

International

Zelensky wins diplomatic, military support from G7

US to provide yet more 'ammunition, artillery, armored vehicles'

HIROSHIMA: President Volodymyr Zelensky secured more arms, munitions and "unwavering" diplomatic support from G7 allies in Hiroshima Sunday, as Russia claimed victory in the battle for a devastated eastern city. Meeting leaders from a bloc of rich democracies, Zelensky won a commitment from US President Joe Biden to provide yet more "ammunition, artillery, armored vehicles" on top of access to F-16 jets. Top Zelensky aide Andriy Yermak said the US package included additional ammunition for HIMAR rocket launchers, artillery shells, anti-tank guided missiles and thermal imaging systems worth \$375 million. Zelensky's surprise trip to Japan has been a major diplomatic coup, putting his country and Russia's 15-month-long invasion firmly at the top of the agenda.

But success in the negotiating rooms contrasted sharply with difficulties on the ground, as he reflected on the months-long battle for Bakhmut and new Russian claims to have taken control of the eastern city. Asked about the fate of the former salt-mining town of 70,000 people, Zelensky was notably downbeat, saying "you have to understand there is nothing" there.

"For today, Bakhmut is only in our hearts," he said. Ukrainian forces have tried for months to keep a toe-hold on the town, forcing Moscow to commit significant numbers of troops there in the process.

On Saturday, Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated mercenaries from the Wagner organization and regular units for the operation to "liberate" the town. Zelensky's invitation to visit Hiroshima, a city synonymous with the horrors of nuclear war, was a "deeply meaningful" symbol of support,



HIROSHIMA: Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky (center) joins G7 leaders at a working session during the G7 Leaders' Summit in Hiroshima on May 21, 2023. — AFP

according to host Fumio Kishida, Japan's prime minister. "By inviting President Zelensky to Japan, we demonstrated the unwavering solidarity of G7 with Ukraine," he said.

As well as securing backing from allies, the visit afforded Zelensky a rare opportunity to win over a handful of nations who have pointedly offered little or no condemnation of Russia's invasion. Leaders from India, Brazil, Vietnam and Indonesia were among those invited to attend the summit as non-members.

'I understand your pain'

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has accused the West of "encouraging the war" and is yet to confirm he will even meet his Ukrainian counterpart. The reception was warmer however from India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who told Zelensky: "I understand your pain and the pain of Ukrainian citizens very well." "I can assure you that to resolve this India and, me personally, will do whatever we can do." Zelensky offered an upbeat assessment of the encounter,

bomb. He was then joined by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who comes from Hiroshima, and the pair placed bouquets of white flowers before the graceful concrete arch of the Cenotaph, through which an eternal flame is visible. Zelensky wore a solemn expression as he laid the flowers, tied with ribbons in the blue and yellow of Ukraine's flag.

Hiroshima's mayor joined the leaders to explain elements of the memorial park and monument, adorned with a plaque reading: "Let all the souls here rest in peace, for we shall not repeat the evil." The visit has particular significance for Zelensky, who has faced thinly veiled threats by Russian leader Vladimir Putin to deploy nuclear weapons as he prosecutes his devastating war. But it is also deeply meaningful for Kishida, who has declared achieving a "world free of nuclear weapons" his life's work.

The trip also brings Kishida full circle after his trip to Ukraine in March, where he made a surprise stop in the town of Bucha, site of an alleged massacre by Russian troops. A visibly shaken Kishida spoke then of his "indignation" at the "brutality" witnessed by the town. Kishida broke with Japan's traditionally cautious approach on foreign policy to take a strong early position alongside Western allies against Moscow's invasion. His government has offered aid and diplomatic support in the form of sanctions against Russia, though it is constitutionally limited in its ability to offer weaponry. Zelensky made his surprise arrival at the G7 summit on Saturday, and he is due to make a speech later in the evening after talks with Kishida. — AFP

Japan, S Korea leaders in historic Hiroshima visit

HIROSHIMA: Japan and South Korea's leaders made a historic visit Sunday to a memorial for Koreans killed in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, as long-frosty ties between the neighbors warm. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and his South Korean counterpart Yoon Suk Yeol, joined by their wives, laid white bouquets at the stone memorial and bowed side-by-side at the site.

The visit came on the sidelines of the G7 summit, to which Japan has invited several non-member nations, including South Korea. It is the first time leaders of the two countries have jointly visited the memorial, and only the second time a Japanese prime minister has done so.

"This will be remembered as a courageous action by Prime Minister Kishida that paves the way for a peaceful future while expressing grief for the Korean victims of the atomic bombing," Yoon said at the top of a bilateral meeting after the memorial visit. It is the latest step in their careful diplomatic dance to achieve a long-awaited thaw in ties. Tokyo and Seoul, both key US allies, have long been at odds over issues related to Japan's brutal 1910-1945 colonial rule of Korea, including sexual slavery and forced labor.

