



PHILIPPINES MARCOS STRIKES DEFENCE AND OTHER DEALS IN TOKYO

## ROW OVER WEST BANK OUTPOST EXPOSES ZIONIST ENTITY'S CABINET SPLIT

Page 6

Page 7



PARIS: France's President Emmanuel Macron (C) speaks during a joint statement with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky (L) and Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz (R) at the presidential Elysee Palace in Paris. —AFP

# ZELENSKY RALLIES EUROPEAN ALLIES

## 'UKRAINE IS EUROPE AND YOUR NATION'S FUTURE IS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION'

**BRUSSELS:** Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky received a hero's welcome to Brussels on Thursday as he lobbied star-struck EU leaders for help to repel a renewed Russian offensive. Two weeks ahead of the first anniversary of Europe's most brutal conflict since the 1940s, Zelensky has embarked on only his second foreign trip since Moscow launched a full-scale invasion.

After Wednesday's visits to London and Paris to lobby Britain, France and Germany for modern fighter jets and long-range missiles, the former actor turned war leader came to Brussels to address EU leaders and MEPs.

The European Parliament treated Zelensky to cheers and a standing ovation as he arrived to press Ukraine's case-as the country that sees itself as fighting to defend Europe's eastern borders-for a rapid welcome into the EU fold.

"We are defending against the most anti-European force of the modern world-we are defending ourselves, we Ukrainians on the battlefield, along with you," Zelensky told MEPs. Parliamentary speaker Roberta Metsola, reflecting the warm response of other senior EU officials, declared: "Ukraine is Europe and your nation's future is in the European Union."

"States must consider, quickly, as a next step, providing long-range systems and the jets you need to protect the liberty too many have taken for granted," she said. After the parliamentary address, Zelensky was to join the 27 leaders of the EU member states as the special guest at their regular European Council summit.

## UN URGES NO 'POLITICISATION' OF AID TO SYRIA

**GENEVA:** The UN insisted Thursday on the need to avoid "politicisation" of aid to earthquake victims in Syria, which faces international sanctions, and urged Washington and Brussels to ensure there were "no impediments".

"Emergency response must not be politicised," Geir Pedersen, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, told reporters in Geneva, saying aid needed to get to areas controlled by Damascus as well as those held by rebels. Monday's massive earthquake flattened entire sections of major cities in Turkey and Syria, killing more than 17,100 people, injuring thousands more and leaving many more without shelter in the winter cold.

The situation is of particular concern in Syria, which has been ravaged by more than a decade of civil war and where at least 3,162 people have been killed in the quake. "We need to do everything to make sure that there are no impediments whatsoever to the life-saving support that is needed in Syria," Pedersen said.

Damascus has been hit by more than a decade of economic sanctions, and there have been calls for them to be temporarily lifted to facilitate the arrival of aid. Others meanwhile highlight that sanctions are not designed to impede aid.

When asked about this, Pedersen said he had been "discussing the issue, in particular with representatives from the United States and from the European Union". "They assure me that they will do whatever they can to make sure that there are no impediments to assistance coming to Syria to help in this operation," he said.

**Kremlin warning**  
Arriving at the talks, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said: "It's very important that we speed up military aid to Ukraine. I think all of us looked in the warehouses at what we have. But we should do more." But the Kremlin reacted with its usual grim warning.

"We see this as a growing engagement of Germany, UK, France in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The boundary between indirect and direct engagement is gradually disappearing. We can only regret it," spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. "The actions of these countries lead to an escalation of tensions... make this conflict more painful... and these actions will not change the objectives of our country within the framework of the special military operation."

The NATO and EU powers of Europe have been, along with the United States, the main backers of Ukraine's beleaguered defenders since President Vladimir Putin's Russia unleashed a full-scale invasion on February 24 last year.

Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was proud to show Zelensky the Challenger tanks London is dispatching to Ukraine alongside German-built Leopards from several countries to reinforce Kiev's forces.

The EU leaders will also tout the 67 billion euros (\$72 billion) they have spent on military and financial aid to Kyiv, including funds spent on hosting four million Ukrainian refugees. But Zelensky has more to ask. Ukraine's army is facing a renewed Russian offensive and its commanders want modern

western fighter jets and long-range missiles to strike back deep into Russian-held Ukrainian territory. Macron and Scholz pledged that Europe would back Ukraine until its eventual victory.

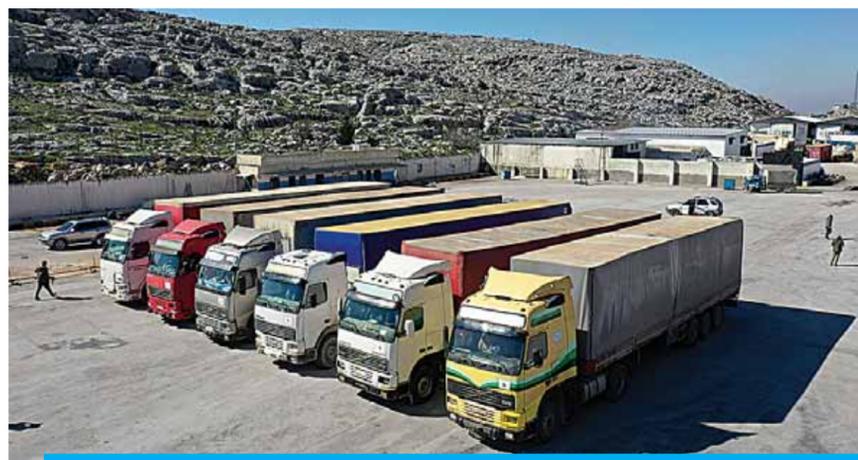
### 'Wings for freedom'

Arriving at the Brussels summit, Scholz told reporters: "We are gathered here today to give a sign of solidarity and unity. We can send out this signal once again and show that we will continue our support for Ukraine in defending its independence and integrity for as long as necessary."

