

International

Deadly Russian missiles hit Ukraine energy infrastructure

‘The most difficult situation is currently in the regions of Kyiv, Odessa and Vinnytsia’

KYIV: Russian forces fired dozens of missiles at Ukraine on Thursday in a blistering wave of strikes targeting energy infrastructure, a day after Germany and the United States pledged heavy tanks for Kyiv. The latest wave of attacks came as the Kremlin said Moscow perceived the tank deliveries “as direct involvement in the conflict” and Ukraine conceded it was facing mounting pressure from Russian troops on the eastern front. On a road near the eastern frontline city of Bakhmut, a team of medics welcomed the long-awaited promise of heavy tanks.

“This should have happened sooner, and in bigger quantities,” a doctor called Liza told AFP, adding that she was “very thankful.” On Wednesday, the United States announced it will provide 31 Abrams tanks to help Ukraine repel Russia’s invasion, mirroring a similar move by Germany. German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius said on Thursday that Leopard tanks pledged by Berlin will arrive in “late March, early April.”

Training of Ukrainian troops on German Marder infantry fighting vehicles will start in the next few days, he added, and “a little later” for the Ukrainian soldiers who will be trained on the Leopard. In Kyiv, the Ukrainian army said its forces had destroyed 47 out of the 55 missiles launched by Russia in a new wave of attacks on Thursday. Russian missiles killed one person and wounded two more in the capital, said Kyiv mayor Vitali Klitschko. The 55-year-old man was killed by fragments of a missile that was shot down by Ukrainian air defense systems, city officials said.

Emergency shutdowns

Since October, Russia has been launching regular mass strikes against energy infrastructure across Ukraine, with temperatures currently near zero degrees Celsius (32 degrees Fahrenheit). Energy



KYIV, Ukraine: Workers repair power lines following a Russian missile strike on the industrial zone of Kyiv on Thursday, amid Russian invasion of Ukraine. — AFP

Minister German Galushchenko accused Russia of seeking to “create a systemic failure in Ukraine’s energy system.” “Emergency shutdowns have been introduced. The most difficult situation is currently in the regions of Kyiv, Odessa and Vinnytsia,” Galushchenko added after the latest strikes.

In the southern region of Odessa on the Black Sea, “such a situation may last for several days until

the damaged power facilities are restored,” energy provider DTEK said. The attacks delayed the visit of French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, who arrived in Odessa to discuss aid with Ukraine’s top diplomat Dmytro Kuleba. Ukraine’s air force also said Thursday its units shot down all 24 Iranian-made drones launched by Russian forces from near southern Ukraine. By announcing heavy tank deliver-

600 different ways of defining wages when someone works that day,” she said.

A recent poll by the Epinion institute indicated an overwhelming majority of Danes opposed the move, which was not mentioned during last autumn’s election campaign. Only 17 percent supported the plan, while 75 percent were against it. “They’re interfering with the Danish model,” Pernille Holm, a physiotherapist in her 30s, told AFP on Thursday.

“We have a way of doing things here in Denmark. We (negotiate) with our employer. And the unions negotiate our rights as workers. The government should not be able to do anything without including these two parts,” she insisted.



COPENHAGEN: Picture taken on June 26, 2020 shows Lizette Risgaard, head of the main organization of the trade union movement. — AFP

Deja vu

An online petition started by FH has garnered almost half a million signatures. Only the three governmental parties, which hold a majority in parliament, support the measure. The Lutheran Church and organizations representing military employees have also protested vehemently.

“I am furious that they are using the military this way by saying that the money from the public holiday will go to increasing the budget,” the head of the main union representing military personnel, Jesper Korsgaard Hansen, told tabloid BT. In parliament, the nine opposition parties ranging from the extreme left to the extreme right say they will refuse to take part in any new defense policy agreement until the government withdraws its plan. For Danes, there is a sense of deja vu. Ten years ago, a Social Democratic government tried to abolish the same public holiday but gave up amid a national outcry.—AFP

pockets” and that the issue could be left until the school day ends. “Tragically almost an hour later, violence struck at Richneck Elementary School. Abby Zwerner was shot in front of those horrified kids,” said Toscano.

“This tragedy was entirely preventable if the school administrators responsible for school safety had done their part and taken action when they had knowledge of imminent danger,” she said. Zwerner survived being shot in the chest and is now recuperating at home, but faces more surgery. Later Wednesday, Newport News authorities announced the decision to fire school district superintendent George Parker III “based on the future trajectory and needs of our school division.”

The school board stressed that the “decision was made without cause as Dr. Parker is a capable division leader” and thanked him for his service. The case stunned much of the nation, given the age of the boy, even as the United States faces increasing numbers of school shootings. The boy apparently removed his mother’s gun from a closet. His parents issued a statement last week praising Zwerner and claiming that the gun had been secured.

