

The world in brief

Catch up quickly on the global stories that matter



Photograph: AFP via Getty Images

America struck dozens of suspected **Islamic State** sites across central **Syria** in what Pete Hegseth, the war secretary, said was an operation to “eliminate” IS fighters and infrastructure. It reportedly involved fighter jets, attack helicopters and artillery salvos. Donald Trump had vowed to avenge the deaths of two American soldiers and an interpreter, who were killed on December 13th in Syria by a lone gunman suspected of being affiliated with IS.

America’s **Department of Justice** began releasing more **Epstein files** ahead of a [congressionally mandated deadline](#). The records—related to investigations into Jeffrey Epstein, a convicted sex offender who died in 2019—were published on a government website. Some are heavily redacted, and the DOJ is holding back files it says would compromise active cases. Todd Blanche, the deputy attorney-general, said more would be published in coming weeks.

Fielding questions at his marathon end-of-year press conference, President **Vladimir Putin** claimed that Russian troops were still advancing in **Ukraine**, seizing the “strategic initiative”. Mr Putin praised Donald Trump’s attempts to end the war. But he also said there would be no peace until the “root causes” of the conflict were

addressed. Russia demands that Ukraine cede large chunks of its eastern territory.

The **European Union** reached [a deal](#) to loan **Ukraine** €90bn (\$106bn) for the next two years, after marathon talks in Brussels. The bloc will raise joint debt backed by its budget. Ukraine will only return the funds once Russia pays reparations. EU leaders said they would continue to discuss the possibility of using frozen Russian assets to support the embattled country.

The **Trump administration** announced deals with nine pharmaceutical companies that will lower **drug prices** for some Americans. Patients who buy drugs through Medicaid (health care for the poor) or through a planned TrumpRx website (linking to manufacturers' direct-buy pages) will be charged prices [comparable](#) to those in other rich countries. In exchange the companies received three-year exemptions from threatened tariffs.

A UN-backed hunger monitor said that after an influx of humanitarian aid there is no longer famine in **Gaza**. Before the [ceasefire between Israel and Hamas](#) in October the same body had warned of a “man-made famine” in some parts of the strip. Even so, the organisation warned that “only basic survival needs are being met.”

The **International Court of Justice** said that in January it will hear a case in which **Myanmar** is accused of genocide. The Gambia brought the case to the UN’s top court in 2019, after the [forced expulsion](#) of over 700,000 Rohingyas from Myanmar two years earlier. The trial could establish precedents in the ICJ’s genocide case against Israel, brought by South Africa over the war in Gaza.

Figure of the day: **150,000**, the number of users of “Text with Jesus”, a chatbot featuring a well-groomed, hipsterish avatar for the Son of God. [Read the full story](#).



Photograph: AFP

A fragile peace in the Middle East

We are looking back on 2025. Today we are examining conflicts around the world.

After Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7th 2023, violence spread across the Middle East. Israel waged a ruthless war on the militant group in Gaza. It hammered Iran's proxies in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. And it traded missiles and drones with Iran itself.

This year the fighting reached a new level. In June Israel launched air strikes on Iran, intending to weaken the regime and its nuclear-weapons programme. [America joined the war](#), bombing Iran's most heavily fortified nuclear sites. After the strikes, Donald Trump imposed a ceasefire. He then turned his focus to Gaza. In October he [brokered a truce](#) between Israel and Hamas.

The Middle East has been transformed. Yet [much remains the same](#). Hamas, though weakened, is still a force. Gaza's [ceasefire looks fragile](#). The clerics remain in power in Iran. Israel, fearing Iran could revive its nuclear programme, could launch a second war to overthrow the regime. The region is braced for another uneasy year.



Photograph: AP

Slaughter rages in Sudan

Sudan has been locked in a devastating civil war since April 2023. In March this year there appeared to be a turning-point. The Sudanese Armed Forces recaptured the capital, Khartoum, from the Rapid Support Forces, the paramilitary group that has been fighting it for control of the country. The victory stirred hopes that the SAF might deal the RSF a final blow.

But the RSF fought back. In May it used drones to strike Port Sudan, the SAF's main base, for the first time. Then in October it captured el-Fasher, the capital of the western region of Darfur, after an 18-month siege. Its fighters perpetrated a murderous rampage in the city. So far, peace talks have failed. Donald Trump, eager for a Nobel peace prize, may try to force a quick-and-dirty truce next year. But the SAF and RSF both have incentives to keep fighting. The anarchy in Sudan could continue.





Photograph: US Navy Photo/Triniti Lersch

America's red-hot war on drugs

For years America's Caribbean bases were quiet. Then, suddenly, they were [abuzz with activity](#). This summer Donald Trump ordered naval vessels, fighter jets and drones to the region. In November the *uss Gerald R. Ford*, the world's largest aircraft-carrier, arrived. The American flotilla gathered in the Caribbean is the biggest since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

One reason for the build-up is Mr Trump's [bombing campaign](#) against suspected drug-smuggling boats from Colombia and Venezuela. Since September America's armed forces have killed at least 80 people in the Caribbean and the eastern Pacific. American lawmakers from both parties have warned that such strikes could be illegal, a charge the White House denies. The deployment is also intended to pile pressure on Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela's dictator, whom the Trump administration claims (with little evidence) is a drug kingpin. America is reportedly [seeking a deal](#) for Mr Maduro to leave power. If he does not, Mr Trump has refused to rule strikes on Venezuela itself.



Photograph: Reuters

Ukraine's agonising stalemate

Donald Trump has upended diplomacy over the war in Ukraine. America's president has repeatedly tried to force Ukraine to agree to a peace deal with Russia. At almost every stage he has put pressure on Ukraine, rather than its invader. In February he berated Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky. In August he invited Vladimir Putin, Russia's leader, to a summit in Alaska. Mr Trump's envoy, Steve Witkoff, has held negotiations with Russian officials since the start of the year.

These efforts have produced several peace plans. Yet despite the feverish activity, the talks have settled into a stalemate. With European countries now paying its bills, Ukraine is better able to resist Trumpian blackmail and defend its interests in negotiations. Russia's demands still amount to Ukraine's capitulation, which it will not accept. [On the battlefield](#), the fighting is deadlocked. Mr Putin hopes that Ukraine will eventually fold. But that is unlikely. Next year, [Russia's war of attrition](#) will probably grind on.



Russian-controlled

..... Jan 1st 2024 — Jan 1st 2025 — Dec 17th 2025

Sources: Institute for the Study of War; AEI's Critical Threats Project



Illustration: The Economist

Daily quiz

We will serve you a new question each weekday. On Friday your challenge is to give us all five answers and tell us the theme. Email your responses (and your home city and country) by 1700 GMT on Friday to [\[email protected\]](mailto:). We'll pick three winners at random and crown them on Saturday.

Thursday: Which Irish-set film won the Golden Globe for best musical or comedy film in January 2023?

Friday: Which insects, noted for their night-time chirping, featured in both a novella by Charles Dickens and the fairy tale, Pinocchio?

In such an ugly time, the true protest is beauty.

Phil Ochs