

## International

# Brazil rejects US criticism, defends Russia ties and Chinese propaganda on Ukraine war

## Brazil has not joined Western nations in imposing sanctions on Russia

**BRASILIA:** Brazil pushed back against US criticism that President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is parroting Russian and Chinese propaganda on the Ukraine war as he held talks with Moscow's top diplomat.

Lula's meeting Monday with Sergei Lavrov in Brasilia follows state visits to China and the Middle East, during which Lula said the United States should "stop encouraging war and start talking about peace" in Ukraine. He also claimed Kyiv shares the blame for the conflict, which began when Russian forces poured into Ukraine in February 2022.

Lula's remarks echoed a line frequently used by Moscow and its strategic ally Beijing, which blame the West for the war. In addition to earning a US reproof the comments drew frustration Tuesday from Kyiv, which warned Brazil's leader was giving "equal weighting" to Ukraine and Russia over the war's origins.

China seeks to position itself as neutral on the Ukraine conflict, but has maintained its partnership with Moscow and refrained from imposing sanctions. In the Brazilian capital, Lavrov thanked Lula for his discussions last week on seeking

to help mediate peace talks. But Lula's recent remarks on Ukraine sparked criticism from the White House, which has spearheaded international efforts to isolate Moscow and bolster Kyiv. "In this case, Brazil is parroting Russian and Chinese propaganda without at all looking at the facts," US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters on Monday. He described Lula's message on the war as "deeply problematic."

Brazilian Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira, who had also met with his Russian counterpart, shot back, saying: "I don't know how or why he reached that conclusion but I do not agree at all." Despite Lula's comments about the United States, the 77-year-old, who returned to power in January after serving two terms from 2003 to 2010, is also seeking closer ties with Washington.

His visits to China and the United Arab Emirates came after meeting in February with US President Joe Biden. But Lula's latest remarks antagonized Kyiv, which stressed Brasilia was denying Russian aggression as the cause of the conflict. "An approach that gives equal weighting to the

victim and the aggressor and accuses countries that help Ukraine defend itself against deadly aggression of encouraging war, does not correspond to the real state of affairs," Ukraine's foreign ministry spokesman Oleg Nikolenko wrote on Facebook.

### Latin America tour

G7 foreign ministers warned Tuesday that any nation helping Russia's war effort would face "severe costs." Meeting in Japan, the top diplomats from the world's leading economies pledged to crack down on those helping Russia evade sanctions and acquire weapons.

Brazil has not joined Western nations in imposing sanctions on Russia for its invasion, and has refused requests to supply ammunition to Ukraine. "We are grateful to our Brazilian friends for their clear understanding of the genesis of the situation (in Ukraine). We are grateful for their desire to contribute to finding ways of settling this situation," Lavrov said after meeting with his Brazilian counterpart.

Russia desires a swift end to the conflict but any solution would have to be based on "multipolarity," he said, accusing the West



**BRASILIA:** Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov meets with his Brazilian counterpart Mauro Vieira at Itamaraty Palace in Brasilia on April 17, 2023. — AFP

of "trying to dominate the international arena." Washington does not have "any objection to any country that wants to try to bring an end to the war," Kirby said.

"That could happen right now, today, if Mr (Russian President Vladimir) Putin

would stop attacking Ukraine and pull its troops out." Brazil is Lavrov's first stop on a weeklong Latin American tour that will include Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba—countries with leftist governments hostile to Washington. — AFP

## EU urges leaders not to let China divide bloc

**STRASBOURG:** EU chief Ursula von der Leyen urged the bloc's leaders to show unity in the face of China on Tuesday, one week after French President Emmanuel Macron stirred a fierce debate over ties with Beijing. Macron triggered a firestorm following a trip to China by asserting that Europe should not automatically follow US policy on Taiwan and should avoid "crises that aren't ours".

"A strong European China policy relies on strong coordination between member states and EU institutions and on the willingness to avoid divide and conquer tactics," von der Leyen, who accompanied Macron to Beijing, told MEPs. "We have already in the recent days and weeks seen those tactics in action and it is now time for Europe to move to action too. Now is the time to demonstrate our collective will," she said, in an address to the European Parliament.

