



France's President and La République en Marche (LREM) candidate for re-election Emmanuel Macron wave supporters during an election campaign meeting in Marseille, southern France, yesterday, ahead of the second round of voting in France's presidential election.

PHOTO: AFP

40,000 more Ukrainians flee war: UN

AFP, Geneva

Many of the nearly five million people who have fled Ukraine will not have homes to return to, the United Nations said yesterday as another 40,000 fled the country in 24 hours.

UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, said 4,836,445 million Ukrainians had left the country since the Russian invasion on February 24 -- a number up 40,200 on Friday's total.

The UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) says nearly 215,000 third-country nationals -- largely students and migrant workers -- have also escaped to neighbouring countries, meaning more than five million people in all have fled Ukraine since the war began.

Nearly two thirds of all Ukrainian children have been forced from their homes, including those still inside the country.

Beyond the refugees, the IOM estimates 7.1 million people have left their homes but are still in Ukraine.

Lost warship dents Russian pride, capability

AFP, Paris

Russia's loss of its flagship cruiser Moskva represents a dent in the operational capabilities of the Russian navy and a severe wound to Russian pride at the height of the war against Ukraine, analysts say.

The Moskva sank on Thursday after an explosion and fire that Ukraine claimed was a successful missile strike and Russia said was the result of exploding ammunition.

Until the sinking of the Moskva, nobody had good reason to doubt Russia's supremacy in the Black Sea during the conflict with Ukraine but these calculations have now changed.

"In symbolic terms this is a great loss," said ex-admiral Pascal Ausseur, director general of the Toulon-based Mediterranean Foundation of Strategic Studies (FMES).

The 12,000-ton ship should have been able to withstand one missile impact or more and get a fire under control, but instead went under in just 12 hours, he told AFP.

"That was not part of the plan," Ausseur said, adding that the Moskva probably housed the command post for the naval group which now will have to find a new home.

Coming after successive setbacks for President Vladimir Putin in the 52-day-old war -- including an unexpectedly weak air and land combat record -- the loss of the Moskva will also have a real impact on the Russian navy's ability to attack Ukrainian targets and keep its fellow fighters safe.

The 186-metre (610-foot) long cruiser was equipped with 16 surface-to-surface Bazalt/Vulcan missiles used against ships as well as Fort missiles, which are navy-adapted versions of long-range S-300s, and short-range Osa missiles.

Able to carry a crew of 680, its role was to give air cover to other ships during their

crucial for Russian capabilities as Moscow cannot dispatch a replacement for the Moskva while Turkey keeps the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits closed to warships.

This, some analysts say, may not make a huge difference to the current phase of the war which has seen the Russian navy play a limited role.



operations, especially during the bombing of targets on the coast and landings, according to a Telegram post by Sergei Brachuk, a spokesman for the Odessa regional military administration.

But beyond representing a body blow to Russian military prestige, the Moskva's loss is probably not a game changer for the Russian campaign, Western analysts said.

"The rest of the Black Sea Fleet remains a puissant force," said Nick Brown at British intelligence analysis firm Jane's.

The remaining force is all the more

But the ship's loss could force Moscow to revise any plans to give the navy a bigger role in the future, said Maia Otarashvili at the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

The full story of what caused the Moskva's demise are unlikely to be known soon, as experts will need to examine its hull which is now somewhere in the depths of the Black Sea.

But it's already clear that the disappearance of the Moskva "reveals a real vulnerability" of the Russian navy, Ausseur said.

Bidens report \$600k in 2021 income

AFP, Washington

US President Joe Biden -- who pledged transparency around his personal finances while in office -- and his wife Jill Biden reported a bit more than \$600,000 on their federal tax returns for 2021, the White House said Friday. The couple paid \$150,439 in taxes on \$610,702, for a tax rate of 24.6 percent, the White House said. In publishing their tax information, the president and first lady -- the first to work

outside the White House, as a professor -- are bringing back a custom dating back to the 1970s but interrupted by previous president Donald Trump. Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband Doug Emhoff declared a 2021 income of \$1.6 million on their federal returns, and paid a tax rate of 31.6 percent, or \$523,371.

Finance minister to succeed S'pore PM

REUTERS, Singapore

Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday said that Finance Minister Lawrence Wong would succeed him as the city-state's leader. Wong was chosen as leader of the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) so-called fourth generation team, according to an announcement on Thursday, paving the way for him to become prime minister. "The plan is for Lawrence to succeed me as PM, either before or after (if the PAP wins) the next General Election. It is due in 2025 and will surely be a tough fight," Lee said in a social media post yesterday. Lee, whose father Lee Kuan Yew was the island nation's independence leader, has been prime minister since 2004. Stability has long been one of wealthy Singapore's major strengths, making it a haven for investors and businesses in a region where political upheaval is not uncommon.

