



American military personnel from the allied nations deployed to Romania take part in a ceremony during a visit of the Nato secretary general and Romania's president at the Mihail Kogalniceanu Military Base Mihail Kogalniceanu, Romania yesterday. Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg yesterday warned of the “real risk for a new armed conflict in Europe” as both the alliance and Russia are increasing their troop presences around Ukraine.

PHOTO: AFP

‘Nothing for the poor’  
Protesters in gov’t-held Syria decry economic hardship

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Hundreds of people in Sweida, a Druze-majority city in southwestern Syria, have taken to the streets for a fifth day to decry corruption and worsening living standards, according to activists.

Protesters yesterday gathered in the government-held city’s main square, waving the multicoloured Druze community flag.

“We cannot live,” a religious elder at the protest told the crowd. “We want to live in our nation with our dignity and rights for everyone.”

The demonstrators accuse President Bashar al-Assad’s government of failing to address a spiralling economic crisis.

“The regime has made so many flawed decisions that has led to this economic deterioration,” Rayyan Maarouf, of media activist group Sweida 24, told Al Jazeera. “They have not tried to present a solution to all of this.”

Over the past week, protesters blocked roads with burning tyres and gathered in the city square, according to social media posts. One of them, a woman attending with her young child, held a loaf of bread on which she had etched the phrase, “There is nothing left for the poor.”

## Quad pledges co-op on ‘coercion’, climate, Covid

### Condemns N Korea’s ‘destabilising ballistic missile launches’ in violation of UNSC resolutions



REUTERS, Melbourne

The United States, Australia, Japan and India yesterday pledged to deepen cooperation to ensure the Indo-Pacific region was free from “coercion”, a thinly veiled swipe at China’s economic and military expansion.

Foreign ministers of the so-called Quad group, meeting in the Australian city of Melbourne, also promised to increase cooperation on Covid-19, cyber threats and counter-terrorism.

In a joint statement, they vowed to work on humanitarian relief, disaster assistance and the delivery of infrastructure to the region, and condemned North Korea’s “destabilising ballistic missile launches” in violation of UN Security Council resolutions.

They said their informal Quad grouping was determined to deepen engagement with regional partners, and increase their capacity to combat unregulated and illegal fishing.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken travels onwards to Fiji today to meet with Pacific island leaders to whom fishing and climate change are likely to be priority issues.

“We agreed to boost maritime security support for Indo-Pacific partners to strengthen their maritime domain awareness and ability to develop their offshore resources, to ensure freedom of

navigation and overflight and to combat challenges such as illegal fishing,” Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne said after the meeting.

The Quad partners “oppose coercive economic policies” that run counter to the World Trade Organization system, “and will work collectively to foster global economic resilience against such actions”, the statement said, a reference to China’s recent trade boycotts of Australia and Lithuania.

Blinken arrived in Australia this week as Washington grapples with a dangerous standoff with Moscow, which has massed some 100,000 troops near Ukraine’s border and stoked Western fears of an invasion. Russia denies it has such plans.

China has denounced the Quad as a Cold War construct and a clique “targeting other countries”.

Payne said earlier yesterday the Quad’s cooperation on the region’s Covid response was “most critical”, with cyber and maritime security, infrastructure, climate action and disaster relief – especially after the recent Tonga volcanic eruption – also in focus.

The Quad nations have begun holding annual naval exercises across the Indo-Pacific to demonstrate interoperability, and the United States itself conducts freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea.

## US could use frozen Afghan funds for 9/11 victims

AFP, Washington

President Joe Biden seized \$7 billion in assets belonging to the previous Afghan government yesterday with the aim of splitting the funds between victims of the 9/11 attacks and desperately needed aid for post-war Afghanistan.

The unusual move saw the conflicting, highly sensitive issues of a humanitarian tragedy in Afghanistan, the Taliban fight for recognition, and the push for justice from families impacted by the September 11, 2001 attacks collide, with billions of dollars at stake.

The first stage was simple: Biden formally blocked the assets in an executive order signed yesterday.

The money – which a US official said largely stems from foreign assistance once sent to help the now defunct Western-backed Afghan government – had been stuck in the New York Federal Reserve ever since last year’s Taliban victory.

The insurgency has not been recognised by the United States or any other Western countries, mostly over its human rights record.

However, with appalling poverty gripping the country after decades of war and the previous government’s rampant corruption, Washington is trying to find ways to assist, while side-stepping the Taliban.

## PEGASUS SCANDAL

### EU to launch rare inquiry

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The European parliament is preparing to launch a committee of inquiry into the Pegasus spyware scandal after evidence emerged of government critics in Poland and Hungary being targeted with the surveillance software. The cross-party body will seek testimony from member states’ intelligence services, elected politicians and senior officials, with a previous inquiry into alleged European facilitation of CIA “black sites” providing a model. The move is the most significant yet from Brussels since a group of media organisations including the Guardian revealed that Pegasus software was being used against journalists, activists and politicians in numerous countries across the world including in Europe. It follows the announcement from the Israeli government this week that it would investigate reports of Israeli police using Pegasus against its citizens. Local media reports claimed the list of targets included people involved in the corruption trial of the former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

## TRUMP DOC HANDLING

### US House panel launches probe

REUTERS, Washington

A US congressional committee is investigating former President Donald Trump’s handling of White House records after 15 boxes of documents were transferred from his Florida resort to a federal agency, including whether the material included classified information, the panel’s chairwoman said on Thursday. House of Representatives Oversight Committee Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney said in a statement she was “deeply concerned” that the records were not promptly turned over to the National Archives when Trump’s term ended in January 2021 and “that they appear to have been removed from the White House in violation of the Presidential Records Act.” Maloney, a Democrat, also expressed concern over US media reports that Trump “repeatedly attempted to destroy presidential records, which could constitute additional serious violations” of that law, which requires the preservation of written communications related to a president’s official duties.

## Koala listed as endangered

AFP, Sydney

Australia officially listed koalas across a swathe of its eastern coast as “endangered” yesterday, with the marsupials fighting to survive the impact of bushfires, land-clearing, drought and disease. Conservationists said koala populations had crashed in much of eastern Australia over the past two decades, warning that they were now sliding towards extinction. Environment Minister Sussan Ley said she had designated koala populations as “endangered” to offer them a higher level of protection in New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Queensland. The koala, a globally recognised symbol of Australia’s unique wildlife, had been listed as “vulnerable” on the eastern coast just a decade earlier. “We are taking unprecedented action to protect the koala,” the minister said, highlighting a recent government promise of Aus\$50 million (US\$36 million) to protect and recover koala habitats.



A Palestinian demonstrator hurls an object at Israeli forces during a protest against Jewish settlements near Nablus, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

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