

We must do everything to end war next year: Zelensky

AFP, Kyiv

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky yesterday said that Kyiv would like to end the war with Russia next year through "diplomatic means", as both countries prepare for Donald Trump's return to the White House.

February 2025 would mark the third anniversary of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, with Russia's troops gaining ground in recent months against Kyiv's outnumbered and outgunned soldiers.

The prospect of Trump returning to power in the United States next year has raised questions about the future of the conflict, as the Republican has been critical of US military aid to Kyiv.

Zelensky spoke a day after saying the war will end "sooner" than it otherwise would have done once Trump becomes president.

He also spoke a day after Russian President Vladimir Putin held his first phone call with a major Western leader, speaking to German Chancellor Olaf Scholz who initiated the call despite Kyiv's objections.

"For our part, we must do everything we can to ensure that this war ends next year. We have to end it by diplomatic means," Zelensky said in an interview with Ukrainian radio. "And this, I think, is very important."

There have been no meaningful talks between Russia and Ukraine, but Trump's re-election has plunged the attritional conflict's future into uncertainty, with the Republican repeatedly promising to cut a quick deal to end the war.

"We have to understand what the Russians want," Zelensky said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said he will only accept talks with Ukraine if Kyiv surrenders Ukrainian territory that Moscow occupies.

The Kremlin said he repeated that demand in the phone conversation with Scholz on Friday.

Zelensky has rejected Putin's conditions.



Wave of air strikes rock south Beirut

Strikes follow Israeli evacuation calls; Lebanon studying US plan to end war; 35 more killed in Gaza



AFP, Beirut

Israel launched a wave of air strikes on Hezbollah bastions in Beirut and south Lebanon yesterday, a day after Lebanese government officials said they were studying a US truce proposal.

An Israeli strike on neighbouring Syria earlier this week killed two leaders from Islamic Jihad, a Palestinian group which has fought alongside Hamas militants in Gaza, a source told AFP.

Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad are all backed by Israel's arch-enemy Iran, which on Friday said it backed a swift end to the nearly two-month war in Lebanon.

Since September 23, Israel has escalated its bombing of targets in Lebanon, later sending in ground troops after almost a year of limited, cross-border exchanges of fire begun by Hezbollah militants over the Gaza war.

AFP TV footage showed fresh strikes on the southern suburbs of Beirut yesterday, following calls from the Israeli army for residents to evacuate.

Lebanon's state-run National News Agency said "the enemy" carried out three air raids in the morning, later reporting another attack in the neighbourhood of Chiyah.

The Israeli military said its aircraft had targeted "a weapons storage facility" and a Hezbollah "command centre" in south Beirut.

It also reported a strike on the southern city of Tyre, in a neighbourhood near UNESCO-listed ancient ruins.

Elsewhere in south Lebanon, the health ministry said Israeli strikes killed two rescuers affiliated with Hezbollah and its ally Amal.

Hezbollah claimed several rocket attacks on northern Israel, targeting military sites including a naval base in the Haifa area.

Lebanese authorities say that more than 3,440 people have been killed since October last year, when Hezbollah and Israel began trading fire.

In Gaza, the Israeli military said its forces continued "operational activity" in the northern areas of Jabalia and Beit Lahia, the targets of an intense offensive since early October. Troops also operated in the southern district of Rafah.

Israel says its renewed operations in the ravaged north were meant to stop Hamas militants from regrouping.

A UN-backed assessment at the weekend warned famine was imminent in northern Gaza, and UN figures showed the Israeli operation had forced at least 100,000 people to flee.

Israel has pushed back against a Human Rights Watch report this week that said its displacement of Gazans amounts to a "crime against humanity", as well as findings from a UN Special Committee that pointed to warfare practices that "are consistent with the characteristics of genocide".

The Gaza health ministry said at least 35 people were killed in the territory in the previous 24 hours, taking the overall death toll in more than 13 months of war to 43,799.

Internet cut, curfew imposed in Manipur

AFP, Guwahati

An Indian state riven by months of ethnic tensions yesterday imposed an internet shutdown and curfew after angry protests over the recovery of six bodies of people believed to have been kidnapped by insurgents.

Manipur in India's northeast has been rocked by periodic clashes for more than 18 months between the predominantly Hindu Meitei majority and the mainly Christian Kuki community, dividing the state into ethnic enclaves.

The bodies were suspected to be of those belonging to the Meitei community who went missing in Jiribam district after a gunfight between Kuki insurgents and Manipur police last week.

