

Will do 'whatever we can' to solve Ukraine crisis

Modi tells Zelensky at the sidelines of G7

AFP, Hiroshima

India will do "whatever we can" to resolve the Ukraine crisis, Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged yesterday as he met President Volodymyr Zelensky for the first time since Russia's invasion.

"I understand your pain and the pain of Ukrainian citizens very well," Modi said, as the pair met on the sidelines of the Group of 7 summit in Hiroshima, Japan.

"I can assure you that to resolve this India and, me personally, will do whatever we can do," Modi said.

It was the pair's first in-person meeting since Russia's invasion began 15 months ago, which New Delhi has pointedly resisted criticising.

A post on Zelensky's Telegram account said he had "thanked India for supporting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of our country, in particular at the sites of international organisations".

Zelensky also thanked Modi for providing humanitarian aid to the war-torn country, and invited India to join the implementation of the "peace formula" initiative devised by Ukraine.

Zelensky arrived in Hiroshima on Saturday afternoon for a surprise in-person appearance after winning US approval for Ukraine to obtain advanced fighter jets.

He quickly embarked on a whirlwind of diplomatic pitstops with leaders from the major developed democracies in the G7, as well as invited developing nations, including India.

Modi also thanked Zelensky for the help provided to Indian students after Russia's invasion, the Telegram post added.

The Ukrainian leader earlier held talks with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Britain's Rishi Sunak, who he also met days ago on a tour of European allies to drum up support for a planned spring offensive.

On Telegram, Zelensky said he had thanked Sunak "for the UK's leadership in the international fighter jet coalition".

And in discussions with European Council President Charles Michel, Zelensky raised export restrictions on Ukrainian agricultural products and the "inadmissibility" of the measures being extended after June 5, he said on his Telegram account.

The EU has approved restrictions through June 5 on the imports of several Ukrainian products to help ease excess supplies in neighbouring countries.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina meets President Mohammed Shahabuddin at the Bangabhaban yesterday

PHOTO: PTD

Ukraine wins access to F-16s at G7

Moscow says move would carry 'colossal' risks for West

AFP, Hiroshima

President Volodymyr Zelensky huddled with G7 leaders on a landmark visit to Hiroshima yesterday, securing long-sought access to US fighter jets and mounting a diplomatic offensive.

Zelensky's surprise summit appearance is his furthest foray from Kyiv since Russia's invasion began 15 months ago, and offers a chance to confer not only with allies but unaligned powers including India and Brazil.

His bold diplomatic gambit appeared to have paid off.

Zelensky won a "historic" White House decision allowing Kyiv to acquire F-16 fighter jets, the most sophisticated material yet supplied by the West, with the promise of more to come.

Zelensky said the jets would not help the war effort immediately, but the decision was "a great result".

"I'm very happy," he said, as he held a string of meetings with G7 leaders, including those from Italy, Britain, France and Germany.

"It really will help our society, our people to save houses, families."

The trip is an opportunity to press his plan for a peace process contingent on Russian withdrawals, and woo powers like India and Brazil which have not condemned

Moscow's war.

After a bloody winter of fighting that saw Russian gains in the eastern city of Bakhmut, Ukraine's forces have regrouped for a counteroffensive but they remain dependent on the flow of Western weaponry.

Military experts say the aircraft would be a significant upgrade from Ukraine's ageing Soviet-era fleet, offering greater ability to eventually strike targets in the air or on the ground.

Zelensky won a "historic" White House decision allowing Kyiv to acquire F-16 fighter jets, the most sophisticated material yet supplied by the West, with the promise of more to come.

They are also a potent symbol of Western support for Ukraine, forestalling any talk of waning interest as the conflict grinds on.

Russia today reacted furiously, saying Western countries will be running "colossal risks" if they supply Ukraine with F-16 fighter jets, TASS news agency quoted Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko as saying.

"We see that Western countries are

still adhering to the escalation scenario. It involves colossal risks for themselves," Grushko was quoted as saying.

Mick Ryan, a strategist and retired Australian major general, called the decision "very significant".

"F-16s have the sensors and weapon systems that are either equal to, or overmatch, Russian fighters," he told AFP, saying the jets would make life "more difficult" for Russian missile launching aircraft operating in and around Ukraine.

Russia was exiled from the then-Group of Eight in 2014, when President Vladimir Putin's forces annexed Crimea.

Until now, US President Joe Biden had effectively vetoed the transfer of US-made F-16s, with officials citing long pilot training times and the risk of escalating the conflict with Russia.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan insisted there had been no about-turn in US policy, and the decision was based on the "exigencies of the conflict".

He added that Ukraine had committed to not using US military equipment to hit targets inside Russia.