But Yoon and Kishida have made active efforts to restore soured ties since Seoul announced a plan to compensate those affected by wartime forced labor, without Tokyo's involvement.

They have resumed regular high-level talks, with Yoon in Tokyo in April and Kishida travelling to Seoul earlier this month, where he said his "heart aches" for Koreans who suffered under colonialism.

The two leaders have faced criticism and skepticism from conservatives at home for their engagements. But Kishida's remark in Seoul "significantly resonated among the public" in South Korea, Yoon said on Sunday. His "courage and decision to show a genuine and heartfelt attitude is very important," he added.

Kishida also welcomed the thaw in ties and said the stepped-up pace of meetings "demonstrates the progress of the Japan-South Korea relationship." — AFP

Zelensky compares Bakhmut destruction to Hiroshima in 1945

HIROSHIMA: President Volodymyr Zelensky on Sunday compared the "total destruction" of the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut to the 1945 devastation of Hiroshima, now hosting the G7 summit, after it was hit by a US atomic bomb. Bakhmut, which had a pre-war population of 70,000 people, has been the scene of the longest and bloodiest battle in Russia's invasion. Occasional footage from Bakhmut during months of heavy fighting have shown a city of ruins.

"The photos of Hiroshima remind me of Bakhmut. There is absolutely nothing alive. All the buildings are destroyed," Zelensky said. "Absolute total destruction. There is nothing. There are no people."

Zelensky laid flowers on Sunday at a memorial in Hiroshima to victims of the 1945 US atomic bomb attack, in a sombre and highly symbolic moment. Curious crowds lined the streets as the wartime leader's motorcade weaved its way towards the park complex that houses several memorials commemorating the approximately 140,000 people killed by the bomb. Zelensky, who has stolen the spotlight with a surprise appearance at the G7 summit, stopped first at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, which houses evidence of the horrors wrought by the

loves this country," said 27-year-old student Renaldo de Andrade. CNRT won a presidential election last year after capturing 62 percent of the vote in a runoff, with Nobel Peace laureate and Gusmao ally Jose Ramos Horta assuming the post. Gusmao is hoping to build on that momentum by taking over the legislature, but he may need to forge an alliance with smaller parties. "I believe that I will win an absolute (majority) and I'm ready to assume the prime minister's mandate... to build this country better than before", Gusmao told journalists at a polling station.

Alkatiri's Fretlin, meanwhile, has vowed to secure a clear victory and retain its lead in parliament. "If Fretlin wins for this period, the important thing that we have to do is combat corruption and invest more in education, health and agriculture," Alkatiri said on Sunday after casting his ballot. As counting started in polling stations, leaders called for peace. "I have asked all political parties to have the discipline and maturity to respect the people", said President Jose Ramos Horta. Some major political events in East Timor have been marred by violence and conflicts in the past.

In 2018, more than a dozen people were injured and several cars torched after clashes between Fretlin and CNRT. 21 years after independence, East Timor is still struggling with poverty, the aftermath of the COVID pandemic and devastating natural disasters, including a 2021 cyclone that killed at least 40 people. East Timor's budget is heavily dependent on oil revenues, but revenues from existing fossil fuel projects are soon expected to run dry. The next government will need to decide on allowing the development of the Greater Sunrise project, which aims to tap trillions of cubic feet of natural gas. — AFP



DILI, East Timor: East Timorese Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak casts his ballot paper during the general election in Dili on May 21, 2023. — AFP



HIROSHIMA: Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (left) and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky bow as they prepare to lay wreaths at the Cenotaph for the Victims of the Atomic Bomb at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, following the G7 Summit Leaders' Meeting in Hiroshima on May 21, 2023. — AFP

East Timor polls close as voters hope for end to deadlock

DILI, East Timor: Voters in East Timor flocked to polling stations on Sunday to cast their ballots in parliamentary elections, hoping for an end to years of political deadlock in Asia's youngest country. This is the fifth parliamentary poll since East Timor gained independence from Indonesia in 2002 after a 24-year occupation, with 65 national lawmakers to be elected to a five-year mandate.

Voters formed long queues, carrying umbrellas for shade as they patiently waited for their turn until polling stations closed at 3 pm (0600 GMT). "All people came to give their voices, because one voice can make a change," 61-year-old Cesar dos Santos de Carvalho told AFP at a polling station in the capital Dili. "I hope the political party that I chose can put attention on health, education, infrastructure and agriculture, because these are the priority sectors." Nazario Gregorio Guterres, another voter, stressed the need to improve infrastructure in East Timor, one of the world's poorest countries. "Just (look at) our capital city, Dili. It's difficult to get electricity and clean water. The party I chose must fix roads, electricity, and provide clean water," said Guterres.

