

## Beijing blasts EU sanctions for 'smearing' Chinese firms

BEIJING:(news desk) Beijing accused the EU on Tuesday of "smearing" Chinese firms after the bloc sanctioned companies from China for supplying Russia's military in the war on Ukraine.

China will "take the necessary measures to resolutely protect the proper and legitimate rights and interests of Chinese enterprises", foreign ministry spokesman Lin Jian said.

The European Union added four Chinese companies to a blacklist on Monday for allegedly "supplying sensitive drone components and microelectronic components" to the Russian military.

Two other firms and one Chinese businesswoman were hit for circumventing EU sanctions aimed at stopping equipment flowing to Moscow. The EU has targeted Chinese firms before for supporting Russia's military, but Monday's sanctions were the toughest yet. Lin said on Tuesday the sanctions were "without basis in international law".

"When it comes to Ukraine, China has always done its best to promote peace talks, and has never provided weapons to the parties involved in the conflict," Lin told a regular press conference.

Beijing urges the EU to "stop smearing and blaming China without any factual basis", he added. China presents itself as a neutral party in the Ukraine war and says it is not sending lethal assistance to either side, unlike the United States and other Western nations. But it remains a close political and economic ally of Russia, and Nato members have branded Beijing a "decisive enabler" of the war, which it has never condemned.

## Cyclone kills over 34 people in Mozambique

MAPUTO: (News desk) Cyclone Chido claimed at least 34 lives after sweeping across Mozambique, the National Institute of Risk and Disaster Management announced on Tuesday.

The cyclone first hit the country on Sunday at the Cabo Delgado province, where 28 people were killed, the centre said, releasing its latest information as of Monday evening. Three other people died in Nampula province and three in Niassa, further inland, it said.

Another 319 people were reported injured by the cyclone, which brought winds of around 260 kilometres an hour and heavy rainfall of around 250 millimetres in 24 hours, the centre said. Nearly 23,600 homes and 170 fishing boats were destroyed and 175,000 people affected by the storm, it added. Chido struck a part of northern Mozambique that is regularly battered by cyclones and is already vulnerable because of conflict and underdevelopment. The cyclone landed in Mozambique after hitting the Indian Ocean island of Mayotte, where it is feared to have killed hundreds of people. As the French Indian Ocean island of Mayotte grappled with the devastation of cyclone, France's new Prime Minister Francois Bayrou on Tuesday fended off a torrent of criticism after he chaired a provincial town hall meeting. The controversy erupted less than a week after Bayrou was named as the sixth prime minister of President Emmanuel Macron's mandate with the task of ending months of political crisis.

## UNSC told smooth end to sanctions on Syria key to address 'immense needs'

UNITED NATIONS:(news desk) Concrete movement on an inclusive political transition in Syria will be key in ensuring the country gets the economic support it needs, United Nations special envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen told the Security Council on Tuesday.

"There is a clear international willingness to engage. The needs are immense and could only be addressed with broad support, including a smooth end to sanctions, appropriate action on designations too, and full reconstruction," he said.

Pedersen and UN aid chief Tom Fletcher briefed the 15-member council from Damascus, where they met the country's new leaders after President Bashar al-Assad was ousted by insurgent forces led by the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

The US, Britain, the European Union and others imposed tough sanctions on Syria after a crackdown by Assad on pro-democracy protests in 2011 spiraled into civil war. But the new reality in Syria has been further complicated by sanctions on Islamist group HTS for its days as an al Qaeda affiliate.

Formerly known as Nusra Front, HTS was al Qaeda's official wing in Syria until breaking ties in 2016. Along with unilateral measures, the group has also been on the UN Security Council al Qaeda and Islamic State sanctions list for more than a decade, subjected to a global assets freeze and arms embargo.

Fletcher appealed to all states to ensure "sanctions and counter-terrorism measures do not impede humanitarian operations" in Syria.

Many diplomats acknowledge that the removal of sanctions could be used as leverage to ensure Syria's new authorities fulfill their commitments. Diplomats and UN officials are also keen to avoid a repeat of the difficulties faced in Afghanistan.



In this grab taken from a handout footage released by the Russian Emergencies Ministry on December

## Trump sues newspaper for 'misleading' survey

NEW YORK: (news desk) President-elect Donald Trump has filed a lawsuit against the Des Moines Register newspaper and its top pollster, court documents showed, the day after he stepped up his legal threats against news outlets and said he would also consider suing social media influencers and others for defamation. The lawsuit filed on Monday night in Polk County seeks "accountability for brazen

election interference committed by" the newspaper and pollster J. Ann Selzer over its poll published on Nov 2. That poll showed Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris leading Trump by 13 percentage points in Iowa. "Selzer's polling 'miss' was not an astonishing coincidence it was intentional," the lawsuit said. "As President Trump observed: 'She knew exactly what she was doing.'" The

lawsuit seeks unspecified damages and an order barring the Des Moines Register from engaging in "ongoing deceptive and misleading acts and practices" related to polling. Gannett, parent company of the Des Moines Register, is also named in the suit. A Gannett representative said the organisation stands by its reporting and believes the suit is without merit. In his remarks to reporters on Monday, Trump

threatened to sue the Des Moines Register over the poll. "In my opinion, it was fraud and it was election interference," Trump said. It costs a lot of money to do it, but we have to straighten out the press, Trump also told reporters. Some legal experts say Trump's comments and legal actions risk chilling news coverage of the incoming administration even if legal protections for journalists are for now robust.

