

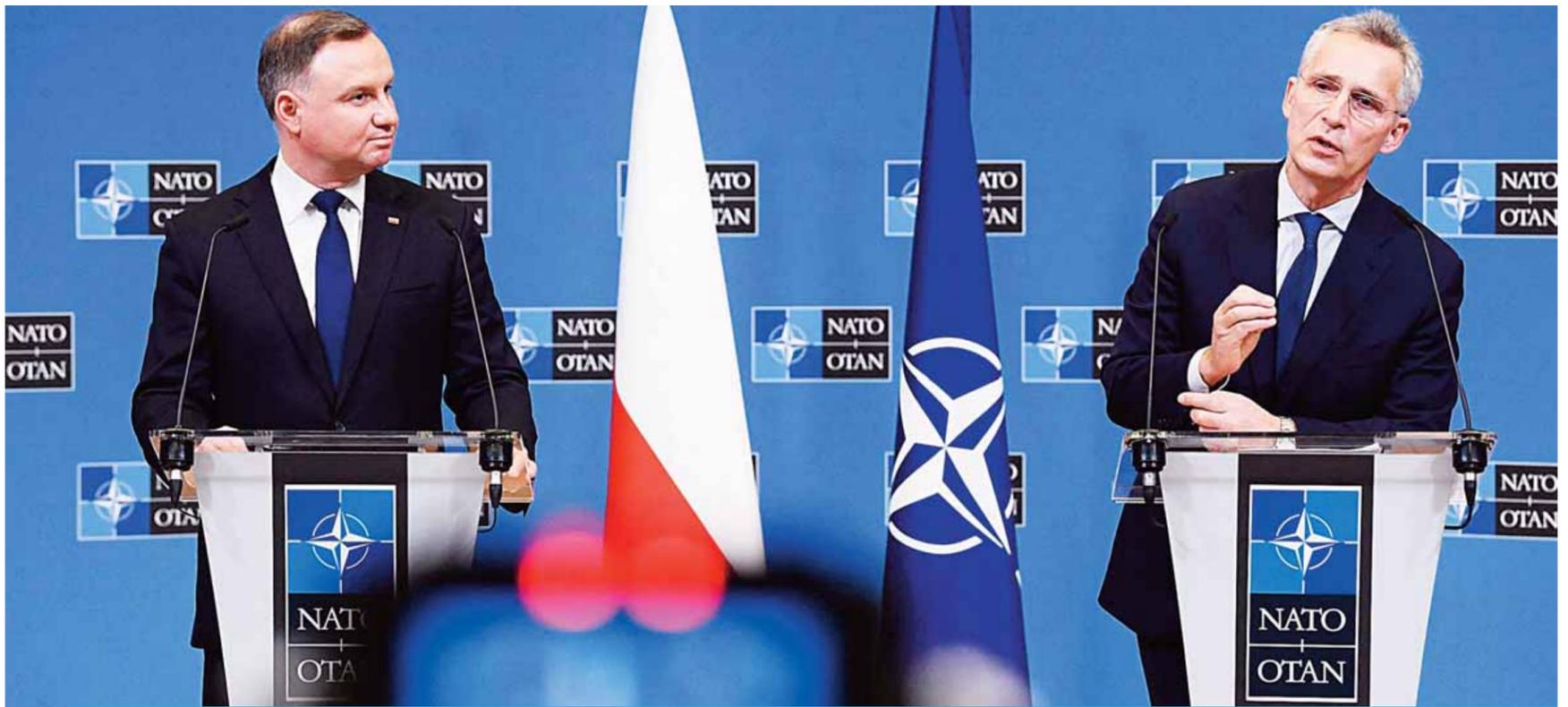


China locks down city of 3.5m near Vietnam border

Family denounces 'show trial' of German held in Iran

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BRUSSELS: NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (R) and Polish President Andrzej Duda (L) give press conference after their meeting at NATO headquarters in Brussels yesterday. —AFP

Diplomatic flurry to avert Russia-NATO clash

German, Czech, Slovak and Austrian foreign ministers expected in Kyiv

MOSCOW: With war clouds gathering over Ukraine, international diplomacy goes into overdrive yesterday with the French and Russian presidents to talk in Moscow and the German chancellor heading to the White House to meet with US leader Joe Biden.

Also yesterday, the German, Czech, Slovak and Austrian foreign ministers were expected in Kyiv, which has played down dire US warnings that Moscow had stepped up preparations for a major incursion into Ukraine. US officials have said the Kremlin has assembled 110,000 troops along the border with its pro-Western neighbour but intelligence assessments have not determined whether President Vladimir Putin has actually decided to invade.

