

News in brief

Spanish police snatch 2.7 tonnes of cocaine off yacht



Spanish police seized nearly three tonnes of cocaine from a yacht near the Canary islands and arrested six suspects believed to be involved in a Balkan-based trafficking gang, Europol said yesterday. Heavily-armed officers swooped on a sailing boat eight days ago, while various police agencies arrested suspects at various locations in the Serbian-led operation. Belgrade police in January last year kicked off a probe into the cartel, which was suspected of large-scale cocaine smuggling across the Atlantic Ocean. "The targeted organisation was... suspected of organising multi-tonne cocaine shipments from Brazil to the EU," the Hague-based Europol said in a statement.

Four Armenian servicemen were killed and three Azerbaijani soldiers wounded yesterday, the two countries said, as they accused each other of engaging in a new round of clashes.

Four Armenian troops killed in clash with Azerbaijan



Tensions between Baku and Yerevan have escalated sharply in recent months, as both sides accuse the other of cross-border attacks. "As a result of an Azerbaijani provocation, four servicemen were killed and one wounded on the Armenian side," Armenia's defence ministry said, after earlier reporting two were killed. The ministry said earlier that Azerbaijan had fired at Armenian positions near the town of Sotk, less than ten kilometres (six miles) from the Azeri border.

Kazakh leader calls for rare vote on nuclear plant



Kazakhstan's leader yesterday called for a referendum on the construction of a nuclear power plant in the Central Asian country marked by the legacy of devastating Soviet nuclear tests.

Authorities carried out hundreds of nuclear tests on Kazakhstan's steppes during the USSR era, overlooking the environmental and health impact. Many in Kazakhstan -- also the world's leading uranium producer -- are sceptical of introducing nuclear into the country's energy mix. "Whether or not to build a nuclear power station is an extremely important question and impacts the future of our country," President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said.

CURIOSER & CURIOSER

Sri Lanka policeman sacked for playing piano while president fled



A man plays a piano inside the Sri Lanka's presidential palace, in Colombo on July 10, 2022, a day after it was overrun by anti-government protestors

Sri Lanka's police force said yesterday it had sacked an officer who entertained protesters with an impromptu piano performance after they stormed the island nation's presidential compound last year. Constable R. M. D. Dayaratne was deployed to help protect the colonial-era residence on the day it was taken over by protesters who forced then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country. Instead, he sat at a grand piano in the compound and played a song to the crowd streaming through its rooms. "Dayaratne was on social media playing the piano while the building was being vandalised," a senior officer, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP. "He was our Nero," the officer added, referring to the ancient Roman emperor said to have played the fiddle while the city burned in a weeklong fire.

Police authorities concluded that the constable had breached discipline after a lengthy investigation. Before the compound was stormed in July 2022, protesters had been camped outside Rajapaksa's office for months demanding he step down over the island nation's unprecedented economic crisis. Protesters seized the residence and were later seen frolicking in the presidential pool and jumping on Rajapaksa's four-poster bed. Rajapaksa was accused of precipitating corruption and mismanagement that triggered the downturn, which led to severe shortages of food, fuel and medicines. He was forced to seek temporary exile in Singapore, from where he issued his resignation, though he has since returned to Sri Lanka. His successor, Ranil Wickremesinghe, has offered an amnesty to those returning historic artefacts stolen from the building.

Muslim Scholars begins visit to Afghanistan



Muslim Scholars attend a meeting in Afghanistan

A delegation of Muslim Ummah scholars and thinkers arrived in the Afghan capital, Kabul on Thursday morning, for meetings with Afghan scholars, along with ministers and officials in the government of the de facto authority in Afghanistan. The delegation's visit comes within the framework of the follow-up of the OIC General Secretariat to the resolutions of the Executive Committee and the Council of Foreign Ministers, which called on the Secretary-General of the OIC to dispatch a delegation of ulemas and religious scholars led by the International Islamic Fiqh Academy and other relevant religious institutions in the Muslim world to engage with Afghanistan on issues of utmost importance, such as tolerance and moderation in Islam, girls' education and women's work.

