

Militants killed at least 31 people in a village in central Mali when they fired upon a bus ferrying people to a local market, the latest deadly attack in a region racked by violent insurgency, Reuters reported.

Civilian killed, more injured in US drone strike in Syria's Idlib



This picture shows an American MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicle in flight and firing a Hellfire missile.

At least a civilian was killed and seven others injured in a US military drone strike in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib, only a few days after Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin ordered a review into a 2019 US Syria bombings that killed dozens of civilians.

The Arabic-language Enab Baladi weekly newspaper reported that the air raid targeted a man riding a motorcycle near the village of Kafr Battikh, which lies in the southern Saraqib district of the province, on Friday, Press TV reported.

Seven members of a family, including three women and a child, were also injured while they were traveling in a car across the road.

Enab Baladi added that the US-made MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicle struck the motorcycle with three missiles.

Hours later, United States Central Command (CENTCOM) said it would open an investigation into possible civilian casualties inflicted in the drone strike in Idlib, with Pentagon officials claiming the attack was meant to target a "senior Al-Qaeda leader."

"We abhor the loss of innocent life and take all possible measures to prevent them," Cap-

tain Bill Urban, a spokesman for Central Command, said in a statement.

He added, "The possibility of a civilian casualty was immediately self-reported to US Central Command. We are initiating a full investigation of the allegations and will release the results when appropriate."

Friday's drone strike follows another attack on Idlib in September, which was also alleged to have killed a top terrorist operative. The US military claimed at the time that no civilians were killed in that attack.

Last month, The New York Times, citing anonymous sources and classified documents, published a report that said a previous American airstrike in March 2019 hit "a large crowd of women and children huddled against a river bank" near the town of Baghuz, and may have resulted in the Pentagon's largest civilian casualty incident in Syria.

"Without warning, an American F-15E attack jet streaked across the drone's high-definition field of vision and dropped a 500-pound bomb on the crowd, swallowing it in a shuddering blast. As the smoke cleared, a few people stumbled away in search of cover. Then a

jet tracking them dropped one 2,000-pound bomb, then another, killing most of the survivors," the Times wrote.

Following the report, CENTCOM reluctantly admitted that it may have killed up to 80 people, including some civilians, though still argued that the slain women and children may have been working on behalf of the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group at the time they were bombed.

The US military has stationed forces and equipment in eastern and northeastern Syria, with the Pentagon claiming that the deployment is aimed at preventing the oilfields in the area from falling into the hands of Daesh terrorists.

Damascus says the unlawful US deployment is meant to plunder the Arab country's resources.

Former US president Donald Trump admitted on several occasions that American forces were in Syria for its oil.

After failing to oust the Syrian government with the help of its proxies and direct involvement in the conflict, the US government has now stepped up its economic war on the Arab country.



REUTERS

Officials finalize details on official vehicles during the deployment of the EU observation mission in Caracas, Venezuela, on October 28, 2021.

Venezuela denies visa extension for EU's electoral observers

Venezuela has denied visa extensions for electoral observers from the European Union, requiring them to leave the South American country this weekend, a source with knowledge of the matter said.

The observers arrived in October for regional and local elections that took place on Nov. 21. Members of the delegation's leadership had said they would remain until Dec. 13, Reuters reported.

"There was not an extension of the stay so they must leave this weekend," said the source, who declined to be identified because they are not authorized to speak on the record.

The source did not specify why the visas were not extended.

President Nicolas Maduro has called the observers "spies" and said their preliminary report — which said voting conditions were better than in previous contests but that some candidates were blocked unfairly — is an effort to stain a peaceful and democratic electoral process.

The Information Ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The mission's only official spokesperson is

its head, Isabel Santos, who left Venezuela at the end of November. The mission declined to comment on members' visas.

"The proclamation of the (winning) candidates has been carried out and now the members of the observation mission will leave Caracas on Dec. 5," the mission said in a statement on Friday, adding it will return to the country at the beginning of 2022 to present its final report.

The electoral authority and the Foreign Ministry also did not respond to requests for comment.

The elections were a sweeping victory for the ruling Socialist party, which picked up 19 governorships, while opposition politicians claimed three.

The only race still to be decided is the governorship of Barinas state, a Socialist party stronghold.

The Supreme Court of Justice this week ordered a new vote because of a close race and disqualified opposition candidate Freddy Supperano. Incumbent Argenis Chavez has resigned as governor and said he will not seek re-election.

Israeli spyware Pegasus used

to hack into 11 US diplomats' phones: Reports



AFP

Apple Inc. notified at least 11 US diplomats that their iPhones have been hacked by unknown assailants using Pegasus spyware developed by the Israeli cyberarms firm NSO Group, according to multiple reports.

The revelation, the first confirmed cases of Israeli surveillance tools be-

ing used against US government officials, comes a month after Joe Biden's administration blacklisted the NSO Group following reports that Pegasus was implicated in cyberattacks on journalists, activists and politicians around the world, Press TV reported.

The hacks, which took place in the

last several months, mostly targeted US Embassy employees in Uganda, according to Reuters, which first reported the intrusions and said nine US diplomats were hacked.

