



Philippine fishermen struggle as oil spill keeps them ashore

## Zionist parties discuss justice reforms after Netanyahu U-turn

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VIENNA: Handout photo made available by the IAEA shows Rafael Grossi (C), Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) posing for a photo with senior staff members before leaving on a trip to Ukraine from Vienna International airport. — AFP

# IAEA chief arrives at Ukraine nuke plant

## Europe's largest atomic facility currently controlled by Russian forces

KYIV: The UN atomic watchdog chief arrived Wednesday at Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in a rare visit to Europe's largest atomic facility currently controlled by Russian forces. There are persistent fears over the safety of the nuclear plant in the southern Zaporizhzhia region, where there has been frequent shelling since Russian troops invaded last year. The Ukrainian nuclear power operator Energoatom and Russian news agencies announced on social media that the International Atomic Energy Agency's Rafael Grossi had arrived with his delegation.

Energoatom distributed footage of a convoy of civilian and military vehicles marked with the letter Z, a symbol emblazoned on Russian military hardware in Ukraine. "Raphael Grossi plans to see how the situation at the ZNPP has changed, speak with the nuclear engineers at the plant, and act as a guarantor of the rotation of members of the IAEA permanent mission," it said on social media.

This is Grossi's second visit to Zaporizhzhia since Russia invaded Ukraine last February and the aim of the visit is to "assess first-hand the serious nuclear

safety and security situation at the facility," the IAEA said. The agency has had a team of experts inside the plant since September 2022, but Grossi has said the situation "is still precarious".

### 'Anything can happen'

Earlier this week, he met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who said it was not possible to restore safety at the plant with Russia in control. "Without the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops and personnel from the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant and adjacent territory, any initiatives to restore nuclear safety and security are doomed to failure," Zelensky told Grossi.

Renat Karchaa, an advisor to Russia's Rosenergoatom, which runs the facility, said Wednesday ahead of the visit that it would unlikely bring about any major breakthroughs. "We are far from having any illusions that Grossi's visit will dramatically change anything. For us, this is an ordinary working event," he was cited as saying by Russian news agencies.

"Of course anything can happen," he added. The plant needs reliable electricity supply to ensure es-

sential nuclear safety and security functions. But it has suffered repeated electricity outages during the war, causing alarm in the IAEA and the international community. The Russian invasion has caused devastation across swathes of the country, and despite more than 13 months of gruelling battles, Ukraine's top diplomat on Tuesday struck a defiant tone.

"Russia has to withdraw from every square meter of Ukrainian territory," Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said in a virtual session ahead of the Summit for Democracy, which US President Joe Biden will formally kick off on Wednesday. "There should be no misinterpretation of what the word withdrawal implies."

### 'Crime of aggression'

In Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, fighting in recent months has been concentrated on the eastern city of Bakhmut, with Kyiv saying it is holding out in the urban hub to exhaust Russian troops. The key military objective of Russia's invasion is the complete capture of Donetsk, which it already claimed to have annexed last year even as fighting there is ongoing.

Moscow said Tuesday it had for the first time downed a long-range rocket supplied by the United States to Ukraine. These devices have a range of up to 150 kilometres (93 miles), which could threaten Russian positions and supply depots far behind the front lines. Russian authorities said Wednesday that Ukrainian forces had used US-supplied HIMARS systems to strike Melitopol in the Zaporizhzhia region. The city controlled by Moscow lies some 65 kilometres from the frontline and analysts have speculated it could be a target for a highly-anticipated Ukrainian counter offensive.

Since the invasion, more than 850 health facilities in Ukraine have been attacked, according to the World Health Organization—creating a massive gap in health and emergency services. A Norway and EU-backed project is conducting medical evacuation flights, carrying Ukraine's war wounded to hospitals across Europe. Vladyslav Shakhov, who had to leave Ukraine on a medical flight for treatment after he was hit by shrapnel, said he was "not happy about leaving my country". "I hope they will get me back on my feet quickly so I can get back," the 24-year-old said. — AFP



NASHVILLE: People pay their respects at a makeshift memorial for victims at the Covenant School building at the Covenant Presbyterian Church following a shooting, in Nashville, Tennessee. — AFP

## Nashville school shooter hid seven firearms in house

NASHVILLE: The 28-year-old who shot dead six people at an elementary school in Nashville was able to buy and conceal multiple weapons in the family home despite evidence of mental health issues, police said Tuesday. Two nine-year-old girls, a nine-year-old boy, two teachers and a school custodian died in the Monday attack, which recharged the bitter debate over gun rights in the United States. Parents with their children joined a steady stream of mourners in front of a makeshift memorial to the victims of the massacre at the Covenant School in Nashville as the sun set Tuesday, many of them in tears.

"It's just unimaginable to think that these beautiful kids are not going to come home again," Lisbeth Melgar, who brought her two children to see the memorial, told AFP as she gently tucked her daughter's hair behind her ear. Earlier, Nashville police chief John Drake told reporters that the shooter, Audrey Hale, had been receiving treatment for an "emotional disorder," and that Hale's parents believed their child—who lived at home with them—had bought and later resold a single gun.

But Hale, who was killed during the attack, was armed with two assault rifles and a handgun upon entering the small Christian academy of about 200 students, which the shooter had once attended as a pupil.