Russian airport at own territory, Ukraine says

Kremlin working to prevent future drone attacks but avoids commenting on Ukrainian claims

AFP | Kyiv

Ukraine's military intelligence said yesterday that a recent drone attack on an airport in northwestern Russia which damaged several transport planes was carried out from within Russian territory.

The claim, falling on the first day of the school year, came as President Vladimir Putin told Russian students that their country was "invincible" and police in Kyiv scrambled to respond to bomb threats in schools.

The attack this week on Pskov airport some 700 kilometres (more than 400 miles) from Ukraine marked the latest strike to rock Russian territory since Kyiv vowed to "return" the conflict to Moscow in July. "The drones used to attack the



Pupils attend a class on the first day of the new school year, known as 'Day of Knowledge' in Irpin, northwest of Kyiv

'Kresty' air base in Pskov were launched from Russia," Ukraine's intelligence chief Kyrylo Budanov said on social media yesterday. "Four Russian IL-76 military transport planes were hit as a result of the attack. Two were destroyed and two were seriously damaged," he added.

Budanov said the aircraft had been used by the defence ministry to transport troops and cargo. The Kremlin said this week that

military experts were working to find out which routes the drones were taking in order "to prevent such situations in the future".

Asked about Ukrainian claims yesterday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declined to comment and instead deferred questions to the defence ministry.

The region of Pskov, which was also targeted by drones in late May, is surrounded by NATO members Estonia and Latvia to

Joburg fire toll rises as South Africa debates 'hijacked' buildings

AFP | Johannesburg

The death toll from a fire that engulfed a Johannesburg building rose to 76, authorities said yesterday as relatives of the victims waited outside a mortuary to identify their loved ones. Health Minister Joe Phaahla said two people died in hospital a day after flames ripped through the five-storey building forcing South Africa to confront an illegal housing "crisis". "We've got 76 fatalities," Phaahla told reporters, after visiting some of the more than 60 people who were injured and receiving treatment at health-care facilities in the city. Authorities were at work to identify the victims, whose bodies were brought to a morgue in Soweto.



South African Police Service (SAPS) K-9 Unit arrive at the entrance of a burned apartment block in Johannesburg

Thembalethu Mpahlaza, the head of forensics services in Johannesburg's Gauteng province, said the process would require DNA tests as most were "burnt beyond recognition". There were only "12 bodies

that are identifiable, that can be viewed," he told reporters outside the mortuary. Earlier in the day, search dogs combed the charred building while charity workers brought blankets, clothing and other

goods to more than 100 survivors accommodated at a Johannesburg shelter. The fire has reopened a debate about so-called hijacked buildings -- old disused blocks that have fallen under the control of criminal syndicates who collect rent from squatters. President Cyril Ramaphosa said it was "a wake-up call for us to begin to address the situation of housing in the inner cities" as he visited the site late on Thursday.

Many of these abandoned buildings are controlled by gangs who rent out the space

MERVYN CIROTA, PROVINCIAL COUNCILLOR

Super Typhoon Saola sweeps towards southern China cities

AFP | Hong Kong

Tens of millions of people in Hong Kong, Shenzhen and other southern Chinese megacities sheltered indoors yesterday as Super Typhoon Saola threatened to become the strongest storm to hit the region in decades. Hundreds of flights were cancelled across the region, the start of the school year was delayed in Hong Kong, and the rain-drenched finance hub's streets were deserted. China's national weather office had predicted Saola "may become the strongest typhoon to make landfall in the Pearl River Delta since 1949", referring to a low-lying region that



Sand bags are placed to stop flooding by the waterfront at Tseung Kwan O in Hong Kong

includes Hong Kong, Macau and Guangdong province. With a direct hit possible, authorities in Hong Kong raised

the warning level yesterday evening to the city's highest -- "T10" -- which had only been issued 16 times since World War

II before Saola. "Do not go outside and stay away from exposed windows and doors. Make sure you have a safe place to shelter and be prepared for the change in wind directions," the Hong Kong Observatory warned in a bulletin issued at 8:15 pm (1215 GMT). Packing sustained winds of 210 km (130 miles) per hour, Saola's impact poses "a high threat to Hong Kong", and is expected to skirt the city in the next few hours. "Members of the public should stay on high alert. You are advised to remain where you are if protected and be prepared for destructive winds," the observatory said.