



'Drink it anyway': Syria water woes peak in cholera outbreak

China's former justice minister faces life in prison for bribery

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MOSCOW: Police officers detain a man following calls to protest against partial mobilization announced by Russian President, in Moscow, on September 21, 2022. —AFP

Russian invasion has cost Ukraine \$1tn

'I don't want to die': Russians flee abroad after Putin's call-up

FRANKFURT/KYIV: Russia's invasion of Ukraine has caused almost \$1 trillion of damage, a Kyiv government official said Thursday, as the war batters the country's economy.

In terms of "direct and indirect costs" Ukraine had suffered "somewhere close to \$1 trillion" in damages, said Oleg Ustenko, economic advisor to President Volodymyr Zelensky. The figure was equivalent to five times Ukraine's annual GDP before the invasion in February, Ustenko said at an event hosted by the German Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin.

The official previously estimated the damage caused by invading Russian forces in the first two weeks of the war totaled around \$100 billion. The destruction and displacement as a result of the conflict was a "significant problem for public financing", Ustenko said.

Many businesses that had not been destroyed were "not working at full capacity or they are working just several hours a day", he said. "It means that the budget is going to receive much less compared with what was expected initially." Despite drastic cuts to government spending, the Ukrainian government was running a deficit of five billion euros (\$4.9 billion) per month since the invasion, Ustenko said.

In 2023, Kyiv expected the gap to narrow to around 3.5 billion euros, he added. Allies have rushed to pump Ukraine with aid to fill the gap, with the World Bank, European Union and G7 countries pledging billions in cash. The Ukrainian government expected the economy to shrink by 35 to 40 percent this year, Ustenko said.

The drop was the "deepest decline in our GDP that we have experienced since 1991" and the founding of the modern Ukrainian state, he added.

Kremlin proxies in Ukraine double down ahead of votes

KYIV: Kremlin-installed officials in Ukrainian regions controlled by Moscow's forces vowed on Thursday to press ahead with polls this week on annexation by Russia, after world leaders condemned the votes and said the results would be void. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was expected to defend what Ukraine's allies are calling an unlawful land grab, during a UN Security Council meeting called by France over rights abuses in Ukraine.

Four Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine—Donetsk and Lugansk in the east and Kherson and Zaporizhzhia in the south—announced that they would hold the votes over five days, beginning on Friday. Vladimir Saldo, the Moscow-installed head of Kherson, which fell early into the Russian invasion, said the referendum would go ahead in his region regardless of the criticism. "The date has been set. We have the green light. Voting begins tomorrow and nothing can prevent this," he told Russian state-run media.

"People have been waiting and they're demanding that this vote is held soon," he added. Western leaders convening in New York this week unanimously condemned the ballots. Speaking at the United Nations, US President Joe Biden accused Russian

US sanctions Iran morality police after woman's death

WASHINGTON: The United States placed Iran's morality police on its sanctions blacklist Thursday following the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old arrested for allegedly wearing her hijab headscarf improperly. The US Treasury said the morality police were "responsible" for Amini's death, which has sparked an outpouring of popular anger, as it announced the sanctions "for abuse and violence against Iranian women and the violation of the rights of peaceful Iranian protesters."

The sanctions move was taken as violent protests erupt-

Russians flee
Dmitri flew to Armenia with just one small bag, leaving behind his wife and children, adding to the thousands fleeing Russia to avoid serving in the war against Ukraine.

"I don't want to go to the war," he told AFP. "I don't want to die in this senseless war. This is a fratricidal war." Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision this week to mobilize several hundred thousand reservists has spurred a fresh exodus over the country's borders. "The situation in Russia would make anyone want to leave," said another new arrival, 44-year-old Sergei, who arrived with his teenage son.

