castro committed it to "respectful" talks with the United States. In an address to a few hundred party delegates, Castro emphasized that Cuba would not renounce "the principles of the revolution and socialism."

But he affirmed a "willingness to conduct a respectful dialogue and build a new kind of relationship with the United States," which has had sanctions against Cuba since 1962. Castro, 89, is stepping down as PCC first secretary—the most powerful position in Cuba—ending a near six-decade family hold on power that started in 1959 under his revolutionary brother, Fidel, who died in 2016.

The reins will now pass to 60-year-old Miguel Diaz-Canel, who has already served as Cuba's pres-

ident since 2018, when Castro relinquished that part of his executive portfolio. Ties with the United States, after a historic but temporary easing of tensions under president Barack Obama between 2014 and 2016, worsened under Donald Trump, who reinforced sanctions.

White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Friday the United States was not planning any immediate change in its policy toward Cuba. "Support for democracy and human rights will be at the core of our efforts," she said.

First civilian leader

Diaz-Canel will become Cuba's first civilian leader since the Castro-led revolution of the 1950s, which happened before he was even born. The official handover of power to the first non-Castro PCC first secretary is expected on the fourth and final day of the congress next Monday. In a tweet Friday, Diaz-Canel said the congress would be a forum where "ideas are entrenched, history recognized and the future discussed" while underlining there would be "continuity."

Diaz-Canel, who will remain Cuban president, takes over as the country battles its worst economic crisis in 30 years, sky-high inflation, biting food short-



HAVANA: Picture released by Cuban News Agency (ACN) of Cuban First Secretary of the Communist Party Raul Castro attending the opening session of the 8th Congress of the Cuban Communist Party at the Convention Palace in Havana Friday. — AFP

ages, long lines for basic necessities and growing disgruntlement over limited freedoms. Cuba's economic crisis has been caused in part by its own management failures, worsened by ramped-up US sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic, which dried up tourists—a key income source for the island. — AFP

Heavy fighting near Yemen's Marib leaves 96 dead

DUBAI: Heavy fighting near the Yemeni city of Marib has killed 96 combatants over the past two days as Houthi rebels press their offensive on the government's last northern toehold, loyalist commanders said Friday. "Clashes between the two sides on several fronts in the Marib area on Wednesday and Thursday killed 36 loyalists troops and 60 rebels," one government military source told AFP.

The Iran-backed Shiite rebels rarely disclose their own losses.

Aircraft of a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia provided air support to government ground forces. The Houthis are "keeping up their slow advance on Marib and now constitute a very real threat on the Kassara and Mashjah fronts, northwest of the city," another loyalist military official told AFP.

The loss of Marib would be a heavy blow for the Yemeni government, currently based in the southern city of Aden, and for its Saudi backers. The city of Marib and its surrounding oil fields make up the last significant pocket of government-held territory in the north, the rest of which is under rebel control, including the capital Sanaa. The city's fall could also lead to humanitarian disaster, as vast numbers of civilians displaced from fighting elsewhere have sought refuge in the area.

Around 140 camps have sprung up in the surrounding desert to provide basic shelter for up to two million displaced, according to the Yemeni government. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has warned that the suffering will only end when a political solution is found between the Houthis and the government. The rebels see Marib as a strategic prize that will give them more bargaining power in peace talks that Washington says must begin soon.

The conflict has killed tens of thousands of people since Saudi Arabia and its allies intervened in 2015.

Millions have been pushed to the brink of famine, in what the United Nations has described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. — AFP

Biden drops promise for quick expansion in refugee admissions

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden's administration announced Friday he was scrapping his pledge for a rapid expansion in the number of refugees allowed into the United States, but seemed to backtrack later in the day after fierce blowback from within his Democratic Party.

The outcry came after a senior administration official said Biden would maintain the historically low ceiling of 15,000 people resettled a year, a number set by predecessor Donald Trump who had imposed hardline border policies.

The Biden administration had recently stated it wanted to allow in about 60,000 refugees annually, ramping up to double the following year. That aim had been part of the Democrat's broader promise to end harsh anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment whipped up by Trump.

Instead, the White House will keep the strict 15,000 limit so that it can "rebuild" a broken program and deal with pandemic-related complications, said the official, who asked not to be identified. After a top Democrat and refugee aid groups slammed Biden's target as "appalling low" and "deeply disappointing," the White House issued a statement later Friday saying the number was provisional.



LOS ANGELES: Immigrant families and their supporters attend a rally at Mariachi Plaza in Los Angeles, California, demanding President Joe Biden move forward with his plan to grant legal status to the more than 10 million undocumented immigrants. — AFP

Noting that Biden has green-lighted settlement of refugees from previously blocked regions and signed off on flights from those areas to begin within days, the White House said it expected Biden "to set a final, increased refugee cap for the remainder of this fiscal year by May 15," but added that "his initial goal of 62,500 seems unlikely." The admissions system left by the Trump administration was "even more decimated than we'd thought, requiring a major overhaul in order to build back toward the numbers to which we've committed," the senior official said. White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan also said the refugee program needs rebuilding. — AFP

At least 41 dead as migrant boat sinks off Tunisia

TUNIS: At least 41 people, including a child, have died after a boat carrying African migrants to Europe sank off Tunisia, the UN refugee agency and International Organization for Migration said on Friday. "According to reports from local UNHCR and IOM teams, three survivors were rescued by the Tunisian National Coast Guard" following Thursday's sinking, they said in a joint statement.

"The bodies of 41 people, including at least one child, have so far been retrieved," the statement said. Earlier, Ali Ayari, spokesman for the Tunisian coast guard in the eastern city of Sfax, had put the death toll at 20. He said the bodies of 11 men, eight women and a child were retrieved. Seventeen other people were missing.

Search operations, halted due to bad weather, would continue yesterday, he added. The joint UNHCR-IOM statement said all those who perished were from sub-Saharan Africa. "This tragic loss of life underscores once again the need to enhance and expand state-led search and rescue operations across the Central Mediterranean, where some 290 people have lost their lives so far this year," it added. — AFP