## India proposes holding simultaneous mega polls

NEW DELHI: (news desk) India's ruling party on Tuesday tabled a parliamentary bill to synchronise state and national elections, a proposal that would vastly extend what is already the world's largest democratic exercise. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) say the concurrent polls proposed by the "One

Nation, One Election" bill would cut costs, but opposition parties condemned the move as bid to bolster power. Phased voting in general elections for the national parliament this year — when Modi won a third term — stretched over six weeks in a staggeringly complex logistical exercise for an electorate of 968 million.

Election officials travelled by foot, road, trains, helicopters, boats, and occasionally camels and elephants to set up polling stations in remote locations. Currently voting for state assemblies — some with populations bigger than most nations in the world — are staggered from the national vote. The bill "proposes aligning

the election cycles" of the national parliament in New Delhi with state assemblies, India's justice ministry said in a statement on Tuesday.

"By synchronising these electoral timelines, the approach aims to address logistical challenges, reduce costs, and minimise disruptions caused by frequent elections," it added.



US President-elect Donald Trump attends a viewing of the launch of the sixth test flight of the SpaceX Starship

## 3rd tanker in trouble as oil washes up on Russian coast

MOSCOW: (news desk) Spilled oil has washed up along "tens of kilometres" of the Russian Black Sea coast after two tankers were badly damaged in a storm at the weekend, a regional official said on Tuesday, and state media said a third ship was now in trouble.

TASS news agency said the third tanker had issued a distress signal but its hull was still intact, there was

no oil spillage and the crew was safe. RIA news agency said the tanker, Volgoneft 109, was safely stationed near the port of Kavkaz in the Kerch Strait, which runs between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.

The first ship, the Volgoneft 212, split in half on Sunday in the strait. The second, the Volgoneft 239, ran aground 80 metres from the shore near the port of Taman on the east

side of the strait. The ships, both more than 50 years old, were carrying some 9,200 metric tons of oil products in total, TASS reported, raising fears it could become one of the largest environmental disasters to hit the region in years. A certificate showed the third tanker was built in 1973 and was part of the same ageing fleet. Veniamin Kondratyev, governor of the southern Krasno-

dar region, said fuel oil had been found along the coast between the towns of Temryuk and Anapa. "This morning, while monitoring the shoreline, stains of fuel oil were discovered. Oil products washed ashore for several tens of kilometres," he said. The Russian Black Sea resort town also declared a state of emergency on Tuesday after oil spilled from two damaged tankers.

## Scholz's poll rivals outline right-wing vision for Germany

BERLIN: (news desk) Germany's conservative opposition, leading in the polls ahead of Feb 23 elections, on Tuesday outlined plans to shift the EU powerhouse firmly to the right on immigration, social and economic policy.

Friedrich Merz, head of the Christian Democrats (CDU), is tipped to replace Social Democrat Chancellor Olaf Scholz, whose term the conservatives have slammed as "three lost years" for the stuttering economy.

A day after Scholz lost a confidence vote he had called to pave the way for the early elections, Merz charged that the chancellor had "lost the confidence of a majority of the population a long time ago". Merz — long a party rival of the CDU's more moderate ex-chancellor Angela Merkel — has steered a return to the party's right-wing roots to try to win support of voters tempted by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. In their campaign programme published on Tuesday, the CDU and its Bavarian allies the CSU vowed to "stop illegal migration" and scale down benefits for rejected asylum seekers to a "bed, bread and soap" minimum. They also pledged "zero tolerance" on crime, more video surveillance in public spaces and to "shut down mosques where hate and anti-Semitism is being preached". Much of the platform may be softened in the coalition talks that typically follow German elections, but for now the alliance vowed to reverse two decades of more centrist

## Sara Sharif's dad, stepmother get life term for her murder

LONDON: (news desk) A UK court on Tuesday handed life sentences to the father and stepmother of a murdered 10-year-old British-Pakistani girl who died after being subjected to a prolonged "campaign of torture" and "despicable abuse".

Urfan Sharif, 43, and Beinash Batool, 30, will serve at least 40 and 33 years respectively for the killing of Sara Sharif.

London's Old Bailey court heard that her body was found covered in bites and bruises with broken bones and burns inflicted by an electric iron.

