

News in brief

◆ **The European Union** yesterday proposed banning the export of more drone and missile tech to Iran after a deadly crackdown on protesters, European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen said. “Europe stands in full solidarity with the brave women and men of Iran who are risking their lives to demand freedom for themselves and future generations,” von der Leyen wrote on X. “Today, we are proposing to ban additional exports of critical drone and missile technologies.” Von der Leyen said the EU was also readying other sanctions on those responsible for the “continued and brutal repression” of protests that rocked the Islamic Republic. The protests constituted the biggest challenge to the Iranian leadership in years.



EU moves to tighten ban on drone exports to Iran after crackdown

◆ **Actor and comedian** Russell Brand appeared before a UK court Tuesday facing two new charges of rape and sexual assault. The two new charges against Brand, 50, were brought in December 2025 and relate to two alleged incidents with separate women in London in 2009. In May last year, he had already pleaded not guilty to two counts of rape, two counts of sexual assault and one count of indecent assault for alleged incidents involving four different women between 1999 and 2005. Appearing remotely via video-link wearing a partially buttoned pale blue shirt, Brand, the ex-husband of popstar Katy Perry, only spoke to confirm his name and his date of birth. He was granted conditional bail and is due to appear again in Southwark Crown Court in south London on February 17 for a pre-trial hearing.

UK comedian Russell Brand in court on two new rape charges

◆ **California Governor** Gavin Newsom urged Europeans yesterday to stop playing nice with US President Donald Trump over Greenland, “develop a backbone” and “punch him in the face”. In blunt remarks to reporters at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the prominent Democratic politician called Trump “weak” and said the European Union should “push back very aggressively” against the US leader. “He’s good at exploiting weaknesses, but he backs down when he’s punched in the face,” Newsom said. “You can’t play all sides. Enough of the niceties,” he added. “Stop trying to appease him. Fight fire with fire.” He called Trump’s bid to take over Greenland “madness” but said the US president would not try to seize it “militarily”. “This whole excursion in Greenland is absurd and people need to recognise what they’re up against and stand tall and firm, develop a backbone and speak with one unified voice. Punch him in the face,” Newsom said.

California governor urges Europe: Grow ‘backbone’ and ‘punch’ back at Trump



SPOTLIGHT

UK approves plans for Chinese mega-embassy in London



Hong Kong former veteran labour activist Christopher Mung Siu-tat (L) and Hong Kong activist Chloe Cheung (R) listen to others as they take part in a press conference concerning the decision on the new Chinese embassy, outside the Houses of Parliament in central London

AFP | London, United Kingdom

The UK government yesterday gave China the green light to build a “mega-embassy” in the heart of London eight years after Beijing bought the site, triggering fresh anger from residents and rights groups. The 20,000-square-metre (235,000-square-foot) site is set to become the largest embassy complex in the UK by area, and one of the largest in the centre of a Western capital. But it could still face legal challenges and residents vowed Tuesday to act. Housing minister Steve Reed’s decision to grant planning permission came after several delays over national security concerns. There have also been protests by activists who fear the

sprawling site could be used to spy on and harass dissidents. Reed said the decision was now final, barring a successful challenge in court. A government spokesperson said intelligence agencies had helped to develop a “range of measures... to manage any risks”. “Following extensive negotiations in recent months, the Chinese government has agreed to consolidate its seven current sites in London into one site, bringing clear security advantages,” the spokesperson said. Security minister Dan Jarvis said China would continue to pose national security threats. But he said after “detailed consideration of all possible risks around this new embassy... I am assured that the UK’s national security is protected”

Israel begins demolitions at UNRWA headquarters

The compound has been empty of UNRWA staff since January 2025



Machinery demolishing a structure inside the headquarters of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem

● **Roland Friedrich, the agency’s director in the West Bank, called the move political**

● **Israel has repeatedly accused UNRWA of providing cover for Hamas**

● **The Saudi foreign ministry voiced its “strongest condemnation” and expressed support for the UN agency.**

● **UNRWA’s Friedrich said the UN rejected the Israeli claim and insisted that the compound “remains United Nations property**

AFP | Jerusalem, Undefined

Israeli bulldozers began demolitions at the headquarters of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees in east Jerusalem on Tuesday, in what the organisation called an “unprecedented attack”. UNRWA spokesman Jonathan Fowler said in a statement to AFP that Israeli forces “stormed into” the compound shortly after 7:00 am (0500 GMT) and ejected security guards from the site, before bulldozers entered and began demolishing buildings. “This is an unprecedented

attack against UNRWA and its premises. And it also constitutes a serious violation of international law and the privileges and immunities of the United Nations,” Fowler said. “What happens today to UNRWA can happen tomorrow to any other international organisation or diplomatic mission around the world,” he added. Roland Friedrich, the agency’s director in the West Bank, called the move political. Friedrich told AFP “it seems the intent is to seize the land for settlement construction as has openly been stated by Israeli officials for many years in the media and elsewhere”. The Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority condemned the demolitions, warning of the “gravity of this deliberate escalation against UNRWA” and calling the move “an attempt to undermine the international protection system for Palestinian refugees”. AFP photos showed heavy machinery demolishing structures at the compound, as an Israeli flag fluttered overhead. An AFP photographer reported that far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir briefly visited the site. “This is a historic day, a day of celebration and a very important day for governance in Jerusalem,” Ben Gvir was quoted as saying in a statement. Israel has repeatedly accused UNRWA of providing cover for Hamas, claiming that some of its employees took part in the group’s October 7, 2023 attack on Israel, which sparked the war in Gaza.

A series of investigations, including one led by France’s former foreign minister Catherine Colonna, found some “neutrality-related issues” at UNRWA but stressed Israel had not provided conclusive evidence for its headline allegation. ‘No immunity’ An Israeli foreign ministry statement defended the demolitions and said “the State of Israel owns the Jerusalem compound”. The compound in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem has been empty of UNRWA staff since January 2025, when a law banning its operations took effect after a months-long battle over its work in the Gaza Strip. “UNRWA-Hamas had already ceased its operations at this site and no longer had any UN personnel or UN activity there,” the foreign ministry said. “The compound does not enjoy any immunity and the seizure of this compound by Israeli authorities was carried out in accordance with both Israeli and international law,” it said. UNRWA’s Friedrich said the UN rejected the Israeli claim and insisted that the compound “remains United Nations property and is protected by the privileges and immunities of the UN, regardless of whether it is currently in use”. Although the UNRWA ban applies in east Jerusalem because of its annexation by Israel, the agency still operates in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini also denounced the demolitions on X, saying it was yet another attempt by “Israeli au-

thorities to erase the Palestine Refugee identity”. As the UN agency created specifically for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians displaced from their homes during the creation of Israel in 1948, UNRWA provides refugee status registration, as well as health and education services for Palestinian refugees. Along with refugee status, which is passed on through generations, comes the right of return, which Israel contests, and is one of the most contentious issues for a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Months after the war in Gaza began in October 2023, Israeli authorities declared UN chief Antonio Guterres and Lazzarini personae non gratae in Israel. Jordan’s foreign ministry “strongly condemned” the demolition, calling it “a blatant violation of international law”. The Saudi foreign ministry also voiced its “strongest condemnation” and expressed support for the UN agency.



The UNRWA compound was a prison during the time of the Ottoman Empire, and later became property of the Jordanian government, which subsequently transferred it to UNRWA.