

VOA NEWS

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This is VOA News. I'm Joe Ramsey.

There were explosions in Gaza on Wednesday as Israel appeared to intensify airstrikes on the enclave, raising fears amongst Palestinians that a long-awaited assault on Rafah, which Israel has threatened to carry out, could be soon.

Smoke rose on the horizon over Gaza after the explosions that came hours after Israel bombed at least three homes in the southern city of Rafah overnight, with one of the airstrikes killing 11 people from a family, health officials said.

Pope Francis appeared to be in better health on Wednesday as he praised Israeli and Arab fathers who both lost daughters in conflict. AP correspondent Charles De Ledesma reports.

They "lost their daughters" in this war, the Pope says, "and they're both friends." "They don't look at the enmity of war," but "at the friendship of two men" who are fond of each other and have passed "through the same crucifixion."

Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian, lost his 10-year-old daughter who was killed by a rubber bullet shot by an Israeli soldier, while Rami Elhanan, an Israeli, lost his 14-year-old daughter in a Palestinian suicide attack. Their stories have been told in *Apeirogon*, a book by Colum McCann.

I'm Charles De Ledesma.

A Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said on Wednesday it was extremely hard to believe the Islamic State would have had the capacity to launch an attack on a Moscow concert hall last Friday that killed at least 143 people. She repeated Moscow's assertions for which it has not provided evidence Ukraine was behind the attack on the Crocus City Hall, the deadliest Russia has suffered in 20 years.

Ukraine has repeatedly denied it had to do anything with the attack. The U.S. has backed up that claim.

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Russia may have used a new type of guided bomb in airstrikes on the northeastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv that killed at least one person on Wednesday, local officials said.

The officials said four children including a three-month-old baby were among 19 people wounded in Kharkiv in the latest strikes since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, some of which have caused blackouts, including in Kharkiv.

Six people are presumed dead after a cargo ship leaving the Port of Baltimore in the U.S. state of Maryland accidentally destroyed the Francis Scott Key Bridge and the rescue operation shifted to search and recovery on Wednesday. VOA's chief national correspondent Steve Herman in Washington reports.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, speaking to reporters at the White House on Wednesday, said the span of Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge crumpled due to the impact of a force similar to that of a big aircraft carrier ramming into it.

"... the impact of this collision we're talking about. It's not just as big as a building. It's really as big as a block - 100,000 tons all going into this pier all at once."

Officials say it is too early to know when the debris of the bridge can be removed from the Patapsco River and when the Port of Baltimore will return to normal operations.

Steve Herman, VOA News, Washington.

Muslim families displaced by conflict in Democratic Republic of Congo's east are observing Ramadan under the shadow of war, erecting makeshift mosques in camps and sharing what little food that can be spared in order to break fast. Reuters correspondent David Doyle has more details.

Abdulrahman Katandi feels especially blessed to be fasting this year. His family, including a pregnant wife and a young daughter, have fled rebel violence around the town of Sake in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Now at Goma's Lac Vert refugee camp, they are spending Ramadan living off meager rations of rice and tinned sardines. But Katandi is grateful that, thanks to his fasting, they will have enough, though barely, for everyone to eat each day.

Thousands of civilians have fled to Goma amid a fresh advance by M23 rebels this year. Newcomers from Sake joined hundreds of thousands already displaced around the provincial capital since 2022 due to the ongoing conflict.

Reuters correspondent David Doyle.

The United States on Wednesday announced sanctions on six individuals and two entities based in Russia, China and the United Arab Emirates, accusing them of channeling funds to North Korea's weapons programs.

A U.S. Treasury Department statement said the action was taken in coordination with South Korea.

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