



US troops deploy for Europe from Pope Army Airfield at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, US, on Thursday. The US plans to deploy 3,000 troops to fortify Nato forces in Eastern Europe amid fears Russia could invade Ukraine, the Pentagon said Wednesday. About 1,000 US troops stationed in Germany will be moved eastward to Romania while 2,000 more will deploy to Poland and Germany from the US.

PHOTO: AFP

Taking charge or losing control? Top aides' resignations leave UK PM Johnson reeling

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was scrambling to save his premiership yesterday after four of his inner circle quit in the fallout from lockdown-breaking parties in his Downing Street office.

Long-term ally and key policy advisor Munira Mirza unexpectedly quit on Thursday, delivering a hammer blow to the embattled leader and sparking a flurry of further resignations in his top team.

Amid speculations, his spokesman yesterday claimed Johnson has not lost control of his Downing Street operation, adding that three of the aides who resigned on Thursday did so by mutual consent.

Energy Minister Greg Hands said the exodus was a sign that Johnson was "taking charge", having promised a clear out of staff following the "partygate" revelations.

But the manner of the departures, particularly that of loyalist Mirza, has increased the sense that the fate of the prime minister is no longer in his own hands.

Mirza quit after Johnson linked Labour opposition leader Keir Starmer to the failure by UK authorities to prosecute veteran TV host Jimmy Savile for child sex offences. Revelations about Savile emerged after his death in 2011.

Thursday's drama prompted the right-wing Daily Mail tabloid, which is normally supportive of the government, to headline its front page "Meltdown in Downing Street", as the resignations rolled in.

Downing Street confirmed that chief of staff Dan Rosenfield was leaving. His resignation comes after a top civil servant, in a long-awaited inquiry, this week condemned "failures of leadership" over a series of parties held in violation of Covid restrictions.

Also going is Martin Reynolds, the top civil servant in Johnson's operation.

To trigger a leadership challenge, 54 of the 360 Conservative MPs in parliament must write letters of no confidence to the chairman of the party's 1922 Committee. A snap poll by YouGov conducted on Jan. 31 showed that 63 percent of voters wanted Johnson to resign, though another YouGov poll showed just 31 percent thought he would resign.



'FALSE FLAG' UKRAINE ATTACK CLAIMS West 'making things up'

Says Russia; Erdogan says West making crisis worse



Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping pose during their meeting in Beijing, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

AFP, Moscow

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday accused "Western colleagues" of making things up after US officials claimed to have evidence of a planned operation by Moscow to film a fake Ukrainian attack on Russians.

"The delusional nature of such fabrications -- and there are more and more of them every day -- is obvious to any more or less experienced political scientist," he said in televised remarks.

The Pentagon said Thursday it had evidence of a plan by Moscow to film a fake Ukrainian attack on Russians to justify an assault on its pro-West neighbour.

The Kremlin yesterday said that Washington could not be trusted.

"I would recommend not to believe anyone, and especially the US State Department, when it comes to these issues," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Neither the Pentagon nor State Department offered evidence to back up the claim.

Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby told reporters that Washington believed the Russian government plans to stage an attack by the Ukraine military or intelligence forces "against Russian sovereign territory, or against Russian speaking people."

"As part of this fake attack, we believe that Russia would produce a very graphic propaganda

video, which would include corpses and actors that would be depicting mourners and images of destroyed locations," he said.

That could allow Moscow, which has amassed more than 100,000 troops and heavy offensive arms on Ukraine's border, with an excuse for invading.

Washington's claim came on the back of visits from European leaders to shore up support for Kyiv, including from British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba yesterday welcomed the displays of support, saying they had prevented Russia from "further aggravating the security situation".

Following his trip on Thursday, Erdogan accused the West of making the crisis "worse".

"Unfortunately, the West until now has not made any contribution to resolving this issue," he said in comments published by local media yesterday.

"They are only making things worse," Erdogan said, adding that Joe Biden "has not yet been able to demonstrate a positive approach".

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz was the latest European leader to announce a visit to the region yesterday, saying he would go to Ukraine on February 14 and Russia the next day. French President Emmanuel Macron will visit Moscow on Monday and Kyiv on Tuesday for talks with his Russian and Ukrainian counterparts.

