

BLACK SEA GRAIN DEAL

Russia signals end to pact in July if demands not met

REUTERS, United Nations

Russia has signaled that if demands to improve its grain and fertilizer exports are not met then it will not extend beyond July 17 a deal allowing the safe wartime export of the same products from three Ukrainian Black Sea ports.

It made the same threat and demands in March. Moscow then agreed last week to renew for 60 days the Black Sea export pact - initially brokered by the United Nations and Turkey last July with Russia and Ukraine to try to ease a global food crisis aggravated by Moscow's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Since March Russia appears to have prioritized two specific demands: restarting a pipeline to transport Russian ammonia to the Ukrainian Black Sea port of Pivdenyi for export to global markets; and reconnecting Russia's agricultural bank, known as Rosselkhozbank, to the SWIFT international payment network.

"If Rosselkhozbank is not connected to SWIFT and there is no progress on the implementation of other 'systemic' problems that are blocking our agricultural exports, then the 'Black Sea initiative' will also have to look for alternatives," Russia's

Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Thursday.

It suggested land exports through Europe as an alternative, saying that avenue was more costly for Ukraine.

Rosselkhozbank was cut off from SWIFT by the European Union in June over Russia's invasion. An EU spokesperson has said the bloc is not considering the reinstatement of Russian banks.

To help convince Russia to allow Ukraine to resume Black Sea grain exports, a three-year pact was also struck last July in which the UN agreed to help Moscow carry out its food and fertilizer shipments.

Under the pact - and as an alternative to returning Rosselkhozbank to SWIFT - US bank JPMorgan Chase & Co has processed some Russian grain export payments, sources told Reuters last month, and could process dozens more. But Russia has dismissed this as unsuitable in the longer term.

The United Nations is working with the African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) to create a platform to help process transactions for Russian exports of grain and fertilizer to Africa, the top UN trade official told Reuters on Wednesday.



Firefighters work at a facility of a transport company damaged by a Russian missile strike, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Dnipro, Ukraine yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Rahul Gandhi to be issued passport valid for 3 years

Delhi court rules

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

A court in Delhi yesterday allowed Congress leader Rahul Gandhi to get a regular passport with 3-year validity.

The development came after Gandhi had approached the court for a no-objection certificate (NOC) to get a passport, reports our New Delhi correspondent. Rahul Gandhi surrendered his diplomatic passport upon disqualification as an MP.

Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate (ACMM) Vaibhav Mehta passed the order on Rahul's application.

"I am partly allowing your application. Not for ten years but three years," the magistrate told Rahul's lawyer.

Rahul needed the court's permission because he is accused in the National Herald case in which BJP leader Subramanian Swamy is the complainant.

The National Herald case is based on a private criminal complaint of Swamy against Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and others, accusing them of cheating, conspiracy, and criminal breach of trust.

Swamy had opposed Rahul's NOC application, saying it was "devoid of any merit" and that the passport should be issued only for one year and renewed every year.

Swamy also contended that Rahul Gandhi's citizenship was under question due to his British citizenship.

The submission was opposed by Rahul Gandhi's advocate Tarannum Cheema who claimed that two petitions asking for criminal proceedings on citizenship issues has already been dismissed by the higher courts.

Turkey's bitter election battle nears decision day

Erdogan appears on course to extend two decades of his Islamic style of rule until 2028 in tomorrow's runoff

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey yesterday entered the final stretch of a bitter presidential campaign that has seen Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his secular rival exploit fears about migrants and Kurdish militants.

Erdogan appears on course to extend two decades of his Islamic style of rule until 2028 in tomorrow's runoff.

His victory would preserve the key Nato member's reputation as a problem child that plays off rivalries between Moscow and Washington while pushing its own course in the Middle East.

Secular opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu presented a clear alternative to Erdogan in the first round on May 14.

The former civil servant ran an inclusive campaign that pledged to mend ties with Western allies and cure Turkey's economic problems with orthodox prescriptions rejected by Erdogan.

Kilicdaroglu created a six-party alliance that grouped some of Turkey's most irreconcilable forces and received the crucial support of Kurds.

It was the type of coalition that Erdogan excelled at building while repeatedly winning at the polls.

But Kilicdaroglu still lost by nearly five points in what was widely seen as Erdogan's toughest election - and the most consequential in Turkey's post-Ottoman history.

The 74-year-old opposition leader vanished from view for four days and then reappeared as a transformed man.

He dropped his appeals for social cohesion in the sharply polarised country and instead turned his focus on expelling millions of migrants and fighting

militants.

"As soon as I come to power, I will send all the refugees home," Kilicdaroglu said in his first post-election address.

Erdogan responded along the same lines.

He doubled down on his attempts to cast Kilicdaroglu as an ally of outlawed Kurdish militants and scoffed at the opposition's attempts to talk tough on security issues.



"Until yesterday, they were terrorist lovers," Erdogan said of his rivals this week.

"You're the coward who cooperates with terrorists," Kilicdaroglu retorted on Twitter.

Some analysts view this campaign as Turkey's dirtiest in recent memory.

