



Russians fleeing Putin face lukewarm welcome in France

N Korea fires missile after COVID cases prompt Kim to order lockdown

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COLOMBO: People buy vegetables at a market after authorities relaxed the ongoing curfew for a few hours in Colombo on May 12, 2022. — AFP

## Crisis-hit Sri Lanka appoints new PM

Ranil Wickremesinghe to replace president's brother

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's embattled president swore in a new prime minister Thursday to replace his brother, who was banned from leaving the country after his supporters launched violent attacks on a protest against the nation's economic crisis. The new premier, Ranil Wickremesinghe, has already served in the office five times—but it remains unclear if he will be able to get any legislation through parliament.

The 73-year-old will be tasked with navigating Sri Lanka through the worst economic downturn in its history as an independent nation, with months of shortages and blackouts inflaming public anger.

"A cabinet is likely to be appointed tomorrow," Sudewa Hettiarachchi, a spokesman for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, told AFP. In a televised address to the nation on Wednesday night, Rajapaksa stopped short of yielding to weeks of nationwide protests calling for him to resign. But in a bid to win over opposition lawmakers demanding he quit, Rajapaksa, 72, pledged to give up most of his executive powers and set up a new cabinet this week.

Mahinda Rajapaksa, the president's brother, resigned as prime minister on Monday after his supporters attacked anti-government demonstrators

who had been protesting peacefully for weeks.

This marked a turning point and unleashed several days of chaos and violence in which at least nine people were killed and over 200 injured, with dozens of Rajapaksa loyalist homes set on fire.

On Thursday, a court banned Mahinda, his politician son Namal, and more than a dozen allies from leaving the country after ordering an investigation into the violence. "Congratulations to the newly appointed Prime Minister," Mahinda tweeted from the Trincomalee naval base on the country's east coast, where he took refuge after fleeing the capital Colombo. "I wish you all the best as you navigate these troubled times." Security forces patrolling in armored personnel carriers with orders to shoot looters on sight have largely restored order.

A curfew was lifted Thursday morning—only to be reimposed after a six-hour break allowing Sri Lanka's 22 million people to stock up on essentials.

### 'Collapse beyond redemption'

Sri Lankans have suffered months of severe shortages of food, fuel and medicine—as well as long power cuts—after the country burnt through foreign cur-

rency reserves needed to pay for vital imports.

The central bank chief warned Wednesday that the economy would "collapse beyond redemption" unless a new government was urgently appointed. Wickremesinghe is seen as a pro-West free-market reformist, potentially making bailout negotiations with the International Monetary Fund and others smoother. With many from Rajapaksa's party having defected in recent months, no group in the 225-member assembly has an absolute majority, making parliamentary approval of the unity government's legislation potentially tricky.

It also remains to be seen whether a new cabinet will be enough to calm public anger if Rajapaksa continues to resist calls for his resignation.

"What he has done is despicable, he has brought all of us to this state of hunger and poverty," Abu Nawaz, a small business owner in Colombo, told AFP. "What is the point of keeping him as the president?" he added. "Will this end our miseries?"

Wickremesinghe had already been working closely with Rajapaksa before his appointment to shake up the finance ministry and the central bank with sweeping policy changes, an official close to their



COLOMBO: In this file photo taken on August 02, 2020, United National Party (UNP) party leader Ranil Wickremesinghe waves to supporters during the party's final campaign rally ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections in Colombo. — AFP

discussions told AFP. The central bank almost doubled key interest rates and announced a default on Sri Lanka's \$51-billion external debt as part of the policy shift, officials said. —AFP

## Finland poised for NATO membership

HELSINKI: Finland on Thursday took a step towards fast-track membership of NATO, triggering a warning from the Kremlin, as the war in Ukraine throttled supplies of Russian gas to Europe.

"Finland must apply for NATO membership without delay," President Sauli Niinisto and Prime Minister Sanna Marin announced in a statement in Helsinki. "NATO membership would strengthen Finland's security," they said. "As a member of NATO, Finland would strengthen the entire defense alliance."

But Russia warned Finnish membership of NATO would "definitely" be seen as a threat. "The expansion of NATO and the approach of the alliance to our borders does not make the world and our continent more stable and secure," spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. In launching the invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin cited in part what he called the threat to Russia from NATO, which expanded eastwards after the Cold War. Finland's embrace of the alliance was ruled out as recently as January, for the country has been a declared neutral in East-West crises for decades.