With the US veto lifted, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak quickly announced that Britain would "work together with the USA and the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark to get Ukraine the combat air capability it needs".

JOKE ON CHINESE MILITARY Backlash stirs fear of comedy clampdown

REUTERS, Beijing

One joke by a Chinese comedian about the nation's military has spurred online uproar, a \$2 million fine, a police probe, a sweep of cancelled shows and fears for the survival of Chinese stand-up comedy, a rare refuge for somewhat free speech.

The furore over Li Haoshi's wisecrack in Beijing last weekend marks the biggest scandal yet for a form of entertainment that, despite China's tightening censorship regime, had managed to gain popularity with performances in small groups and material that managed to just toe the line.

"Stand-up comedy has been the last bastion in which people ... can still enjoy entertaining commentary about public life," said Beijing-based independent political analyst Wu Qiang. "After this, the space for stand-up comedy and public expression in general will inevitably keep shrinking."

The State Council's information office, which handles media queries on behalf of the government, did not respond to Reuters request for comment.

China's comedy scene rose quickly during the COVID-19 pandemic as people spent more time indoors watching viral streamed comedy shows. The most popular were produced by Xiaoguo Culture Media Co, the firm at the centre of the current uproar.

Following reports that these broadcasts were increasingly subject to censorship, especially when it came to sensitive subjects such as Shanghai's lockdown, offline shows proliferated, in part because of a perception that comedians were freer to speak in front of small groups than vast broadcast audiences.

\$4.9b next fiscal if projects are ready on time

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"This will only be an initial funding from the World Bank for the around \$20-billion project, a feasibility study of which is now underway. This project will be implemented in phases," said a finance ministry official.

He said Bangladesh has already received \$2 billion under the CPF in the current fiscal year, and more than \$1 billion is in the pipeline for two more projects in the same fiscal.

RISK FACTORS

The WB has identified some risk factors in implementing the CPF.

The multilateral lender in its report said that while the security situation in the country has improved since the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery terrorist attack, the weakness of policy and institutions keeps the governance risks elevated in terms of preparation and implementation of reforms and

investments supported under the CPF.

"The World Bank Group will closely monitor political economy risks and developments and consider adjustments to the CPF programme as needed," it said.

Macroeconomic risk is rated substantial given the growing uncertainties in the global economic outlook, the CPF said.

"The heightened global commodity prices have already put pressure on the country's external balance as well as on its fiscal balance, while the financial sector remains vulnerable," it observed.

A delay in phasing out the current multiple exchange rate arrangements and continued restrictions on foreign exchange rates would not only affect the macroeconomic condition, but also affect the implementation of projects under the CPF, the report

NASA taps Bezos's Blue Origin to build Moon lander

AFP, Washington

Two years after awarding Elon Musk's SpaceX a contract to ferry astronauts to the surface of the Moon, NASA on Friday announced it had chosen Blue Origin, a rival space company founded by billionaire Jeff Bezos, to build a second lunar lander.

Blue Origin's lander was selected for the Artemis 5 mission, currently scheduled to take place in 2029. The company will first have to demonstrate it can safely land on the Moon without a crew.

Bezos, the founder and former CEO of Amazon, said on Twitter he was "honored to be on this journey with @NASA to land astronauts on the Moon -- this time to stay."

The contract amounts to \$3.4 billion, but John Couluris, vice-president in charge of lunar transport at Blue Origin, said during a press

conference that the company would itself contribute "well north" of that amount to develop the craft.

The Artemis programme marks NASA's return to the Moon after more than 50 years and is made up of several missions, each with increasing complexity.

In 2021, the US agency chose SpaceX to build a lander for Artemis 3, the first mission in the series to have actual astronauts set foot on the lunar surface.

The contract was worth \$2.9 billion, although SpaceX is supplementing that amount with its own funding.

Blue Origin had also competed for the first contract, and filed an unsuccessful lawsuit against NASA when SpaceX was chosen as the sole lander provider.

The space agency had originally intended to offer two contracts, a practice commonly used to guard

against the possibility one fails, but said it had been constrained by budget concerns.

NASA in 2022 also chose the SpaceX lander for its Artemis 4 mission, but at the same time requested submissions from other companies for the rest of the programme.

"We want more competition. We want two landers," NASA boss Bill Nelson said on Friday. "It means that you have reliability. You have backups."

Blue Origin's lander, dubbed Blue Moon, is being developed with several partner companies, including Draper, Boeing, Astrobotic, Honeybee Robotics, and Lockheed Martin.

The latter will be responsible for developing a crucial element. Once in lunar orbit, Blue Moon will need to be refueled before it can descend and collect the astronauts from the surface of the Moon.

PM calls on president, apprises him of her recent foreign trips

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a courtesy call on President Mohammed Shahabuddin at Bangabhaban yesterday.

