

International

Russia backs Myanmar junta's efforts to 'stabilise' country, hold elections

Polls to take place when conflict-wracked country is stable and peaceful

YANGON: Russia backs the Myanmar junta's efforts to "stabilise" the crisis-wracked country and hold elections next year, its foreign minister said in talks with top generals on Wednesday, according to Russian state media. The Southeast Asian nation has been in turmoil since the putsch last year, with the junta accused by rights groups of committing war crimes as it struggles to crush resistance to its rule. Isolated internationally and with Western governments imposing sanctions, the military government has sought to deepen ties with major ally and arms supplier Russia-whose invasion of Ukraine it has said was "justified".

"We are in solidarity with the efforts [by the junta] aimed at stabilising the situation in the country," Sergei Lavrov said during talks in Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw, according to the TASS news agency. "Next year, you will hold legislative elections and we wish you success," Lavrov added, referring to proposed August 2023 elections that opponents of the coup have said will be neither free nor fair.

On Monday junta chief Min Aung Hlaing—who trav-



NAYPYIDAW, Myanmar: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov shaking hands with Myanmar Min Aung Hlaing, Senior General and Chairman of the State Administration Council in Naypyidaw. — AFP

Lavrov is scheduled to travel on to an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) foreign ministers' meeting in Cambodia from which the junta's top diplomat has been excluded. The bloc joined a chorus of international outrage last week after the junta announced it had executed four prisoners, including a former lawmaker and a democracy activist, in the country's first use of capital punishment in decades.

'Disappointed and disturbed'

ASEAN has been growing increasingly frustrated at Myanmar's lack of progress on a five-point peace plan agreed last year. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen—the current ASEAN chair—on Wednesday warned Myanmar against further hangings.

He said the regional bloc was "disappointed and disturbed" by last month's executions, and that the further use of capital punishment would mean a "rethink" of the

five-point peace plan. Isolated on the international stage, the junta has turned increasingly to allies including China and Russia. Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing was in Moscow on a "private" visit in July and reportedly met with officials from Moscow's space agency Roscosmos and nuclear agencies. In Naypyidaw, Lavrov said Roscosmos would build "new infrastructure" in Myanmar in cooperation with the junta.

The army has justified its power grab by alleging massive fraud during the 2020 elections, in which Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) trounced a military-backed party. Last year, it cancelled the results of the polls, saying it had uncovered more than 11 million instances of voter fraud.

International observers said the voting was largely free and fair. More than 2,100 people have been killed in a military crackdown on dissent, according to a local monitor. — AFP

S Lanka arrests protest leader Joseph Stalin

COLOMBO: A top Sri Lankan trade union leader in the forefront of protests which led to the ousting of Gotabaya Rajapaksa from the presidency was arrested Wednesday, witnesses and officials said. Joseph Stalin, the secretary of the Sri Lanka Teachers' Union, becomes the senior most activist to be arrested in a crackdown against protesters forced Rajapaksa to flee last month. "He is being arrested for holding a demonstration in May in violation of a court order," police told reporters at Stalin's union office in Colombo as he was being detained. Scores of others have already been remanded in custody by police on charges of damage to public property during months of protests which peaked with the storming of Rajapaksa's palace on July 9.

Tens of thousands of people incensed by the island nation's economic crisis stormed Rajapaksa's palace and his seafront office-forcing him to flee the country and later resign. Rajapaksa's successor, Ranil Wickremesinghe, has drawn a distinction between "protesters" and "rioters" and vowed tough action against "any trouble maker." Police also arrested another protester who had raided the liquor cabinet of the deposed leader, downed a beer and took off with a presidential mug. The 43-year-old man's arrest comes after he shared a photo of himself on Facebook at Colombo's Presidential Palace, a police official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The man was arrested earlier this week for alleged unlawful entry into a state building and retaining stolen property. "He will be brought to Colombo to stand trial," the official said. The palace was occupied for about 10 days before it was handed back to the authorities. Last week, police arrested another trade union activist from the Colombo port for removing two official flags from the palace and using them as a bedsheet and a sarong. He was identified from the videos he had shared on social media.

Sri Lanka's 22 million people have endured months of lengthy blackouts, record inflation and shortages of food, fuel and petrol. Rajapaksa had been blamed by protesters for mismanaging the nation's finances and public anger had simmered for months before the mass demonstrations that forced his ouster.—AFP

New HK chief among world's highest paid politicians

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's new leader John Lee received a salary bump that would make him among the world's highest-paid politicians, according to figures provided by his office Wednesday, even as the financial hub's economy undergoes a downturn.