Fuel-laden ship sinks off Tunisia

AFP, Tunis

A tanker carrying 750 tonnes of diesel fuel from Egypt to Malta sank yesterday in the Gulf of Gabes off Tunisia's southeast coast, sparking a rush to avoid a spill. "The ship sank this morning in Tunisian territorial waters. For the moment, there is no leak," local court spokesman Mohamed Karray said. The Equatorial Guinea-flagged Xelo was headed from the Egyptian port of Damietta to the European island of Malta when it requested entry to Tunisian waters on Friday evening due to bad weather. Tunisian authorities evacuated the seven-member crew. The last maritime accident involving the country was in October 2018, when Tunisian freighter Ulysse slammed into the Cyprus-based Virginia anchored about 30 kilometres off the northern tip of the French island of Corsica, sending hundreds of tonnes of fuel spilling into the Mediterranean.

CHINA'S 'SPACE DREAM'

A Long March to the Moon and beyond

AFP, Beijing

The return to Earth of three astronauts yesterday after six months at China's new space station marks a landmark step in the country's space ambitions, ending its longest crewed mission ever.

The world's second-largest economy has put billions into its military-run space programme, with hopes of eventually sending humans to the Moon.

China has come a long way in catching up with the United States and Russia, whose astronauts and cosmonauts have decades of experience in space exploration.

Here is a look at the country's space programme, and where it is headed:

Soon after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957, Chairman Mao Zedong pronounced: "We too will make satellites."

It took more than a decade, but in 1970, China launched its first satellite on a Long March rocket. Human spaceflight took decades longer, with Yang Liwei becoming the first Chinese "taikonaut" in 2003.

As the launch approached, concerns over the viability of the mission caused Beijing to cancel a live television broadcast at the last minute.

But it went smoothly, with Yang orbiting the Earth 14 times during a 21-hour flight aboard the Shenzhou 5.

China has launched seven crewed missions since.

Following in the footsteps of the United States and Russia, China began planning to build its own space station circling the planet.



Left, Officials stand near the capsule of the Shenzhou-13 spacecraft after it returned to earth carrying three Chinese astronauts in China's Inner Mongolia, yesterday. Chinese astronaut Ye Guangfu is assisted by officials to leave the capsule.



PHOTO: AFP

the far side of the Moon in January 2019 -- a historic first.

This was followed by one that landed on the near side of the Moon last year, raising a Chinese flag on the lunar surface. The unmanned spacecraft returned to Earth in December with rocks and soil -- the first lunar samples collected in four decades.

And in February 2021, the first images of Mars were sent back by the five-tonne Tianwen-1, which then landed a rover on the Martian surface in May that has since started to explore the surface of the Red Planet.

A trio of astronauts docked successfully in October with the core Tianhe module of the Chinese space station, which was placed in orbit in April 2021.

The astronauts stayed at the station for six months before returning safely to Earth on Saturday, ending China's longest crewed mission to date.

The Chinese space station Tiangong -- meaning "heavenly palace" -- will need a total of around 11 missions to bring more parts and assemble them in orbit.

Once completed, it is expected to remain in low Earth orbit at between 400 and 450 kilometres (250 and 280 miles) above our planet for at least 10 years -- realising an ambition to maintain a long-term human presence in space.

While China does not plan to use its space station for global cooperation on the scale of the International Space Station, Beijing said it is open to foreign collaboration.

It is not yet clear how extensive that cooperation will be.

The Tiangong-1 lab was launched in 2011. The craft was also used for medical experiments and, most importantly, tests intended to prepare for the construction of a space station.

That was followed by the "Jade Rabbit" lunar rover in 2013, which initially appeared a dud when it turned dormant and stopped sending signals back to Earth.

It made a dramatic recovery, however, ultimately surveying the Moon's surface for 31 months -- well beyond its expected lifespan.

In 2016, China launched its second orbital lab, the Tiangong-2. Astronauts who visited the station have run experiments on growing rice and other plants.

Under President Xi Jinping, plans for China's "space dream" have been put into overdrive.

Beijing is looking to finally catch up with the United States and Russia after years of belatedly matching their milestones.

Besides a space station, China is also planning to build a base on the Moon, and

the country's National Space Administration said it aims to launch a crewed lunar mission by 2029.

But lunar work was dealt a setback in 2017 when the Long March-5 Y2, a powerful heavy-lift rocket, failed to launch on a mission to send communication satellites into orbit.

That forced the postponement of the Chang'e-5 launch, originally scheduled to collect Moon samples in the second half of 2017.

Another robot, the Chang'e-4, landed on