



North Korea 'ready for nuclear test' with Biden due in Seoul

French MP candidates under fire in post-MeToo era

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SEVERODONETSK: Anna Poladyuk (R), 66, takes cover from cooking outside at the entrance of the basement of an apartment after she heard the sound of incoming mortar fire, followed by an explosion, in Severodonetsk, eastern Ukraine. —AFP

Ukraine steelworks defenders surrender

Russian pleaded guilty to a war crime, faces life sentence

KYIV: Russia said Thursday that 1,730 Ukrainian soldiers had surrendered this week at the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol, showing some emerging on crutches after an all-out battle that has become emblematic of the nearly three-month-old war. The number included 80 who were wounded and taken to a hospital in Russia-controlled territory in eastern Ukraine, the defence ministry in Moscow said.

The ministry released a video appearing to show the surrendered soldiers hobbling out of the sprawling plant after it was besieged for weeks. Russian troops patted them down and inspected their bags as they exited.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said it had registered "hundreds of Ukrainian prisoners of war" from the plant in Mariupol, a port city levelled by Russian shelling. Ukraine accuses Moscow's forces of war crimes against civilians in Mariupol and elsewhere, and has begun the first prosecution of a Russian soldier.

Vadim Shishimarin, a shaven-headed Russian sergeant from Irkutsk in Siberia, pleaded guilty to a war crime and faces a life sentence. He admitted to shooting dead Oleksandr Shelipov, an unarmed 62-year-old man, in Ukraine's Sumy region on February 28 — four days into the invasion.

Shishimarin was remorseful as he took the dock for a second day on Thursday. "I know that you will not be able to forgive me, but nevertheless I ask you for forgiveness," he said, addressing Shelipov's wife in the cramped courtroom in Kyiv.

Folk celebration

But while Mariupol has fallen, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said the ancient

folk traditions. Wearing an embroidered shirt instead of his usual military khaki top, Zelensky said on the Telegram social media platform that his people remained "strong, unbreakable, brave and free".

Zelensky's defiance, and his army's dogged resistance, have earned the West's admiration and a steady flow of military support. G7 finance ministers were meeting in Germany to thrash out more cash support. G7 partners have to "assure Ukraine's solvency within the next days, few weeks", German Finance Minister Christian Lindner told the newspaper Die Welt.

But German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said there could be "no shortcuts" to membership of the European Union for Ukraine. Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba condemned the "second-class treatment" of his country.

Famine warning

Russia's actions are already redrawing the security map of Europe. US President Joe Biden was to host the leaders of Finland and Sweden later Thursday to discuss their bids to join NATO, after the Nordic neighbours decided to abandon decades of military non-alignment.

"I warmly welcome and strongly support the historic applications from Finland and Sweden for membership in NATO," Biden said, offering US support against any "aggression" while their bids are considered.

Beyond Europe, the invasion also threatens to bring famine, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said. "Malnutrition, mass hunger and famine" could follow "in a crisis that could last for years," Guterres warned, urging Russia to release grain exports from occupied Ukraine. Russia and Ukraine produce 30 percent of the

global wheat supply, and the war has already sent food prices surging around the world.

'Time to run'

Despite their last-ditch resistance in places such as Mariupol, and the successful defence of Kyiv, Ukrainian forces are retreating in the east. The losses often come after weeks of battles over towns and small cities that are pulverised by the time the Russians surround them in a slow-moving wave.

"I tell everyone that there is no reason to worry when the banging is from outgoing fire," Volodymyr Netymenko said as he packed up his sister's belongings before evacuating her from the burning village of Sydorove in eastern Ukraine.

"But when it is incoming, it is time to run. And things have been flying at us pretty hard for the past two or three days." In the Russian region of Kursk, one person died and others were injured in an attack on a village on the border with Ukraine, the local governor said.

War crimes trials

A second war crimes trial was due to open in Ukraine Thursday. The International Criminal Court is deploying its largest-ever field team to Ukraine, with 42 investigators, forensic experts and support staff to gather evidence of alleged war crimes.

Ukrainian civilians are bearing the brunt of incessant Russia mortar fire raining down on the eastern city of Severodonetsk. Nella Kashkina sat in the basement next to an oil lamp and prayed. "I do not know how long we can last," the 65-year-old former city worker said.

"We have no medicine left and a lot of sick people-sick women-need medicine. There is simply no medicine left at all." —AFP

Swedish citizen risking Iran execution is 'hostage': Amnesty

PARIS: An Iranian-Swedish citizen facing imminent execution in Iran is being held as a hostage by Tehran in a bid to force Belgium and Sweden to make concessions in two cases concerning former Iranian officials, Amnesty International said Thursday. Ahmadreza Djalali was sentenced to death in 2017 on espionage charges that are deemed baseless by Stockholm and his supporters, and Iranian media reports say he could be hanged by May 21, a punishment that officials have repeatedly insisted will be carried out.

