

News in brief

◆ **Texas authorities faced** mounting scrutiny yesterday over the response to flash flooding that has left at least 120 people dead, as details surfaced about reported delays of early alerts that could have saved lives. The confirmed death toll from Fourth of July holiday floods that ravaged the central Texas Hill Country -- including a river bank cluttered with children's summer camps -- stood at 120, after police lowered it by one from a day earlier. And the urgent search for more than 170 people still missing entered a seventh day. Hundreds of workers in Kerr County and other central Texas communities continue to comb through piles of muddy debris, but with no live rescues reported this week, worries have swelled that the death toll could still rise. With US President Donald Trump preparing to visit the disaster zone Friday with First Lady Melania Trump, new questions have emerged about when the first emergency alerts reached the hundreds of people in the path of nature's fury. At a news conference Thursday Kerrville police Sergeant Jonathan Lamb deflected a question about police radios being unable to communicate with county and emergency officials, perhaps hampering rescue efforts as the flood raged.

Russia says holds 'frank exchange' with US on Ukraine war

◆ **Russian and American** top diplomats held a "frank exchange" as they met in Malaysia on Thursday, Moscow said, with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio saying his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov had shared a "new idea" on Ukraine. The pair met hours after Moscow pummelled Kyiv for a second night in a row and as the UN said the number of victims from Russian attacks was at its highest level in three years. After launching the barrage, which killed two people in the Ukrainian capital, Moscow denied peace talks with Kyiv were at a dead end.

◆ **The UN warned** yesterday that Washington was setting a "dangerous precedent" by imposing sanctions on a UN expert for criticising US policy on Gaza and called for the cancellation of the action. United Nations rights chief Volker Turk also called for a halt to "attacks and threats" against people appointed by the UN and international institutions like the International Criminal Court, whose judges have also been hit with US sanctions. "I urge the prompt reversal of US sanctions against a special rapporteur of the UN Human Rights Council, Francesca Albanese, in response to work she has undertaken under the mandate on the situation of human rights in the occupied Palestinian territory," Turk said in a statement.

Scrutiny over Texas flood response mounts as death toll hits 120



UN says US sanctions on expert sets 'dangerous precedent', must be reversed



SPOTLIGHT

The \$10 mn bag: Original Birkin smashes records



The "Birkin" bag by Hermes which belonged to British-French actress and singer Jane Birkin at the Sotheby's auction house in Paris

Paris, France

The first-ever Birkin bag designed by French luxury brand Hermes for celebrity Jane Birkin sold for 8.58 million euros (\$10 million) at a Sotheby's auction in Paris yesterday, smashing previous price records for a handbag. The modern design classic, owned by a Paris-based handbag collector, sparked a telephone bidding war up to seven million euros, with the final sale price set at 8.58 million with commission and fees, the Sotheby's website showed. "After weeks of anticipation, the bidding opened at 1 million euros -- prompting a gasp from the room," Sotheby's said in a statement. The final buyer, who eclipsed eight other rivals, was a "private collector from Japan", the auction house added,

without giving further details. The previous record price for a handbag at auction was set by a diamond-encrusted crocodile skin Hermes Kelly 28, which fetched \$513,000 in 2021 at Christie's in Hong Kong. Sotheby's had advised that the Birkin prototype was expected to beat that level during its sale. But the staggering price tag for a well-worn item is in keeping with the fashion world's recent flashy aesthetics. After years of so-called "quiet luxury" dominating catwalks, designers have embraced more ostentatious looks in recent seasons that have been dubbed "boom boom" by some trend forecasters. Modern-day Birkin bags are offered by Hermes to loyal clients, with prices starting at around \$10,000.

Hamas says Israeli troops sticking point in truce as **Gaza pounded**

Opposed to Israeli control over Rafah, on the border with Egypt



Israeli troops deploy by Israel's border fence with the Gaza Strip

● **Israel announced earlier this year that the army was seizing large areas in Gaza**

● **Earlier agreed to release 10 people seized in its October 7, 2023 attack**

● **Hamas has given no timeline for the release of hostages**

● **On Thursday, eight children were among 17 killed in an Israeli strike outside a medical clinic in Deir el-Balah in central Gaza**

AFP | Jerusalem, Undefined



and Israel's military withdrawal were sticking points, as were its demands for "real guarantees" for a lasting peace.

Senior Hamas official Bassem Naim told AFP on Thursday: "We cannot accept the perpetuation of the occupation of our land and the surrender of our people to isolated enclaves under the control of the occupation army (Israel). "This is what the negotiating delegation is presenting to the occupation so far in the current round of negotiations in Doha."

Hamas was particularly opposed to Israeli control over Rafah, on the border with Egypt,

and the so-called Morag Corridor between the southern city and Khan Yunis, he added.

Israel announced earlier this year that the army was seizing large areas in Gaza and incorporating them into buffer zones cleared of their inhabitants.

Naim also said the group wanted an end to the current delivery of aid by a US- and Israel-backed group, a system which has seen scores killed while seeking handouts. On Thursday, eight children were among 17 killed in an Israeli strike outside a medical clinic in Deir el-Balah in central Gaza, the civil defence agency said.

Rabih Torbay, the head of US medical charity Project Hope, which runs the facility, called it "a blatant violation of humanitarian law, and a stark reminder that no one and no place is safe in Gaza, even as ceasefire talks continue". Hamas called it "an atrocious crime".

Israel's military said it had struck a Hamas man in the city who had infiltrated Israel during the 2023 attack and that it "regrets any harm to uninvolved individuals".

UN brings fuel into Gaza for first time in 130 days: spokesman

The United Nations managed to bring 75,000 liters of fuel into Gaza, the first in 130 days, the secretary-general's spokesman said yesterday, noting it was still far from enough to alleviate shortages in the war-torn territory.

"We and our humanitarian partners need hundreds of thousands of liters of fuel each day to keep essential life-saving and life-sustaining operations going, meaning that the amount entered yesterday isn't sufficient to cover even one day of energy requirement," said Stephane Dujarric, warning that crucial services will shut down if more fuel does not enter Gaza immediately.

Israel says would negotiate permanent Gaza ceasefire during 60-day truce

Jerusalem, Undefined

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday said that Israel was ready to negotiate a permanent ceasefire in Gaza during a 60-day truce but only if the Palestinian territory was demilitarised. "At the beginning of this ceasefire, we will enter negotiations for a permanent end to the war,"

he said, adding that Israel's "fundamental conditions" were that "Hamas lays down its weapons" and no longer has "governing or military capabilities".

"If this can be achieved through negotiations, great. If it cannot be achieved through negotiations within 60 days, we will achieve it through other means, by using force, the force of our heroic army," he added.

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A total of 251 hostages were seized in the attack. Forty-nine are still being held in Gaza, including 27 the Israeli military says are dead.