Von der Leyen reiterated her call for the 27-nation EU to reduce its dependence on an increasingly assertive Beijing for key resources, while not fully "de-coupling" its economy from China and its vast markets.

"On the issue of Taiwan, The EU's one China policy is long-standing," the head of the EU's executive

arm said. "We have consistently called for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. And we stand strongly against any unilateral change of the status quo in particular, by the use of force".

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said "Taiwan is crucial for Europe" in part due to the important shipping routes and its role producing semiconductors. "It's not just for moral, ethical reasons that we should reject any external interference in the affairs of Taiwan," he said.

He insisted European fleets needed to take part in freedom of navigation operations in the straits and said the bloc should be ready to "face down provocations no matter where they come".

### 'Well-tuned chorus'

Macron's comments drew sharp criticism from several of France's EU allies, especially nations in the east of the bloc that see the United States as their primary security guarantor in the face of China's ally Russia. Borrell said the bloc's member states should try to get on the same "same wavelength" over Beijing.

"We can't speak with just one voice because of the multiplicity of voices that we have, but at least we could be a well-tuned chorus," he told the European Parliament. Borrell said the bloc needed to find common ground on whether it wanted to forge its own independent voice in global affairs and how it should deal with China's stance on Russia's war in Ukraine. European leaders have pushed Beijing to get its close ally Moscow to pull back, but there have



**STRASBOURG:** European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen speaks during a debate on the need for a coherent strategy for EU-China relations, as part of a plenary session at the European Parliament in Strasbourg. — AFP

been no concrete results from their diplomatic outreach. "We all have our relations with China, but they can't develop normally if China doesn't use its influence with Russia to get it to withdraw its

troops from Ukraine," Borrell said. "Any neutrality which doesn't draw a distinction between the aggressor and the country aggressed is basically on the side of the aggressor," he said. — AFP

### News in Brief

#### Belgium jailed aid worker

**BRUSSELS:** Belgium on Tuesday said it had formally asked Iran to repatriate jailed aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele from Tehran, after a disputed prisoner exchange treaty entered into force. Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib said she had informed her Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian of the "transfer request for our compatriot Olivier Vandecasteele". "I denounced his conditions of detention and requested a visit by our ambassador in Iran," she wrote in a social media post. Iran arrested Vandecasteele, 42, in February 2022 and sentenced him to 40 years for spying, in a move condemned as "hostage diplomacy" by his backers. Brussels is eyeing a swap for Iranian official Assadollah Assadi, jailed in Belgium after he was convicted of masterminding a plot to blow up a 2018 Iranian opposition event outside Paris. But a potential exchange was held up for months after a legal challenge by an Iranian opposition group to a prisoner exchange treaty with Tehran. The complaint was dismissed by Belgium's Constitutional Court last month, fuelling hopes that Vandecasteele could be returned home. The treaty formally entered into force on Tuesday. — AFP

#### EU backs visa-free travel

**STRASBOURG:** The European Parliament voted Tuesday to allow visa-free visits to the EU for citizens of Kosovo, starting by the end of next year. Kosovo, once a Serbian province in the former Yugoslavia, is the last territory in the Western Balkans without visa-free travel to the EU's Schengen travel area. The reform will be welcomed in Pristina as another step towards full recognition and a boost for the European ambition of a territory that won independence after a 1998-1999 war. Serbia still does not recognize the independence of its former breakaway province, and nor do five EU member states: Spain, Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia and Romania. "This finally enables the people of Kosovo to easily travel, visit relatives and do business in the EU," said Austrian socialist MEP Thijs Reuten, who guided the measure through parliament. "But it is more than that: this milestone is also an important foundation for the future and ever-closer cooperation between the EU and Kosovo." Kosovo citizens will be allowed to travel to the EU, and European citizens to go to Kosovo, without requesting a visa, for periods of up to 90 days in any 180-day period. The measure will come into force once the new European Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS) is in place to allow member states to better share information. — AFP

## Indonesia searches missing soldiers after Papua attack

**TIMIKA:** Indonesian forces on Tuesday were searching for four soldiers who went missing last week after a deadly rebel ambush in Papua, the country's military chief said. The missing troops were part of the search for Phillip Mark Mehrtens, a pilot with Indonesian airline Susi Air, who was taken in February by armed separatists at Nduga airport in Papua.

