Israel opposition chief calls for end to Gaza war

AFP, JERUSALEM: Israeli opposition leader Yair Lapid on Monday urged an end to more than 20 months of war in Gaza, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faces mounting calls to halt the fighting.

Following the swift conclusion of Israel's war against Iran with a ceasefire last week, foreign leaders such as US President Donald Trump as well as Israeli ex-prime minister Naftali Bennett have pressed Netanyahu to find a similar off-ramp in the fight with Hamas.

"There is no longer any benefit for the State of Israel from continuing the war in Gaza. Only damage on the security, political and economic level," Lapid told a meeting of lawmakers from his parliamentary group.

"This is also the position of the army," he added.

"Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir appeared before the cabinet yesterday and said that the political echelon needs to decide on the next objective. The meaning of this sentence is, the army has no more objectives in Gaza."

The war in Gaza was triggered by Hamas's unprecedented attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, which resulted in the deaths of 1,219 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on Israeli official figures.

Israel has vowed to destroy the Islamist movement, but after more than a year and a half of devastating war, Hamas is still hanging on in the Gaza Strip.

"Hamas will not be eliminated as long as an alternative government is not brought into Gaza," Lapid said, suggesting enlisting the help of Egypt and other Arab countries.

A public opinion poll published the day after Tuesday's ceasefire with Iran by public broadcaster Kan showed that nearly two-thirds of respondents wanted the Gaza war to end.

ISRAEL EYES PEACE ACCORDS WITH SYRIA, LEBANON

AFP, JERUSALEM: Israel said Monday it is "interested" in striking peace agreements with neighbouring Lebanon and Syria, a potentially historic shift in the region after decades of war and animosity. With Syria under new leadership after the fall of longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad and Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah movement weakened, Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar told journalists his government wanted more normalisation agreements with Arab countries. "Israel is interested in expanding the Abraham Accords circle of peace and normalisation," Saar said of the US-brokered deals that Israel signed with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco in 2020, during US President Donald Trump's first term. "We have an interest in adding countries such as Syria and Lebanon, our neighbours – to the circle of peace and normalisation while safeguarding Israel's essential and security interests," Saar told a news conference in Jerusalem alongside his Austrian counterpart Beate Meinl-Reisinger.

China lifts nearly Two-year ban on seafood from Japan over nuclear plant wastewater

AP, BEIJING: China has reopened its market to seafood from Japan after a nearly two-year ban over the discharge of slightly radioactive wastewater from the tsunami-destroyed Fukushima nuclear power plant.

A notice from the customs agency said the ban had been lifted Sunday and that imports from most of Japan would be resumed.

The ban, imposed in August 2023, was a major blow to Japan's fisheries industry. China was the biggest overseas market for Japanese seafood, accounting for more than one-fifth of its exports.

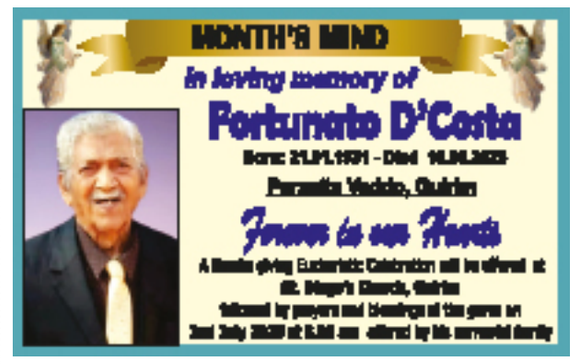
The nuclear plant at Fukushima was heavily damaged by a deadly tsunami that followed a huge offshore earthquake in 2011. Water still must be pumped in to cool the radioactive fuel. The water is then stored in what was an ever-growing complex of tanks on the property.

