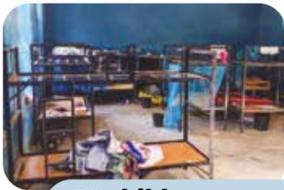


News in brief

◆ **Fifty of the more than 300 children** snatched by gunmen from a Catholic school in Nigeria have escaped their captors, a Christian group said yesterday. Gunmen on Friday raided St Mary's co-education school in Niger state, taking 303 children and 12 teachers in one of the largest mass kidnappings in Nigeria. The abduction came days after gunmen stormed a secondary school in neighbouring Kebbi state, abducting 25 girls. "We have received some good news as fifty pupils escaped and have reunited with their parents," said the Christian Association of Nigeria in a statement, adding they escaped between Friday and Saturday. The number of boys and girls - aged between eight and 18 years - kidnapped from St Mary's is almost half of the school's student population of 629. The Nigerian government has yet to comment on the number of students and teachers abducted.



50 children kidnapped from Nigerian Catholic school escape captivity

Brazil 'very concerned' about US naval build-up near Venezuela

◆ **Brazil is "very concerned"** about a US military build-up near Venezuela, fearing a conflict, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said yesterday, adding he intended to speak with US counterpart Donald Trump about it. "I am very concerned about the military apparatus that the United States has placed in the Caribbean Sea. I am very concerned, and I intend to discuss this with President Trump because it worries me," Lula told reporters in Johannesburg after attending a G20 summit. "I think there is no reason to have a war now," he said. "Let us not repeat the mistake that happened in the war between Russia and Ukraine. That is to say, once a shot is fired, it is hard to predict how it will end." The United States has sent an aircraft carrier strike group, other navy warships as well as stealth aircraft to the region near Venezuela. On Friday it warned civilian aircraft in Venezuelan airspace to "exercise caution". US forces have conducted strikes on more than 20 vessels in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific since September, killing more than 80 people. US officials allege they were drug-runners, but provided no evidence.

◆ **Over 800,000 new voters register for Nepal post-uprising polls**

◆ **Hundreds of thousands** of new voters have registered to cast their ballot in Nepal's first polls since a mass uprising in September ousted the government, election officials said yesterday. Election Commission spokesman Narayan Prasad Bhattarai told AFP there was "a total of 837,094 registered names" of first-time voters. Bhattarai said that by Friday, 123 established parties had registered to take part in the March 5 parliamentary polls, while another 40 new slates await further verification to be allowed to run. Interest in participating in the elections has surged, especially among young people who see it as a critical test of whether the demands of protesters who took to the streets against economic hardships and government corruption can translate into meaningful change.



SPOTLIGHT

Daughter of S. Africa president accused of recruiting for Russian forces

AFP | Johannesburg, South Africa

South African police are investigating claims that a daughter of ex-president Jacob Zuma was involved in recruiting men to join Russian mercenaries in the Ukraine war, they said yesterday. The allegations against Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, an MP in her father's MK political party, were made by one of her sisters in an affidavit asking for a formal investigation, police said.

It claims Zuma-Sambudla and two other people were involved in recruiting 17 South Africans whom the presidency said this month it had been asked to rescue from Ukraine's war-ravaged Donbas region.

It was alleged the men were

lured to Russia under false pretences and handed to a Russian mercenary group to fight in the Ukrainian war without their knowledge or consent," the statement said.

The case had been handed to a special police unit that investigates crimes against the state to determine the charges.

The presidency said in early November it had been asked to bring home the 17 men who were allegedly "trapped" in Donbas after being lured there "under the pretext of lucrative employment contracts".

The war that started with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has drawn in mercenaries on both sides, including from several African countries.

Reports in South African media said the men were allegedly sent to Russia for security training by the opposition MK party, which is headed by Zuma, the president between 2009 and 2018.

It is illegal for South Africans to join foreign armies unless authorised by the government.



Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla

Israel says targeted Hezbollah chief of staff in Beirut strike

The strike took place in Beirut's southern suburbs

◆ **Israel said would do "everything necessary" to stop Hezbollah**

◆ **Lebanon says 5 killed, 28 wounded in Israel's Beirut strike**

AFP | Jerusalem, Undefined

Israel said it had carried out an air strike yesterday targeting Hezbollah's chief of staff in Beirut, leaving a smoking hole in the side of an apartment building and debris scattered in the street, according to AFP journalists.

Lebanon's health ministry reported at least one person killed in the strike, and 21 people wounded, calling it a "preliminary toll".

The strike took place in Beirut's southern suburbs, a densely populated area where Hezbollah holds sway, and caused "injuries and significant damage", according to Lebanon's official National News Agency (NNA).

