

Ukrainian forces brace for bloody fight for Kherson

Experts say re-taking the city from Russian troops would be a major victory in war

REUTERS, West of Kherson

Oleh, the commander of a Ukrainian mechanized infantry unit dug into trenches west of Kherson, is confident his Russian foes will be forced to abandon the strategic port by winter weather, logistical logjams and the threat of encirclement.

But neither he nor his men think the Russians will go quickly or quietly and nor do they intend to let them. His comments raise the spectre of a bloody slog in the coming weeks for control of a key city on the west bank of the Dnipro River which acts as a gateway to the peninsula of Crimea annexed by Russia in 2014.

"They will keep fighting. They will defend their positions as long as they have the ability to do so," said Oleh, 26, a battle-hardened major who has risen through the ranks since enlisting as a teenager 10 years ago. "It will be a hard fight."

Kirill Stremousov, deputy head of the Russian-installed administration in Kherson region, said on Thursday that he hoped Russian forces would put up a fight.



"If we leave Kherson, it will be a huge blow," he added, in comments broadcast by Russia's RT television.

The contest for the only provincial capital seized by Moscow in the full scale invasion launched on February 24 may be one of the most consequential of the war so far.

For Russian President Vladimir Putin, it would be another setback following a series of significant battlefield losses since mid-August.

With control of the Dnipro's west bank, military experts said, Ukrainian forces would have a springboard from which to seize a bridgehead on the east side for an advance on Crimea.

Crimea is home to Russia's Black Sea fleet and Kyiv has made the peninsula's recovery its sworn goal.

Were Kherson to fall in counter-offensive, experts added, it would also be a humiliation for Putin, as Kherson is one of the four occupied regions of Ukraine that he announced would be part of Russia "forever" with great fanfare on September 30.



People take part in a candlelight vigil to commemorate the 156 people killed in the October 29 Halloween crowd crush, in Seoul yesterday. The victims were among the estimated 100,000 that had flocked to the capital's popular Itaewon nightlife district to celebrate the Halloween. President Yoon Suk Yeol declared a weeklong national mourning period that ended yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

MALAYSIA POLLS Mahathir, 97, files candidacy

AFP, Langkawi

Mahathir Mohamad, the nearly 100-year-old elder statesman of Malaysian politics, yesterday filed his candidacy in what is likely to be his final race, as campaigning for upcoming general elections began.

Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob called for elections 10 months ahead of schedule, with the graft-tainted ruling party of jailed ex-leader Najib Razak seeking to cement its political comeback four years after it was dramatically voted out.

A Guinness World Record holder for being the "world's oldest current prime minister" when he became premier for a second time in 2018, the 97-year-old Mahathir will stand again to defend his parliamentary seat in the holiday island of Langkawi in the November 19 vote.

Visibly slowed by age but still looking healthy, Mahathir was greeted by dozens of supporters waving flags of his Homeland Fighters' Party as he arrived at a local government office in Kuala, the island's main town, to register his candidacy.

Mahathir told reporters that he stood a "good chance" of winning and laughed off suggestions he should retire. "I'm still standing around and talking to you, I think making reasonable answers," he said.

He added his party would not form any alliances with parties that are led by "crooks or jailbirds".



Iranians stage new protest actions over Amini's death

Security forces compel univ students to remove their facemasks; shopkeepers observe strike

AFP, Paris

Iranian students protested and shopkeepers went on strike yesterday despite a widening crackdown, according to reports on social media, as demonstrations that flared over Mahsa Amini's death entered an eighth week.

The clerical state has been gripped by protests that erupted when Amini, 22, died in custody after her arrest for an alleged breach of Iran's strict dress code for women.

As the working week got underway, security forces adopted new measures to halt protests at universities in the capital Tehran yesterday, searching students and forcing them to remove facemasks, activists said.

But students were seen demonstrating and chanting "I am a free woman, you are the pervert" at Islamic Azad University of Mashhad, in northeast Iran, in a video published by BBC Persian.

"A student dies, but doesn't accept humiliation," sang students at Gilan University in the northern city of Rasht, in footage posted online by an activist. AFP was unable to immediately verify the videos.

In the northwestern city of Qazvin, dozens were heard chanting similar slogans at a mourning ceremony 40 days after the death of protester Javad Heydari.

The Norway-based Hengaw rights group said people were observing a "widespread strike" in Amini's home town of Saqez, in Kurdistan province, where shops were shuttered.

"Our weapon is our unity, our weapon is our rage, our weapon is our resistance... You

cannot stand against the will of people," tweeted Hassan Ronaghi, the brother of prominent rights campaigner Hossein.

Oslo-based group Iran Human Rights said Wednesday that at least 176 people have been killed by the security forces in the protest crackdown.

It said another 101 people had lost their lives in separate protests since September 30 in Sistan-Baluchistan, a mainly Sunni Muslim province in the southeast of the country.