The government announced this week that its economy has tipped into a technical recession, after being battered by the pandemic, mounting interest rates and weakened global trade. Despite the city's dip in fortunes, the chief executive will still be comfortably compensated, according to figures provided by his office.

The former secretary chief, who assumed office in July, is paid HK\$452,200 (\$58,000) a month, and will

First Ukrainian grain shipment checks in Turkey

ISTANBUL: A Russian and Ukrainian team on Wednesday completed a high-stakes inspection of the first shipment of grain from Ukraine since the Kremlin's invasion five months ago helped spark a global food crisis. The checks aboard the Sierra Leone-flagged Razoni in Istanbul were being watched closely for signs of how well the first agreement signed by Moscow and Kyiv since Russia invaded its pro-Western neighbour can hold. A deal brokered by Turkey and the United Nations last month lifted a Russian naval blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea cities and set terms for millions of tonnes of wheat and other grain to start flowing from Ukraine's filled silos and ports.

Ukraine exports roughly half of the sunflower oil used on the world market and is one of the world's main suppliers of grain. An almost complete halt to its exports helped push up global food prices and make imports prohibitively expensive in some of the poorest countries in the world.

The Razoni is due to deliver more than 26,000 tonnes of maize to Lebanon—a crisis-wracked country that imports more than 80 percent of its wheat from Ukraine and Russia. The ship sailed through a specially designated corridor in the mine-infested waters of the Black Sea before reaching the northern edge of the Bosphorus Strait on Tuesday. A team of 20 inspectors from the two warring parties and the UN and Turkey strapped on orange helmets and boarded the ship early Wednesday for a check that officials said lasted less than 90 minutes.



ISTANBUL: Sierra Leone-flagged cargo vessel Razoni sails along the Bosphorus Strait past Istanbul. A team of Russian and Ukrainian officials inspected the first shipment of grain exported from Ukraine since Moscow's invasion. — AFP

Arms depot

The 186-metre (610-foot) long vessel is now due to sail down the Bosphorus Strait in the heart of Istanbul before moving on to the Marmara and Aegean seas. The UN secretary general's spokesman, Stéphane Dujarric, said he hoped for "more outbound movement" from Ukraine on Wednesday.

Kyiv says at least 16 more grain ships are waiting to depart. But it also accuses Russia of stealing Ukrainian grain in territories seized by Kremlin forces and then shipping it to allied countries such as Syria. But Turkish hopes that the grain deal could help build trust and lead to ceasefire talks have so far proved futile.

Russia has continued to pound southern Ukrainian cities near the Black Sea with missiles and pressed on with its grinding ground assault across the east. Officials in Mykolaiv said no one was killed Wednesday in shelling on one of the southern city's supermarkets that came just days after the region's grain mogul and his wife died in a targeted strike on their house.

Moscow said on Wednesday that it had destroyed another foreign arms depot in western Ukraine—a region the furthest removed from the fighting. Kyiv has launched mandatory evacuations from the eastern Donetsk region—now bearing the brunt of Russia's offensive—because the government does not expect to be able to provide it with heat in the cold winter months.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has urged the estimated 200,000 remaining residents of the Donetsk region to leave. Kyiv's forces have been pressing a counter-offensive to drive out the Russians from the southern Kherson region near the Kremlin-annexed Crimea peninsula.—AFP

receive an entertainment allowance of over \$10,000 as well, his office told AFP Wednesday. His salary is a step-up from that of his predecessor Carrie Lam, who used to earn around \$54,000 a month.

This means Lee earns more than US President Joe Biden—whose annual salary is \$400,000—and is second only to Singaporean leader Lee Hsien Loong, who nets around \$1.6 million a year.

The 64-year-old was chosen for Hong Kong's top job earlier this year after running unopposed, with his campaign receiving around \$1.4 million in donations.

Like Lam, he is also subject to sanctions by the United States for his role in China's ongoing crackdown on freedoms in the city.

Lam once revealed she had "piles of cash" at home as she was denied banking services due to the US sanctions. It is unclear whether Lee receives his salary in cash. But he has on multiple occasions denounced the American sanctions as "bullying" and said he paid them no attention. The Chinese city regularly tops the chart as one of the most expensive cities to live in, with world-beating levels of wealth inequality. — AFP

Militias have sprung up to battle the army

elled to Moscow last month—said polls could only take place when the conflict-wracked country was "stable and peaceful". The putsch has sparked renewed fighting with established ethnic rebel groups in border areas, while dozens of civilian "People's Defence Force" militias have also sprung up to battle the military.

