

Israel and Hamas trade blame over hospital blast

Gaza struggles to save survivors as rage grows in West Asia; Biden arrives in Tel Aviv, backs Israel's claim that rocket fired by Palestinian militants led to explosion; strikes resume from both sides

Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, GAZA STRIP

Doctors hamstrung by dwindling medical supplies rushed on Wednesday to save people badly wounded in a massive blast at a Gaza City hospital the day before, performing surgery – often without anaesthesia – on patients lying on floors, as Israel kept up its attacks on the besieged territory.

The Hamas militant group blamed Israel for the massive blast at the al-Ahli Hospital – saying nearly 500 died – while Israel blamed a rocket fired by other Palestinian militants.

Public outrage over the hospital carnage spread through West Asia as U.S. President Joe Biden landed in Israel in hopes of pre-



All that remains: People inspect the rubble of a destroyed building in southern Gaza on Wednesday. AFP

venting a wider conflict in the region.

Upon his arrival, Mr. Biden embraced Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – and expressed concern for the suffering of Gaza's civilians.

He later said the hospital blast appeared not to be

Israel's fault. "Based on what I've seen, it appears as though it was done by the other team, not you," he told Mr. Netanyahu in remarks in front of the media.

Palestinian rocket attacks on Israel resumed shortly before Mr. Biden's arrival, after a 12-hour lull.

Modi expresses outrage at attack

NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday expressed outrage at the hospital bombing in Gaza Strip. "...Civilian casualties in the ongoing conflict are a matter of serious and continuing concern. Those involved should be held responsible," he posted on X. » **PAGE 10**

Israeli strikes on Gaza also continued on Wednesday, including on cities in south Gaza that Israel had described as "safe zones" for Palestinian civilians.

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Active

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After the hospital blast, Jordan cancelled a meeting between Mr. Biden, Jordan's King Abdullah II, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi. Mr. Biden was now visiting only Israel.

The war between Israel and Hamas was "pushing the region to the brink," Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi told state-run television.

The Israeli military held a briefing on Wednesday morning laying out its case for why it was not responsible for the explosion at the al-Ahli Hospital.

Israeli military spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said it was not firing in the area when the blast occurred. And, he said, Israeli radar confirmed a rocket barrage was fired by the Palestinian militant group Islamic Jihad from a nearby cemetery at that time of the blast, around 6:59 p.m.

Hamas called Tuesday's hospital blast "a horrific massacre," saying it was caused by an Israeli strike. The Islamic Jihad dismissed Israel's claims, accusing Israel of "trying hard to evade responsibility for the brutal massacre it committed".

'T.N. is the safest State with low crime rate'

DGP points out that 64.5 offences per lakh population are against women. That is the national average. The Tamil Nadu average is 22.4. Allegations that crimes have gone up suddenly at certain places are not true. Statistics show that there are fewer murders than in previous years, he says

R. Sivaraman
CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu Director-General of Police (DGP) and Head of Police Force Shankar Jiwai has said Tamil Nadu is one of the safest States, with the lowest crime rate, in the country. He made the statement on Tuesday while interacting with journalists of *The Hindu* and listed the steps taken by the police for public welfare.

Explaining that law and order is understood by the statistics presented, he said, "64.5 offences per lakh population are against women. That is the national average. The Tamil Nadu average is 22.4. Many of the parameters with respect to the offences in our country are defined by the National Crime Records Bureau, which is a repository of all statistics with respect to crimes. Tamil Nadu is one of the safest [States]... From a statistical point of view, there is no law and order issue at all."

But Mr. Jiwai added, "It is for [members of] the pu-



DGP Shankar Jiwai interacting with journalists of *The Hindu* in Chennai on Tuesday. R. RAGU

blic to judge... Tamil Nadu handles the largest number of protests, rallies and demonstrations in the country. It's such a democratic place. What other parameters do you want? Especially in view of not a single major instance of disruption of public order affecting the daily routine of citizens."

He said, "Whenever law and order issues come up, we, at the [police] headquarters, immediately look into them. There are allegations in some quarters that murders have gone up

suddenly at certain places or crimes have gone up. So, we investigate such allegations and find that they are not true." He said the statistics showed that there were fewer murders than in the previous years. Moreover, they were not predominantly due to the caste factor, or revenge murders by rowdies.

Two-pronged approach

The DGP dismissed the perception that drugs were available everywhere. "The police have a two-pronged approach: supply



There have been allegations in some quarters that murders have gone up suddenly at certain places or crimes have gone up. We have investigated such allegations and have found that they are not true

SHANKAR JIWAI
Tamil Nadu Director General of Police

reduction and demand reduction. Supply reduction means the role of the police. If you see our seizure, we have crossed an all-time high... We have seized a large quantity of drugs, with a record high seizure of cannabis and scheduled drugs like nitrazepam and tapentadol... The performance of the police is pretty good in supply reduction. In demand reduction, we are coming up with a lot of awareness and we have a separate wing looking after it..."

To a question on the

measures to curb police excesses, Mr. Jiwai noted, "There is no place for excesses on the part of the police... We have clear standards. Because police excesses bring us a bad name. Luckily, we do not have any custodial death in the last one year; earlier, the State had seen an average of five or six custodial deaths a year." He said that whenever any allegation of police excesses was reported, a due inquiry by a sub-divisional magistrate or a judicial magistrate was conducted.