But the February 24 invasion shocked the Nordic country. It shares a 1,300-kilometre (800-mile) border with Russia and its past is studded with conflict with its giant neighbor. The Atlantic alliance has already declared it will warmly embrace two countries with rich pockets and advanced militaries. Finland's entry will be "smooth and swift," NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg promised on Thursday. A special committee will announce Finland's formal decision on a membership bid on Sunday. Sweden, another neutral state, is widely expected to follow its neighbour.



KANKAANPAA, Finland: Picture taken on May 4, 2022 shows a Leopard battle tank of the Armored Brigade during the Arrow 22 exercise at the Niinisalo garrison in Kankaanpaa, western Finland. — AFP

### Russian gas

Fears grew meanwhile of the broader economic impact from the crisis. Russian energy giant Gazprom said that gas transiting to Ukraine to Europe dropped by a third after Kyiv suspended supplies through a key route. Germany said Wednesday that it saw a 25 percent drop in supplies of Russian gas flowing through Ukraine.

Ukraine is a major supply route for Russian gas to Europe and the two sides have kept flows going despite the conflict. The European Union's heavy reliance on Russian gas has made it reluctant to add these imports to a list of economic sanctions that have started to take a toll on Moscow's foreign exchange reserves. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, in a rhetorical blast from Tokyo, said Russia "is today the most direct threat to the world

order with the barbaric war against Ukraine".

Moscow has focused on eastern and southern Ukraine since it failed to take Kyiv in the first weeks of its campaign. Ukraine's presidency said shelling continued throughout the Lugansk region—part of the eastern Donbas where Ukrainian forces are mounting a fierce defense against Russian forces and Kremlin-backed separatists. Russian troops are trying to take complete control of Rubizhne, block a key highway between Lysychansk and Bakhmut highway and seize Severodonetsk, the office said. In the northeastern region of Chernigiv three people were killed and 12 others wounded on Thursday in a strike on the town of Novgorod-Siversky, an emergency services spokesman said. Across Ukraine, lives have been turned upside down, forcing millions to make anguished choices of how to respond. —AFP

Department number three Victoria Nuland replacing him at a meeting in Morocco on defeating the Islamic State group and at a meeting of Group of Seven foreign ministers in northern Germany.

Blinken was set Thursday to resume public appearances with a meeting with Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai on the sidelines of a US-ASEAN Summit in Washington. Blinken last year scrapped a stop in Thailand after a COVID outbreak within his traveling party.

Also on Thursday, Blinken will participate—virtually—in a summit convened by President Joe Biden on fighting COVID. —AFP

## Blinken ends quarantine, will head to Europe

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday ended a weeklong quarantine after testing positive for COVID-19 and will travel to Europe this weekend, the State Department announced. The top US diplomat will leave

## Zionists push plans for nearly 4,500 West Bank settler homes

JERUSALEM: Zionist entity advanced plans on Thursday for 4,427 housing units for Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank, a non-governmental organization said. The Civil Administration's high planning committee gave final approval to 2,791 units and initial endorsement for another 1,636 units, said Peace Now, an organization that closely monitors Zionist settlement building.

"This is bad news for Zionists and deepens the occupation, making it harder to achieve future peace," Hagit Ofra of Peace Now said. The report of further expansion comes amid heightened tensions in the West Bank, one day after veteran Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh was shot dead during a Zionist army raid in clashes in the Jenin refugee camp. The United States has said it "strongly" opposes such new construction in the West Bank.

Zionists seized the West Bank and nearly 700,000 Zionists have moved into settlements that most of the international community regard as illegal. Last week, US State Department deputy spokeswoman Jalina Porter referred to Thursday's planning meeting, stressing that "Zionists program of expanding settlements deeply damages the prospect for a two-state solution." The housing plans are scattered throughout a large swathe of the West Bank known as Area C, where Zionist entity exercises military and planning control.

Zionists' settlement expansion in the West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem has continued under every Zionist entity since 1967. However, construction accelerated in the last few years under former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with a significant boom during former president Donald Trump's US administration, which Palestinians accused of egregious pro-Zionist bias.

While Prime Minister Naftali Bennett ousted Netanyahu, leading an ideologically diverse coalition, he is the former head of a settler lobby group and opposes Palestinian statehood. "It's disappointing that this government that promised change is following similar policies to the government of Netanyahu," said Ofra. Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked, a member of Bennett's right-wing Yamina party, said the news Thursday was a "day of celebration for the settler movement." —AFP