Lanka president calls for diaspora investment

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka marked its independence day yesterday with an appeal to its diaspora to send money home to overcome the island's worsening economic crisis and a pledge to protect foreign investments. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa urged millions of Sri Lankans abroad to invest their savings in their home country, which is facing its worst debt crisis since independence from Britain 74 years ago. "Expatriate Sri Lankans who provide foreign exchange to the country are a major resource to us," Rajapaksa said. "I invite all expatriate Sri Lankans to invest in their homeland." Colombo's foreign reserves, which stood at \$7.5 billion when Rajapaksa took office in November 2019, have fallen by more than half, to \$3.1 billion. Worker remittances, Sri Lanka's number one foreign currency source, fell nearly 60 percent in December.

Zuckerberg loses \$29b in a day

REUTERS

Mark Zuckerberg lost \$29 billion in net worth on Thursday as Meta Platforms Inc's stock marked a record one-day plunge. Meta's stock fell 26 percent, erasing more than \$200 billion in the biggest ever single-day market value wipeout for a US company. That pulled down founder and Chief Executive Officer Zuckerberg's net worth to \$85 billion, according to Forbes. Zuckerberg owns about 12.8 percent of the tech behemoth formerly known as Facebook. Zuckerberg's one-day wealth decline is among the biggest ever and comes after Tesla Inc top boss Elon Musk's \$35 billion single-day paper loss in November.

MISSING WOMEN ACTIVISTS UN demands info from Taliban

AFP, Kabul

The United Nations has demanded the Taliban provide information on two more women activists allegedly detained by the group this week from Kabul -- bringing to four the number missing in Afghanistan this year. UNAMA did not reveal the names of the two women activists gone missing this week, but another rights advocate told AFP that Zahra Mohammadi and Mursal Ayar had been arrested by the Taliban. The latest detentions come less than a month after activists Tamana Zaryabi Paryani and Parwana Ibrahimkhal went missing after participating in a Kabul protest.

Suu Kyi back in court

AFP, Yangon

Ousted Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi returned to a junta court yesterday after skipping a previous hearing because she felt unwell, a source with knowledge of the case said. Suu Kyi has been detained since her civilian government was ousted in a coup last year that triggered mass protests and a bloody military crackdown, with more than 1,500 civilians killed. Cut off from the world except for brief meetings with her legal team and court appearances, the Nobel laureate faces a raft of charges that could see her jailed for more than 150 years. On Thursday the junta announced it had filed an eleventh corruption charge against Suu Kyi for allegedly receiving \$550,000 as a donation for a charity foundation named after her mother.



HUGE US RAID IN SYRIA

IS chief 'kills himself'

AGENCIES

The leader of Islamic State died when he blew himself and family members up during a US military raid in Syria, President Joe Biden said on Thursday, dealing a blow to the jihadist group's efforts to reorganize as a guerrilla force after losing large swathes of territory.

Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quraishi, had led Islamic State since the death in 2019 of its founder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was also killed when he detonated explosives during a raid by US commandos.

As US forces closed in on Quraishi in northwestern Syria overnight, he triggered a blast that also killed members of his own family, including children, according to Biden and US officials.

The blast was so big it hurled bodies out of the three-storey building where Quraishi was and into surrounding streets in the town of Atme, US officials said, blaming Islamic State for all civilian casualties.

"Thanks to the bravery of our troops, this horrible terrorist leader is no more," Biden said in remarks at the White House.



A senior White House official said the blast was believed to have killed Quraishi, his two wives and a child on the third floor, and likely a child who was on the second floor with Quraishi's lieutenant and his wife, who were killed after firing on US forces. Two additional fighters were killed after firing on US helicopters, the official said.

Quraishi had been using the house and an unwitting family

living on the first floor as a "protective shield," a factor that complicated planning for the raid, the official added.

The official was unable to explain the discrepancy between those numbers and those provided by Syrian rescue workers, who said at least 13 people were killed, including four women and six children.

Quraishi's death is another setback for Islamic State nearly three years after its self-declared caliphate was dismantled and its fighters defeated by US and Iraqi forces.

The US government had offered a \$10 million reward for information leading to Quraishi, who was an Iraqi also known as Amir Mohammed Said Abd al-Rahman al-Mawla.

Biden and US officials described Quraishi as the "driving force" behind the 2014 genocide of minority Yazidis in northern Iraq, and said he oversaw a network of Islamic State branches from Africa to Afghanistan.



Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) activists hold placards reading "say no to genocide games" during a protest against the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, in New Delhi, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP