

OVAL OFFICE SPAT

What next for Ukraine?

AFP, Washington

The fiery altercation between Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky at the White House on Friday was shocking but not entirely unexpected, analysts say, with the way forward for Kyiv looking increasingly uncertain.

US President Trump has long been a critic of the United States's billions in aid for Ukraine after Russia invaded it in February 2022, and had promised – without providing details – to end the war soon after coming to office.

On February 12, he spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin, appearing to start peace negotiations without involving Ukraine – a move that angered Kyiv and shocked European capitals.

Trump, however, has refused to say if he would provide such guarantees, insisting Putin “respects” him enough not to break any deal.

On Friday, tensions erupted after Trump and his vice president, JD Vance, accused Zelensky of not being “thankful” enough for US support.

“He can come back when he is ready for peace,” said Trump after the meeting.

When asked, Trump and those in his administration have repeatedly refused to place responsibility on Moscow for starting the war.

On Friday, Trump appeared to imply that he was not criticising Putin because negotiations were ongoing.

Ukrainian political analyst Volodymyr Fesenko told AFP there was a long list of US actions under Trump that indicated such a rupture was on the horizon.

What comes next is unclear, but it could augur badly for Ukraine, said Brian Finucane, a senior adviser at the International Crisis Group (ICG).

“There are rumours from the administration that it may curtail arms shipments to Ukraine currently in the pipeline under presidential drawdown authority,” he said.

Those arms shipments were approved by former US president Joe Biden as he was leaving office, in what appeared an attempt to cement billions in additional aid before Trump took office.

Speaking to Fox News after the tense White House meeting, Zelensky conceded it would be “difficult” for Ukraine to hold off invading Russian forces without US support.



Muslim worshippers pray amidst the rubble and ruins in a destroyed part of Gaza City's historic Omari Mosque on the first day of the holy fasting month of Ramadan yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Uncertainty as first phase of Gaza truce due to expire

Homeless, people in the tiny Palestinian enclave welcome Ramadan

AGENCIES

The first phase of the Israel-Hamas truce is drawing to a close yesterday, but negotiations on the next stage, which should secure a permanent ceasefire, have so far been inconclusive.

The ceasefire took effect on January 19 after more than 15 months of conflict that has killed 48,388 people in Gaza, a majority of them civilians, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory, figures the UN has deemed reliable.

Over the initial six-week phase, Gaza militants freed 25 living hostages and returned the bodies of eight others to Israel, in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails.

A second phase of the fragile truce was supposed to secure the release of dozens of hostages still in Gaza and pave the way for a

more permanent end to the war.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had sent a delegation to Cairo, and mediator Egypt said “intensive talks” on the second phase had begun with the presence of delegations from Israel as well as fellow mediators Qatar and the United States.

But by early yesterday, there was no sign of consensus.

Max Rodenbeck, of the International Crisis Group think tank, said the second phase cannot be expected to start immediately.

“But I think the ceasefire probably won't collapse also,” he said.

A Palestinian source close to the talks told AFP that Israel had proposed to extend the first phase in successive one-week intervals with a view to conducting hostage-prisoner swaps each week, adding that Hamas had rejected the plan.

UN Secretary-General Antonio

Guterres said on Friday that the Israel-Hamas ceasefire “must hold”.

The truce enabled greater aid flows into the Gaza Strip, where more than 69 percent of buildings were damaged or destroyed, almost the entire population was displaced, and widespread hunger occurred because of the war, according to the United Nations.

In Gaza and throughout much of the Muslim world, yesterday also marked the first day of the month of Ramadan.

Among the rubble of Gaza's war-wrecked neighbourhoods, traditional Ramadan lanterns hung and people performed nightly prayers on the eve of the holy month.

“Ramadan has come this year, and we are on the streets with no shelter, no work, no money, nothing,” said Ali Rajih, a resident of the hard-hit Jabalia camp in north Gaza.

“My eight children and I are homeless, we're living on the streets of Jabalia camp, with nothing but God's mercy.”

Rattled, allies rally behind Ukraine

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House, said he had spoken to both Trump and Zelensky and vowed “unwavering support” for Kyiv.

Zelensky wrote “Thank you for your support” in individual replies on social media platform X to around 30 messages from European leaders.

Starmer and Zelensky were set to meet in London yesterday afternoon, the prime minister's office said.

Representatives from more than a dozen European countries will convene in the British capital today to focus on shoring up support for “securing a just and enduring peace” in Ukraine, according to Downing Street.

