



Young Georgians shun Moscow, push for EU dream

More migrants brought ashore to Italy as locals march for victims

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LEICESTER: Gary Lineker (2R), former England footballer turned sports TV presenter for the BBC, arrives at the King Power Stadium in Leicester, central England, ahead of the English Premier League football match between Leicester City and Chelsea. —AFP

BBC chief refuses to quit amid chaos

Lineker forced to 'step back' from presenting the flagship Premier League highlights show

LONDON: Britain's finance minister on Sunday said "people's confidence" in the BBC needed to be restored as the broadcaster's boss vowed not to quit amid the chaos surrounding Gary Lineker's removal as Match of the Day host. Lineker was forced to "step back" from his duties presenting the flagship Premier League highlights show after accusing the UK government of using Nazi-era rhetoric in announcing its policy to tackle illegal immigration.

The BBC said on Friday that Lineker, England's fourth highest goalscorer of all-time, had breached guidelines on impartiality and the corporation would seek "an agreed and clear position on his use of social media" before an on-screen return.

Former BBC chief Greg Dyke warned on Saturday that "it looks like - the perception out there - that the BBC has bowed to government pressure," deepening an ongoing row over impartiality at the broadcaster. Finance minister Jeremy Hunt told Sky News on Sunday that he "profoundly" disagreed with Lineker's remarks, but that the decision was one for the BBC and its director general Tim Davie.

"The reason that it is a great national institution that we all treasure so much, is because it is respected for impartiality," he said. "We need to make sure that what comes out of this is that people's confidence in the impartiality of the

BBC is restored." Lineker's critics claim the public-funded broadcaster has allowed him to use the platform afforded him as the face of its much-loved football show to influence contentious political issues. But his backers accuse the broadcaster of taking their cues from Conservative politicians, pointing out that current BBC chairman Richard Sharp facilitated a loan guarantee for former prime minister Boris Johnson while applying for the job.

Prime Minister reacts

The decision to remove Lineker caused chaos to scheduled sports programming across the BBC's television and radio output. Former England players Ian Wright and Alan Shearer were among the pundits who refused to take up their usual roles on Match of the Day, followed by the programme's commentators.

As a result, the longest-running football television programme in the world was aired for the first time without a presenter, pundits or even commentary in a shortened 20-minute highlights package of six matches from the English top-flight.

Despite the disrupted format, BBC entertainment correspondent Lizo Mzimba tweeted Sunday that viewing figures were up nearly half a million on last

week's audience, with 2.58 million people tuning in.

Weekend preview show Football Focus and results programme Final Score were also pulled from the schedule, as was Sunday's round-up show Match of the Day 2, while BBC Radio 5Live's coverage was disrupted. When asked if he should resign over the Lineker issue, Davie replied: "Absolutely not."

"I think that my job is to serve licence-fee payers and deliver a BBC that is really focused on world-class impartial landmark output, and I look forward to us resolving this situation and looking forward to delivering that."

He added: "To be clear, success for me is Gary gets back on air and together we are giving to the audiences that world-class sports coverage which, as I say, I'm sorry we haven't been able to deliver today." Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said Saturday he hoped the stand-off can be "resolved in a timely manner."

'Immeasurably cruel'

Lineker is a freelance broadcaster for the BBC, not a permanent member of staff, and is not responsible for news or political content so does not need to adhere to the same strict rules on impartiality. However, former BBC boss Mark Thompson told the broadcaster on Sunday that the former

Leicester, Everton, Barcelona and Tottenham striker may have technically breached the guidelines.

He pointed to a section that says that non-journalists "who nevertheless have an additional responsibility to the BBC because of their profile at the BBC" should avoid "taking sides on party political issues, or political controversies". The row was sparked by Lineker's response to a video in which Home Secretary Suella Braverman unveiled plans to stop migrants crossing the Channel on small boats. Lineker, the BBC's highest-paid star with an annual salary of £1.35 million (\$1.65 million, 1.53 million euros) according to the figures released last year, wrote on Twitter: "This is just an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people in language that is not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the '30s."

The Conservative government intends to outlaw asylum claims by all illegal arrivals and transfer them to other countries, such as Rwanda, in a bid to stop the crossings, which totalled more than 45,000 last year.

A YouGov poll published on Monday showed 50 percent backing the measures, with 36 percent opposed. But another of its polls published Saturday showed that 53 percent opposed Lineker's removal, compared to 27 percent who backed it. —AFP

Ukraine readies counteroffensive

KYIV: The Ukrainian military was preparing Sunday for an upcoming counteroffensive, with a top commander saying his forces' ongoing defence of Bakhmut in the face of fierce and sustained Russian attacks was necessary to "buy time" for that push.

The remarks came as British intelligence said the frontline had shifted in the fight for Bakhmut—the longest and bloodiest battle of Moscow's year-long invasion—but that any further Russian advance in the devastated town would be "highly challenging".

Some military experts have questioned the sense of continuing to hold the city, but the commander of Ukraine's ground forces, Oleksandr Syrsky, said that it helped win time in preparation for the coming counteroffensive.