An official in Kerman province admitted the authorities were having trouble quelling the protests that first broke out after Amini's death on September 16.

"The restrictions on the internet, the arrest of the leaders of the riots and the presence of the state in the streets always eliminated sedition, but this type of sedition and its audience are different," Rahman Jalali, political and security deputy for the province, was quoted as saying by ISNA news agency.

In a flare-up in Sistan Baluchistan,

up to 10 people, including children, were killed Friday by security forces in the city of Khash, Amnesty International said.

Molavi Abdol Hamid, the cleric who leads Friday prayers in Sistan-Baluchistan's capital Zahedan, in a statement condemned the incident in Khash as a "massacre" that he said killed 16 people.

A video verified by AFP shows youths running for cover and screaming as bursts of gunfire are heard on a road in Khash.

Ultra-conservative President Ebrahim Raisi on Friday dismissed a pledge by his US counterpart Joe Biden to "free Iran".

Campaigning for mid-term elections, Biden had said: "Don't worry we're gonna free Iran. They're gonna free themselves pretty soon."

Raisi retorted that Iran had already been freed by the overthrow of the Western-backed shah in 1979.

"Our young men and young women are determined and we will never allow you to carry out your satanic desires," he told a gathering commemorating the November 1979 seizure of the US embassy in Tehran by radical students.

US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby on Friday played down the American leader's remarks.

"The president was expressing our solidarity with the protesters as he's been doing, quite frankly, from the very outset," Kirby told reporters.

Asked whether the Biden administration thought the Iranian regime could soon fall, he said: "I don't believe we have indications of that kind".

80 Rohingyas detained in Myanmar Traffickers abandon them

AFP, Yangon

More than 80 Rohingya people seeking to travel by boat to Malaysia have been detained in Myanmar's southeast after traffickers abandoned them, a security source told AFP yesterday.

Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar's western Rakhine state are widely regarded as illegal immigrants in the Buddhist-majority country and have long faced discrimination, been denied citizenship, health care and education.

The group, which included women and children, had been detained by authorities on Friday near Thanbyuzayat town in Mon state, a security source who didn't want to be named told AFP.

"They were hiding near rubber farms after the boats which they took from Rakhine state left them," the source said, adding that traffickers had promised to take them to Malaysia.

PROBING IMRAN'S ALLEGATIONS Pak PM seeks full court commission

THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has demanded Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Umar Ata Bandial to constitute a "full court commission" to probe allegations levelled by PTI Chairman Imran Khan wherein he accused the premier, interior minister and a senior military official of orchestrating the failed assassination attempt on him. "I am requesting chief justice of Pakistan to constitute a full court commission and include all judges whether they are senior or junior," said the premier while addressing a press conference in Islamabad yesterday. PM Shehbaz vehemently rejected the allegations that he, interior minister and the senior military official had any link with the attack on Imran Khan during PTI's long march. "If I am found involved in any conspiracy, I will quit politics," he announced. Prime Minister Shehbaz said he will write to the chief justice to formally request him to constitute the full court commission headed by a top court judge. "The federal government will also fully cooperate with the commission and will accept its findings wholeheartedly," he added.

Twitter sacks half of its 7,500 staff

AFP, San Francisco

Twitter sacked half of its 7,500-strong staff on Friday as new owner Elon Musk launched his major overhaul of the troubled company just a week after his blockbuster takeover. An internal document seen by AFP said "roughly 50 percent" of employees were impacted and would be denied access to company computers and email on an immediate basis. Workers around the world were shown the door and took to Twitter to vent their frustration or disbelief and say goodbye to one of Silicon Valley's most iconic companies.

"Woke up to the news that my time working at Twitter has come to an end. I am heartbroken. I am in denial," said Michele Austin, Twitter's director of public policy for the United States and Canada. "Regarding Twitter's reduction in force, unfortunately there is no choice when the company is losing over \$4M/day," Musk tweeted Friday evening in his first comment on the subject, 24 hours after the company's initial email notifying employees of forthcoming layoffs.

FINAL MIDTERMS DASH

Biden, Trump target pivotal battleground

REUTERS, Philadelphia

The biggest names in Democratic and Republican politics -- Joe Biden, Barack Obama and Donald Trump -- headed to Pennsylvania yesterday hoping to tip the balance in a closely contested midterm race that could determine control of the US Senate. Former President Obama caps a five-state tour aimed at stemming his party's losses in Tuesday's congressional elections with appearances in Pittsburgh alongside Democratic Senate nominee John Fetterman before heading to Philadelphia, where he will take the stage at Temple University with President Biden. Former President Trump, meanwhile, will be gunning up support for Republican Senate nominee Mehmet Oz, and Republican gubernatorial nominee Doug Mastriano at a rally in Latrobe, Pittsburgh.



Former leader of the Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn attends a protest to demand the government to call for a general election in London, Britain yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS