

International

Start training Ukrainians to use Leopard tanks, Germany says

Poland says ready to deliver 14 Leopard tanks to Kyiv

BERLIN: Germany said Tuesday that allies could start training Ukrainian forces to use the Leopard battle tanks desperately sought by Kyiv to repel Russian troops, provoking a defiant response from the Kremlin.

Berlin stopped short of granting permission for the tanks to be sent to Ukraine, but underscored that the pending decision was imminent. Poland sought to push Germany to speed up its decision, with Warsaw putting forward a formal application for the transfer of the German-made armament from its stocks to Ukraine.

But in Kyiv, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was battling a deepening corruption scandal within his government, sacking several officials over graft while others resigned. Ukraine has been urging Germany for weeks to allow the export of powerful German-made Leopard tanks, but Berlin has so far declined to give the green light.

A US-led meeting of Kyiv's allies in Germany last week failed to yield a decision despite a growing clamor from several European countries ready to export the tanks. Defense Minister Boris Pistorius indicated Tuesday that a decision could be imminent, saying he had "expressly encouraged partner countries that have Leopard tanks that are ready for deployment to train Ukrainian forces on these tanks".

"I expect a decision to be made shortly," he added ahead of a meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Berlin. Stoltenberg welcomed the "clear message" from the minister, "because after a decision has been taken on the delivery on battle tanks, it will take some time to... make them ready" and to train Ukrainian soldiers to use them. "We must provide heavier and more advanced systems to Ukraine, and we must do it faster," Stoltenberg said, adding that he expected a decision by Berlin "soon".

Moscow shows no signs of changing course in its invasion, he added, noting that Russia has mobilized over 200,000 troops and is acquiring new weapons from

countries like North Korea or Iran. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the delivery of the tanks would "bring nothing good to the future relationship" between Berlin and Moscow. "They will leave a lasting mark," he warned.

Mounting pressure

Pistorius had emphasized earlier that Berlin was not opposed to Leopard deliveries but had simply not made a decision yet. "We are supporting Ukraine not to lose this war, to win it against Russia," he said in an interview with the ZDF broadcaster. Pistorius also defended Chancellor Olaf Scholz against accusations of dithering on whether to approve the delivery of Leopards. "Taking the lead does not mean blindly going ahead," he said. "And if the decision takes another day or two, then that's just the way it is."

Pistorius, who took office only last week at a crucial time for the German defense ministry, also insisted there was no division among Ukraine's Western allies. Observers would be "well advised not to wantonly conjure up this supposed division within NATO," he said.

While scores of nations have pledged military hardware for Ukraine, Kyiv is clamoring for the more powerful Leopard tanks, seen as key to punching through enemy lines. The tanks are used by several EU nations but these countries require Berlin's permission to send the German-made armaments on to Ukraine under Germany's war weapons control act.

Polish request

Poland, one of the loudest voices calling for permission to send the tanks, had said this month it was ready to deliver 14 Leopard tanks to Kyiv within the framework of an international coalition of countries.

"The Germans have already received our request for consent to send Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine," Defense

was," he said, adding that he felt "a little safer".

Wall of omerta

The Cosa Nostra, immortalized in the Godfather movies, had already changed from the ruthless organization that three decades ago murdered judges and set off deadly car bombs in Italy's major cities. Those acts of violence triggered a years-long crackdown by the state, and experts say the Mafia has now been eclipsed by other groups in Italy, notably the 'Ndrangheta in the southern region of Calabria. But it was strong enough to keep Messina Denaro protected for 30 years on the run.

The culture of 'omerta' — the protective silence that surrounds the Mafia — was evident to journalists covering the aftermath of his arrest, which occurred as he visited a health clinic in Palermo. "The mafia bases all its strength on fear, and so people are scared of exposing themselves. They don't want to be mixed up in it, they don't want to risk anything and prefer to turn away — without realizing that this is something that affects everybody," Cimarosa said.

His father Lorenzo had married into the Messina Denaro family, marrying the mob boss's cousin — Cimarosa's mother — and "helping" them, including "supporting them financially", Cimarosa said. But after being arrested, Lorenzo agreed to work with the authorities, and "broke a

tions, and at a time when Biden's Republican predecessor Donald Trump is being investigated for his mishandling of hundreds of classified files.

November 9, 2022

The Department of Justice begins investigating Biden's handling of classified documents.

December 20, 2022

Biden's personal lawyers find more documents in the garage of his family home in Wilmington, Delaware, where the 80-year-old president often spends weekends. The attorneys inform the Justice Department and hand over the documents. The White House has yet to make a public statement on either of the discoveries.

January 9, 2023

The White House confirms for the first time, reacting to media reports, that secret papers were found in Biden's office, but makes no mention of those found in his home in Wilmington.

January 10, 2023

At a news conference in Mexico, where Biden is on an official visit, the president says he was "surprised" to learn about the classified document discoveries and does not know what is in them.

January 12, 2023

The White House confirms that a "small number" of classified documents were found in storage areas and in the library of Biden's Wilmington home. Facing an uproar in opposition

then drove to another dance studio where police say only the "heroic" actions of a young man who wrestled the weapon off him prevented another slaughter. Hours later, Tran shot himself dead as police moved in on his white van.

Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna said Monday that Tran, who had been arrested in 1994 for unlawful possession of a firearm, had fired 42 rounds in the attack. But, he said, much was still unknown. "We still don't have a motive, but we want to know the motive behind this tragic event," he told reporters. "What drove a madman to do this? We don't know. But we intend to find out."

Detectives were looking Monday at Tran's previous connections to the two dance studios, with personal relationships a key area of interest, the Los Angeles Times reported. Monterey Park resident Chester Hong



BERLIN: Germany's new Defense Minister Boris Pistorius (right) and NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg give a joint press conference following talks on January 24, 2023 at the Defense Ministry in Berlin. —AFP

Minister Mariusz Blaszczak said on Twitter on Tuesday. "I am also calling on the German side to join our coalition of countries supporting Ukraine with Leopard 2 tanks," he added.

As Ukraine marked 11 months since the start of the war on Tuesday, Zelensky urged his troops to keep up the fight against Russia. "Today is exactly 11 months of full-scale war. The 335th day," Zelensky said. "A day that we will pass in the same way as the 334th, uniting all our forces for the sake of one thing — victory. For the sake

of Ukraine's victory."

But the comments came with Zelensky battling a widening corruption scandal that has felled several senior officials. A number of senior Ukrainian officials resigned after the defense ministry was accused of signing food contracts at inflated prices, while several more — including four deputy ministers — were dismissed. Among them is a deputy defense minister, two deputy ministers of development of communities and territories, and a deputy minister of social policy. —AFP

Cousin of Sicilian mob boss fights 'Mafia mentality'

CASTELVETRANO: As the son of a mafioso turned state witness and a cousin of captured Cosa Nostra boss Matteo Messina Denaro, Giuseppe Cimarosa has seen the Sicilian Mafia and its intimidation tactics up close.

But while many in Messina Denaro's hometown of Castelvetroano stayed silent following his arrest last week after 30 years on the run, Cimarosa organized a demonstration against the Mafia in front of the mobster's ancestral home.

"Now the real battle is cultural. Now you have to change people's mentality," the 40-year-old riding instructor told AFP at his stables in the town in western Sicily, where the mob boss was born and reigned with terror. "Now the enemy is no longer the Mafia but the Mafia-like behavior or simply a way of thinking that unfortunately is still rampant. We must start with teaching in schools, and then the state has to support those who, like me, rebel."

Cimarosa was disappointed that the turnout at last week's small protest was not higher, but he himself breathed a sigh of relief at Messina Denaro's arrest. "The Mafia is not as unbeatable as it thought it



CASTELVETRANO: Anti-mafia activist Giuseppe Cimarosa, who is related to arrested mafia boss Matteo Messina Denaro through his mother, is pictured at his stud farm in Castelvetroano, Sicily, on January 20, 2023. —AFP

wall of omerta that until then was very strong".

Threats

For Cimarosa, his mother and brother, the betrayal — as his father's collaboration was seen — created a "stigma for me, for my family, that has been difficult to shake off". They declined government protection, with Cimarosa insisting he would not give up his identity "because of a criminal who I neither know or have ever met".

"We never received explicit threats.

But some things happened that made me think they could be messages," he said. "Years ago, I found one of my horses dead... and then shortly after my father's death his tomb was destroyed twice."

He admits to thinking "practically every day" about leaving Sicily. "However, I stayed because I believe that this is my mission. Because it would have been too easy to say what I said far away," he said. "My words have more value if I say them from Castelvetroano." —AFP

Biden's secret documents: The drip, drip of revelations

WASHINGTON: The first secret documents turned up in Joe Biden's former private office and home back in November, but it was January before the White House publicly admitted the embarrassing discovery — under pressure from a steady drip of media revelations.

Since then, searches of the president's home have uncovered several more sets of classified files in a snowballing affair threatening to overshadow the Democrat's expected announcement that he will seek a second term in 2024. Here is a timeline of developments in the saga:

November 2, 2022

While emptying an office that Biden used occasionally between 2017 — after the end of his term as Barack Obama's vice-president — and the launch of his 2020 campaign, Biden's personal lawyers find "a small number of documents" marked as classified in a locked closet. The following day, the documents are handed over to the National Archives, as US presidents and vice presidents are required to do when they leave office.

