



A few hundred protesters gather during a demonstration against a possible Nato membership of Sweden outside the ruling Social Democrats party's office in Stockholm, Sweden, yesterday. Sweden on Friday inched closer to a reversal of its decades-long policy of military non-alignment, as a security policy review concluded that joining Nato would reduce the risk of conflict in northern Europe.

PHOTO: AFP

ATTACK AT JOURNO'S FUNERAL

Outcry against Israel mounts

AFP, Jerusalem

The US and EU led an international outcry yesterday after Israeli police charged the funeral procession of Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh and beat pallbearers who almost dropped her coffin.

Thousands of mourners packed Jerusalem's Old City on Friday for the burial of the 51-year-old Al Jazeera journalist, two days after she was killed during an Israeli raid in the occupied West Bank.

Television footage showed pallbearers struggling to stop Abu Akleh's casket from falling to the ground as baton-wielding police charged towards them, grabbing Palestinian flags.

The United States was "deeply troubled to see the images of Israeli police intruding into her funeral procession," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

The European Union condemned what it said was "unnecessary force" used by the Israeli police.

Israel and the Palestinians traded blame after Abu Akleh was shot in the head on Wednesday near Jenin refugee camp in the northern West Bank. She had been wearing a helmet and a bulletproof vest marked "Press".

Israel's army said an interim investigation could not determine who fired the fatal bullet, noting stray Palestinian gunfire or Israeli sniper fire aimed at militants were both possible causes.

The Palestinian public prosecution said an initial probe showed "the only origin of the shooting was the Israeli occupation forces". Al Jazeera said Israel killed her "deliberately" and "in cold blood".

In a rare, unanimous statement, the UN Security Council condemned the killing, calling for "an immediate, thorough, transparent, and impartial investigation."

Abu Akleh, a Christian and a Palestinian-American, was a highly respected reporter and her funeral drew massive crowds. The Jerusalem Red Crescent said 33 people were injured in Friday's mayhem, of whom six were hospitalised. The Israeli police said they arrested six people.

The United States, European Union and United Nations have backed calls for a full investigation into her killing. Israel has publicly called for a joint probe, which the Palestinian Authority has rejected.



ASEAN SUMMIT IN WASHINGTON

US hails 'new era'
Myanmar junta slams summit snub, lauds ties with China

AGENCIES

US President Joe Biden said on Friday a first summit in Washington with leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) marked the launch of a "new era" in the relationship between the United States and the 10-nation bloc.

In a joint 28-point "vision statement" after a two-day meeting, the two sides took what analysts called a symbolic step of committing to raise their relationship from a strategic partnership to a "comprehensive strategic partnership" in November.

On Ukraine they reaffirmed "respect for sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity," wording that a regional expert said went further than past Asean statements. The statement did not condemn Russia by name for its Feb 24 invasion.

The summit marked the first time Asean leaders gathered as a group in Washington and their first meeting hosted by a US president since 2016.

Biden's administration hopes the effort will show that the United States remains focused on the Indo-Pacific and the long-term challenge of China, which it views as its main competitor, despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

He was also hoping to persuade Asean countries to toughen their stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Biden told the Asean leaders that "a great deal of history of our world in the next 50 years is going to be written in the Asean countries, and our relationship with you is the future, in the coming years and decades."

Biden called the US-Asean partnership "critical" and said: "We're launching a new era - a new era - in US-Asean relations."

Vice President Kamala Harris said the United States would remain in Southeast Asia for "generations" and stressed the need to maintain freedom of the seas, which the United States says is challenged by China.



"The United States and Asean have shared a vision for this region, and together we will guard against threats to international rules and norms," Harris said.

Neither she nor Biden mentioned China by name. The United States has accused China of using coercion against its neighbors.

Asean groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Biden hosted a summit dinner at the White House on Thursday, and his administration promised \$150 million for areas including infrastructure, security, pandemic preparedness and clean energy.

New US commitments will include deployment of a Coast Guard vessel to the region to help counter what the United States and regional countries have described as China's illegal fishing. Still, US spending pales in comparison to that of China, which in November alone pledged \$1.5 billion in development assistance for Asean over three years to fight Covid and fuel economic recovery.