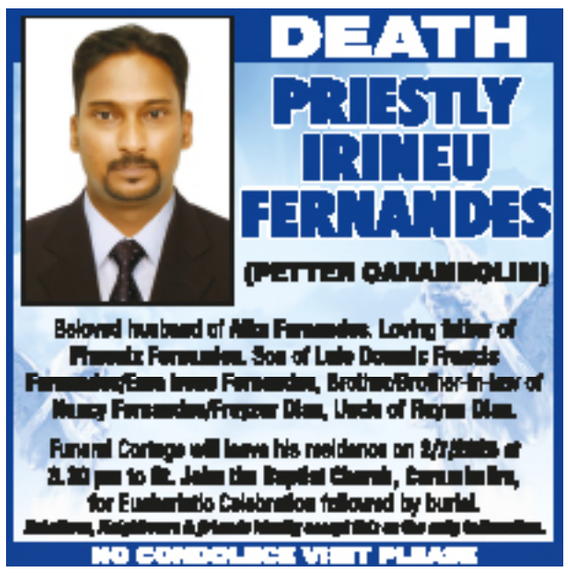
After years of debate, the utility won government permission to discharge the water gradually into the sea after treating it to remove most of the radioactive elements.

Japanese officials said the wastewater would be safer than international standards and have negligible environmental impact.

China disagreed and imposed a ban, saying the discharge would endanger the fishing industry and coastal communities on its east coast.

The ban will remain in place for seafood from 10 of Japan's 47 prefectures, including Fukushima and nearby ones.





Pak, China working to establish new regional bloc with an aim to replace SAARC: Report

PTI, ISLAMABAD: Pakistan and China are working on a proposal to establish a new regional organisation that could potentially replace the now-defunct South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), according to a media report on Monday.

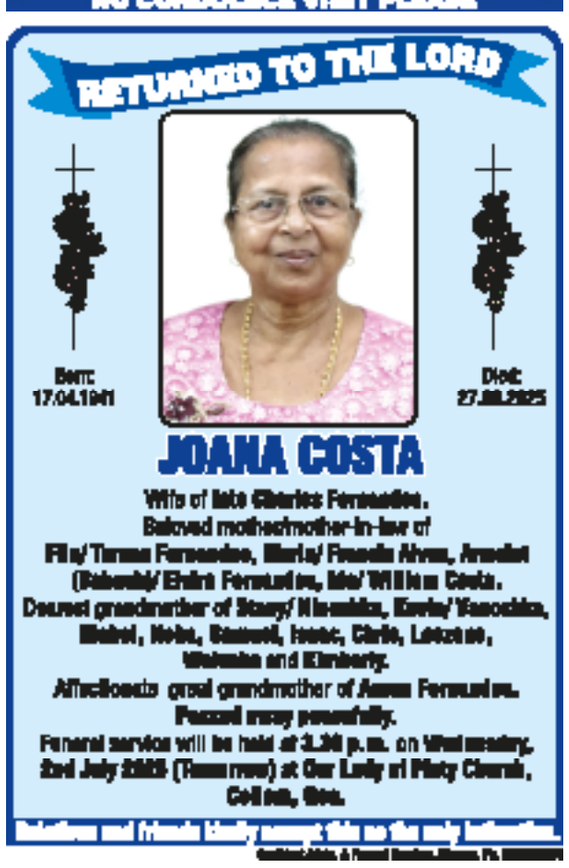
Quoting diplomatic sources familiar with the development, the Express Tribune newspaper reported that talks between Islamabad and Beijing are now at an advanced stage as both sides are convinced that a new organisation is essential for regional integration and connectivity.

Citing sources, the paper said that this new organisation could potentially replace the regional bloc SAARC, which comprises India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

A recent trilateral meeting between Pakistan, China and Bangladesh in Kunming, China, was part of those diplomatic manoeuvres, they said, adding that its goal was to invite other South Asian countries, which were part of SAARC, to join the new grouping.

