



Myanmar junta free 3,000 prisoners in New Year amnesty

## US helicopter raid in Syria targets senior IS group leader: Centcom

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### Foreign Ministers' Meeting KARUIZAWA, NAGANO April 16-18, 2023



KARUIZAWA: (Clockwise from top center) Japan's Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi, Canadian Foreign Minister Melanie Joly, French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, Italy's Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani, Deputy Secretary-General of the European External Action Service (EEAS) Enrique Mora, British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken pose for a photo at the start of the first working session of a G7 Foreign ministers' meeting. — AFP

# G7 offers common front on China

## The unity of G7 is extremely important: Yoshimasa Hayashi

**KARUIZAWA:** For G7 diplomats meeting in the Japanese resort town of Karuizawa, unity was the name of the game on Monday, with ministers lining up to insist there is no daylight between them on China policy. The two days of talks are taking place under the long shadow cast by controversial remarks from French President Emmanuel Macron, who last week suggested Europe should avoid "crises that aren't ours".

From the opening remarks of Monday's first session, the desire to emphasize common ground was on clear display, with Japan's Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi telling his counterparts "the unity of the G7 is extremely important".

Monday's first session, and the ministers' working dinner the night before, focused on China and regional challenges, with Hayashi urging counterparts to "demonstrate to the world the G7's strong determination" to defend the "international order based on the rule of law".

Host Japan has put regional challenges atop the

agenda, and recent events including Chinese military drills around Taiwan and North Korean missile tests have sharpened that focus. As the ministers began talks, the US Navy announced it had sailed a guided-missile destroyer through the Taiwan Strait in a freedom-of-navigation operation, with Beijing saying it had tracked the vessel.

The controversy over Macron's remarks will prompt closer scrutiny of whatever language a final statement uses on China and its threats to seize self-ruled Taiwan. But comments during bilateral talks on Monday showed the direction of travel, with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken saying discussions so far had "only reinforced the convergence of views that we have", as he met with his French counterpart Catherine Colonna. "We're united, we're giving clearly the same signal to the rest of the world that any situation requires respect of international law as a precondition to the rest," Colonna added.

The ministers are expected to agree strong lan-

guage in a final statement on Tuesday, warning against militarization of the South China Sea, and repeating opposition to any "change of the status quo by force" on Taiwan. They are also likely to warn about the weaponization of trade, and the need for diversification of supply chains on sensitive material like semiconductors -- seen as another message directed at Beijing. "There is a lot of unity in the room and basically you'll see that reflected," a senior State Department official said.

The ministers will send the message that "we want to work with China but we are certainly going to stand up against any coercion" or market manipulation, the official added. Still, for all the outward expressions of unity, Macron's comments reflect the fact that there are real differences among the allies, said Jacques deLisle, director of the Asia programme at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia.

"Europe's assessments of China and views of Taiwan have moved toward positions that the US has

avored. But this has not brought consensus," he said. "Washington's views of China have become still more negative and, relatedly, signals of support for Taiwan have grown much stronger, maintaining a gap between European and American positions."

And in a sign that the daylight between the allies remains a concern, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock warned Europeans "must not withdraw into our shells." "We must not limit ourselves to defending the European peace," she told a press conference in Karuizawa.

Despite the focus on China, Ukraine has remained a priority at talks with the diplomats committing to "intensifying" sanctions against Russia, without outlining any specific new measures. They also agreed stepped-up efforts to "prevent and respond to evasion of sanctions as well as third party weapon supply to Russia," likely to be seen as a further warning to China, among others, on cooperating with Moscow on its war in Ukraine. — AFP

## Four dead, 28 hurt in Alabama birthday party shooting

**WASHINGTON:** At least four people were killed and more than 20 others injured, mostly teens, in a Saturday night shooting at a birthday party in Alabama, officials said, in the latest spasm of American gun mass violence. Local news reports said the shooting occurred at a Sweet 16 party at a dance studio in Dadeville, a small town northeast of the state capital Montgomery.

"There were four lives tragically lost in this incident, and there's been a multitude of injuries," Sergeant Jeremy Burkett, a spokesman for the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency (ALEA), told reporters Sunday. He

specified later that 28 people had been wounded, some of them critically, and urged residents to come forward with any information they might have related to the attack. But Burkett provided no further details on how the shooting unfolded or why.

Annette Allen told the Montgomery Advertiser that her grandson Phil Dowdell was among those who died: He had been celebrating his sister Alexis' 16th birthday when gunfire ripped through the party. "He was a very, very humble child. Never messed with anybody. Always had a smile on his face," Allen said of her grandson, a high school senior and football player due to graduate within weeks. "Everybody's grieving," Allen said of the small community of some 3,000 residents.