The young democracy, a former Portuguese colony, has 890,000 registered voters, and a total of 17 parties are vying for seats, but the election is expected to mainly be a showdown between the two largest. The Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor, also known as Fretlin, leads the coalition currently in power, while the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT) is hoping to make a comeback. CNRT is led by Xanana Gusmao, East Timor's first president who was in office until 2007, while Fretlin's leader is former prime minister Mari Alkatiri. Both are considered independence-era icons and are veterans of East Timor politics, but they have been locked in a bitter feud for decades.

'Respect the people'

Younger voters make up a large part of the electorate in the country of 1.3 million people, 65 percent of whom are under 30. "I voted for CNRT. I support Xanana (Gusmao). He is... an influential character (who) leads with responsibility. He has integrity and

saying he believed India "will participate in the restoration of the rules-based international order that all free nations clearly need."

Zelensky is also looking for support for a 10-point peace plan, centred on the demand that Russia retreat from Ukrainian territory. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the message from Ukraine and its allies was clear: "Russia must withdraw troops".

Any peace plan, he said, "can't simply be linked to a freeze of the conflict". "Russia should not bet that if it holds out long enough, it will end up weakening support for Ukraine." Zelensky had previously been scheduled to attend the G7 summit remotely but arrived on the back of a major breakthrough in his battle to wrest advanced weaponry from the West.

The White House dropped its longstanding reluctance to allow allies to supply Kyiv with F-16 fighter jets, opening the way for Ukraine to receive its most sophisticated material yet. Washington insisted the aircraft were part of a US strategy to support Ukraine "in a way that avoids World War III", and deflected criticism that their decision was too long coming. Zelensky acknowledged the jets would not help the war effort immediately but hailed the decision as "a great result". Mick Ryan, a strategist and retired Australian major general, called the decision "very significant". "F-16s have the sensors and weapon systems that are either equal to, or overmatch, Russian fighters," he told AFP. It insisted however that it still seeks "constructive and stable relations" with China. China hit back late Saturday, expressing its "strong dissatisfaction" with the G7's final communique, and Russia too lashed out at the group's efforts to "contain" Beijing and Moscow. — AFP

News in brief

5 arrested in Greece for trying to buy votes

ATHENS: Five people have been arrested in northern Greece on accusations of electoral fraud ahead of the country's national elections, Athens News Agency reported Sunday. According to the General Regional Police Directorate of Thessaly, the arrests occurred late Saturday, with officers seizing 197 ID cards, passports, two photocopies of ID cards and a bag with 114 closed envelopes, each containing a card of a parliamentary candidate and five ballot papers with the name of the candidate already ticked. They were found in a car owned by one of the suspects. A total amount of 6,060 euros was also found in the possession of two of those arrested. — AFP

UK's interior minister under fire over speeding claims

LONDON: UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on Sunday faced questions over interior minister Suella Braverman after reports she asked civil servants to arrange for her penalty driving course for speeding to be done in private. Sunak said he did not know the "full details" of the case but a spokeswoman for his Downing Street office later said he "of course" had confidence in his controversial minister. The Sunday Times reported that Braverman asked Home Office officials to help set up a one-to-one driving awareness course after she was caught speeding last year. Her request was refused. — AFP

Attack on rally drivers leaves 10 dead in Mexico

TIJUANA, Mexico: At least 10 people were killed and nine wounded on Saturday when gunmen attacked a group of amateur rally drivers in the northern Mexican town of Ensenada, near the US border, authorities said. The motorists, who were participating in a race, were parked on the side of a highway when a group of men got out of a pickup truck and opened fire. The attack "left nine wounded and 10 people dead," Ensenada authorities said in a statement. The prosecutor's office of the state of Baja California, where Ensenada is located and which has been hard hit by drug violence, announced the formation of a "special investigation group" to identify the killers and determine the motives behind the shooting, the statement said. — AFP

Paraguay confirms bird flu cases

ASUNCION, Paraguay: Cases of bird flu have been detected in backyard chickens in Paraguay, authorities said Saturday. The disease was found in the domesticated birds from the towns of Mariscal Estigarribia and Neuland in Mennonite farming areas, the National Animal Health and Quality Service (Senacsa) reported. The potential cause being investigated is chickens having contact with infected migratory birds, the office said. "The birds will be slaughtered to eliminate the source of infection," Senacsa said. The disease has spread in Latin America in recent months and has triggered phytosanitary alerts. — AFP