Police excess

"We keep trying to educate our personnel and tell them that excesses will bring a bad name to the department. Our policy is clear: there should not be police excesses. When it comes to our notice, we immediately see to it that disciplinary action is taken. In many instances, policemen are suspended or removed from service or criminal cases are registered against them. We will not encourage that basically. If it happens and it is

known to us, we do inquire." Mr. Jiwai said the State Cyber Crime Wing call centre received 800 to 900 calls every day on the helpline number 1930. The call centre is being upgraded at a cost of ₹1 crore and the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC) has come up with a standardised software. It will be implemented in about three months.

"We are receiving 800 to 900 complaints. It means approximately 30,000 cases a month. This is the highest number of cases that we have seen. The cyber crimes are 15-20 times more than the cases reported under the IPC and the local laws. We have been trying to rise to the occasion. The most important part in cyber crime, especially when a financial fraud has taken place, is to immediately freeze the money in transit. If a call is made within 48 hours, nodal officers who are tied up with wallets and banks will freeze the money. That is done by the central wing here," he added.

Fear factor

Food and fuel prices may yet play spoilsport in the inflation battle

Inflation faced by consumers eased to 5% in September, bringing some relief after a sharp rally in prices that began with July's 15-month high inflation rate of 7.44%. This not only marks a return to the 2% to 6% tolerance range of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), but also matches the bank's upgraded estimate of 6.4% average inflation between July and September. Of course, the preferred inflation rate remains 4% and the RBI will remain "resolutely focused" on durably attaining that. By its own reckoning, that target appears distant – this quarter is expected to average 5.6% inflation, followed by 5.2% between January and June 2024. Even these expectations may need to be tempered. While the RBI has projected an average inflation of 5.4% in 2023-24, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank raised their estimates this month to 5.5% and 5.9%, respectively. So, September's 5% inflation, which was partly aided by base effects from 2022 when the inflation pace was 7.4% and partly by a sharp dip in volatile prices of tomatoes and vegetables, with a little help from the Centre's LPG price cuts, is unlikely to sustain or cool further.

Although food inflation which had spurred the spike in prices through July and August, has eased to 6.6% in September, this was disproportionately influenced by crashing vegetable prices even as the inflation pace accelerated for pulses, fruits, eggs and sugar. Cereals and spices inflation remained sticky at 11% and 23.1%, respectively. Rural inflation remained higher than that faced by urban consumers, and with the erratic monsoon hurting *kharif* season sowing in crops like pulses and uncertainties about the El Niño effects on the *rabi* crop, weak rural demand as well as food price pressures remain a source of concern for the economy. The Wholesale Price Index released on Monday shows pulses prices spiked 17.7% while onions rose 55% in September, compared to 10.4% and 31.4% in August, respectively. At -0.26%, wholesale price rise just about stayed in deflationary mode for the sixth month on the back of double-digit upticks through the same period last year. But that streak may be nearing its end. The government has held retail fuel prices since last May and may even be tempted to cut them ahead of critical elections. But producers, facing the brunt of higher global oil and gas prices, which rose at an eight-month high pace of 15.6% in September, have been raising prices for two months now. Global prices for urea, that India largely imports, are up 20% since March. These will start to feed into retail prices soon so it is not time to celebrate cooling inflation yet.

Sea service

Ferry between Tamil Nadu, Northern Sri Lanka holds much potential

The commencement of a passenger ferry service between Kankesanthurai in Sri Lanka's Northern Province and Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu last week marks the fulfilment of a long-standing demand across the Palk Strait for the revival of a sea link. Sri Lanka's civil war, which lasted nearly 25 years, had disrupted the movement of people and goods on traditional maritime routes – Talaimannar to Rameswaram and Colombo to Thoothukudi. Twelve years ago, a ferry service between Colombo and Thoothukudi did not last long due to a lack of patronage. There was also the popular Boat Mail connecting Chennai and Talaimannar via Rameswaram and Dhanushkodi through a rail link and a ferry, which nonagenarians recall. The cyclone in December 1964, which devastated Dhanushkodi, and the civil war ended the multiple transport links, forcing peoples in both countries to rely only on air services, which cover Madurai and Tiruchi too these days. Ten months ago, the Chennai-Jaffna air service resumed and according to an estimate, 10,000 tourists from India visited Sri Lanka over six months. The inauguration of a private cruise service in Chennai four months ago facilitated visits by 6,000 passengers to the island-nation. As pointed out during the launch of the Nagapattinam-Kankesanthurai service, the development would not only strengthen cultural, economic, and civilisational ties but also improve cooperation in disaster management and maritime security. It may, at some stage, also enable seamless voluntary repatriation of thousands of refugees from Sri Lanka, living in Tamil Nadu.

Normal operations of the service – it ran for a few days this month – are to resume in January in view of the northeast monsoon. By then, it is hoped that the authorities, especially in India, would take steps in the interest of the sustainability of the ferry service. With a fare of around ₹7,670 a person for a journey, the difference between this rate and air fares is not competitive enough for anyone to opt for the ferry. Increasing the baggage allowance of 50 kg would help. The provision of amenities at Nagapattinam port such as a dormitory and improving rail connectivity at Nagapattinam require attention, as passengers from Sri Lanka are sure to want to visit Chennai. On the part of Sri Lanka, economists, policymakers and activists should consider promoting economic ties including exports from the Northern Province, given the inherent asymmetrical bilateral relationship. Ultimately, sustained policy attention is critical to making this service a success. After all, Nagapattinam is predominantly agrarian and one of the economically backward spots of Tamil Nadu. So, it is up to the governments of the two countries to ensure that the Nagapattinam-Kankesanthurai ferry service does not meet the fate of the Thoothukudi-Colombo service.