President Joe Biden, who was briefed on the shooting, said the nation was again grieving over young Americans killed in gun violence. "What has our nation come to when children cannot attend a birthday party without fear?" Biden, who has long sought tighter gun safety measures, asked in a statement.

"Guns are the leading killer of children in America, and the numbers are rising—not declining," he added. "This is outrageous and unacceptable." The nearby Lake Martin Community Hospital received 15 individual gun-shot wound patients, mostly victims in their teens, Heidi Smith, marketing director for the rural health facility's operator IvyCreek Healthcare, told AFP.

Six of the patients were discharged and nine have been transferred to facilities with higher levels of care. Of those, five were in critical condition, Smith said. "It's been terrible," she said. More than 12 hours after the tragedy, neither Burkett nor other law enforcement officials provided any details on who may have perpetrated the shooting and why, or whether a suspect has been detained.

"We can't share anything further at this time," the sergeant said, adding only that "it was tied to a birthday party." Dadeville Chief of Police Jonathan Floyd called the town "a tight-knit community full of wonderful people."

The Alabama Law Enforcement Agency said its State Bureau of Investigations has launched a probe together with Dadeville police and federal agencies including the FBI.

Television station WRBL of nearby Columbus, Georgia reported heavy police activity overnight and crime scene tape around a building in Dadeville, where it said white sheets could be seen covering parts of the floor.

State leaders took to Twitter Sunday offering prayers and decrying violence but they did not provide details on what happened. "This morning, I grieve with the people of Dadeville and my fellow Alabamians," Governor Kay Ivey posted. "Violent crime has NO place in our state."

The United States, a country of around 330 million people, is awash with some 400 million guns, and deadly mass shootings are a regular occurrence. The latest deaths came on the 16th anniversary of the deadliest US school shooting on record, in which 32 people were killed at Virginia Tech in 2007. — AFP

## Ukraine's war widows count the cost

**KYIV:** Olga Slyshyk began to fear the worst in January this year when her husband, Mykhailo, a military engineer serving on the front line in eastern Ukraine, didn't contact her on her birthday. It wasn't unusual for the 40-year-old trained lawyer to be offline for days at a time, but Slyshyk knew he would reach out — one way or another — on January 14 if he was alive and well.

"I was sure he would call or find some way to congratulate me. But I had had a very bad dream and I already knew something was wrong," she told AFP in Kyiv wearing black and holding her two-year-old son Viktor.

"On January 15, I found out he had died." More than one year after Moscow invaded, Slyshyk is among a growing number of women widowed by Russian forces and left to count the cost of Ukraine's determination to hold out and push Moscow's invasion back.

Neither side has disclosed the exact figures of troops killed, though recently leaked US intelligence documents suggest as many as 17,500 Ukrainian servicemen have been lost. Slyshyk said a social media group for war widows she joined had more than 300 members after her husband was killed defending Soledar in the eastern Donetsk region, but it had doubled in size since.

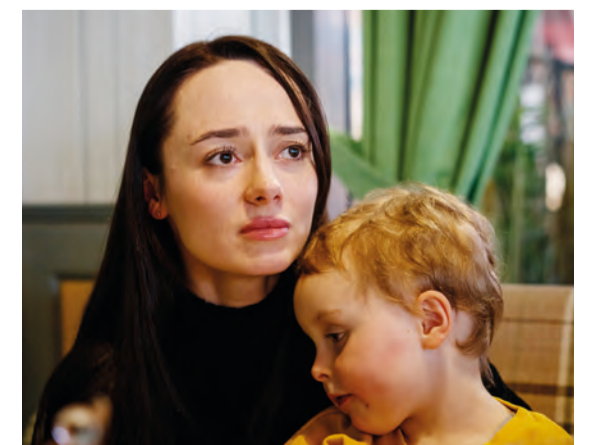
### 'You to live with it'

President Volodymyr Zelensky last August hosted widows and their children at an honors ceremony to reassure next of kin their loved ones'

sacrifice had not been in vain. "They will remain forever at battle. But they live on in the memory of their relatives," he said, greeting mourning women and their children one by one.

Thirty-year-old Slyshyk, who was born in Mariupol — a port city besieged and captured by Russian forces last spring — said she often evokes the memory of her killed husband. "All the time. Both in my head and aloud. I'll be unable to open a tin can, weeping from frustration, and I cry out: 'Misha, I'm not even able to do this' and then suddenly, it opens."

Daria Mazur, 41, said she learned of her husband's death in 2014 from graphic pictures of his bloodied corpse published on Russian media after fierce fighting with Kremlin-backed separatists. He was killed while withdrawing from Ilovaisk, an infamous and costly chapter of the conflict for Ukraine that saw hundreds killed that August as Kyiv troops pulled back in the face of advancing pro-Russian forces. — AFP



KYIV: Ukrainian Olga Slyshyk poses during an interview with AFP journalists in Kyiv, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. — AFP