Meanwhile, Myanmar's junta on Friday slammed the United States for snubbing it at a regional summit and meeting with opposition leaders, and instead lauded its ties with "powerful" China.

"In the Asia-Pacific region, China is a powerful country. Our country is dealing with and having relations with powerful China and India," he said.

Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed elected UAE president

AFP, Abu Dhabi



The UAE's long-time de facto ruler Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan was elected as president yesterday, official media said, a day after the death of former leader Sheikh Khalifa. The 61-year-old was unanimously elected by the Federal Supreme Council, WAM news agency said, becoming the ruler of the oil-rich country founded by his father in 1971. Sheikh Mohamed, often known as 'MBZ', met members of the Federal Supreme Council, made up of rulers of the UAE's seven emirates, as the country enters a period of mourning for his half-brother Sheikh Khalifa. Sheikh Mohamed's ascension, which was widely expected, formalises his position as leader of the desert state of 10 million after years of calling the shots while Sheikh Khalifa was sidelined by poor health.

OPPOSITION TO NATO EXPANSION

US 'working to understand Turkey's position'

AFP, Washington

Washington is "working to clarify Turkey's position" after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed opposition to Finland and Sweden joining Nato, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said Friday. The idea of the two nations becoming members of the transatlantic alliance had received "broad support from Nato member countries," Psaki said. Pentagon spokesman John Kirby likewise said the United States is working to "better understand" Ankara's stance. Erdogan told journalists on Friday that "we do not have a positive opinion" about the two countries joining the alliance. Turkey has long accused Nordic countries, in particular Sweden, which has a strong Turkish immigrant community, of harboring extremist Kurdish groups as well as supporters of Fethullah Gulen, the US-based preacher wanted over the failed 2016 coup. To gain Nato membership, all the 30 members of the alliance must agree unanimously to extend a formal invitation.

Tripura CM Bilab Dev resigns amid party infighting

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi



Chief Minister of India's BJP-ruled Tripura state Biplab Kumar Deb yesterday resigned from the post amidst serious infighting in the party's state unit one year ahead of fresh assembly elections there. Deb said he has submitted his resignation to Governor S N Arya whom he met at the Raj Bhavan in Agartala, capital city of Tripura.

Later in the day, the BJP appointed Dr Manik Saha as his replacement. Saha, who is a dentist by profession, was elected as a Rajya Sabha MP just last month and is also the Tripura state president of the BJP. Deb took to Twitter to congratulate his successor and said Tripura will prosper under PM Modi's "vision and leadership". Deb was appointed the chief minister after the BJP stormed to power in 2018, ending 25 years of Left Front rule in Tripura.



"The spread of the malignant epidemic (Covid-19) is a great turmoil to fall on our country since the founding. But if we don't lose focus in implementing epidemic polic..., we can more than overcome the crisis."

Kim Jong Un as North Korea reports 21 new deaths

RUSSIA REFERENDUM

Georgia's breakaway region to vote in July

AFP, Moscow

The leader of Georgia's breakaway region of South Ossetia on Friday set July 17 as a date for a referendum on joining Russia.

"Anatoly Bibilov signed a decree on holding a referendum in the Republic of South Ossetia," his office said in a statement, citing his people's "historic aspiration" to join Russia.

South Ossetia was at the centre of the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 after which the Kremlin recognised the territory -- along with another separatist region, Abkhazia -- as an independent state and stationed military bases there.

Bibilov lost his bid for re-election earlier this month. Russia has expressed hope the incoming leader, Alan Gagloev, will preserve "continuity" in ties with Moscow.

The announcement came amid Russia's military campaign in Ukraine, where separatist regions of Donetsk and Lugansk have also expressed interest in joining Russia.

In August 2008, Russia launched an assault against Georgia which was battling pro-Russian militia in South Ossetia. The fighting ended five days later with a European Union-mediated ceasefire but claimed more than 700 lives and displaced tens of thousands of ethnic Georgians.



Child migrant Eliana, 4, from Guatemala, is being carried towards a member of the Texas Army National Guard, after she and other asylum-seeking migrants waded across the Rio Grande river into the United States from Mexico in Roma, Texas, US, on Friday.

PHOTO: REUTERS