"I have followed dozens of campaigns since 1979, and I have never seen both candidates clearly lying to this extent," the Cumhuriyet newspaper's exiled former editor Can Dunar told AFP from Germany.

"This is the first time we are seeing

such an insult-filled campaign."

Most of Turkey's pre-election polls underestimated Erdogan's level of support in the first round.

They now show him leading by five points or more - a margin that has instilled a sense of panic on Turkey's financial markets.

Indirect evidence shows Turks dumping their liras and stocking up on gold and dollars in anticipation of a currency crash after the election.

Official data show Turkey's central bank burning through \$25 billion in a month while trying to prop up the lira.

Turkey's net foreign currency reserves - an important measure of a country's financial stability - have dropped into negative territory for the first time since 2002.

Capital Economics predicted that Erdogan would only relent and adopt more conventional economic policies "if Turkey suffered a severe crisis and banking strains".

"Our base case is that Turkey manages to (just) avoid such a crisis, but the risks appear skewed towards a worse outcome," the London-based consultancy said.

Kilicdaroglu's decision to ally himself with a fringe far-right group this week nearly cost him the support of a pro-Kurdish party that accounts for a tenth of Turkey's vote.

The Kurdish-backed HDP decided Thursday not to back a poll boycott because this would only help extend Erdogan's "one-man regime". But HDP co-leader Pervin Buldan did not hide her frustrations with Kilicdaroglu's new approach.

"It is wrong to score political points off immigrants or refugees," Buldan said.

Israeli settler kills Palestinian

REUTERS, Jerusalem

The Israeli military said an armed Israeli settler shot dead a Palestinian man who it said tried to carry out a stabbing attack in a settlement in the occupied West Bank yesterday. The military said an unidentified man infiltrated the gated area in the southern West Bank near the city of Hebron and tried to stab a resident before being "neutralised". There were no Israeli casualties and soldiers were scanning the area, it said. The Palestinian health ministry said it was informed by the unit that coordinates civilian affairs with Israel of a Palestinian man who was shot dead "by the occupation" south of Hebron. Local media said the incident occurred as people in the settlement of Teneh Omarim were gathering for prayers for the Jewish Shavuot festival. The Israeli military alerted settlers there to remain indoors and lock their doors shortly before 10:00 am (0700 GMT) in a message sent via its app.

EU DISPUTE

OpenAI chief accused of 'blackmail'

AFP, Paris

The European Union on Thursday accused the boss of OpenAI, the firm that created the explosively popular ChatGPT bot, of "blackmail" by suggesting that new rules would force his company to leave the bloc. Sam Altman told reporters in London that OpenAI could potentially "cease operating" in Europe if the bloc pushed ahead with its long-awaited AI Act, a regulation designed to protect the public from the technology. Altman is in the middle of a global tour to charm leaders and powerbrokers from Lagos to London, but his comments appeared to anger EU industry commissioner Thierry Breton. "There is no point in attempting blackmail - claiming that by crafting a clear framework, Europe is holding up the rollout of generative AI," tweeted Breton, referring to the artificial intelligence software.



A climate protester is being evacuated by French gendarmes during a demonstration on the outskirts of the Paris venue for Total Energies Annual General Meeting in Paris, France yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

PRISONER SWAP
Iran frees Belgian aid worker

AFP, Brussels

Iran has freed Belgian aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele after almost 15 months in custody, in a prisoner exchange facilitated by Oman, senior officials said yesterday.

Belgium's Prime Minister Alexander de Croo said the 42-year-old had arrived in Oman and added: "If all goes to plan, he'll be with us this evening. Free at last!"

Separately, Oman's foreign ministry announced it had helped broker an "exchange deal" and that an Iranian previously held in Belgium was on his way to Tehran.

Neither government identified the freed Iranian, but Tehran has been demanding the release of diplomat Assadollah Assadi, jailed in Belgium over a 2018 plot to bomb an Iranian opposition rally outside Paris.

Belgium has always insisted that Vandecasteele was innocent and his trial rigged. He was sentenced in January to 40 years in prison and 74 lashes for "espionage", Tehran's judiciary said at the time.

Protecting India's tigers also good for climate: study

AFP, Paris



India's efforts to protect its endangered tigers have inadvertently helped avoid a large amount of climate change causing carbon emissions by preventing deforestation, a study said on Thursday.

Three quarters of the world's wild tigers live in India, but the destruction of natural habitat have seen their numbers plummet.

The number of tigers roaming the country's forests fell from 40,000 when India gained independence in 1947 to just 1,500 in 2006.

However, their number rose above 3,000 this year, according to the latest official figures.

To help their numbers rebound, India has designated 52 tiger reserves where logging and deforestation are heavily regulated.

Aakash Lamba, a researcher at the National University of Singapore and the study's lead author, told AFP that tigers are an "umbrella species".

This "means that by protecting them we also protect the forests they live in, which are home to an incredible diversity of wildlife," he told AFP.

Forests are a "carbon sink", which mean they absorb more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than they release, making them a crucial tool in the fight against climate change.