

News in brief

◆ **Tonga's government** has rejected an attempt by the king to revoke key ministerial appointments, it said yesterday, describing the move as unconstitutional. A country of about 100,000 people spread across some 170 islands, Tonga was settled around 1,500 BC and claims to be the only remaining indigenous monarchy in the Pacific islands. The government said in a statement that it had received a letter Friday conveying King Tupou VI's decision. The letter said the king was revoking Prime Minister Hu'akavameiliku's appointment as armed forces minister, as well as the appointment of Fekitamoeola 'Utoikamanu as foreign affairs and tourism minister. The Tongan government said it had received legal advice from the attorney general that the move was unconstitutional. It cited a clause in the constitution that ministers' appointments can only be revoked by the king "on the recommendation of the prime minister" or by a vote of no confidence in the legislative assembly.



Tonga's government faces off with king

Kenya cult leader charged with murdering nearly 200 children

◆ **A Kenyan court** yesterday charged the leader of a starvation cult and dozens of suspected accomplices with murdering nearly 200 children in a forest near the Indian Ocean. Self-proclaimed pastor Paul Nthenge Mackenzie, who has already been charged with terrorism, manslaughter as well as child torture and cruelty, is alleged to have incited hundreds of his acolytes to starve to death in order to "meet Jesus". On Tuesday, Mackenzie and 29 other suspects pleaded not guilty to 191 counts of murder, including of three infants, according to court documents seen by AFP. A 31st suspect was deemed to lack the mental fitness to stand trial and ordered to return to the Malindi High Court in a month's time.



◆ **Argentina's President** Javier Milei delighted his Israeli hosts on Tuesday by announcing moves to shift his country's embassy to Jerusalem, almost as soon as he touched down. The 53-year-old economist, who upended traditional politics to win election last year, was greeted warmly off his plane by Israel's Foreign Minister Israel Katz at Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv. Milei, on his first official visit since taking office barring a brief swing through the Davos economic forum in Switzerland, said: "My plan is to move the embassy to west Jerusalem". Confirmation of the widely expected announcement found favour with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose office said he "warmly welcomes" the move.

Argentina plans to move embassy to Jerusalem: Milei



SPOTLIGHT

Israel minister sorry after son implies Biden has Alzheimer's



National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir

Jerusalem, Undefined

Israel's National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir apologised yesterday after his son implied in an online post that US President Joe Biden had Alzheimer's disease.

Shuvael Ben-Gvir wrote that it was "important to raise awareness" about the degenerative brain condition "which is the most common cause of cognitive decline and dementia in older people".

The post on X, formerly Twitter, was written above a photograph of Biden, who is 81 and seeking re-election, with renewed focus from political rivals on his age.

Shuvael Ben-Gvir's post was later deleted but his father wrote on the same platform that his "beloved son" had committed a "serious error" and that he "deeply disapproved" of it.

"The United States of America is our great friend and President Biden is a friend of

Israel," he wrote in Hebrew. There was no place for such "derogatory" comments, he said, adding: "I apologise for my son's words."

In recent days, Ben-Gvir has himself criticised Biden after Washington took the rare move of imposing sanctions on four Israeli settlers following rising violence against Palestinian civilians in the occupied West Bank.

Ben-Gvir himself lives in a settlement.

He also lashed out at Washington last month after being criticised for his push for the transfer of Gazans out of the Palestinian territory.

"The United States is our best friend, but first of all we will do what is best for the State of Israel: the migration of hundreds of thousands from Gaza will allow the (Israeli) residents of the (Gaza) envelope to return home and live in security and will protect the IDF (Israeli) soldiers," the extreme-right minister posted on X.

Houthis claim fresh Red Sea ship attacks

AFP | Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Yemen's Houthi rebels said yesterday they had struck US and British ships in two attacks in the Red Sea, the latest among dozens of incidents that have disrupted global shipping.

The Iran-backed rebels, who control much of the war-torn country, have been harassing shipping in a campaign they say is in solidarity with Palestinians in the Israel-Hamas war.

Their attacks have triggered reprisals by US and British forces, including a wave of air strikes that hit dozens of targets late on Saturday.

Houthi spokesman Yahya Saree said the first attack yesterday "targeted the American ship Star Nasia, while the other targeted the British ship Morning Tide". The Houthis "will carry out more military operations against all hostile American-British targets" in self-defence, Saree warned on X, formerly Twitter.