PAK ARMY CHIEF DESCRIBES TERRORISM IN J-K AS 'LEGITIMATE STRUGGLE'

PTI, ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Army Chief AsimMunir has described terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir as a "legitimate struggle", saying his country would always stand by the people of Kashmir in their struggle. Field Marshal Munir also warned India of a "befitting response" in case of any future attack, weeks after the two nations briefly locked horns in a dangerous conflict. "What India labels as terrorism is, in fact, a legitimate and lawful struggle for freedom, recognised by international law," Munir said while addressing a passing out ceremony at Pakistan Naval Academy, Karachi, on Saturday.



Fires break out as southern Europe heatwave intensifies

AFP, ROME: Firefighters mobilised in several countries to tackle blazes as southern Europeans sought shelter from punishing temperatures of a heatwave that is set to intensify in the coming days.

Fires broke out in France and Turkey Sunday, with other countries already on alert.

Authorities from Spain to Portugal, Italy and France urged people to seek shelter and protect the most vulnerable from the summer's first major heatwave.

Ambulances stood on standby near tourist hotspots as experts warned that such heatwaves, intensified by climate change, would become more frequent.

In Turkey, forest fires broke out Sunday afternoon in the western Izmir province, fed by strong winds, local media reported.

Firefighters backed by specially adapted planes were battling the blaze, but five neighbourhoods in the Seferihisar district had to be evacuated, said the local governor.

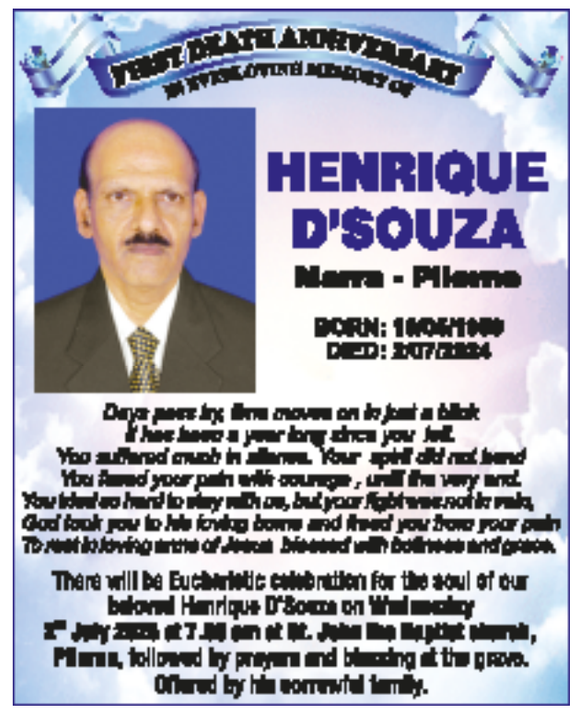
In France, wildfires broke out in the Corbieres area of Aude in the southwest, where temperatures topped 40 degrees (104F), forcing the evacuation of a campsite and abbey as a precaution.

