

## International

# Sri Lanka parliament speaker warns crisis risks starvation

## Crowds attempt to storm homes of several government figures

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's crippling economic crisis risks starvation across the island nation of 22 million while acute shortages and blackouts will get worse, the speaker of parliament warned Wednesday. Scarce supplies of food and fuel, along with record inflation and blackouts, have inflicted widespread misery in the country's most painful downturn since independence from Britain in 1948.



More than 60 people arrested

Public anger is at a fever pitch, with crowds attempting to storm the homes of several government figures—including President Gotabaya Rajapaksa—and large demonstrations elsewhere. Mahinda Yapa Abeywardana told legislators that more hardships were to come.

"We are told this is the worst crisis, but I think this is just the beginning," Abeywardana said at the start of a two-day debate on the worsening economic woes. "The food, gas and electricity shortages will get worse. There will be very acute food shortages and starvation." Security forces have dispersed protests with tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets, but a state of emergency imposed by the president last week to quell demonstrations was lifted at midnight.

More than 60 people had been arrested in connection with unrest and many have said they were tortured in police custody. Legislators had pushed for a debate on the emergency decree during this week's session of parliament, where the government has lost its majority after the desertion of political allies—several of whom have since called for Rajapaksa's resignation.



COLOMBO: Police officers try to stop medical students as they protest against Sri Lanka's crippling economic crisis, outside the Health Ministry in Colombo on April 6, 2022. — AFP

Opposition parties had already rejected the president's overture to form a unity administration after the resignation of nearly the entire cabinet late on Sunday. But there has so far been no clear signal that opposition legislators will attempt a no-confidence motion to topple the Rajapaksa administration.

### Prior warnings

A critical foreign currency shortage has left Sri Lanka struggling to import essential goods, with the pandemic torpedoing vital revenue from tourism and remittances. Rating agencies have warned of a potential default on Sri Lanka's \$51 billion foreign debt, and authorities are unable to raise more commercial loans because of credit downgrades.

Economists say the crisis has been exacerbated by government mismanagement, years of accumulated borrowing and ill-advised tax cuts. Agriculture ministry secretary Udith Jayasinghe warned in December that the country could face a famine due to the government's decision to ban agrochemical imports last year. The decision, taken in an apparent effort to shore up foreign currency reserves, saw farmers leave their fields barren instead of toiling over crops without the aid of fertiliser and pesticides. Jayasinghe was sacked within hours of issuing his warning.

Sri Lanka has said it will seek an IMF bailout to overcome the crisis but negotiations are yet to begin, and the country's latest finance minister resigned Tuesday after just one day in office.—AFP

## Former Amnesty India chief stopped from leaving country

NEW DELHI: Amnesty International's former India chief said Wednesday he was stopped from flying to the United States because of government legal action against the human rights watchdog. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration has long been accused of trying to silence critics, and activists say they have been targeted for harassment since he took office in 2014.

Aakar Patel said he was stopped from boarding his flight to the United States at the airport in the southern city of Bangalore because he was on an "exit control list". He wrote on Twitter that he was then contacted by the country's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and told he was prevented from leaving "because of the case Modi govt has filed against Amnesty International India".

Amnesty has been a vocal critic of the Modi government's treatment of minorities and alleged abuses by Indian security forces in the disputed territory of Kashmir. It halted its India operations in 2020 after the government froze its bank accounts in what the group said was part of an official "witch hunt".

Amnesty's Bangalore offices had been raided two years earlier by the Enforcement Directorate, which investigates financial crimes in India. The group had also faced sedition charges, later dropped, over a 2016 event to discuss human rights violations in Kashmir. Amnesty on Wednesday called on Indian authorities to allow Patel to fly.

"For Aakar, who dares to raise his voice peacefully and consistently against injustice, a travel ban is nothing but retaliation from the Indian government against his activism," said the watchdog's deputy secretary general Kyle Ward.