They said Russia is on track to amass a large enough force—some 150,000 soldiers—for a full-scale invasion by mid-February. Such a force would be capable of taking the capital Kyiv in a matter of 48 hours in an onslaught that would kill up to 50,000 civilians, 25,000 Ukrainian soldiers and 10,000 Russian troops and trigger a refugee flood of up to five million people, mainly into Poland, the officials added.

On top of the potential human cost, Ukraine fears further damage to its already struggling economy. And if Moscow attacks Ukraine it could face retaliation over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline—set to double natural gas supplies from Russia to Germany—with Berlin threatening to block it. Russia is seeking a guarantee from NATO that Ukraine will not enter the alliance and wants the bloc to withdraw forces from member states in eastern Europe.

'Apocalyptic predictions'

Moscow denies that it is planning to invade Ukraine, and Kyiv's presidency advisor said the chances of a diplomatic solution to the crisis remained "substantially higher than the threat of further escalation". On Twitter, Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba sought to

calm tensions, saying: "Do not believe the apocalyptic predictions. Different capitals have different scenarios, but Ukraine is ready for any development."

President Emmanuel Macron of France, which currently holds the rotating presidency of the EU, will be in Moscow yesterday and Kyiv today to spearhead efforts to de-escalate the crisis. He is expected to push forward a stalled peace plan for the festering conflict with Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

The trip will be a political gamble for Macron, who faces a re-election challenge in April. Also on Monday, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz will meet with Biden in Washington. "We worked hard to send a clear message to Russia that it will have a high price if they were to intervene into

Ukraine," Scholz told the Washington Post in an interview ahead of his meeting.

"I really appreciate what President Biden is doing in the bilateral talks between the United States and Russia. They are very difficult." Biden has reacted to the Russian troop buildup by offering 3,000 American forces to bolster NATO's eastern flank, with a batch of the troops promised arriving in Poland on Sunday.

But US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told Fox News Sunday that Biden "is not sending forces to start a war or fight a war with Russia in Ukraine". "We have sent forces to Europe to defend NATO territory," he said.

Scholz said Sunday that Berlin was prepared to send extra troops to the Baltics in addition to 500 soldiers already stationed in Lithuania under a NATO operation. While he is in Washington, his foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, will be in Kyiv along with her Czech, Slovak and Austrian counterparts for a two-day visit. Scholtz will be in Moscow and Kyiv next week for talks with Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. —AFP

Humanitarian crisis feared as cyclone kills 20 in Madagascar

ANTANANARIVO: Cyclone Batsirai swept out of Madagascar yesterday after killing 20 people, displacing 55,000 and devastating the drought-hit island's agricultural heartland, leading the UN to warn of a worsening humanitarian crisis.

Madagascar was already reeling from a tropical storm which killed 55 people weeks earlier, and the latest extreme weather event came as South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said the continent is "bearing both the brunt and the cost" of global warming.

Batsirai made landfall on the Indian Ocean island's east on Saturday evening bringing heavy rain and winds of 165 kilometres (102 miles) per hour, after drenching the French island of La Reunion. Jean Benoit Manhes, a representative of UN children's agency UNICEF in the country, told AFP yesterday that "Batsirai left Madagascar this morning at 7 am (0400 GMT) heading out into the Mozambique Channel."

Madagascar's disaster management agency said that Batsirai had left 20 people dead and forced 55,000 from their homes. UNICEF warned that many

of the victims were likely to be children, which make up more than 50 percent of the country's population.

The cyclone first hit a sparsely populated agricultural area in the country's east on Saturday, before later weakening. The eastern city of Mananjary was "completely destroyed," a resident named Faby said.

'Constant humanitarian crisis'

Batsirai then moved west inland, causing flooding that ravaged rice fields in the country's central "breadbasket," UNICEF said. "The impact of the cyclone does not end today, it will last for several months, particularly the impact on agriculture," Manhes said. "The roofs of several schools and health centres were blown off" in the affected areas, UNICEF said.

Batsirai spared the capital Antananarivo and the island's main port Tamatave, which led to a lower death toll than had been initially feared by the authorities and aid organisations, who had warned that nearly 600,000 people could be affected and 140,000 displaced. Some 77 percent of Madagascar's population live below the poverty line and the latest blow comes during a severe drought in the south which has plunged more than a million people into acute malnutrition, some facing famine.

The cyclone partly destroyed the main road linking the island's north and south, "which will make it difficult to provide access and reinforcements to villages, including in drought-hit areas," Manhes said.