Three bodies were pulled from a river in Jiribam on Friday while three more were found yesterday, local media reports said.

News of the discovery provoked incensed mobs to attack the homes of seven local politicians, an army source told AFP on condition of anonymity, adding that only minor damage had been recorded.

Protesters also burned tyres and blocked roads in the capital city of Imphal yesterday.

The Manipur government announced a curfew was in effect in part of the city due to the "developing law and order situation".

10 newborns killed in India hospital fire

AFP, Lucknow

A fire at the neonatal unit of an Indian hospital killed 10 newborns, authorities said yesterday, with another 39 rescued from a blaze blamed on a faulty oxygen machine.

Building fires are common in India due to a lack of firefighting equipment and a routine disregard for safety regulations.

The fire broke out at about 10:30pm on Friday night at the Maharani Lakshmbai Medical College in Jhansi, around 450 kilometres south of the capital New Delhi.

Babies rescued from the fire, all only days old, were moved to a new unit inside the hospital where staff were caring for them.

"The postmortem examinations of the babies are being carried out. The 39 infants who have been rescued are unscathed," he added.

Police superintendent Gyanendra Kumar Singh said the fire likely started in a piece of machinery used to enrich the oxygen level in the atmosphere.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi called the deaths "heart-wrenching" in a post on X.

Baloch separatists kill 7 Pak soldiers

AFP, Quetta

Separatists fired on a paramilitary border post in Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province, killing seven soldiers, local authorities said yesterday, a week after the same militant group killed 26 people at a railway station.

"Around 40 to 50 armed terrorists attacked a border post manned by the Frontier Corps Balochistan in Kalat district, killing seven soldiers and wounding 15 others," a local official told AFP.

A local civilian administrative officer confirmed the number of casualties, adding that the wounded were "airlifted from this remote area to (provincial capital) Quetta for medical treatment".

Jeeyand Baloch, a spokesman for the Balochistan Liberation Army, claimed responsibility for the attack without giving further details.

The BLA frequently claims deadly attacks against security forces or Pakistanis from other provinces, notably Punjabis. Militants have targeted energy projects with foreign financing -- most notably from China -- accusing outsiders of exploiting the resource-rich region while excluding residents in the poorest part of the country.

Businesses seek high security, low interest

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"If extortion continues in different places under different names, the prices of commodities will not come down."

The contractionary monetary policy has also sent the interest rates on bank loans to the roof, making debt servicing difficult for entrepreneurs, he said, adding that this may cause non-performing loans to rise.

Mostafa Kamal, chairman and managing director of MGI, a commodity importer and processor, also raised the issue of law and order.

The cost of transporting goods rose, although the leaders of the system changed, he said, indicating extortion is still in play.

"We're feeling it. They [extortionists] come in the name of a new party. Their demand has also increased and they are citing price rises for this increase."

Mostafa Kamal alleged police at stations ask businesses to negotiate with the extortionists instead of taking action.

He also claimed people wrongly blame syndicates of businessmen for high inflation, but in reality, the depreciation of the taka against the dollar -- 35 percent in three years -- led to a rise in the prices of imported goods and raw materials. "Price rises in the international market also contribute to domestic price

hikes." Mostafa Kamal said representatives of businesses asked the government to consider the rise in dollar price, duties, and production costs in a meeting to fix prices.

He said the government should not use the term "fair price" while selling daily necessities through the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh. "This is not the fair price. This is the subsidised price. Everybody should mention it. Otherwise, many will think that we are operating unfair businesses."

"We have been criminalised through this," he said.

Energy is another big concern for businesses, as many factories are operating 60-70 percent of their capacity for the dearth of energy.

Mostafa Kamal alleged he is still struggling to get facilities like power and gas after investing \$700 million in the Cumilla Economic Zone.

"We are facing bureaucratic red tape. Around 10,000 people will be employed in this zone, but the availability of utilities is still uncertain," he said.

"How will FDI [Foreign Direct Investment] come to Bangladesh where domestic investors are struggling to get utilities," he remarked. "Foreign investors will definitely come with big

investments when they see the domestic investors doing well."

He said there should be a rule that an official has to clear a file in three months. The entrepreneur should also be informed within three months about their next step to launch a business.

Kamran T Rahman, president of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI), suggested re-energising the police by recruiting officers through short-term courses to restore confidence and efficiency.

While the central bank is raising interest to curb inflation, it is straining businesses. He asked whether alternative economic measures could be considered to tame inflation.