They said the boy suffers from “an acute disability” and was under a special school care plan that usually involved a member of the family accompanying him to school and class. “The week of the shooting was the first week when we were not in class with him,” they said. Because of his age, charges are not likely. His parents could, however, face charges for allowing the child access to a gun.—AFP

Hands off our public holiday, cry angry Danes

COPENHAGEN: The Danish government’s plan to abolish a public holiday to help fund the defense budget amid the war in Ukraine is putting Denmark’s cherished welfare model at risk, the country’s biggest trade union warned. “It’s a big threat to the Danish model,” said Lizette Risgaard, the head of the FH union which has 1.3 million members in a country of 5.9 million inhabitants. “Politicians should stay out of labor market issues. If they go through with this they’ll be imposing their will and violate our agreements”, she thundered in an interview with AFP on Wednesday.

The left-right government coalition in power since December, headed by Social Democratic Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, plans to scrap the religious holiday known as “Great Prayer Day”, observed since the 17th century. Initially introduced as a day of prayer, fasting and penitence, it falls on the fourth Friday after Easter and is now a common date for confirmations. But the government wants to get rid of it and use the money to raise the defense budget to NATO’s target of two percent of GDP by 2030, instead of 2033 as previously planned.

The government insists the accelerated calendar is necessary due to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The move is expected to provide an extra three billion kroner (\$440 million) to state coffers. The cancelled holiday would entail an additional 7.4 hours of labor per worker, according to the government.

“I don’t think it’s a problem to have to work an extra day”, Frederiksen said. “We are facing enormous expenditures for defense and security, health care, psychiatry and the green transition,” she said, presenting the new government’s program to parliament.

Danes will have to work an extra day, which their employers will have to pay them for. But the public holiday and the wages paid to both those who work that day and those who are off, are already enshrined in the country’s sacred collective wage agreements.

Overwhelming opposition

“It’s a public holiday. And of course, they can say ‘OK, we want to abolish it’”, said Risgaard. “But then they are going against what we have agreed upon in negotiations: to have the right to be with your family that day. In our collective wage agreements, there are

Teacher shot by 6-year-old to sue school over inaction

WASHINGTON: An American elementary school teacher shot by her six-year-old student plans to file a lawsuit against school authorities saying they ignored multiple warnings over the threat, her lawyer said Wednesday. Attorney Diane Toscano said administrators at the Richneck Elementary School in Newport News, Virginia were warned three times on January 6 by her client Abigail Zwerner and other teachers that the boy could have a gun and was threatening others. Zwerner survived the shooting, but was seriously injured. That morning Zwerner, 25, told school administrators that the boy, who has not been identified, had threatened to beat up another child. “But the school administration could not be bothered,” Toscano said. An hour later another teacher told them that the boy apparently brought a gun to school but she did not see it in his school bag, and that he might have it in his pockets.

A third teacher then reported that another student said while crying that he had seen the gun and been threatened with it. Still no action was taken, and a school employee was denied permission to physically search the boy. An administrator said the boy “has little

ies, the United States and Germany swept aside long-standing misgivings and signaled a new surge of Western support for a counteroffensive against the Russian invasion.

‘Intensifying’ Donetsk front

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave the green light to Germany sending 14 Leopard 2 tanks—a decision that opens the floodgates to several other European countries armed with Leopards to send their own contributions. Although Western countries have already sent Ukraine everything from artillery to Patriot anti-missile defense systems, tanks were long considered a step too far, risking a widening backlash from Russia.

But with Ukraine gearing up for a counteroffensive to push back increasingly entrenched Russians in the east and south, the allies are now scrambling to send the powerful weapon. After a series of battlefield setbacks, Russia has claimed gains on the eastern front, where Ukraine conceded that its troops had pulled out of the town of Soledar in the Donetsk region.

Russian forces and units with the Wagner mercenary group claimed two weeks ago they had captured the small salt-mining town. On Wednesday, Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Ganna Malyar said Moscow was also intensifying pressure along the eastern front, in the fight for nearby Bakhmut.

“The enemy is throwing a significant number of personnel, weapons and military equipment into the battle, trying to break through our defenses,” Malyar said. The US-based Institute for the Study of War said Russia was engaging in “spoiling attacks across most of the frontline in Ukraine in order to disperse and distract Ukrainian forces.” Those measures, it said, were in order to “set conditions to launch a decisive offensive operation” in the eastern Lugansk region.—AFP

EU looks to boost returns of migrants denied asylum

STOCKHOLM: EU interior ministers on Thursday discussed how to return irregular migrants to their home countries more effectively—with some arguing for limiting visas to uncooperative nations. “Returning those who have been denied asylum in Europe is a really important issue,” said Maria Malmer Stenegerd, migration minister for Sweden, which hosted the meeting as current holder of the EU presidency.