Passing sentence, Judge John Cavanagh said Sara had been subjected to "acts of extreme cruelty" but that Sharif and Batool had not shown "a shred of remorse". "The stress, pain and trauma that this campaign of violence will have caused to Sara is hard to contemplate," he told them. "This poor child was battered with great force again and again," he said. A post-mortem revealed she had 71 fresh injuries and at least 25 broken bones.

## Gaza truce talks gain momentum as officials push for deal

WASHINGTON: (news desk) An agreement to halt the 14-month-old war in Gaza and free prisoners held in the Palestinian enclave could be signed in coming days with talks in Cairo making progress, sources briefed on the meeting said on Tuesday. The US administration, joined by mediators from Egypt and Qatar, have made intensive efforts in recent days to advance the talks before President Biden leaves office next month. "We believe — and the Israelis have said this — that we're getting closer, and no doubt about it, we believe that, but we also are cautious in our optimism," White House spokesperson John Kirby told Fox News. "We've been in this position before where we weren't able to get it over the finish line." The sources said a ceasefire deal could be days away that would stop the fighting and return prisoners held by Hamas in Gaza in exchange for Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails. Hamas said in a statement a deal was possible if Israel stopped setting new conditions. A Palestinian official close to the mediation efforts said negotiations were serious, with discussions under way about every word. Sources briefed on the meeting said Netanyahu was on his way to Cairo, but a statement from Netanyahu's office said he had a meeting on Tuesday with senior military and security officials on Mount Hermon, a strategic plateau just inside Syria.

## FIA casts wide net as boat tragedy toll reaches five

GUJRAT:(news desk) The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has registered a case against four alleged human traffickers and reportedly detained two suspects from Sialkot and Gujrat, as the number of Pakistani nationals killed in a boat wreck off Greece rose to five on Tuesday.

The rise in the death toll was announced by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif during a cabinet meeting, saying: "Illegal migrants were aboard a boat that sank in Greece and sadly five Pakistanis drowned in that while around over 40 were rescued." The case — in which the state has become the complainant after the parents' refusal — was registered by the FIA Gujranwala circle in response to the death of 20-year-old Sufyan, whose parents had paid Rs2.4 million to a network of agents, led by one Qamaruz Zaman, to send the deceased from Sialkot to Europe. The FIR claimed that Sufyan, a resident of Pasrur, flew to Egypt from where he was taken to Libya in his quest to reach Europe. It said the deceased was tortured by the traffickers and was forced to board the ill-fated boat. Sources said that at least three more cases were being lodged with the FIA Gujrat circle against the human traffickers over the recent tragic incident, claiming that 18 suspects had been identified and raids were underway to detain them. Furthermore, FIA officials have been directed to become complainants in the cases of victims from Gujrat and Mandi Bahauddin, as two victims belonged to Sialkot and two hailed from Gujrat and Mandi Bahauddin.

## Six die as magnitude 7.4 quake hits Vanuatu

WELLINGTON: (news desk) An earthquake of magnitude 7.4 struck Vanuatu's capital Port Vila on Tuesday, killing at least six people and damaging two reservoirs and a hospital, according to local media and the United Nations.

National broadcaster VBTC showed footage of vehicles crushed under the debris of collapsed buildings and boulders strewn across a highway. Drone footage showed landslips near a shipping

terminal. On Tuesday evening, the caretaker prime minister, Charlot Salwai, declared a state of emergency and said a curfew would be imposed for seven days in the worst affected areas. International assistance had been requested. It was a "sad and devastating time" in Port Vila, he said, expressing sympathy to families who had lost loved ones. An official at Port Vila's hospital told VBTC that six people had died and

more than 50 were injured. Rescue efforts to find people trapped in collapsed buildings continued in the evening, a police official told local media. "It was the most violent earthquake I've experienced in my 21 years living in Vanuatu and in the Pacific Islands. I've seen a lot of large earthquakes, never one like this," Dan McGarry, a journalist based in Vanuatu, said. Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong said there was

significant damage and Australia was preparing to deploy assistance, including urban search and rescue and emergency medical teams on Wednesday.

Port Vila's international airport was closed, Vanuatu's High Commission in Canberra said. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated 116,000 people had been affected by the earthquake. It said there were six unconfirmed deaths

and damage to the two main water reservoirs. The structure of the hospital in Port Vila was affected, with the operating theatre not functioning and triage tents set up outside to manage the influx of patients, it said in a statement. Authorities were unable to communicate with the National Disaster Management Office until Tuesday evening, when Starlink satellite services were provided, it said. Fiji Prime

Minister Sitiveni Rabuka said on Facebook he was "saddened by the news of the earthquake which has claimed lives and devastated families in Vanuatu". Commonwealth Secretary General Patricia Scotland said on X many people had been injured and infrastructure had been destroyed. Security camera footage from the moment the quake struck showed people scattering in panic in a garage and cars rocking on the ground.