Looking lost and exhausted in an Armenian airport, he confirmed that they had fled "because of the mobilization", but refused to give his full name. "We choose not to wait to be called up," said his 17-year-old son Nikolai. "I am not panicking, but I feel this uncertainty," he added. It was a sentiment shared by other Russians arriving off the same flight to Yerevan. "It's wrong to go to war in the 21st century-to put it mildly," Alexei, 39, told AFP. He was not sure if he would ever be able to return to Russia, he added. "It all depends on the situation."

'False information'
Military-aged men made up the majority of those arriving

President Vladimir Putin of "shamelessly" violating the UN Charter with a war aimed at "extinguishing Ukraine's right to exist as a state".

The integration of the war-scarred regions into Russia would represent a major escalation of the conflict, as Moscow could then try to say it was defending its own territory from Ukrainian forces. After the votes were announced by his proxy officials in Ukraine, Putin announced that Russia would call up some 300,000 reservists to bolster the war effort and cautioned that Moscow would use "all means" to protect its territory. Former Russian leader Dmitry Medvedev said in a statement on social media that those means included "strategic nuclear weapons". He predicted the voting regions "will integrate into Russia".

For most observers, the results of the concurrent votes are already a foregone conclusion and were rushed because Ukrainian forces were making sweeping gains in a counter-offensive to recapture the east. The referendums are reminiscent of a similar ballot in 2014 that saw the Crimean Peninsula in Ukraine annexed by Russia. Western capitals said the vote was fraudulent and hit Moscow with sanctions in response. Election officials in the Donetsk region, which has been partially controlled since 2014 by Moscow-backed separatists, said that voting would take place door-to-door for the first days. But it would only be possible in polling stations on the final day, Tuesday.

Putin's move this week to call up reservists for Ukraine sparked small protests across Russia, resulting in more than 1,300 people being detained.

ed across Iran following the death last week of Iranian-Kurdish Amini, who had been arrested by the public morality unit of the national police.

"Mahsa Amini was a courageous woman whose death in morality police custody was yet another act of brutality by the Iranian regime's security forces against its own people," said Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen. "We condemn this unconscionable act in the strongest terms and call on the Iranian government to end its violence against women and its ongoing violent crackdown on free expression and assembly," Yellen said in a statement.

According to an official count, at least 17 people have died in unrest following Amini's death as women burned their headscarves and protesters denounced the government leadership and restrictions on women. The Oslo-based non-government group Iran Human Rights said at least 31 civilians had been killed in six nights of violence.

The Treasury also placed sanctions on Mohammad

off the latest flight from Moscow. Many were reluctant to speak. Yerevan has become a major destination for Russians fleeing since war began on February 24. Since then, Armenia says at least 40,000 Russians have arrived in the small Caucasus country, once a part of the Soviet Union.

Nearly 50,000 Russians have fled to neighboring Georgia, national statistics from June showed.

The Kremlin on Thursday dismissed as "fake" reports that Russians eligible for mobilization were rushing for the exit. "A great deal of false information has emerged about this," said spokesman Dmitry Peskov. But flights out of Russia were nearly fully booked for the week ahead to cities in the nearby former Soviet countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. And Putin's call-up order did not just provoke a dash for the exit—there were protests too.

Police arrested more than 1,300 people Wednesday at demonstrations against mobilization across Russia, according to one group monitoring protests, OVD-Info. On social networks, there were fears Russia would seal its borders.

But Germany's Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said Thursday Russian deserters could "obtain international protection" in her country.



UN chief urges probe into Ukraine war 'catalog of cruelty'



NEW YORK: Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, with French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, speaks to the press outside the UN Security Council at the UN Headquarters on September 22, 2022 in New York. —AFP

Flights out of Russia to neighboring countries, mainly former Soviet republics that allow Russians visa-free entry, are nearly entirely booked and prices have skyrocketed, pointing to an exodus of Russian wanting to avoid going to war. Looking lost and exhausted in the arrivals hall of the airport in the capital of Armenia, 44-year-old Sergei said he had fled Russia to escape being called up. "The situation in Russia would make anyone want to leave," he told AFP on condition of anonymity. Dmitry, 45, said he flew to Armenia from one of Russia's eastern regions with one small bag, leaving behind his wife and two children and with "no clue what I'll be doing here". —AFP

Rostami Cheshmeh Gachi, the head of the morality police, Haj Ahmad Mirzaei, the head of the morality police's Tehran division, and five other senior security officials involved in the repressions of protesters.