Last week, prominent Indian activist and writer Rana Ayyub was prevented from flying to London to speak about the intimidation of journalists in India. Ayyub, a fierce government critic, tweeted that she was stopped at Mumbai airport because of a probe into an alleged money laundering case against her. Delhi's high court on Monday gave the 37-year-old permission to fly.—AFP



Aakar Patel

## India backs probe into Ukraine civilian deaths

NEW DELHI: India's foreign minister said Wednesday he was "deeply disturbed" by civilian deaths in the Ukrainian city of Bucha but stopped short of blaming Russia, calling for an independent probe. New Delhi has historically close ties with Moscow and has refrained from condemning its invasion of its ex-Soviet neighbour, abstaining in several UN votes and hosting Russia's foreign minister for talks in India last week.

The discovery of hundreds of civilians found dead in areas from which Russian troops have withdrawn has sparked global outrage, with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky describing them as "war crimes" and "genocide".

Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar told parliament Wednesday that India was "deeply disturbed" and "strongly condemned the killings". "This is an extremely serious matter and we support the call for an independent investigation," he added.

The Kremlin has said that the images were fakes produced by the Ukrainian army or that the deaths occurred after its soldiers pulled out. India, the world's largest democracy, has been under intense Western pressure to take a tougher line on Russia, with US President Joe Biden calling Delhi "somewhat shaky". Last week saw a flurry of diplomatic visits to India, including Washington's chief sanctions strategist and Britain's foreign secretary. On Tuesday Jaishankar spoke by phone with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited New Delhi last Thursday and Friday, praising India for not taking a "one-side" approach. Western financial sanctions aimed at isolating Russia have reportedly made it difficult for India to pay Russia for imports and the two are reportedly working on a rupee-ruble mechanism to facilitate trade.

Harsh V Pant, a New Delhi-based analyst, told AFP that there has been "a gradual evolution in India's position" on the invasion. "While earlier India was only talking about a diplomatic resolution, it is now asking to fix responsibility for specific actions," Pant said.

Manoj Joshi with the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi said that the latest comments "could be interpreted as a slight shift in India's position." "But given the humanitarian situation in Ukraine it was the most logical reaction. They couldn't have said anything else publicly," Joshi told AFP. India, however, is in a tricky spot since the Ukraine crisis has pushed Russia closer to China. Delhi shares Western alarm over China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, and is a member of the so-called Quad alliance with the United States, Japan and Australia.—AFP

## US approves \$95m sale of missile systems to Taiwan

WASHINGTON: The US announced Tuesday it has approved the sale of up to \$95 million worth of training and equipment to support Taiwan's Patriot missile defense system, something Taipei said would help protect the island from any invasion by China.

"The proposed sale will help to sustain (Taiwan's) missile density and ensure readiness for air operations," the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency said in a statement. It added Taiwan will use the proposed training and equipment as a "deterrent to regional threats and to strengthen homeland defense."

Taiwan's foreign ministry welcomed the arms deal—the third approved under US President Joe Biden.

"In the face of China's continuing military expansion and provocation, Taiwan must fully demonstrate its strong determination to defend itself," it said in a statement. "Our government will continue to strengthen our self-defense and asymmetric combat capabilities."

Taiwan's defense ministry said the deal is expected to take effect in one month. The latest arms purchase comes as Taiwan closely watches the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, as it also lives under the constant threat of an invasion by a giant neighbor. The Chinese foreign ministry on Wednesday condemned the deal, saying it "severely harms US-China relations, and the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait."

"China will take resolute and forceful measures to resolutely defend its own sovereignty and security interests," spokesman Zhao Lijian said without elaborating. Beijing has sanctioned US defense giants—including Boeing Defense, Lockheed Martin and Raytheon—for selling arms to Taiwan.

China regards Taiwan as its territory and has vowed repeatedly to seize it one day, by force if necessary.

Beijing has ramped up its sabre-rattling in recent years, sending 969 Chinese warplanes into Taiwan's air defense zone in 2021, according to a database compiled by AFP—more than double the roughly 380 in 2020.