European Commission statistics show that in 2021, out of 340,500 orders for migrants to be returned to their countries of origin, only 21 percent were carried out. “We have a very low return rate,” noted EU home affairs commissioner Ylva Johansson. “We can do significant progress here to increase the numbers of returns and have it more effective and quicker,” she said. The Swedish EU presidency believes cooperation could be improved with countries outside the EU whose citizens make up significant numbers of irregular migrants. Malmer Stenegerd said it was “crucial” that EU member states use the full weight of their governments—including leveraging development aid—to press third countries on the returns issue. The EU funds various reintegration programs in countries that readmit their citizens who have been denied asylum in Europe.

These are separate from deportations or forced returns based on a court or administrative order, which are often carried out under escort and typically do not include in-country assistance. The EU has had a mechanism in place since 2020 to use visa issuance as a lever against countries that refuse to take back their nationals or decline to issue them with the necessary travel papers.

But so far that measure has only been applied to Gambia, for whose citizens getting a Schengen visa is more difficult and costly. The commission in 2021 proposed the mechanism be extended to Bangladesh and Iraq, but that has not happened. Johansson said after a November visit to Bangladesh that the threat of the visa sanction has prompted Dhaka to become more “politically open” to accepting irregular migrants back from Europe.

EU leaders in December 2021 called for “all relevant tools” to be used to push migrant-originating countries to cooperate on readmissions, including access to development aid, trade and visas. France backed a carrot-and-stick approach, with its junior minister for citizen affairs, Sonia Backes, saying in Stockholm that first “constructive dialogue” should be used. That “should then be hardened by restrictive measures if results aren’t met,” she said.

Germany however has reservations about that approach. German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said accords signed, especially with countries in north Africa, “on one hand allowed legal paths (for migration), and on the other, effective returns”.

Austria backs fence

The overall tone on migration has hardened in Europe since 2015–2016, when it took in over a million asylum-seekers, most of them Syrians fleeing the war in their country.

The bloc in 2016 struck a deal with Turkey for it to prevent much of the onward passage of irregular migrants into Europe. Austria is backing the construction of a fence along the border of EU member Bulgaria with Turkey to further reduce the flow of asylum-seekers. Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer said on Monday, during a visit to that border region, that the fence would cost around two billion euros and he called on the European Commission to fund it.—AFP



UNITED STATES: Chunli Zhao, the man who is accused of shooting dead seven people in Half Moon Bay, California, appears for his arraignment at the San Mateo Criminal Court in Redwood City, California. — AFP

California farm shooting suspect could face death penalty: Prosecutor

LOS ANGELES: The man accused of killing seven fellow farmworkers and wounding another in California could face the death penalty if convicted of multiple murder charges, a prosecutor said Wednesday, as the suspect appeared in court for the first time. Zhao Chunli, 66, was arrested Monday in Half Moon Bay, south of San Francisco, shortly after twin attacks at farms that left five men and two women dead. Zhao appeared in court in nearby Redwood City on Wednesday wearing orange jail clothing.

He faces seven counts of murder, one of attempted murder and what prosecutors called a special circumstance allegation of multiple murder. A Mandarin language translator was on hand for a hearing in which his attorney requested the formal arraignment be postponed. San Mateo County Superior Court Judge Susan Jakubowski remanded Zhao in custody and ordered that he appear in court on February 16.

‘Workplace violence’

San Mateo County District Attorney Stephen Wagstaffe told the San Francisco Chronicle that the special circumstance allegation “makes him eligible for the punishment of life without parole or death.” “That decision will be made down the road after the full investigation is completed and we learn everything we can about Mr. Zhao,” Wagstaffe added in an email to the paper. San Mateo County Sheriff Christina Corpus said Tuesday that it appeared the suspect had known the victims.

“All the evidence we have points to this being an instance of workplace violence,” she said. Zhao is believed to have used a legally-purchased semi-automatic pistol in the rampage. The suspect is a Chinese national who has lived in the Half Moon Bay area for at least a decade, including for seven years at the mushroom farm where the killing spree began, the San Jose Mercury reported.

The paper cited Captain Eamonn Allen saying the sheriff’s department was working to support the suspect’s wife. “They lived on the property together, so there’s a very real concern of retribution or backlash on her,” Allen said.

Charging documents and information from the coroner reveal five of the dead had Chinese names, with two of them being aged in their 70s. There was no immediate reply to AFP queries to Chinese consulates in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Mexico’s consulate in San Francisco confirmed two of the dead were Mexican men. Another Mexican man survived the attack and is in hospital in Palo Alto, the consulate told AFP.

The Half Moon Bay attacks came on the heels of another deadly rampage in California on Saturday in which an elderly Asian gunman killed 11 people at a dance club in Monterey Park, near Los Angeles. He shot himself dead the following morning as police moved in. US Vice President Kamala Harris was expected in Monterey Park on Wednesday, where her office said she would meet with families of some of the victims. A vigil was also expected later in the day.—AFP