Security firm Ambrey had initially reported a drone attack on a British-owned cargo ship off Yemen but later said a projectile had targeted the Barbados-flagged vessel. It was launched from a small boat sighted near the ship, Ambrey said, adding that the projectile did not impact the ship but exploded nearby, causing minor

Cargo ship crew seized by Yemen's Houthis 'safe': Bulgaria

AFP | Sofia, Bulgaria

The crew of the Galaxy Leader cargo ship, captured by Yemen's Houthi rebels in November, are "safe and sound" and will return to Bulgaria soon, authorities in Sofia announced yesterday.

The Houthis seized the Galaxy Leader on November 19.

"The information we have ... on the sailors of the Galaxy Leader captured in the Red Sea is that they are well, safe and sound," Transport Minister Georgy Gvozdeykov told private Bulgarian television station BTV.

The crew is staying at a hotel and their return to Bulgaria is being organised, Gvozdeykov added without providing further details.

The Galaxy Leader is owned by a British company, itself owned by an Israeli businessman.

It had been chartered by a Japanese company when it was seized by the Houthis, who said



The Galaxy Leader cargo ship (R), seized by Houthi fighters

they were acting in "solidarity" with Palestinians trapped in the besieged Gaza Strip.

The fate of the 25 crew members -- who are Bulgarian, Filipino, Ukrainian and Mexican -- had not been made public until now.

In January, Bulgarian Prime

Minister Nikolay Denkov said their release was the subject of discussions with the Houthis.

Negotiations are also underway over the bulk carrier MV Ruena, a Bulgarian ship sailing under Maltese flag which Somali pirates hijacked in December.

damage. There were no casualties among the crew, the British firm said. British maritime security agency UKMTO said it had received a report of an incident off the rebel-held port city of Hodeida.

"The master stated that a projectile was fired at his vessel on the port side which passed over the deck, causing slight damage to the bridge windows," United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations said, without identifying the vessel or the flag it was flying. "The vessel and crew are safe," it added, saying the ship was proceeding on its voyage as planned.

Trade disruption

The Greek merchant marine ministry said the Star Nasia sus-

tained material damage but that the hull did not appear to have been breached and no injuries were reported among the Filipino crew.

Ambrey, in a report on the incident, said a Marshall Islands-flagged, Greek-owned bulk carrier was targeted while transiting southwest of Aden.

The vessel, en route from the United States to India, reported an explosion 50 metres off its starboard side, Ambrey said, also adding that no injuries were reported.

"The vessel's owner was listed on the US stock market," the firm said. "Ambrey assessed it likely the vessel was assessed to be US-affiliated due to the vessel owner and US port call."

UKMTO also said it had re-

ceived a report of an explosion in close proximity to a merchant vessel transiting southwest of Aden. It said the vessel and crew were safe, without providing additional details.

The Houthis have launched more than 30 attacks on commercial shipping and naval vessels since November 19, according to the Pentagon.

The Houthi attacks have prompted some shipping companies to detour around southern Africa to avoid the Red Sea, a vital route that normally carries about 12 percent of global maritime trade.

Most trade between Asia and Europe usually passes through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal that leads to the Mediterranean Sea.



According to the International Monetary Fund's PortWatch platform, total transit volume through the Suez Canal was down 37 percent this year by January 16 compared with the same period a year earlier.

Three die in 'terrorist' attack outside Istanbul court

AFP | Istanbul, Turkey

Turkish police yesterday shot dead two assailants from a leftist organisation, branded "terrorists" by authorities, who attacked a security checkpoint outside Istanbul's main court, killing one person and injuring five, officials said.

Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya said the assailants were members of the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C) -- a fringe leftist group that has staged periodic attacks in Turkey since the 1980s.

The DHKP-C issued no initial claim of responsibility.

The group, which is considered a terrorist organisation



Police forensic experts examine the area after a shooting outside the Caglayan courthouse, in Istanbul

by the United States, has been fighting US influence in the Middle East and across the world.

In 2014, Washington offered a \$3 million reward for the capture of the group's leaders.

"I congratulate our security forces, who eliminated the

treacherous attack with timely intervention," President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in televised remarks.

"Two terrorists, one a woman and the other a man, were neutralised."

Erdogan said the attack in-

jured three police and three civilians, one of whom died later.

A witness told AFP the assailants opened fire on police after a brief altercation at a checkpoint leading to a main entrance to the sprawling building, which has been used for some of Turkey's biggest trials.

"A conflict broke out at the exit gate. I saw two people, a man and a woman, shooting at the police. The male was shot first. Then the woman fired a few more shots. They shot her," said 25-year-old Mahir Yildiz.

"I heard 20-25 gunshots. There was great panic and fear at that moment. We didn't know which way to go. The police blocked the entrance and exit and gathered everyone inside."