"The real heroes now are the defenders who are holding the eastern front on their shoulders, and inflicting the heaviest possible losses, sparing neither themselves nor the enemy," Syrsky was quoted as saying in a statement on Saturday. "It is necessary to buy time to build reserves and launch a counteroffensive, which is not far off."

In a video released on Saturday, Yevgeny Prigozhin, chief of Russian mercenary group Wagner, said that his forces were close to the administrative centre of the city. Standing on the rooftop of a high-rise building in what is said to be Bakhmut, Prigozhin is seen pointing towards a building in the distance.

"This is the building of the town administration, this is the centre of the town," he said, clad in full military gear. "It is one kilometre and two hundred metres away." Speaking as artillery boomed in the background, Prigozhin said the most important thing now was to receive more ammunition from the army and "move forward".

Wagner has been spearheading offensives against cities in eastern Ukraine including Bakhmut. Both sides have suffered heavy losses. The Ukrainian defence ministry on Saturday reported that its forces had repelled "more than 100 enemy attacks" over the last day along the eastern front.

'A killing zone'

In an interview with the French newspaper Journal du Dimanche, Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Olga Stefanishyna underscored the human cost of Russia's assault on Bakhmut. "Thousands of Russian soldiers died at a considerable rate in this battle," she said. "The human mass of its infantry is a formidable weapon, it seems inexhaustible in volume and in time."



DOLYNA: Volunteers carry remains of a Uragan rocket as they clean the area around the Orthodox Svyato-Heorhiyivskyy Skyt of the Sviatohirsk Cave Monastery destroyed in a shelling in the village of Dolyna, Donetsk region, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. —AFP

But even if it did capture the "small town", she added, "it will not impact the strategic corridors we still control in the region". British military intelligence said that the Bakhmutka River in the centre of the city now marked the front line.

"Ukrainian forces hold the west of the town and have demolished key bridges over the river, which runs north-south through a strip of open ground 200 metres-800 metres wide," the British defence ministry said.

"This area has become a killing zone, likely making it highly challenging for Wagner forces attempting to continue their frontal assault westwards," Wagner chief Prigozhin, an ally of President Vladimir Putin, has been entangled in a power struggle with the defence ministry.

He has several times claimed battlefield victories ahead of Russia's army, criticised the country's top brass and accused the military of not sharing ammunition with Wagner forces. On Saturday he said he was ready to ask Russia's top commanders for forgiveness but at the same time appeared to mock Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov.

He said they were "outstanding military commanders" and added that Russia's greatest mili-

tary leaders including Georgy Zhukov and Alexander Suvorov "could have learnt" from them. "I absolutely-totally-support all their initiatives," Prigozhin added.

Shelling of Kherson

Since Russia's retreat from the city of Kherson late last year, it has been regularly pounded by Moscow's troops. The Russian army has kept shelling the southern city, killing three people and wounding another two, Ukrainian officials said Saturday. "Russian terrorists are shelling Kherson again," said Andriy Yermak, the head of Ukraine's presidential office, posting a picture of firefighters next to a charred car. Galyna Kolisnyk, 53, said the Russians struck when she was in a store. "When we entered, literally five minutes later this tragedy happened," she told AFP.

"Explosions began, our car got hit," she said. "This is horrible." Kherson is the capital of one of the four regions-along with Donetsk, Lugansk and Zaporizhzhia-that Russia claims to have annexed but does not fully control. Donetsk's separatist mayor Alexei Kulemzin said Saturday that Ukrainian shelling had killed two people including a young boy. —AFP

New protests hit Greece over train tragedy

ATHENS: Thousands of demonstrators staged fresh protests in Greece on Sunday as anger grows over the country's deadliest rail crash, ratcheting up pressure on the government over the tragedy. Protesters flooded Athens' Syntagma Square in front of parliament, waving banners that read "We won't forget, we won't forgive" and "We will become the voice of all the dead".

Fifty-seven people, many of them students, were killed when a passenger train and freight train collided head-on in central Greece on February 28. Four railway officials have been charged but public anger has focused on long-running mismanagement of the network, and the country has been rocked by a series of sometimes violent mass protests. On Sunday about 12,000 demonstrators gathered outside parliament while 5,000 took to the streets of the second city Thessaloniki, police said. "It was anger and rage that brought me here," Markella, a 65-year-old Athens protester who gave only one name, told AFP. Another demonstrator, 26-year-old Alexandros, added: "We're getting desperate. You don't know what to say, what to do—all you can do is join the protest." The rallies came in response to calls from various bodies, from trade unions to political groups, to take to the streets.

According to a police statement, "an isolated incident occurred when a small group of people hurled marbles, stones and other objects at the police forces on Karaiskaki Square, causing minor damage". A total of ten arrests and two detentions were made and no injuries were reported.

The biggest protests over the crash so far came on Wednesday when tens of thousands demonstrated nationwide, with clashes erupting, while workers staged strikes. Public and private sector employees are expected to walk out again Thursday. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who is fighting to be re-elected within months, has faced calls from some protesters to quit. He has come under fire for initially pointing to "human error" for the accident, and blaming the stationmaster on duty at the time who allegedly routed the trains onto the same stretch of track by accident. —AFP