Identified by police as a female who had used male pronouns on social media, the shooter had maps of the school and left a manifesto that suggested seven attacks were planned. "Audrey bought seven firearms from five different local gun stores here legally," Drake said. — AFP

## Biden vows funds to stop democratic backsliding

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden on Wednesday opened his second "Summit for Democracy" with pledges of nearly \$700 million in funds and a joint alliance against surveillance technology as US concern mounts over China and Russia. Hoping to show a more global front after his US-focused inaugural summit in 2021, Biden will co-lead the mostly virtual meeting with the president of South Korea—who also agreed to host the next summit—as well as the leaders of Zambia, Costa Rica and The Netherlands. But the 121-member gathering comes as rights groups allege backsliding in countries invited to the summit including Israel and India, both close US partners whose prime ministers have been accused of growing authoritarianism.

Biden will announce \$690 million in US funding to promote democracy overseas including through programs to manage free elections, advance independent media and strengthen action against corruption, a US official said, a fresh commitment after \$424 million offered at the first summit.

The Biden administration will also announce a joint effort with around 10 partners to counter the misuse and proliferation of spyware—which the United States fears has become a growing tool of China as its technological clout increases.

The effort will come two days after Biden banned the US government from using commercial spyware programs and as Biden's Republican rivals lead a controversial push in Congress to ban TikTok, the popular Chinese-owned video-sharing app.

"The idea here is these technologies of course have lawful applications, but have also been shown to be heavily misused by authoritarian states," the US official told reporters ahead of the summit. "We want to kind of get states on the record in terms of promoting rules of the road for their use."

### Walking line on invitations

Biden took office vowing to restore US credibility on democracy after the norms-shattering presidency of Donald Trump, whose supporters rampaged at the Capitol on January 6, 2021 instead of accepting the Republican tycoon's defeat. But Biden has come under fire from some allies for seeking to work with leaders from whom he once promised greater distance including Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Egypt's military ruler turned president Fatah al-Sisi and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has led Turkey for two decades.

None of the three leaders were invited to the summit. The United States also shunned Hungary,



WASHINGTON: Elizabeth Rosenberg, assistant secretary of the Treasury for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes, speaks during the 2023 Summit for Democracy at the US Treasury Department in Washington. — AFP

where Prime Minister Viktor Orban has challenged liberal values, as well as a number of close US partners including Bangladesh, Singapore and Thailand. Israel will take part but Biden on Tuesday made clear his unease over Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's bid to diminish the independence of the judiciary, which the right-wing leader finally paused after mass protests and a general strike.

"Like many strong supporters of Israel I'm very concerned," Biden told reporters. "They cannot continue down this road, and I've sort of made that clear." The United States has mostly stayed silent over India, seen as a bulwark against China, where authorities under Prime Minister Narendra Modi have clamped down on media and last week expelled opposition leader Rahul Gandhi from parliament.

Biden also invited India's historic rival Pakistan, where Imran Khan a year ago was ousted as prime minister and hit by a slew of charges, although Islamabad, a close partner of China, said it would work with the United States bilaterally rather than participating in the summit.

The United States has identified China as the sole long-term adversary to threaten the US-led liberal international order. Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said the summit "hypes up confrontation" and will "stoke division in the name of democracy." The United States has invited Taiwan, a self-governing democracy, even though it does not recognize it as a state, and has given prominent space to Ukraine as it fends off a Russian invasion. Russia's ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Antonov, accused the United States of hypocrisy, pointing to the country's problems of "racism, gun violence, corruption and social inequality." "Democracy is not built on templates, but is a product of the internal development of a particular society," he wrote in an essay. "We have seen the disastrous consequences of the attempts to forcibly export American democracy to Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan." — AFP

## Race against time to save dozens missing after Ecuador mudslide

ALAUSI: Rescuers raced against time in southern Ecuador on Tuesday to find survivors of a weekend landslide that left at least 11 people dead and more than 60 missing. Torrential rain overnight Sunday triggered a mudslide that buried dozens of homes and injured 30 people in the village of Alausi some 300 kilometers (180 miles) south of the capital Quito, officials said. As hopes faded of finding survivors under the rubble, rescuers with dogs and neighbors alike worked feverishly at removing debris, some with their bare hands. "My daughter is here, my granddaughter, my whole family," Carlos Maquero told AFP among the ruins, desperate for a breakthrough. "I want you to understand the pain we're going through," the 40-year-old merchant said. The same region was hit by an earthquake just over a week earlier in which 15 people were killed. There is a "buildup of tons and tons of earth," making it difficult to find survivors, Fernando Yanza, a firefighter working to rescue those trapped, told AFP.

Decreasing oxygen was "the main problem" facing those still trapped, added Yanza, who had been digging down through four meters (13 feet) of mud looking for signs of life. "As you dig, it becomes more dangerous" because the ground becomes less stable, he added. Another firefighter, Adriana Guzman, said removing all the rubble was nigh impossible, "and truly what is found, if it is found, will be bodies." The mudslide's death toll had grown to at least 11 with 67 missing, the SNGR risk management secretariat said in an update Tuesday after four bodies were recovered. "We feel powerless not being able to do anything," said Carmen Quiroz, whose sister-in-law "was buried" along with several others, including infants, under the mud.

### 'As long as it takes'

President Guillermo Lasso visited Alausi, in Chimborazo province, on Monday night where he was met with jeers of "Lasso out!" by some who felt the tragedy could have been avoided. Lasso held a meeting with local authorities and later tweeted the rescue efforts would go on "as long as is necessary."

The army is also taking part in the operation. The government opened three shelters for those affected by the landslide, which covered an area of more than 24 hectares (59 acres). More than 160 homes were damaged. Alausi, a town of some 45,000 people surrounded by green hills, also saw several public buildings hit by the deluge, which damaged roads and closed schools. As a light rain fell on Alausi, resident Carmen Gavilanez, 65, told AFP: "We are afraid that there will be another mudslide and that we will be left with nothing." — AFP