They were on their way to the pilot's location in the hilly Nduga region on Saturday when rebels started shooting at them, Indonesian military chief Yudo Margono said. "We had received information on the whereabouts of the kidnapped pilot. We hoped that, together with local people... we could establish communication and negotiate for the pilot's release," Margono told reporters in the Papuan city of Timika.

"That's what we hoped (for), but rebels shot at us when we were trying to reach the location." One soldier was killed in the ambush, and the military was searching for the four troops still missing, he added.

The military has not identified the rebel group responsible for the ambush, but the West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB) — the militant wing of Papua's main separatist group — has claimed it.

TPNPB said it had killed at least 13 Indonesian soldiers in the attack, but Margono dismissed that as a "hoax". AFP cannot independently verify claims from either side due to the remoteness of the location. The rebels have previously demanded that Indonesia recognize Papuan independence in exchange for the pilot.

TPNPB has called on New Zealand and the United Nations to stop Indonesian military operations in the area. Indonesia maintains a heavy military presence in resource-rich but underdeveloped Papua to quell a long-running separatist insurgency.



**SIDOARJO:** Indonesia's Military Chief Yudo Margono (R) speaks during a press conference at an Indonesian naval aviation base in Sidoarjo on April 18, 2023. Indonesian forces were searching for four soldiers who went missing last week after a deadly rebel ambush in Papua. — AFP

A former Dutch colony, Papua declared independence in 1961, but neighboring Indonesia took control two years later, promising an inde-

pendence referendum. The subsequent vote in favor of remaining a part of Indonesia was widely considered a sham. — AFP

## 34 million Afghans in poverty under Taliban rule: UN

**KABUL:** The number of Afghans in poverty nearly doubled to 34 million as the nation was racked by the collapse of the US-backed government and the Taliban takeover, the UN said Tuesday. After the US-backed republic fell in 2021, vast foreign subsidies were halted and aid programmes dramatically cut back as many countries refused to deal with

## Two dead after landslide at Pak-Afghan border

**LANDI KOTAL:** At least two people were killed and eight injured in a massive pre-dawn landslide that buried dozens of trucks waiting to cross from Pakistan to Afghanistan, officials said Tuesday. Rescuers feared more people could be trapped dead or alive

the Taliban authorities in Kabul. In December last year, those NGOs still providing vital help were dealt a further blow by a Taliban government order barring Afghan women from working for them. This month the curfews were extended to the UN's Afghan female employees and the organization said it now faces an "appalling choice" over whether to continue its aid schemes.

On Tuesday, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) released a stark new assessment of 2022 data estimating 34 million Afghans were living below the poverty line. The figure is a staggering increase of 15 million on 2020, the last full year of rule by the Western-backed government which crumbled during a matter of weeks the following summer.

There is no contemporary census data for Afghanistan, but the UN uses a population estimate of 40 million, meaning 85 percent of the nation is projected to be in poverty. "Some have been compelled to sell their homes, land, or assets that generate income," the UNDP report said. "Others have resorted to the distressing practice of commodifying their own family members, turning children into laborers and young daughters into brides."

The UN airlifts vast sums of US dollars into Afghanistan to pay staff and operating costs — cash injections which have also been vital in shoring up the nation's faltering economy. Between December 2021 and January 2023 about \$1.8 billion was imported this way, according to the UN's mission in Afghanistan. — AFP

those trapped inside is dead, or maybe there is another reason," Faizi told AFP.

Fires broke out following the landslide, the brunt of which struck about 120 metres (130 yards) from the main border crossing. Drivers and their assistants were cooking pre-dawn meals on gas stoves ahead of a day of fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

"The fire is under control now. The rescue operation is ongoing with the help of excavators and other heavy machinery," Faizi added. The cause of the landslide was not immediately clear, but one official said heavy machinery had been in use for months on an expansion project in the hills surrounding the border post. — AFP

"We have recovered two bodies and have taken eight injured to hospital," Bilal Faizi, a spokesman for the Rescue 1122 emergency service, told AFP.

He said it was unclear how many people may be beneath the rubble, but some survivors had reported getting phone calls from colleagues. "They are not receiving calls any more... maybe the mobile battery of