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said he had given the orders for the attack -- the latest against a target in Lebanon despite a year-long ceasefire between Israel and Iran-backed Hezbollah.

"A short while ago, in the heart of Beirut, the IDF (Israeli mil-



Workers clean the rubble from the site of an Israeli air attack that targeted a residential building in Beirut's southern Haret Hreik neighborhood

itary) attacked the Hezbollah chief of staff, who had been leading the terrorist organisation's buildup and rearmament," the premier's office said in a statement.

"Israel is determined to act to achieve its objectives everywhere and at all times."

An AFP correspondent at the scene said the strike hit the third and fourth floors of a nine-storey building, with ambulances gathered around it and rescuers inspecting the apartments.

NNA reported three missiles were fired at the building in the Haret Hreik area, damaging vehi-

cles and other nearby structures.

Israel has carried out near-daily strikes in Lebanon since the November 2024 ceasefire that sought to end more than a year of hostilities with Hezbollah, usually saying it is striking members of the group in the country's south and east.

Sunday's strike, however, was the first on Beirut's southern suburbs since June 5, when Israel said it hit a Hezbollah drone factory.

It follows an earlier strike on the southern town of Aita al-Shaab, which the Lebanese health ministry said killed one

person. Hezbollah was weakened by its fight with Israel, which it started in support of its ally Hamas in Gaza in October 2023 with cross-border exchanges of fire that later escalated into two months of full-blown war.

Since then, Lebanon has come under increasing Israeli and American pressure to disarm Hezbollah, a move that group has rejected.

Netanyahu had insisted earlier on Sunday that Israel would do "everything necessary" to stop Hezbollah from regrouping in Lebanon.

Boos, blowups and last-minute pause as a chaotic COP30 closes out

◆ **India hailed the deal as "meaningful," while Europe, aside from a technical objection, largely stayed silent**

AFP | Belem, Brazil

Jabs about greedy children, boos for the Vatican, and proceedings suspended for more than an hour: the COP30 finale unfolded with the same chaotic energy that defined the summit, exposing the rifts that came close to derailing a deal.

Andre Correa do Lago, the dapper Brazilian diplomat who presided over the two-week affair in Belem, opened the final plenary on Saturday afternoon, nearly a full day behind schedule, after nations worked through the night to find a text they could all live with.

Bleary-eyed delegates took their seats, eager to see the marathon talks finally come to an end.

The summit in this rough-around-the-edges Amazonian city had already been interrupted twice by Indigenous protesters last week -- once when they breached the compound and clashed with security, another time when they blocked delegates from entering -- before a fierce blaze on



COP30 President Andre Correa do Lago (C) listens to his advisers next to United Nations Climate Change Executive Secretary Simon Stiell (L) after the plenary session was interrupted following Colombia's intervention at the COP30 UN Climate Change Conference in Belem, Para state, Bra

Thursday triggered a panicked evacuation.

A round of cheers broke out when Correa do Lago brought down his gavel and announced the adoption of the "Mutirao" text -- a Portuguese word of Indigenous origin meaning "collective efforts" that was also the summit's slogan.

Early in the session, a representative from the Holy See earned loud boos from NGOs after taking the mic to read out the Vatican's definition of gender along strict biological lines -- a side story at this COP after several governments, from Iran to Argentina, sought to clarify their positions in the gender and climate action plan.

But the drama did not end there.

After a COP defined by a bitter struggle between dozens of nations including the European Union pushing for a "roadmap" to transition away from fossil fuels, and oil producers and emerging economies firmly resisting it, the session saw an unusual procedural clash.

Daniela Duran of Colombia declared that her country had raised a point of order in a side text that was gavelled through anyway, and was now formally objecting.

Rather than brush her aside, Correa do Lago suspended the plenary, in an uncommon move that signaled Brazil's determi-

nation to show it was handling concerns seriously.

Observers suggested the pause likely reflected Colombia's deep frustration: the country had been at the forefront of efforts to include a "roadmap," and was displeased with how the talks concluded.

Diplomats huddled as the suspension dragged on for more than an hour before the plenary finally resumed.

"I have not slept, and probably this has not helped, as well as my advanced age," said Correa do Lago, in his mid-sixties, apologizing as he blamed an honest mistake for missing Colombia's point of order.

Still, Russia -- often aligned with Brazil in international forums -- chose to voice its displeasure, objecting to the objections.

India hailed the deal as "meaningful," while Europe, aside from a technical objection, largely stayed silent, underscoring how far the West had been knocked onto the back foot.

British energy secretary Ed Miliband cut an isolated figure, telling AFP during the enforced break that a climate agreement only implicitly referencing oil, coal and gas was still "important in the context of the US leaving Paris," even as he conceded "it's not everything we would have wanted."