The White House makes no public announcement of the discovery, which comes a week before critical midterm elec-

US police focus on jealousy as Lunar New Year shooting motive

MONTEREY PARK: Detectives probing why an elderly Asian immigrant shot dead 11 people as they celebrated Lunar New Year at a dance hall in California are examining whether jealousy or a personal dispute was behind the tragedy, a report said Monday.

Huu Can Tran, 72, used a semi-automatic pistol in a rampage in the Los Angeles suburb of Monterey Park on Saturday night, killing men and women in their 50s, 60s and 70s. One person was shot in the parking lot. He

ranks, US Attorney General Merrick Garland names Robert Hur, a Trump appointee, as special counsel to investigate the matter. Biden's spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre tells the press that the search of his Wilmington home concluded the night before, on January 11.

January 14, 2023

In a new twist, the White House says a lawyer found five additional pages of classified material in Biden's home in Delaware — just a day earlier, on January 13. The total number of documents found in Biden's home and his Washington office has become unclear at this stage — with the White House referring variably to documents, pages or "items" — and no details have been released on their level of classification.

January 19, 2023

Traveling in California, Biden downplays the furor over the documents, declaring that "there's nothing there" and that he has "no regrets."

January 21, 2023

The president's personal attorney, Bob Bauer, announces that six more classified documents have been found at Biden's Delaware home. Unlike previous discoveries, the latest search was conducted by the US Department of Justice — at the president's invitation, according to his lawyers — and lasted from 9:45 am to 10:30 pm. The latest find included documents dating back to Biden's tenure as vice president from 2009 to 2017, but also to his decades-long career in the Senate. —AFP

told AFP on Sunday he believed a domestic dispute over an invitation to a Lunar New Year eve party could be at the root of the attack.

"The wife (was) invited to join the party (but) the husband cannot be invited," he said. "And the husband may be upset and jealous." Luna confirmed officers had been told Tran may have been known to some of his victims, but said there was currently no evidence he was related to any.

'Hostile'

On Monday a picture began to emerge of a man who, according to his marriage license, had immigrated from China, and who had been a regular at the Star Ballroom Dance Studio in the past. Tran's ex-wife told CNN the couple had met there two decades ago when he offered to give her informal lessons. —AFP

Top Indian university bans screening of BBC series on PM Modi

NEW DELHI: A top Indian university has banned the screening of a BBC documentary about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's role during deadly 2002 sectarian riots, after his government attempted to block its spread online.

The broadcaster's program alleges that the Hindu nationalist Modi, premier of Gujarat state at the time, ordered police to turn a blind eye to an orgy of violence there that left at least 1,000 people dead, most of them minority Muslims.

Students at the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi had planned to screen the documentary on Tuesday, defying efforts by Indian authorities to restrict its showing. But a memo from the university's registrar late on Monday ordered students to cancel the event and warned it would take "strict disciplinary action" if its edict was disobeyed. "Such an unauthorized activity may disturb peace and harmony of the university campus," it said. Modi's government has been accused of stifling dissent by free-speech activists and opposition leaders for years. On Saturday it used emergency powers under India's controversial information technology laws to block the documentary from being shared on social media.

Government adviser Kanchan Gupta slammed the series as "hostile propaganda and anti-India garbage" disguised as a documentary. India's order to social media platforms to block links to the documentary "flagrantly contradicts the country's stated commitment to democratic ideals", Beh Lih Yi of the Committee to Protect Journalists said in a statement on Monday.

The 2002 riots in Gujarat began after 59 Hindu pilgrims were killed in a fire on a train. Thirty-one Muslims were convicted of criminal conspiracy and murder over that incident. The two-part BBC documentary cited a previously classified British foreign ministry report quoting unnamed sources saying that Modi met senior police officers and "ordered them not to intervene" in the attacks on Muslims that followed.

It also said the violence was "politically motivated" and the aim "was to purge Muslims from Hindu areas". The riots were impossible "without the climate of impunity created by the state Government... Narendra Modi is directly responsible," it concluded. Modi ran Gujarat from 2001 until his election as prime minister in 2014 and briefly faced a travel ban by the United States over the violence. An investigation team appointed by the Indian Supreme Court to probe the role of Modi and others in the violence said in 2012 it did not find any evidence to prosecute him. —AFP



MONTEREY PARK: People pay their respects in front of a makeshift memorial for victims of a mass shooting outside the Star Ballroom Dance Studio in Monterey Park, California on January 23, 2023. —AFP