

International

Belarus warns against new EU sanctions, says could cut gas

EU expect to approve new sanctions over migrant crisis

SOKOLKA: Belarus's strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko vowed yesterday to respond to any new sanctions imposed over the migrant crisis on the country's border with Poland, including by potentially cutting off the transit of natural gas to Europe. "If they impose additional sanctions on us... we must respond," Lukashenko said in comments to officials released by the presidency.

"We are warming Europe, and they are threatening us," he said, pointing out that Russia's Yamal-Europe gas pipeline transits through Belarus to Poland. "And what if we halt natural gas supplies?" Pressure is building to address the plight of hundreds of migrants, mainly Kurds from the Middle East, who are stuck at the Belarus-Poland border in freezing weather.

The UN Security Council was to meet later for emergency talks on the crisis, after international appeals to deal with the refugees' plight. The West accuses Lukashenko of luring the migrants to Belarus to send them across the border, in revenge for sanctions imposed last year after a heavy crackdown on the opposition.

EU officials say they expect to approve new sanctions over the migrant crisis next week. "We are in a situation in which the proper consequences (for Minsk) are overdue. This is what we want, together with our European partners," German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said yesterday.

'New kind of war'

Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei said Minsk wanted the crisis "resolved as quickly as possible" and was ready to talk to the EU, but the bloc was refusing dialogue. Poland has deployed 15,000 troops along the border, put up a fence topped with barbed wire

and approved construction of a wall on the frontier with Belarus.

In a statement released for Poland's Independence Day yesterday, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said his country was facing a "new kind of war" whose "ammunition is civilians". Poland accuses Belarus of using intimidation to force migrants to breach the frontier and refusing to allow them to leave border areas.

Belarus has in turn accused Poland of violating international norms by blocking the migrants and violently beating them back. Migrants have been trying to cross the border for months but the crisis came to a head when hundreds made a concerted effort on Monday and were pushed back by Polish borders guards.

They set up a camp on the border, sheltering in tents and burning wood from local forests to keep warm, blocked by Polish guards behind razor-wire. Belarus says some 2,000 people are living at the camp.

The migrants have been making sporadic attempts to cross, with border guards reporting 468 attempts overnight yesterday. Journalists and charity workers have been banned from the immediate border area by Polish authorities under state of emergency rules.

Fear in Polish town

Residents in the Polish town of Sokolka near the border said they were worried by the growing tensions but voiced support for the Polish government's tough stance. "I'm afraid of the migrants getting through and what the consequences would be," said Henryk Lenkiewicz, a 67-year-old pensioner walking by a community noticeboard in the town centre.

"The residents here are under constant stress," said the deputy mayor, Piotr Romanow-

Bomb wounds 11 university students in Cameroon

YAOUNDE: A homemade bomb thrown through the roof of a university lecture hall wounded 11 students on Wednesday, the vice-chancellor said, in an English-speaking region of Cameroon in the grip of a bloody separatist conflict. University of Buea vice-chancellor Horace Ngomo Manga that "the device fell to the ground and exploded".

One boy and 10 girls were wounded, he told state radio CRTV, adding that all were in a stable condition. He did not elaborate on the nature of the bomb or who might have thrown it.

Buea is the capital of Cameroon's Southwest region. Both the Southwest and Northwest regions are mainly English-speaking in the otherwise predomi-

nantly French-speaking central African country. A decades-long campaign by militants to redress perceived discrimination at the hands of the francophone majority flared into a declaration of independence on October 1, 2017, sparking a crackdown by security forces. The conflict has claimed more than 3,500 lives and forced 700,000 people to flee their homes, according to NGO estimates that have not been updated in more than a year despite an escalation in violence in recent months.

The United Nations and international organisations regularly denounce abuses and crimes committed against civilians by both sides. Wednesday's bombing has not been claimed, but the anglophone separatists have regularly attacked schools and universities which they accuse of favouring French-language education. The separatists have also recently ramped up attacks on the country's armed forces using improvised explosive devices. In September, a Buea court sentenced four men to death over the killing of seven schoolchildren a year before, however Human Rights Watch called the trial a "sham". —AFP



BERLIN: This combination created on November 10, 2021 of file pictures shows (L-R) Russian President Vladimir Putin (on July 4, 2019 in Rome), the President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko (on November 12, 2019 in Vienna) and Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (on February 20, 2020 in Brussels). Poland said it had seen a surge in attempts to breach its border and had pushed back hundreds of migrants to Belarus. — AFP

ic. Thousands of migrants have also crossed or attempted to cross from Belarus into the eastern EU member states of Latvia and Lithuania in recent months.

At least 10 migrants have died on the Poland-Belarus border, seven of them on the Polish side, according to the Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza. The EU in a statement late Wednesday called for humanitarian organisations to get "immediate and unhindered" access to those needing aid.

European leaders have been putting pressure on Lukashenko's main backer, Russian President Vladimir Putin. German Chancellor Angela Merkel telephoned Putin on Wednesday to ask

him "to use his influence" to stop what she called an "inhumane" instrumentalisation of migrants.

Poland has accused Putin of masterminding the crisis, a claim the Kremlin has dismissed as "irresponsible". France's Europe Minister Clement Beaune said Thursday there was no evidence that Russia was involved in trafficking migrants, adding it should be "part of the solution because Belarus is more and more dependent on Moscow".

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Wednesday accused the West of mounting an "anti-Belarusian campaign", and said Russia and Belarus had "closely coordinated our approaches" to countering it. —AFP

Mozambique sacks defence, interior ministers

MAPUTO: Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi has fired his defence and interior ministers, questioning their competence as the country battles a four-year Islamist insurgency. Nyusi's office issued a terse statement on Wednesday announcing that the defence minister Jaime Neto had been "relieved" of his duties.

A day earlier, a similar statement announced the sacking of interior minister Amade Muquidade. No explanation was given for the dismissal of the two key ministers, appointed just under two years ago.

But on Wednesday Nyusi gave a hint. "A

leader or commander in the area of defense and security cannot afford to sleep (on the job), especially during war times," he said in an address before a military sergeants' graduation ceremony.

"The positions you hold do not allow you to be distracted. Your responsibilities are clear, the armed forces must defend the nation," he said in the capital Maputo. Dozens of soldiers were recently arrested on suspicion of ransacking commercial banks during the jihadist attack on the port city of Palma in March this year.

Until recently when foreign forces deployed to help, the Mozambican army had struggled to fight off the brutal Islamist insurgency. Since July, more than 3,100 African, European and US soldiers have been deployed to the Cabo Delgado province to quell the unrest. At least 3,340 people have been killed and more than 800,000 other displaced there since 2017. —AFP