



MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin (right) shakes hands with French far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen, in the Kremlin in Moscow yesterday. — AP

RUSSIA'S PUTIN HOSTS FRENCH CONTENDER LE PEN IN KREMLIN

LE PEN SAYS SHE, PUTIN AND TRUMP REPRESENT A NEW WORLD

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin granted an audience to French far-right party leader Marine Le Pen in the Kremlin yesterday, bestowing a level of international recognition that has so far eluded her in the countdown to France's presidential election. Opinion polls show Le Pen, who has said she admires Putin, getting through to the second, decisive round of France's presidential election on May 7 but then losing to centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron.

Le Pen backs the lifting of the European Union's economic sanctions imposed on Russia over its role in the Ukraine conflict - a stance she reiterated yesterday.

"We attach great importance to our relations with France, but at the same time we try to maintain equal relations both with the current authorities and with representatives of the opposition," Putin told Le Pen at their meeting. "We do not want to influence events in any way, but we reserve the right to talk to representatives of all the country's political forces, just as our partners in Europe and the United States do." Putin added that Le Pen represented a range of political forces that was gaining momentum.

Le Pen's meeting with Putin is likely to go down well with her core supporters in France, many of whom admire the

Russian leader's conservative stance on social and moral issues. Other French voters, however, may be put off by her association with a leader widely seen in the West as autocratic.

'Fake news'

The meeting also showed that the Kremlin is not shying away from actions that could influence foreign elections, even after the storm over US intelligence agencies' allegations that Russia tried to interfere in the US presidential election to help Donald Trump win the White House. Russia has denied trying to influence the US vote, and has also dismissed allegations that Kremlin-funded media outlets are spreading "fake news" in an attempt to interfere in the French presidential race.

Putin would benefit from getting the sanctions lifted, especially as he is expected to seek a fourth term in office next year. They are curbing Russia's recovery from an economic slowdown caused by low oil prices. Le Pen's party took a 9-million-euro loan from a Moscow-based bank in 2014 and is actively seeking new sources of funding.

Speaking to reporters in a Moscow hotel after her meeting with Putin, Le Pen denied that she had discussed financial aid for her party, echoing an earlier denial from the Kremlin. Le Pen said the discussion had focused on what she said were shared Russian and French interests in the fight against Islamist terrorism. "A new world has emerged in these past years. It's the world of Vladimir Putin, it's the world of Donald Trump in the United States, it's the world of Mr (Narendra) Modi in India, and I think that probably I am the one who shares with these great nations a vision of cooperation and not a vision of submission." — Reuters

SERBIA SAYS NO TO NATO ON AIRSTRIKES ANNIVERSARY

BELGRADE: Serbia's prime minister pledged yesterday that the Balkan country will never join NATO or any other military alliance as Serbia marked the 18th anniversary of the start of NATO airstrikes that stopped its crackdown in Kosovo.

Aleksandar Vucic spoke at a ceremony near a railway bridge in southern Serbia where the Western military alliance's missiles struck a passenger train, killing at least 28 people and injuring dozens.

"We will never be part of the alliance which killed our children, nor of any other alliance," Vucic said. "They wanted to destroy and humiliate small Serbia and kill its children."

Anti-NATO sentiments run high in Serbia since the 78-day bombing in 1999 over a bloody crackdown by

Serbian forces against Kosovo Albanian separatists. Serbian officials claim that more than 2,000 people were killed in the airstrikes while independent estimates put that figure at about 800, mostly soldiers and police.

Some 10,000 people died and 1,660 are still missing from the 1998-1999 Kosovo war that ended with the NATO intervention and the withdrawal of Serbian troops from its former, majority ethnic Albanian-populated province. Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, which Serbia doesn't recognize. Although it is a member of a NATO outreach program and is formally seeking EU membership, Serbia has lately been boosting its military cooperation with Russia, which has agreed to deliver fighter jets, tanks and anti-aircraft systems. — AP

ICC AWARDS 'SYMBOLIC' \$250 EACH TO CONGO WAR CRIME VICTIMS

THE HAGUE: In its first such decision, the International Criminal Court yesterday awarded \$250 dollars as "symbolic" damages to each victim of a former Congolese warlord, a sum swiftly dismissed as meaningless by those who lost homes and loved ones in a militia attack on their village 14 years ago.

The reparations order was a landmark step for the tribunal, set up in 2002 to prosecute the world's worst atrocities, marking the first time it has placed monetary values on the harm caused by such crimes. Presiding judge Marc Perrin de Brichambaut acknowledged at the tribunal in The Hague that the amount of \$250 to each of the 297 victims of Germain Katanga "does not make up for the totality of the crimes", estimating the total damage caused at \$3.7 million.

But in unveiling the collective and individual reparations, he said he hoped it would bring some "measure of relief" and help victims in the Democratic Republic of Congo rebuild their lives.

The ICC sentenced Katanga to 12 years in jail in 2014 after convicting him of five charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity for the February 2003 ethnic attack on Bogoro, a village in troubled Ituri Province. He was accused of supplying weapons to his militia which went on a rampage, shooting and hacking to death with machetes some 200 people.

Katanga, who watched the proceedings by video-link from a jail in Kinshasa where he is on trial over separate charges, was also found liable for \$1 million in compensation, though the court recognised that he was penniless, or "indigent", and had no home or possessions.

It asked that he consider making a public apology or writing a letter to the victims, or even attending a public reconciliation ceremony.

'Two days of beer'

"These individual reparations don't have any symbolic value. Today \$250 doesn't mean anything in the DRC," Salomon Kisebho Byaruhanga, a local tribal chief, told AFP. "Those who will get it will most likely waste it all away on beer in two days," he added, saying it would be far better to rebuild a village or construct a memorial. Perrin de Brichambaut said the court had assessed the total damage at \$3,752,620, and said collective reparations should go towards projects to help the victims with housing, education and "income-generating activities".

The court asked the Trust Fund for Victims, an independent body set up under the tribunal's founding guidelines, to consider using its resources to pay for the reparations and to come up with a plan by late June. Court officials said the fund could release up to \$1 million for reparations in the case. Legal representatives for the victims had assessed the damage at \$16.4 million in a filing to the court last year. They calculated that 228 homes were destroyed, that the school was lost and that hundreds of cattle and other livestock had fled or been killed.

In its ruling, also watched via video-link by victims in Bunia, the provincial capital of Ituri Province, the court set the cost of each destroyed Bogoro home at \$600, while the value of each harvest lost that year was \$150. Victims who suffered psychological harm after the death of a loved one were entitled to \$8,000 for a close family member, or \$4,000 for a more distant relative.

'We've buried our dead'

"What will \$250 change in our lives?" asked Jean Bosco Lalo, a coordinator for the Ituri Civil Society group of local associations. "Our communities have already turned the page. Everyone has rebuilt their homes. We've buried our dead."

The Trust Fund for Victims has \$5 million available, of which \$1 million has been set aside for the case of Thomas Lubanga, sentenced in 2012 to 14 years for conscripting child soldiers in the DRC. In October, judges approved "symbolic reparations" to create a "living memorial" to remember and raise awareness about child soldiers. But a final decision on collective reparations for Lubanga's victims is still awaited. — AFP