

UK PM clings on to power amid ouster calls

New finance minister admits taxes to rise

AFP, London

Britain's new finance minister yesterday warned of looming tax hikes as he admitted to "mistakes" made in a disastrous budget that still threatens to bring down Prime Minister Liz Truss.

"Truss fights for survival," The Times newspaper headlined a day after she forced chancellor of the exchequer Kwasi Kwarteng to carry the can for market turmoil sparked by their budget on September 23.

The Times, Telegraph and other newspapers reported that senior Conservative members of parliament were still plotting to unseat Truss, possibly within days, aghast at the party's collapse in opinion polls since she replaced Boris Johnson on September 6.

New chancellor Jeremy Hunt indicated he would be tearing up the strategy that brought Truss to 10 Downing Street.

"There were mistakes," acknowledged Hunt, a former foreign secretary who is seen as a Tory centrist.

"The prime minister has recognised that, that's why I'm here," Hunt told Sky News.

In one of his first acts on taking office late Friday, the new minister spoke to



Bank of England governor Andrew Bailey, who has had to stage costly interventions to calm febrile bond markets.

Tax cuts were the centrepiece of the ill-starred budget announced by Kwarteng and Truss.

But they were financed through billions in more borrowing, causing panic in financial markets, which has fed into higher costs for British households in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis.

"We will have some very difficult decisions ahead," Hunt said, warning that "all government departments" face spending restraint.

Hunt confirmed he would deliver a new fiscal statement on October 31.

But having abandoned the right-wing economic promises that won her the Conservative leadership election against Rishi Sunak, Truss faced mounting criticism that her political credibility was in tatters.

Former Conservative leader William Hague said Truss's premiership now "hangs by a thread", while ex-chancellor Philip Hammond said she had "thrown away years and years of painstaking work" to establish the party's record for economic competence.



A man looks at a vehicle on the beach of the popular resort of Agia Pelagia, on the southern Greek island of Crete, following yesterday's flash floods. A man was found dead and two others were missing after torrential rain brought major flooding to the Greek island, emergency workers said.

PHOTO: AFP

Putin 'in a corner' with options narrowing

AFP, Paris

US President Joe Biden admitted this week that American diplomats still did not know how Russian President Vladimir Putin could bring an end to his faltering war in Ukraine and save face. Western analysts see no good options.

The question of Putin's "off-ramp" — or decisions that allow him to end the fighting without admitting defeat — has exercised Western policymakers and foreign policy experts since the very start of the war in February.

"Where does he find a way out?" Biden asked on Thursday while talking in New York. "Where does he find himself in a position that he does not, not only lose face, but lose significant power within Russia?"

A French diplomat, talking recently on condition of anonymity, stressed that European allies were no closer to reading Putin's thinking, other than his desire to secure what appears to be an increasingly unlikely military victory.

"There's a war that he is not managing to win, but what would satisfy him? We don't have the answers," the diplomat said.

Instead of looking for a negotiated climbdown, Putin has escalated in recent weeks, formally annexing four regions of Ukraine on September 30 and approving a partial mobilisation of up to 300,000 men for the war.

On Friday, he said Moscow was "doing everything right" in its nearly eight-month invasion of Ukraine despite a string of embarrassing defeats against Kyiv's forces. In the latest sign of embarrassment for him, Kremlin-installed officials in the southern Kherson region, which Russia annexed, urged residents to leave as Kyiv said its soldiers were advancing on the oblast's main city.

"What is happening today is not pleasant. But all the same, (if Russia hadn't attacked in February) we would have been

in the same situation, only the conditions would have been worse for us," Putin told reporters after a summit in the capital of Kazakhstan.

"So we're doing everything right," he insisted.

Putin said there was no need for further massive strikes against Ukraine at present and claimed the Kremlin did not intend to destroy its pro-Western neighbour.

He spoke days after Russia unleashed a wave of missile strikes on cities across Ukraine that left at least 20 civilians dead. Putin said the strikes were in retaliation for the explosion on the Crimea bridge, which



he has described as a "terrorist act".

"He may think the battlefield situation isn't great but things will settle down during the winter, that Ukrainian offences will come to an end, that they'll be able to mobilise," Eliot A Cohen, a military historian and former US State Department adviser, told AFP.

"I think he's mistaken. I think the Russians are in a serious world of hurt," added Cohen, an expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies at the US-based Johns Hopkins University.

The Ukrainians are continuing to win back occupied territory in the northeast and south, while the Kremlin's mobilisation has led to rare dissent in Russia amid evidence that many recruits lack adequate

weapons and kit.

"Russia's behaviour is irrational," wrote Joris van Bladel, a fellow at the Belgian Royal Institute for International Relations think-tank. "The only 'rational' element the Kremlin is counting on is time."

"Russia tries to buy time in the hope that the European countries will collapse before Russia's downfall," he added.

Putin's escalation on the ground has also been accompanied by new rhetoric about the possible use of nuclear weapons which is directed at Western countries.