The risk to his life comes as anger grows among families of Western nationals often held for years on end by Iran, who they say are being held as pawns in a game over which the innocent detainees have no control.

"Mounting evidence strongly indicates that the Iranian authorities are holding... Djalali hostage and threatening to execute him to compel third parties to swap him for former Iranian officials convicted or on trial abroad, as well as to refrain from future prosecutions of Iranian officials," Amnesty International said.

In an unprecedented case, a Swedish court is trying Hamid Noury, a former prison official, over his alleged involvement over massacres in Iranian prisons in 1988, with the verdict expected on July 14. Noury, who was arrested in Sweden in November 2019, is being tried under the principle of universal jurisdiction, which allows states to investigate serious crimes that were committed abroad.

Meanwhile, Assadollah Assadi, a former Iranian diplomat, is serving a 20-year prison sentence in Belgium for his role in a thwarted 2018 bomb attack in France that was targeting a meeting of an exiled opposition group.

Before his arrest in Iran in April 2016, Djalali was a visiting professor in disaster medicine at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, a research university in Brussels. Sweden later granted citizenship to Djalali, who had been a resident in the country, in February 2018.

'Hostage-taking machine'

"The Iranian authorities are using Ahmadreza Djalali's life as a pawn in a cruel political game, escalating their threats to execute him in retaliation for their demands going unmet," said Diana Eltahawy, Amnesty's deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"The authorities are attempting to pervert the course of justice in Sweden and Belgium, and should be investigated for the crime of hostage taking," she said. The London-based NGO says that since at least late 2020, the Iranian authorities had been "conditioning" Djalali's fate on seeking a "deal" with Belgium to swap him for Assadi, and with Sweden for Noury.

The UN Human Rights Office had said Tuesday that it was "deeply alarmed" by reports that Djalali's execution was imminent, saying his hanging would "constitute an arbitrary deprivation of life."

Djalali's supporters, led by his wife Vida Mehrannia, have also sought to keep up the pressure, with his 10-year-old son holding up a sign reading "Free My Dad" at a protest in Stockholm last week where he was joined by his classmates. —AFP

UK police end 'Partygate' probe with 126 fines

LONDON: London police said on Thursday they had completed their probe into the "Partygate" scandal rocking Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government and issued a total 126 fines in all. The Metropolitan Police said in a statement that of the fines issued for breaching COVID restrictions, 73 were to women and 53 to men but that some people received more than one fixed penalty notice.

Police were called in to investigate gatherings at Downing Street and across government departments on eight dates between May 2020 and April 2021. Last week, the force said it had issued more than 100 fines. The exact amount of the penalties has not been confirmed, but the fines can range from £30 to £10,000 (35-11,800 euros, \$37-12,400) for the most serious breaches.

Those fined so far include Johnson, his wife Carrie and finance minister Rishi Sunak. The government said they were fined for a gathering in Downing Street marking the prime minister's birthday in June 2020. Johnson has said he would reveal if he receives further fines.

Britain's domestic Press Association news agency said it understands the prime minister has not yet received notification of another fixed penalty notice. The probe was launched on January 25 and saw 12 detectives sift through 345 documents, including emails, door logs, diary entries and witness statements, 510 photographs and security camera footage and 204 questionnaires, the Met said.

"When COVID regulations were introduced, the Met was clear that whilst we would not routinely investigate breaches of regulations retrospectively, there may be occasions when it would be appropriate to do so," said the Met's Acting Deputy Commissioner Helen Ball.

"The information that we received with regard to the alleged breaches in Downing Street and Whitehall was sufficient to reach our criteria to begin such an investigation. "Our investigation was thorough and impartial and was completed as quickly as we could, given the amount of information that needed to be reviewed," she said.

"This investigation is now complete." Johnson has apologised for the breach of COVID regulations, but refused demands to resign after becoming the first UK leader to be found to have broken the law while in office.

Johnson also faces an investigation by a parliamentary committee into his past denials to the House of Commons of lockdown lawbreaking. The parties have fuelled widespread public anger



LONDON: A handout photograph released by the UK Parliament shows Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaking during prime minister's questions in the House of Commons in London. —AFP

against the ruling Conservatives, who suffered a drubbing in recent local elections.

The main opposition Labour party's leader, Keir Starmer, has promised to step down if police in northeast England fine him for his own alleged breach of coronavirus laws during a campaign meeting. The gathering took place in Durham in April last year, with a video later emerging of Starmer drinking beer and eating a takeaway meal inside an office with party colleagues. —AFP