The prime minister informed the president about her recent tri-nation visit and discussed various issues relating to the affairs of the state.

The premier visited Japan, the UK, and the USA from April 25 to May 9 and took part in different bilateral programmes on trade, investment, and mutual cooperation with those countries, World Bank, and IMF, said president's press secretary Md Joyal Abedin.

Shahabuddin thanked and congratulated Hasina for the successful visit. He particularly appreciated her excellence shown during the meeting with her counterparts and officials of the multilateral organizations.

The visit would further expand bilateral and multilateral ties, including trade and investment with Japan, the US and the UK, the president hoped.

Shahabuddin presented a copy of his book "Egiye Jabe Bangladesh" (Bangladesh will go ahead) to Hasina.

The president and the prime minister also enquired about the health and personal well-being of each other.

President Mohammed Shahabuddin and his spouse Dr. Rebecca Sultana greeted the Prime Minister with a bouquet of flowers on her arrival at Bangabhaban.

HSC student killed in clash over football

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinaipur

A clash between two groups of teenage boys left an HSC student dead in Kaunia upazila of Rangpur on Friday.

Ashikur Islam, son of Tafil Uddin of Harishwar village, died of injuries he suffered during the clash over a football match on the playground of Kaunia college.

Police said Ashikur engaged in an argument with a local named Atikur Rahman, who according to police is 20, while watching the football match of local players.

In the evening, two groups of boys clashed in Kaunia bus stop area, said Montaser Billah, officer-in-charge of Kaunia Police Station.

Ashikur, who received serious injuries, was pronounced dead at Rangpur Medical College Hospital around 10:00pm, he added.

Police detained Atikur and several others after a case was filed.

Shopkeeper dies of electrocution

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

A vegetable seller died of electrocution at his shop in Patgram upazila of Lalmonirhat yesterday.

Omar Faruk, 36, got electrocuted after he touched a corrugated iron sheet which was in touch with a bare electric wire.

The accident happened in Puratan Kachamaal Bazar area, police said.

Russian decision to outlaw Greenpeace 'absurd'

AFP, Moscow

Climate advocacy group Greenpeace on Friday criticised Russia's decision to label it an undesirable organisation, which criminalises its work, as absurd and destructive.

Russia on Friday branded Greenpeace an undesirable organisation, accusing it of anti-Moscow propaganda and attempting to "change power in the country".

The designation also puts the group's staff at risk of prosecution.

"The liquidation of Greenpeace in Russia -- this is an absurd, irresponsible and destructive step that has nothing to do with the protection of the country's interests," Greenpeace said on its Russian website.

The organisation said it believed the decision was "due precisely to the fact that we tried to prevent the implementation of plans that destroy nature, and in many cases successfully so."

Greenpeace cited a long list of projects that it carried out, including for the protection of the Baikal, the

world's largest and deepest freshwater lake.

"Every year our employees and volunteers saved forests and peatland from fire," Greenpeace also said.

The Office of the General Prosecutor had said the climate advocacy group posed "a threat to the foundations of the constitutional order and security" of the country.

Since the start of Russia's military offensive in Ukraine, Greenpeace activists have been engaged in "anti-Russian propaganda" and called for Russia's economic isolation, the statement said.

Greenpeace's efforts have been "aimed at destabilising the socio-political situation and attempting to change power in the country in an unconstitutional way," the Office of the General Prosecutor said.

"The environmental activities of Greenpeace are in fact accompanied by the active promotion of a political position, attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of the state and are aimed at undermining its economic foundations," the statement said.

Police, AL men

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attacked law enforcers, said an officer.

Speaking at a press conference in the town, BNP Vice-Chairman Abdul Awal Mintoo said the next general election will not be free and fair without a caretaker government.

In Rajbari, police detained 20 BNP leaders and activists after a clash among the activists of the BNP, AL, and police members around 12:30pm.

The opposition party said police and the ruling party men had attacked marching BNP activists in Singar Mor area.

BNP leader Ali Nawaz Mahmud Khayyum said he along with activists was walking to the party programme at Azadi Moydan around 12:30pm when ruling party men intercepted them and then police baton-charged

them.

Sahadat Hossain, officer-in-charge of Rajbari Sadar Police Station, said police were trying to calm the situation when BNP activists attacked them, forcing officers to use firearms.

Police detained 20 people from the scene, he added.

In Netrakona, BNP leaders said police and ruling party activists did not let them hold the rally.

At Mymensingh Press Club, Anwarul Haq, convener of Netrakona BNP, said at least 63 activists were arrested.

The activists first tried to gather at Banwapara bus stop, but AL leaders stopped them, he said, adding that the opposition activists then went to Madanpur Mazar area to hold the rally, but the AL men assaulted them.