Britain has promised to train Ukrainian pilots and has said it will consider the proposal for combat aircraft in the "long term". The United States and other NATO allies are nevertheless wary of provoking Russia into an uncontrolled escalation that could draw in western forces.

In frontline eastern Ukraine, the Lugansk regional governor warned that Russia was attacking Ukrainian forces near the town of Kreminna and "systematically destroying" three nearby communities. "For the offensive, we need more armoured vehicles and ammunition," the statement said.

Moscow says Russian forces were advancing on Bakhmut and Vugledar-two key centres of fighting in the eastern Donetsk region of Ukraine, now the flashpoint of the war. Updated maps of Russia have gone on sale in Moscow bookstores that include four annexed Ukrainian regions: Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Lugansk and Donetsk. Putin regularly refers to them as "our historical lands". —AFP



BAB EL-HAWA: This aerial view shows a United Nations aid convoy that entered rebel-held northwestern Syria from Turkey through the Bab el-Hawa crossing on February 9, 2023, the first since a devastating earthquake that killed thousands. —AFP

The rebel-held areas of Syria near Turkey's border are in a particularly dire situation since they cannot receive aid from government-held parts of Syria without Damascus's authorisation.

### Access and resources

At the same time, the sole border crossing used to shuttle life-saving aid from Turkey into conflict-ravaged Syria has seen its operations disrupted by the deadly earthquake. A first aid convoy managed to cross there Thursday, and Pedersen voiced confidence that "there will be obviously more assistance coming".

"Our immediate asks are two: access and resources. We need life-saving aid. It's desperately needed by civilians, wherever they are, irrespective of borders and boundaries," he said. "We need it

urgently, through the fastest, most direct and most effective routes," he said.

Humanitarian aid in rebel-held areas usually arrives through Turkey via a cross-border mechanism created in 2014 by a UN Security Council resolution. But it is contested by Damascus and its ally Moscow, and under pressure, the number of crossing points has been reduced over time to just one from four.

Asked whether it would be possible to open more border crossings to get aid through, Pedersen told AFP that "the Turks are in the process of opening more crossings". But "those are not border crossings that have been approved by the UN, via the Security Council, so that means that it is difficult for the UN to use them", he said. He suggested though that countries might be able to do so. —AFP

## CHINA SLAMS BIDEN'S 'IRRESPONSIBLE' REMARKS ON XI

**BEIJING:** Beijing condemned on Thursday US President Joe Biden's comments that Xi Jinping faced "enormous problems", saying the remarks were "extremely irresponsible". The latest rhetorical skirmish between the United States and China came after last week's downing of a Chinese balloon that Washington said was part of a spy fleet spanning five continents.

Following a brief warming after a November G20 meeting between Biden and Xi, US-China relations have once again nosedived, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken last week calling off a visit to Beijing over the balloon fracas. The US has alleged the high-altitude device-which crossed directly over at least one sensitive US military site-was intended for espionage. China has angrily denied the claims, arguing it was a weather observation craft that blew off course. On Thursday, Beijing confirmed it had refused the offer of a call between the two countries' defence chiefs after Washington shot down the inflatable aircraft.

"This irresponsible and seriously mistaken approach by the US did not create a proper atmosphere for dialogue and exchanges between the two militaries," China's defence ministry said in a statement. The previous day, Washington said the balloon was part of a "fleet", adding they had been spotted around the world for several years and urged allies to step up vigilance.

In an interview with PBS NewsHour the same day, Biden defended the decision to shoot it down and stressed that the US is not looking for conflict with China. He also said Xi had "enormous problems", including "an economy that is not functioning very well". "Can you think of any other world leader who'd trade places with Xi Jinping? I can't think of one," Biden said. China hit back at the remarks Thursday, with foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning telling a regular briefing that Beijing was "strongly dissatisfied". "This type of rhetoric from the US is extremely irresponsible and runs counter to basic diplomatic etiquette," Mao said, adding that Beijing "firmly opposed this". It also doubled down on its position that the balloon shot down last week was for civilian purposes, saying claims it was part of a fleet were part of an "information war" against China.

"The US disregard for China's repeated explanations and communications, excessive reaction, and misuse of force are irresponsible," Mao said. "The international community can see very clearly what the world's biggest country of espionage, monitoring and surveillance is."

### 'Be vigilant'

But in the face of mounting concern over Chinese espionage in the skies, Japan said Thursday it was coordinating with Washington as it analysed unidentified aerial objects spotted over the country in past years. A mysterious balloon-like object was seen over northern Japan in June 2020, with locals posting pictures on social media.

Authorities said then that they were baffled by the object, which in close-up images by residents and media appeared to be composed of a balloon attached to crossed sticks with propellers. In a visit to Washington this week, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said the device shot down by the US showed the need for countries across the alliance to protect themselves. —AFP