

Albania shuts down TikTok for a year

TIRANA: (news desk) Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama announced on Saturday that the government would shut down social network TikTok for at least a year starting at the beginning of 2025.

During a meeting in Tirana with Albanian teachers, parents and psychologists Rama said that "TikTok is the thug of the neighbourhood".

"We are going to chase this thug out of our neighbourhood for one

He added that the government would start programmes that will "serve the education of students and help parents follow their children's journey".

The blocking of the controversial social network comes less than a month after a 14-year-old student was killed and another injured in a fight near a school in Tirana that had begun with a confrontation on social media.

The killing sparked a debate in the country among parents, psychologists and educational institutions about the impact of social networks on young people.

"In China, TikTok promotes how students can take courses, how to protect nature, how to keep traditions, but on the TikTok outside China we see only scum and mud.

Why do we need this?", Rama asked.

The platform attracts young people with its never-ending scroll of ultra-brief videos, and has more than one billion active users worldwide. Less than a month after a 14-year-old student was killed and another injured in a fight near a school in Tirana that had begun with a confrontation on social media.

Zelensky says he has met CIA chief several times

KYIV: (news desk) Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Saturday he had met US CIA director William Burns in Ukraine, a rare public disclosure amid Russia's invasion.

The United States has been Ukraine's most important financial and military backer in the almost three years since Moscow invaded, and Washington is also reported to have routinely shared military intelligence with Kyiv to support its defence.

Zelensky said he had met the CIA director on multiple occasions throughout the war, but their meetings had been undisclosed.

"Bill Burns paid his last visit to Ukraine as CIA director," Zelensky said in a post on Telegram.

"He and I have had many meetings during this war, and I am grateful for his help," he added.

"Usually, such meetings are not publicly reported, and all our meetings — in Ukraine, in other European countries, in America, and in other parts of the world — were held without official information," Zelensky said.

Burns is set to leave the powerful post of CIA chief as president-elect Donald Trump brings in his own candidate.

Houthi strike Tel Aviv in pre-dawn missile attack

TEL AVIV: (news desk) A missile fired from Yemen by Houthi rebels struck Israel's commercial hub Tel Aviv before dawn on Saturday, wounding 16 people in the second such attack in days.

The Israeli military said it failed to intercept the missile, forcing many residents to leave their homes in the early hours. The Houthis claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it used a ballistic missile directed at "a military target of the Israeli enemy".

The rebels have repeatedly launched missiles against Israel in solidarity with the Palestinians since the conflict in Gaza began more than a year ago. Most of them have been intercepted.

In response, Israel has struck multiple targets in rebel-held areas of Yemen, including ports and energy facilities.

"Following the sirens that sounded a short while ago in central Israel, one projectile launched from Yemen was identified and unsuccessful interception attempts were made," the Israeli military said on its Telegram channel.

In a later statement, the military called the missile strike "yet another clear example of Israeli civilians being deliberately targeted". It stressed the country's "aerial defence is not hermetic" so Israelis should follow security instructions.

Israel's emergency medical service, Magen David Adom (MDA), said 16 people were slightly injured. "I was at home and heard a loud explosion. I immediately went to the scene and saw significant blast damage to nearby buildings," medic Yosef Kourdi was quoted as saying in a statement released by MDA.

"MDA teams provided medical care to 16 individuals who were mildly injured by glass shards from shattered windows in nearby buildings due to the impact of the strike," the statement said.



A VIEW of a damaged multi-storey residential building in Kazan, Russia, following a Ukrainian drone attack.—

US Congress passes bill to avert shutdown

WASHINGTON: (news desk) The US Congress averted a Christmastime government shutdown on Saturday after weeks of tense negotiations that went down to the wire, passing a bill to fund federal agencies through mid-March.

With the midnight deadline already expired by minutes, senators dropped normal procedure to fast-track the package to a vote, halting

government shutdown preparations and saving Christmas for more than 800,000 workers at risk of being sent home without pay. "It's good news that the bipartisan approach in the end prevailed... It's a good outcome for America and the American people," Democratic Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said in a speech on the Senate floor.

US President Joe Biden signed into law the bill

passed by Congress to fund the government through mid-March, the White House said. The Democrats run the Senate, so there was never much doubt that the funding package would get a rubber stamp after the party was crucial in helping the Republican majority in the House pass the bill earlier in the day. But with senators often dragging their feet over complex legislation,

there were fears that the funding fight might spill into next week.

That would have meant non-essential operations winding up, with up to 875,000 workers furloughed and as many as 1.4 million more required to work without pay. Congress's setting of government budgets is always a fraught task, with both chambers closely divided between Republicans and Democrats.