The Associated Press and The Washington Post later reported that phone numbers of at least 11 US officials were compromised.

The cyberattacks represent the first known hacks of American officials through the NSO Group and raise serious questions about the use of Israeli spying tools against government officials worldwide.

"We have been acutely concerned that commercial spyware like NSO Group software poses a serious counterintelligence and security risk to US personnel," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at a briefing on Friday.

The Israeli company said in a statement that it was willing to cooperate with "any relevant government authority and present the full information" the firm might obtain as it investigates the matter.

It also reiterated that its spy tools are blocked from working on US

numbers, but said it had "no way to know" whom its customers will choose for hacking.

Apple recently launched a lawsuit against NSO, with reports saying that the tech giant was beginning to alert victims whose iPhones had been compromised by the Israeli hacking tool.

NSO produces sophisticated malware and makes them available to countries worldwide regardless of their own technical abilities.

Pegasus, the NSO's spyware, can hack into a mobile phone and intercept all communications, including encrypted messages. It can also turn any phone into a listening device and enable a Pegasus operator to remotely activate the targeted phone's recorder and camera.

In July, the Pegasus Project, a joint media investigation into NSO, revealed evidence of attacks against American journalists and others.

The phone numbers of top French officials, including President Emmanuel Macron and most of his cabinet, also appeared in a leaked database at the heart of the investigative project.

The investigation also found that senior US diplomat Robert Malley, who currently serves as the Biden administration's special envoy for Iran, appeared to have been selected as a person of interest by an NSO customer.

Omicron 'ultimate evidence' of danger of vaccination inequity: Red Cross

The emergence of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus is the "ultimate evidence" of the danger of unequal vaccination rates around the world, the head of the Red Cross said on Friday.

"The scientific community has warned the international community on several occasions about the risks of very new variants in places where there is a very low rate of vaccinations," Francesco Rocca, the president of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, told AFP in an interview in Moscow.

About 65 percent of people in high-income countries have had at least one dose of vaccine against the coronavirus, but just over seven percent in low-income countries, UN numbers show.

Western countries have been accused of hoarding vaccines and the WHO has urged them to avoid a rush to give out booster shots when millions worldwide have yet to receive a single dose.

"This is a selfish approach coming from the Western community, this is really a blind approach," Rocca said.

"It's unbelievable that we are still not realizing how much we are interconnected. This is why I call the Omicron variant the ultimate evidence."

Omicron, a heavily mutated version of the coronavirus, was first reported in South Africa on November 24 and is now present in more than two dozen countries.

It has sparked a wave of travel bans, cast the global economic recovery into doubt and led to warnings that it could

cause more than half of Europe's COVID cases in the next few months.

"It is essential and vital to identify new solutions, to find an end to the pandemic, and the only way is to vaccinate, so access for everyone, everywhere," Rocca said.

One option, he said, is suspending intellectual property rights for COVID-19 vaccines in order to boost production.

The idea has met with fierce opposition from pharmaceutical giants and their host countries, which insist patents are not the main roadblocks to scaling up production



AP

People are processed before receiving their job against COVID-19 at the Orange Farm, South Africa, on December 3, 2021.

and warn the move could hamper innovation. "It's a moral imperative. I'm not naive. I know that there are the pharmaceutical companies that are protecting their patents," Rocca said.

"The other side of the coin is that governments invested billions... in research. So I think it is immoral what is happening around the patents."

The IFRC, one of the world's largest humanitarian networks, supports local Red Cross and Red Crescent activities in 192 countries.

Belarus ready to end confrontation with West: FM

Belarus is ready to end confrontation with Western nations, Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei said, adding that Minsk has made firm proposals to that effect.

Makei made the remarks in an interview with the Belarus-1 TV channel on Saturday while commenting on his participation in the meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) foreign ministers in Stockholm, Press TV reported.

"What is said publicly during such public events is one thing. On the sidelines, however, our colleagues say that we all should make a stop and start thinking of how to stop fuelling tensions any further and prevent the situation from spiraling further down," Makei said.

"We are ready for that," he said during the interview. "We have made concrete proposals."

"Clearly, this won't happen immediately," the Belarusian top diplomat said, but added, "I think that there is always a way out of any situation, including out of this complicated situation in the current relations between Belarus and the European Union."

He went on to say that he had held talks with some of his Western colleagues on the sidelines of the Stockholm event, though he did not identify those diplomats.

The remarks came just a day after the Belarusian Foreign Ministry lashed out at the West for imposing fresh sanctions on Belarus after accusing Minsk of stoking a migrant crisis.

The US, Canada, and their European allies, which have accused Minsk of hijacking the crisis for "political reasons," decided on Thursday to broaden their restrictive economic measures targeting more Belarusian officials and businesses.

"The depth of the absurdity of the EU's decision on the latest sanctions against sovereign Belarus and its very content is by now difficult to comprehend," the ministry emphasized in an official statement that further censured the West for "demonizing" Belarus while vowing "tough" retaliatory measures.

Nearly 2,000 people camped out last month on the Belarus-Poland border in freezing conditions before the makeshift camp was cleared out by border guards and the migrants were moved to a logistics center.