Some analysts see it as a bluff and others as a sign of desperation.

Western nations have signalled that they would feel compelled to react in some way if Russia crossed the nuclear threshold, raising the risk of direct conflict between the Nato military alliance and Moscow.

"It's a very, very dangerous moment," former US secretary of state John Kerry said late last month.

Putin is "more in a corner than anyone would like him to be because that's not good for anybody", Kerry told MSNBC on September 28.

Kerry's comment has been echoed by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, a key ally of Russia.

In extracts of an interview with the American TV channel NBC released by Belarus's state news agency, Lukashenko said: "The most important thing is, don't drive your interlocutor and even your opponent into a corner. So you mustn't cross those lines — those red lines, as the Russians say. You can't cross them."

"As for nuclear weapons, any weapon is a weapon created for something," Lukashenko was quoted as saying.

"Russia has clearly outlined its position: God forbid there will be an attack on the territory of the Russian Federation; in that event, Russia can use all types of weapons if necessary."

Pakistan 'one of the most dangerous nations': Biden

REUTERS

Pakistan's foreign minister yesterday said he had summoned the US ambassador after President Joe Biden questioned the safety of Pakistan's nuclear programme. In a speech on Thursday, Biden said Pakistan is "maybe one of the most dangerous nations in the world" as it has "nuclear weapons without any cohesion". Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari said he was surprised by the comments. "As far as the question of the safety and security of Pakistan's nuclear assets are concerned, we meet all — each and every — international standard in accordance with the IAEA," he said at a press conference yesterday. Bhutto Zardari said he didn't think the decision to summon the US ambassador would negatively affect relations with the United States, and said officials could address any specific concerns Washington had on the nuclear programme.

China begins key CPC meet today

AFP, Beijing

President Xi Jinping is expected to be handed a historic third term in control of China on October 23, it emerged yesterday, after a spokesman confirmed the Communist Party's 20th Congress will end the previous day. About 2,300 party delegates from every province will gather at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing from today to rubber-stamp the country's next leadership make-up. The five yearly meeting will get underway at 10:00 am with an opening ceremony, after which Xi is expected to deliver a speech that will give an assessment of the previous term as well as a roadmap for the next five years. At the highly choreographed conclave, the 2,296 participants will also pick members of the party's roughly 200-member Central Committee, which in turn selects the 25-person Politburo and its all-powerful Standing Committee — the country's highest leadership body.

Iran is a 'mighty tree' that can't be uprooted

Warns Khamenei; Biden hails protesters

AGENCIES

Iran Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that no one should dare think they can uproot the Islamic Republic, in his toughest warning to protesters since Mahsa Amini's death in police custody ignited nationwide unrest now in its fourth week.

Demonstrations by people from all walks of life, after the Iranian Kurdish woman's death following her arrest for "inappropriate attire", have evolved into widespread calls for the downfall of Khamenei and the Islamic Republic.

The protests mark one of the boldest challenges to clerical rule since the 1979 revolution, even if the unrest does not seem close to toppling the system.

Khamenei compared the Islamic Republic to an unshakeable tree. "That seedling is a mighty tree now and no one should dare think they can uproot it," he said on state TV.

He has accused the country's enemies, including the US and Israel, of fomenting the "riots".

Rights groups say more than 200

people have been killed in the crackdown, including teenage girls. Amnesty International said at least 23 children have died.

Despite Khamenei's stern warning, demonstrators took to streets across Iran again yesterday.

Shopkeepers went on strike in Amini's hometown Saqez, in Kurdistan province, and Mahabad in West Azerbaijan, according to the 1500tasvir social media channel that monitors protests and police violations.

Youths were also seen demonstrating at universities in Tehran, Isfahan and Kermanshah, in footage widely shared online.

The women-led protests have won support from the US president.

"I want you to know that we stand with the citizens, the brave women of Iran," Joe Biden said late Friday.

"It stunned me what it awakened in Iran. It awakened something that I don't think will be quieted for a long, long time," he said.

The crackdown has drawn international condemnation and sanctions on Iran from Britain, Canada and the United States.

1 dead as floods start to recede in Australia

AFP, Melbourne

Australia reported the first fatality from days of widespread flash flooding yesterday, despite heavy rains easing and flood levels topping out across much of the southeast.

Hundreds of homeowners began a long clean-up after storm waters engulfed streets, houses and cars across three states, with Melbourne suburbs among the worst hit.

The apparent flooding victim was a 71-year-old man who was "found deceased in floodwaters in the backyard" of his property in the town of Rochester, a small town north of Melbourne.

As the waters ebbed, residents were left wading through mud-caked streets, abandoned cars, tree branches festooned with debris.

Evacuation orders remain in place for dozens of communities.



Local residents perform Shaanxi folk music at a citizen square near Baota mountain in Yan'an city, in China's northwest Shaanxi province yesterday, one day ahead of the 20th Communist Party Congress.

PHOTO: AFP