Ukraine hits Russian high-rise 1,000km from frontline

MOSCOW: (news desk) Kyiv on Saturday staged a major drone attack on the Russian city of Kazan, 1,000 kilometres from the frontier, the latest in a series of escalating aerial attacks in the nearly three-year conflict.

A drone smashed into a high-rise apartment building in Kazan, a city of more than 1.3 million, damaging a skyscraper but leaving no victims, local officials said.

Though attacks so far

into Russian territory are rare, Kazan and the surrounding oil-rich region of Tatarstan have previously been targeted by Ukrainian drones. Such strikes are seen as embarrassing for Russia, almost three years into its military offensive on Ukraine.

"Today Kazan suffered a massive drone attack," Rustam Minnikhanov, the head of Tatarstan, said in a post on Telegram. "While before industrial enter-

prises were attacked, now the enemy attacks civilians in the morning," he added. Videos on Russian social media networks showed drones hitting high rise buildings and setting off fireballs. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said two drones hit a 37-storey apartment block.

She said Ukraine had been targeting an unspecified industrial facility, but that it suffered no damage.

Ukraine, which has staged

regular attacks on targets inside Russia since the start of the full scale military offensive in February 2022, did not immediately comment.

Russian civil aviation authority Rosaviatsia temporarily closed Kazan international airport, one of the country's busiest.

Some residents were evacuated, but authorities did not provide figures, and all major public events in the area were cancelled as a precaution.



Tel Aviv: Israeli emergency responders inspect a crater at the site where a projectile fired from Yemen landed, on Saturday.

US judge finds Israeli firm liable for WhatsApp hacking

OAKLAND: (news desk) A US judge ruled on Friday in favour of Meta Platforms' WhatsApp in a lawsuit accusing Israel's NSO Group of exploiting a bug in the messaging app to install spy software allowing unauthorised surveillance. US District Judge Phyllis Hamilton in Oakland, California, granted a motion by WhatsApp and found NSO liable for hacking and breach of contract.

The case will now proceed to a trial only on the issue of damages, Hamilton said. NSO Group did not immediately respond to an emailed request for comment. Will Cathcart, the head of WhatsApp, said the ruling is a win for privacy. "We spent five years presenting our case because we firmly believe that spyware companies could not hide behind immunity or avoid

accountability for their unlawful actions," Cathcart said in a social media post.

"Surveillance companies should be on notice that illegal spying will not be tolerated." Cybersecurity experts welcomed the judgment. John Scott-Railton, a senior researcher with Canadian internet watchdog Citizen Lab which first brought to light NSOs Pegasus spyware in

2016 called the judgment a landmark ruling with huge implications for the spyware industry.

The entire industry has hidden behind the claim that whatever their customers do with their hacking tools, it's not their responsibility, he said in an instant message. Today's ruling makes it clear that NSO Group is in fact responsible for breaking numerous laws.

Rebels claim taking army HQ in western Myanmar

BANGKOK: (news desk) A Myanmar ethnic rebel group has captured a military regional command in Rakhine state, it said, in what would be a major blow to the junta. The Arakan Army (AA) had "completely captured" the western regional command at Ann on Friday after weeks of fighting, the group said in a statement on its Telegram channel.

Ann could be the second regional military command to fall to ethnic rebels in five months, and a huge blow to the military.

Myanmar's military has 14 regional commands across the country with many of them currently fighting established ethnic rebel groups or newer "People's Defence Forces" that have sprung up to battle the military's 2021 coup.

Fighting has rocked Rakhine state since the AA attacked security forces in November last year, ending a ceasefire that had largely held since the putsch. AA fighters have seized swathes of territory in the state that is home to China and India-backed port projects and all but cut off state capital Sittwe.

The AA posted photos of a man whom it said was the Ann deputy regional commander, in the custody of its fighters. In decades of on-off fighting since independence from Britain in 1948 the military had never lost a regional military command until last August, when the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army captured the northeastern command in Shan state.

Strong quake strikes off battered Vanuatu

SYDNEY: (news desk) A magnitude 6.1 earthquake struck off the coast of Vanuatu on Sunday, the US Geological Survey said, just days after a deadly 7.3-magnitude quake hit near the same island in the Pacific archipelago.

The nation's main island, Efate, is still reeling from the Tuesday quake, which killed 12 people as it toppled concrete buildings in the capital and set off landslides. The latest quake occurred at a depth of 40 kilometres (25 miles) and was located some 30 kilometres west of the capital Port Vila. Unlike the earlier quake, no tsunami alerts were immediately triggered by the latest tremor, which struck at 2:30am (1530 GMT Saturday). Mobile networks remained knocked out from earlier in the week, making outside contact with Vanuatu difficult. The first quake has damaged water supplies and resulted in halted operations at the capital's main shipping port.