Taiwan has recorded about 280 warplanes entering the zone this year. Western powers, including regional neighbors Japan and South Korea, have looked on with growing alarm at Beijing's designs on Taiwan under President Xi Jinping, China's most authoritarian leader in a generation.—AFP



BRASILIA: Young Brazilian students talk after classes at a public school in Brasilia. The vote of young people aged 16 and 17 in Brazil was instituted as an option in the 1988 Constitution. With seven months to go before the elections, voter turnout among this age group is threatening to become the lowest in 30 years.—AFP

## Young voters blase on Brazil elections

BRASILIA, Brazil: Not only is this the year Brazilian teenager Rodrigo Kutz turns old enough to vote, the almost-16-year-old gets to cast his first ballot in a clutch presidential election. Only thing is, he couldn't care less—like a lot of young Brazilians, who could make up a key voter demographic in the October contest... if only they were interested.

A deeply divided Brazil is heading for a clash of the titans in six months' time, likely to face a stark choice between polar opposites: far-right incumbent Jair Bolsonaro and his nemesis, leftist ex-president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. But "I don't like either of them," says Kutz, a high school student in the capital, Brasilia.

"Maybe a younger candidate would make more sense to me. I hope there will be other options next time around." Brazil is one of just nine countries where 16-year-olds have the right to vote in national elections.

They also have the right not to. Voting is mandatory in Brazil, but only for 18-and-ups. With a month to go for voters to register, 16- and 17-year-olds look set to participate at the lowest rate in 30 years. Just 850,000 have registered so far, down 60 percent in a decade.

At the last elections, in 2018, 1.4 million voters from the youngest demographic turned out. "My parents have been telling me I should vote, but I'm not really into politics," says Eduardo Proenca, 16. "I just see politicians fighting over which one's the least awful. It doesn't really inspire me."

### Neglected demographic

There is not much that is youthful or new about the 2022 race, which looks set to pit the 67-year-old who has led Brazil for the past four years against the 76-year-old who led the country from 2003 to 2010. But figures ranging from pop superstar Anitta to the electoral authorities themselves are trying to get young voters more involved. "You wanna ask me for a picture when you meet me someplace? If you're over 16, I'll

only take a picture if you've got one of your voter registration card," Anitta, a vocal Bolsonaro critic, tweeted recently.

The Supreme Electoral Tribunal has meanwhile launched a social media campaign with a diverse crowd of hip young models telling teens, "Bora votar"—slang for "Let's go vote." "Young people need to get involved to decide our future," the tribunal's top judge, Edson Fachin, told AFP by email. "The worst vote is the one that doesn't get cast."

But the cheerleaders of democracy are up against the apathy of young voters alienated by years of seemingly bottomless corruption scandals and a pandemic-battered economy that has left them out, said political scientist Marco Antonio Teixeira of the Getulio Vargas Foundation. In 2020, at the height of the crisis, some 30 percent of Brazilian youths were neither employed nor in school. Brazilian political parties have also done a bad job involving the next generation, Teixeira said. "They're very hierarchical spaces dominated by the leadership and traditional political families. They're completely passive when it comes to young people," he said.

### 'Extremist views'

Eighteen-year-old Marco Antonio May will have to vote under Brazilian law—but doesn't want to. "If it were up to me, I wouldn't go," he says. "I don't see politicians worrying much about us (young people). Brazil has two dominant candidates who usually have extremist views on everything, and I just find that uninspiring."

The two front-runners have been trying to reach out to young voters, especially Bolsonaro. The president called on "parents and grandparents" to help get teens out to vote against Lula, urging them to explain to kids "where Brazil was going" when it was governed by the ex-steelworker and his hand-picked successor, Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016)—a period that ended with Brazil's economic boom going catastrophically bust amid a tsunami of corruption scandals.

But Bolsonaro is trailing in the polls, and fares even worse among young voters. Lula leads him by 29 percentage points among 16- to 24-year-olds, according to a recent poll from the Datafolha institute, which put the gap between the candidates at 17 percentage points for the electorate as a whole.—AFP