Russia—along with ally China—has been accused by rights groups and a UN expert of arming the military with weapons used to attack civilians. Lavrov and junta chief Min Aung Hlaing also discussed opening new consulates "to promote an increase in travel" between their two countries, TASS said.

The junta has yet to comment on Lavrov's visit.



LAGOS: Hustlers wait for customers outside a night club at Ikoyi Lagos. — AFP

Hustling in Lagos to 'survive in hell'

LAGOS: It's midnight. Luxury cars arrive outside Cocoon, a nightclub in Lagos, Nigeria's largest and most vibrant city. In minutes, dozens of people surround the vehicles, hoping to make a buck. In the wealthy Ikoyi neighbourhood, the flow of people chasing money never stops. All survive on informal jobs they find daily on the streets.

For a handful of dollars, they help people park in front of expensive restaurants, bars and clubs, and help manage traffic during the day. In the megacity of some 20 million people, for the poorest a good day is when you have enough to eat. A bad day is when you don't—and those days are increasingly frequent as high fuel and food costs bite into earnings.

"In Nigeria, it's simple. Either you hustle or you die. So even 100 naira (25 cents), we take it," says Musa Omar, standing opposite the Cocoon nightclub. Africa's most populous country has some 80 million people living below the national poverty line, earning less than 1.90 dollars a day. And in rural Nigeria, millions live in areas where insecurity is rife, making living conditions even harsher. Many are now being pushed to a tipping point, after cost of living and food prices increased following the coronavirus pandemic and then again after Russia declared war in Ukraine.

Nigeria's official year-on-year inflation is now 18 percent, with food inflation at 20 percent—a five-year high. In Lagos, hustlers—people living and working by the day—can be seen at every corner. They embody one of the city's mottos often seen painted in colourful letters on trucks: "No food for lazy man."

The street is like a river, and they hope desperately to catch a passing fish. "I'm willing to work anywhere, to do anything, to make a decent living," said Omar, 36. "Before, it was not like this... prices have gone up, everything is expensive and everybody is suffering."

God, only 'hope'

Every day, thousands of people, mostly young, trickle into the cities and in particular Lagos, hoping to capture a small fraction of the immense wealth concentrated in the hands of a select few. It's the case of Kasheem Sadiq who left Kaduna, in the north, after

the death of his baby son, Yusuf, who "got sick". "I had to find 9,000 naira (about \$20) to pay the treatment but I couldn't because price of food is up. And there is no job anywhere," said the 44-year-old, standing under the only functioning light of a dark street of Lagos.

Now working in Lagos, he says he earns about 2,500 naira (\$6) a day—almost three times more than what half of the population earns—but, "every night, I'm crying, away from my family," he said. It's now 2.20 am outside the Cocoon nightclub. Someone in a Porsche is trying to park while a group of hustlers guide the driver so that he doesn't crash the luxury car in a ditch full of trash. "The rich are getting so rich and nobody cares about the poor," says Abdul Musa, 35, who seems to be the hustlers' informal chief. "Only God can help us."

Drugs, prostitution

From Benue, in the east, Musa has been working the streets of Ikoyi for the past five years. He says he sleeps in a stable at night with donkeys. "I don't want to have children," he says. In this country, "we are surviving in hell."

Five am Clubbers are streaming out, heading back to their cars. It's late, or early, but someone shouting the following three syllables is enough to arouse the crowd: "Bu-ha-ri", in reference to President Muhammadu Buhari.

The 79-year-old former army general is stepping down next year after his two terms in office allowed by the constitution. For many including for those waiting outside Cocoon, the government is "corrupt" and "does nothing for the people". Anita Obasi, the only woman in the group of hustlers, is looking at the stream of cars driving away, smoking a joint. In Nigeria, drugs are widely consumed among the street hustlers as a way to escape reality.

Wearing a black cap, the 24-year-old smiles. She says smoking "eases the pain away". For the past two years, she has been working as a prostitute, charging the equivalent of \$9 a client or \$11 when she travels to them. After two decades of growth, Nigeria entered a recession in 2016, after a fall in oil prices. The economy was just starting to recover in 2020 when the pandemic hit. And the war in Ukraine has made everything much worse. Obasi lives in constant anguish: Will she be able to feed her daughter at the end of the day? "I try thinking about the bright side of things, but everything around me is going down." — AFP