Weightlifting Taiwan granny garners cheers, health benefits at gym

TAIPEI: (news desk) Cheng Chen Chin-Mei beamed broadly as she hoisted a 35-kg (77-pound) weightlifting bar to her waist, dropped it and waved confidently to the enthusiastic crowd in a competition in Taipei.

Cheng Chen, 90, has been pumping iron since last year, encouraged by her granddaughter to take up the sport after she was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. She credits the regimen with helping to fix her posture. Three generations of her family were among a couple of hundred people watching Cheng Chen and 44 others aged 70 or over in a weightlifting competition on Saturday.

In the three-round competition, Cheng Chen lifted as much as 45 kg (99 pounds) using a hexagonal-shaped bar that is said to allow the lifter more stability and options for gripping. "I want to tell all the old people to join the workout," Cheng Chen said after the competition. "You don't need to work extremely hard, but this is to stay healthy." Cheng Chen was not the only nonagenarian in the competition. The oldest participant is 92.

Taiwan is projected to become a "super-aged society" next year, with 20pc or more of its 23 million people aged 65 or older, according to National Development Council data.

Two stampedes claim 13 lives in Nigeria

LAGOS: (news desk) At least 13 people died in two incidents in Nigeria on Saturday as crowds, mostly women and children, scrambled for charity, police authorities said.

In the state capital Abuja, at least 10 people died and many more were injured in a scramble to receive gifts of charity being distributed by the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Maitama district.

"This unfortunate event, which took place around 6:30am, resulted in a stampede that claimed the lives of 10 individuals, including four children, and left eight others with varying degrees of injuries," said Josephine Adeb, a police spokesperson.

In Okija in Anambra state, southeastern Nigeria, a crowd crush occurred after a member of the community offered gifts including rice, vegetable oil and money.

State police said three people were confirmed dead though eyewitnesses and Amnesty International Nigeria put the death toll at 20 with more injured. In both incidents, the victims were mostly women and children who were trampled as crowds tried to reach the provisions being offered. On Thursday, at least 32 people died in a similar incident at an Islamic high school in Ibadan, the capital of Nigeria's southwest Oyo state. Africa's most populous country faces its worst cost-of-living crisis in decades as reforms introduced by President Bola Tinubu have slashed subsidies for electricity and fuel while a devaluation has eroded the value of the currency. Inflation in November rose to 34.60 per cent in annual terms from 33.88pc in October, marking a third consecutive monthly rise.

Gaza ceasefire deal 'closer than ever', says Hamas

CAIRO: (news desk) Hamas and two other Palestinian groups said on Saturday that a Gaza ceasefire deal with Israel is "closer than ever", provided Israel does not impose new conditions.

Last week, indirect negotiations between Israel and Hamas mediated by Qatar, Egypt, and the United States were held in Doha, rekindling hope of an agreement.

"The possibility of reaching an agreement (for a ceasefire and prisoner exchange deal) is closer than ever, provided the

enemy stops imposing new conditions," Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the left-ist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine said in a rare joint statement issued after talks in Cairo on Friday.

A Hamas leader said that talks had made "significant and important progress" in recent days. "Most points related to the ceasefire and prisoner exchange issues have been agreed upon," he said.

"Some unresolved points remain, but they do not hinder the process. The

agreement could be finalised before the end of this year, provided it is not disrupted by (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu's new conditions." He said that if an agreement is reached it will be implemented in phases, ending with "a serious prisoner exchange deal, a permanent ceasefire and a complete withdrawal (of Israeli forces) from Gaza."

On Wednesday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he was "hopeful" for a deal, but avoided making any pre-

dictions as to when it would actually materialise. "I don't want to hazard a guess as to what the probability is," he said at the Council on Foreign Relations. "It should happen. It needs to happen. We need to get people home," he said, referring to the release of prisoners under a ceasefire deal. Despite numerous rounds of indirect talks, Israel and Hamas have agreed just one truce, which lasted for a week at the end of 2023. Negotiations have faced multiple challenges since then, with the pri-

mary point of contention being the establishment of a lasting ceasefire.

Netanyahu has repeatedly stated that he does not want to withdraw Israeli troops from the Philadelphi Corridor, a strip of land cleared and controlled by Israel along Gaza's border with Egypt. Another unresolved issue is the governance of post-conflict Gaza. Pope Francis on Saturday condemned the bombing of children in Gaza as "cruelty", a day after the territory's rescue agency said an Israeli air

strike killed seven children from one family.

Gaza's civil defence rescue agency reported that an Israeli air strike killed 10 members of a family on Friday in the northern part of the territory, including seven children. "Yesterday they did not allow the Patriarch (of Jerusalem) into Gaza as promised. Yesterday children were bombed. This is cruelty, this is not war," he told members of the government of the Holy See. "I want to say it because it touches my heart."