It said Rostami had announced earlier this year that women would be punished for refusing to wear a hijab. "The Iranian government needs to end its systemic persecution of women and allow peaceful protest," said US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

"The United States will continue to voice our support for human rights in Iran and hold those who violate them to account," he said in a statement.

Treasury sanctions aim to freeze any assets those designated might have under US jurisdiction and forbid any American individuals or companies—including international banks with US operations—from doing business with them, effectively limiting their access to global financial networks. —AFP

Finland border authorities said Thursday they had seen an increase in traffic from Russia following Putin's announcement. But it stressed that the influx was still at relatively low levels.

At the Vaalimaa border crossing in Finland, there was a line of cars about 150 metres long could be seen Thursday afternoon. "It was busy in the morning and at night, but now it's starting to calm down," Elias Laine, a border guard there told AFP.

A 23-year-old project manager from Moscow told AFP the mobilization had pushed forward his plans to leave Russia by October. "I'm eligible for the call-up," he explained.

Meanwhile, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday urged a probe into the "catalog of cruelty" in Ukraine's war as he opened a Security Council meeting with the top Russian and US diplomats. Reports from the United Nations rights body show "a catalog of cruelty—summary executions, sexual violence, torture and other inhumane and degrading treatment against civilians and prisoners of war," Guterres said.

"All these allegations must be thoroughly investigated, to ensure accountability," he said, without directly pointing the finger at Russia.

"Perpetrators must be held to account in fair and independent judicial proceedings. Victims and their families have a right to justice, remedy and reparation."

France, the current head of the Security Council, called the session on accountability in Ukraine during the UN General Assembly. —AFP

Hamas warns over Jewish visits to Al-Aqsa mosque

GAZA CITY: Hamas threatened "repercussions" over Jewish visits to Jerusalem's super-sensitive Al-Aqsa mosque compound, in a warning issued Thursday, days before the start of the Jewish high holidays when visitor numbers increase. The mosque compound in the Old City of Zionist-annexed east Jerusalem has been the focus of tensions for years, but Palestinians have voiced increasing anger at the rising number of visits by Jews, who revere the compound as their holiest site, the Temple Mount.

Mahmud Zahar, a senior member of the Islamist group which rules Gaza, warned "the continuation of the Zionist aggression and their brutality against Jerusalem and the holy shrines will be the cause of a major battle."

Speaking in a rare press conference in Gaza's Omari mosque, Zahar alluded to Palestinian concerns that a longstanding convention by which Jews may visit but not pray in the compound was being covertly flouted. He said Zionist entity would be held "fully responsible for the repercussions of these violations." Beyadenu, a group that encourages Jews to visit the Al-Aqsa compound, said it was committed to increasing such visits. "We broke the 50,000 visitor barrier on the Temple Mount" this past year, Beyadenu said ahead of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana.

Tom Nissani, the group's chief executive said: "the goal is 100,000 visitors next (Jewish) year", which begins on Sunday night. Zionist far-right lawmaker Itamar Ben-Gvir, who has led multiple actions in Jerusalem in the past designed to provoke Palestinians, tweeted Thursday that he "went up to the Temple Mount this morning to pray and exercise sovereignty in the holiest place for the people of Zionist entity."

Thousands of Jews-Zionists and tourists-are expected to visit Jerusalem's Old City during the high holidays, which run into mid-October. Zionist entity captured the Old City, along with rest of east Jerusalem, in the Six-Day War of 1967. —AFP