Ukraine fears damage to its struggling economy

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RANOMAFANA, Madagascar: Residents look at the partially collapsed RN25 road in Ranomafana yesterday following the passage of cyclone Batsirai. Cyclone Batsirai swept out of Madagascar yesterday after killing 20 people. —AFP

"Madagascar is in a constant humanitarian crisis," he added. Some 10,000 people on La Reunion were left without electricity on Sunday, three days after Batsirai passed through the island, injuring 12 people on its path. Tropical Storm Ana affected at least 131,000 people across Madagascar in late January, with most of the 55 deaths coming in Antananarivo. Ana also hit Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, causing dozens of deaths. —AFP

In conservative Russia, liberal teachers are shown the door

SAINT PETERSBURG: Biology teacher Olga Shchegoleva had not even finished her first six months at a prestigious school in Saint Petersburg when she came under pressure to quit over a sex education blog. In Vladimir Putin's Russia, teachers are being increasingly caught up in the climate of social conservatism.

The 31-year-old Shchegoleva is one of hundreds of educators who recently have been fired or forced to quit over claims of misconduct, in a trend that reflects Russia's growing intolerance and conservatism.

Shchegoleva is the author of a sex education blog that addresses topics from sexual health and consent to birth control and toys. Even though she writes for adults, several concerned parents complained to the school, which is part of the respected Rimsky-Korsakov conservatory in Russia's former imperial capital.

Shchegoleva said she liked her job—and her students—but felt she had no choice but to quit. "There is

this belief that teachers have no life or hobbies outside of work, and that there are some ethical standards—not officially spelled out anywhere—that teachers are expected to follow," she told AFP.

The education ministry did not respond to an AFP request to provide any figures, but the chairwoman of a Russian teachers' union, Yury Varlamov, said courts had delivered more than 2,000 rulings linked to immoral conduct in the last five years. Most cases involved educators, Varlamov estimated.

"The dismissal of teachers for immoral behaviour is increasingly being used by employers against unwelcome workers," he said. The way the legislation is vaguely worded, experts say, leaves the door open for dismissal over a wide range of activities.

In one prominent case, a teacher from the Siberian city of Omsk who also worked as a plus-size model was pressured to quit in 2018 after pin-up-style pictures featuring her appeared online. In 2021, a teacher from the largest Siberian city of Novosibirsk was pushed out after she posted online a racy video in which she was seen stripping down to lingerie and dancing.

The same year, a teacher from Sevastopol in Russia-annexed Crimea publicly complained about her low salary. She was interrogated by members of law



SAINT PETERSBURG: Olga Shchegoleva, 31, a former biologist school teacher checks her computer during an interview with AFP in Saint Petersburg, on December 14, 2021. —AFP

enforcement and fired. Activists say teachers have been fired for their sexual orientation and others removed for their support of the opposition.

Putin, who enjoys unwavering support from the Orthodox Church, has been promoting increasingly conservative values to rally support from his core constituency. Amid raging tensions with the world's top democracies, he has sought to present Russia as the antithesis of Western liberal values. —AFP

Iran nuclear deal talks to resume in Vienna today

VIENNA: Iran nuclear deal talks will resume in Vienna today, diplomats said yesterday, after negotiators in recent weeks have cited progress in seeking to revive the 2015 landmark accord. Parties to the deal have been negotiating in Vienna since last year with indirect US participation. Talks were most recently halted at the end of last month, and the negotiators returned to their capitals for consultations.

"The 8th round of the Vienna Talks... attended by China, France, Germany, Russia, United Kingdom, Iran and the United States resume tomorrow in Vienna," tweeted Alain Matton, spokesman of the EU, which chairs the discussions. After months of stalemate, progress has been made in recent weeks to revive the 2015 agreement that was supposed to prevent Iran from acquiring an atomic bomb, a goal it has always denied pursuing.

Former US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the pact in 2018 and reimposed tough economic sanctions on Iran, prompting the Islamic republic to begin pulling back from its commitments under the deal and step up its nuclear activities.

'Decisive moment'

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz told the Washington Post in an interview published online yesterday that a successful conclusion of the talks "depends on Iran". "We gave them a clear message that now this is the time for decisions and for progress, and not for prolonging the process," he was quoted as saying.

"This is the decisive moment, and we hope that they will use the chance. We have not too much time left," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said the answers "the United States brings tomorrow to Vienna will determine when we can reach an agreement".

"We have made significant progress in various areas of the Vienna negotiations" including on guarantees that Iran seeks that a new US administration would not breach the deal once again, Khatibzadeh told reporters. —AFP