The MCCI president commended the government for forming reform commissions but urged to expedite all the processes.

Although the foreign exchange reserves dropped, LC opening has improved, he added.

Monzur Hossain, research director at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, said that easing the inflationary pressure and bringing discipline to the financial sector are the major challenges now.

He remarked that the current economic situation is a legacy of the previous government after years of

mismanagement, faulty policy measures, and fixed interest rate policy.

Investment has not increased because of this interest rate policy, but defaulted loans mounted, he pointed out.

He agreed with the business leaders that it would not be wise to use a super-contractionary monetary policy as the only tool to control inflation. The central bank will have to take up a balanced monetary policy with a supportive fiscal policy.

Monzur suggested reducing dependency on the readymade garments sector by diversifying the economy.

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said automation in every sector can ensure transparency and accountability, and ease activities of the private sector. So, the newspaper will continue pushing the government to ensure automation, he added.

Tanvir Ahmed, managing director of Envoy Textiles and director of MCCI, said a Tk 585 crore project named the National Single Window was taken for the automation of the revenue system, but it was not completed.

Referring to the recent labour unrest along the industrial belts, he said the presence of the army on the streets should be reduced so that no one can tarnish their image.

Abrar Hossain Sayem, president of the Bangladesh Apparel Youth Leaders Association (BAYLA), said the government can establish a national data platform and go for using big data analytics with the help of artificial intelligence.

It will ease all the processes and help the authorities make informed decisions for capacity expansion or investment in any sector, he said.

Recovery under Nobel laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus's leadership after the mass uprising brightened Bangladesh's image internationally, Abrar said. "If we miss the momentum, we might lose in a big way."

Some policies are needed to increase investment in the small and medium enterprises sector, said the BAYLA president. "In reality, we do not see the benefit of special economic zones yet. A re-evaluation is needed in this area."

It should be explored how SMEs can invest based on shared resources such as shared solar power and effluent treatment plants, he said.

He suggested forming separate national platforms to address businesses's complaints and to record their suggestions.

Arun Devnath, deputy editor of The Daily Star, also spoke at the discussion.

Bureaucracy aided political criminals'

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Siraz Uddin stressed the need for self-reflection among civil servants. He called on them to restore the administration's reputation.

"We are going through a critical period. While this moment offers opportunities for progress, it also carries the risk of further decline. It is up to us [bureaucrats] to decide whether we will go for reforms."

Acknowledging the frustrations of officials who served over the last 15 years, the principal secretary said, "Some may be hurt by my comments, but the reality is that the civil service was not focused on public welfare

during that period." Criticising the lack of a unified professional vision, he said even the highly regarded officers did not come up with forward-looking proposals.

He attributed the erosion of public trust in the bureaucracy to the moral crisis both in the civil and police bureaucracies.

He warned that if reforms are not prioritised, societal discourse questioning the necessity of the civil service could intensify.

"We must change this perception ourselves and demonstrate that our service is essential and that we are the best."

Expressing frustration over the recent protest by some young people, who were injured during the July uprising, Siraz Uddin said, "Why the injured have to demonstrate on the road for their treatment?"

He said young people brought about the change in power sacrificing their blood. "Over 400 young people lost their eyesight. Just a day before [Thursday], another injured youth passed away."

"We should have gratitude for them. The sacrifices of these young people, who are like our children, paved the way for today's gathering. If they hadn't made these

sacrifices, we wouldn't have been here today. Are we doing anything for them? Do we have an emotional connection to them?"

He said the injured students visited him and said the entire administration had no empathy for them.

The principal secretary questioned why the DCs, UNOs, divisional commissioners, and even ministries did not have empathy for the injured. "Why is this happening? It's not right."

He said the students are not receiving proper treatment and adequate compensations. "Necessary arrangements are not being

made for those who need treatment abroad. Why is this happening?"

Speakers at the event put forward different proposals on reforms in the civil administration.

Senior Secretary of the public administration Ministry Mokhlesur Rahman and Senior Secretary of the Public Security Division Abdul Momen also spoke at the seminar, chaired by BASA President Anwar Ullah and moderated by BASA Secretary Mahbubur Rahman.

The BASA announced that it will organise another seminar soon to discuss these proposals further.

Public Procurement Notice from Bangladesh Police. Includes details about the Public Procurement Act-2006 and Rules-2008, and a table of procurement items such as uniforms, equipment, and services.