

Myanmar junta caused 'perpetual human rights crisis': UN report



Soldiers stand next to military vehicles as people gather to protest the military coup in Yangon, Myanmar, Feb. 15, 2021. ● REUTERS

A report published by the United Nations on Friday accused Myanmar's military of creating "a perpetual human rights crisis" in the Southeast Asian country and called for an immediate end to violence there. Since a junta seized power two years ago, Myanmar has been plunged into chaos, with a resistance movement fighting the military on multiple fronts after a bloody crackdown on opponents

that saw Western countries re-impose sanctions, Reuters reported. The report, which documents alleged human rights violations between Feb. 1, 2022, and Jan. 31, 2023, found that violence had intensified in north-western and southeastern Myanmar due to the military's "indiscriminate airstrikes and artillery shelling, mass burnings of villages to displace civilian populations, and denial of humanitarian

access." The tactic used by the military, the report said, was designed to cut off non-state armed groups from access to food, finances, intelligence and recruits. "The military, emboldened by continuous and absolute impunity, has consistently shown disregard for international obligations and principles," the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Turk, said in a statement.

"Urgent, concrete action is needed to end this festering catastrophe." The junta has previously said it has a duty to ensure peace and security and denied atrocities have taken place, saying it is carrying out a legitimate campaign against terrorists. James Rodehaver, chief of the UN Human Rights Office's Myanmar team, said that armed clashes were occurring in about 77 percent of the country.

"There has never been a time and a situation in which a crisis in Myanmar has reached this far, this wide throughout the country," he told a briefing in Geneva. In its recommendations, the report called on authorities in Myanmar to end the violence and stop persecuting opponents. "Military operations must stop to provide room for dialogue that could end this crisis," the report said.

Tunisian union holds biggest protest yet against president



Demonstrators lift placards and national flags during an anti-government rally called for by the powerful trade union federation UGTT in Tunis, Tunisia, on March 4, 2023. ● FETHI BELAID/AFP

More than 3,000 people demonstrated against Tunisia's government on Saturday at a rally organized by the powerful UGTT trade union, which called on President Kaid Saied to accept "dialogue". Saied has pushed through sweeping changes to the political system in the sole democracy to have emerged from the Arab Spring uprisings, concentrating near-total power in his office since he froze parliament and sacked the government in July 2021, AFP reported. In the biggest crackdown since the president's power grab, police have arrested around 20 prominent political figures over the past two weeks, primarily Saied's opponents. "Freedom, freedom, down with the police state," demonstrators chanted as they marched in Tunis on Saturday, also calling for "a halt to impoverishment" in the North African country. UGTT chief Nouredine Taboubi accused the president of targeting the powerful union as part of a wider crackdown against critics. Taboubi condemned the latest wave of arrests and the imprisonment since February of Anis Kaabi, a top UGTT official for highway workers, who

had been detained after a strike by toll barrier employees. "We will never accept such arrests," Taboubi told the protesters. The UGTT has around one million members and shared a Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 with three other civil society groups for promoting national dialogue in the country of about 12 million inhabitants. Taboubi called on Saied to embrace "dialogue" and "democratic" ways, slamming the president for pursuing a "violent discourse... that is dividing the country". The UGTT chief also defended "the rights of migrants, regardless of their nationality or the colour of their skin". "Tunisia is a country of tolerance, no to racism," he told the crowd. Saied last month ordered officials to take "urgent measures" to tackle irregular migration, claiming without evidence that "a criminal plot" was underway "to change Tunisia's demographic make-up". The rally on Saturday came as some 300 West African migrants in Tunisia prepared to be repatriated, fearful of a wave of violence since Saied's comments.

Russian defense minister pays rare visit to troops in Ukraine

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu paid a rare visit to Russia's forces deployed in Ukraine, awarding medals to military personnel and meeting senior commanders during the trip, a statement and videos issued by his ministry showed on Saturday. Russia's top military chiefs have visited front lines in Ukraine only sparingly since Moscow sent tens of thousands of Russian troops into the neighboring country just over a year ago in what it calls a "special military operation", Reuters reported. Shoigu "inspected the forward command post of one of the formations of the Eastern Military District in the South Donetsk direction" during the visit, the Defense Ministry said in a statement published on messaging app Telegram.

Battle for Bakhmut

Pressure mounted Saturday on Ukrainian troops and civilians hunkering down in Bakhmut, as Kyiv's forces tried to help residents flee amid what Western analysts say may be preparations for a Ukrainian withdrawal from the eastern city that Russian forces have spent months trying to capture, according to AP. A Ukrainian army representative who asked not to

be named for operational reasons told The Associated Press that it was now too dangerous for civilians to leave the city in Donetsk Province by vehicle and that people had to flee on foot instead. Bakhmut has for months been a key target of Moscow's eastern offensive, with Russian troops inching ever closer to Kyiv's key eastern stronghold. Ukrainian units over the past 36 hours destroyed two key bridges just outside Bakhmut, including one linking it to the nearby town of Chasiv Yar along the last remaining Ukrainian resupply route, according to U.K. military intelligence officials and other Western analysts. The U.K. defense ministry said in the latest of its regular Twitter updates that the destruction of the bridges came as Russian fighters made further inroads into Bakhmut's northern suburbs, ratcheting up the pressure on its Ukrainian forces. Capturing Bakhmut would not only give Russian fighters a rare battlefield gain after months of setbacks, but it might rupture Ukraine's supply lines and allow the Kremlin's forces to press toward other Ukrainian strongholds in the eastern Donetsk region.



A still image from video shows Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu (r) during an inspection of a forward command post of Russian armed forces deployed in Ukraine, at an unknown location on March 4, 2023. ● RUSSIAN DEFENSE MINISTRY

NEWS IN BRIEF

Spanish police protest 'gag law' reform



AFP - Thousands of Spanish police took to the streets of Madrid on Saturday, angered by a bid to scrap a controversial law that bans unauthorised use of police images if it puts them in danger. An estimated 4,000 demonstrators rallied alongside right-wing politicians outside the Congress of Deputies, where the proposed reform was under consideration.

Surge in arms smuggling fuels violence in Haiti: UN



AFP - More sophisticated and high-calibre weapons are being illegally shipped into Haiti where violence has reached levels unseen for decades, warned a UN report seen by AFP on Saturday. The gun trafficking, including even heavy machine guns, is "fuelling an ongoing surge of gang violence that has plagued residents for months," said the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Haiti - the poorest country in the western hemisphere - has been mired for years in a vicious cycle of humanitarian, economic and political crises exacerbated by brutal gang violence.

UK: Falklands are British as Argentina seeks talks

AP - Britain has reasserted its sovereignty over the Falkland Islands after Argentina pulled out of a cooperation agreement and demanded new talks over the South Atlantic territory that sparked a 1982 war between the two countries. The pronouncement came after Argentine Foreign Minister Santiago Cafiero said on Twitter that he informed British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly about his country's decision when the pair met on the margins of the Group of 20 summit in India last week.