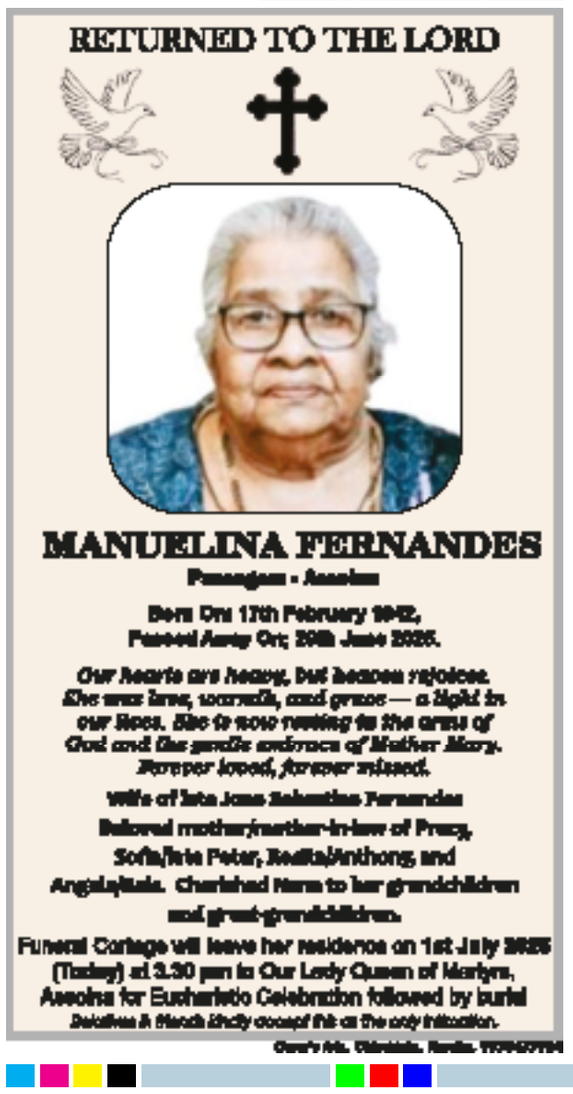
Already last week, Greek firefighters had to battle a forest blaze on the coast south of Athens that forced some evacuations.

French weather service Meteo France put a record 84 out of the country's 101 regional departments on an orange heatwave alert – the second-highest -- for Monday.

Spain's weather service AEMET said temperatures in Extremadura and Andalusia, in the south and southwest, had reached up to 44C Sunday.

In Madrid, where temperatures approached 40C, 32-year-old photographer Diego Radames told AFPTV: "I feel that the heat we're experiencing is not normal for this time of year.





Bangladesh's biggest port resumes operations as strike ends

AFP, DHAKA: Bangladesh's biggest port resumed operations on Monday after customs officials called off a strike that had disrupted the export and import of goods for around 48 hours.

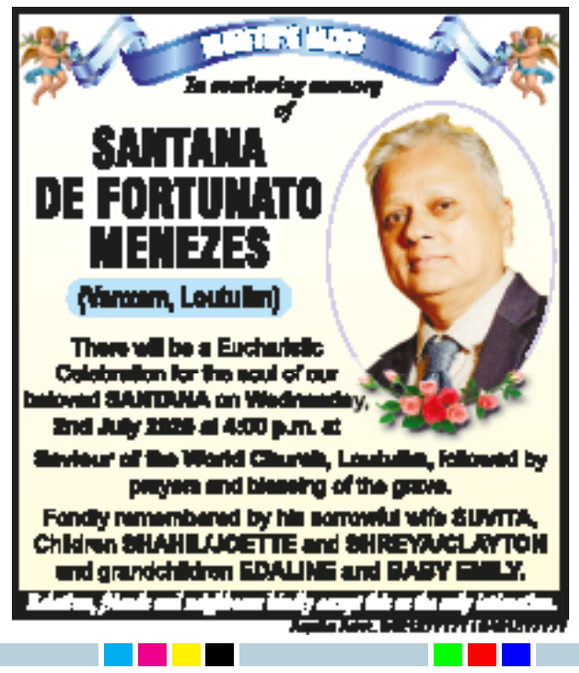
Sehela Siddiqa, Joint Tax Commissioner and secretary of the NBR Reform Unity Council – a platform of protesting workers – confirmed the resumption of activities at Chittagong and all other ports.

"The ports are now fully functional and operating across the country," Siddiqa told AFP. "All employees have returned to work."

A section of employees at the National Board of Revenue (NBR), the country's tax collection authority, has been protesting for over a month against a move by the interim government to reform the agency.

The government's proposal includes abolishing the NBR and establishing two separate bodies to handle tax policy formulation and tax collection.

Over the weekend, some NBR staff launched what they called a "complete shutdown", stopping work in a range of departments, including customs.

The workers resumed duties after the government threatened tough action.

The deadlock ended late Sunday night after hours of intensive negotiations between NBR staff and the Ministry of Finance, mediated by business groups.