The gathering will also address the need for Europe to increase defence cooperation amid fears over whether the United States will continue to support Nato.

There was swift vocal support too from key US allies outside Europe, including from all other members of the so-called Five Eyes intelligence-sharing network that are among Washington's most trusted partners.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said his country would “continue to stand with

Ukraine.” Australia's prime minister reiterated his country's support for Kyiv, saying it will “continue to stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes.”

The events that unfolded live at the Oval Office also divided the US by party line.

Democrats accused Trump and Vice President JD Vance of doing Russian leader Vladimir Putin's “dirty work” after they berated Zelensky in front of the world's media.

But Republicans said the US leaders were right to accuse pro-Western Zelensky of lacking gratitude for American support in Ukraine's defence against Russia's invasion.

French President Emmanuel Macron has said he is ready to “open the discussion” on a possible future European nuclear deterrent, following a request from Germany's next leader, Friedrich Merz.

Merz has stressed the need for the continent to move quickly to “achieve independence” from the United States on defence matters.

Europe's leaders and officials have been blindsided by a staggering collapse in American support for Ukraine in the past weeks, after almost

three years of ironclad backing by the previous administration of Joe Biden. Many still cannot understand why Trump has turned so furiously on Zelensky and conceded key concessions to Putin before even starting talks.

In White House on Friday, the years-long US policy of massive support for Ukraine collapsed in a shouting match.

During the clash, in front of US and international media, Trump and Vance shouted at Zelensky, accusing him of not being “thankful” and refusing to accept their proposed truce terms.

“You don't have the cards right now,” Trump said. “You're either going to make a deal or we're out, and if we're out, you'll fight it out and I don't think it's going to be pretty.”

Zelensky departed shortly after, with Trump posting on social media that “he can come back when he is ready for peace”.

US media reported that Zelensky had been told to leave by senior Trump officials.

Zelensky refused to apologise, telling Fox News, “I'm not sure that we did something bad”. He did, however, say he wished the exchange had not taken place in front of reporters.

He also hoped that the relationship between the US and Ukraine could be salvaged.

“Yes of course [it can be salvaged], because it's relations [between] more than two presidents. We have historical ties and strong relations between our people. And that's why I always begin (by thanking) your people from our people. And this is the most important,” Zelensky said.

He also said it is “crucial” for Ukraine to have Trump's support.

“It's crucial for us to have President Trump's support,” Zelensky said in a series of posts on X yesterday morning. “He wants to end the war, but no one wants peace more than we do.”

Russia was meanwhile delighted.

Former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev called Zelensky an “insolent pig” who had received “a proper slap down.”

Zelensky's Washington trip was a “complete failure”, Moscow said.

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova called Zelensky “obsessed” with prolonging the war and said Moscow's goals remained the “demilitarisation” of Ukraine and annexation of all territories currently

occupied by Russia.

The meltdown came after Trump said Ukraine will have to make “compromises” in a truce with Russia, which has occupied swaths of the country.

Zelensky said there should be “no compromises with a killer on our territory”.

The session then boiled over into Trump and Vance loudly berating the Ukrainian leader, who sat in evident discomfort as his hosts talked over him.

Trump has alarmed Kyiv and European allies with his abrupt U-turn in US policy, casting himself as a mediator between Putin and Zelensky and refusing to condemn the Russian invasion.

He said in the Oval Office that he had “spoken on numerous occasions” to Putin – more than has been publicly reported.

Meanwhile, Russia's assault on Ukraine continued.

Russian infantry were storming the Ukrainian border from the Russian region of Kursk, near areas that were seized last summer by Ukrainian forces, Kyiv said Friday.

And Moscow yesterday said it had seized two more villages in the south of the eastern Donetsk region.

PKK declares truce with Turkey

AFP, Istanbul

Outlawed Kurdish militants yesterday declared a ceasefire with Turkey following a landmark call by jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan asking the group to disband and end more than four decades of armed struggle.

It was the first reaction from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) after Ocalan this week called for the dissolution of the group and asked it to lay down arms.

“In order to pave the way for the implementation of leader Apo's call for peace and democratic society, we are declaring a ceasefire effective from today,” the PKK executive committee said, referring to Ocalan and quoted by the pro-PKK ANF news agency.

“We agree with the content of the call as it is and we say that we will follow and implement it,” the committee based in northern Iraq said.

“None of our forces will take armed action unless attacked,” it added.

The PKK, designated a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States and the European Union, has waged an insurgency since 1984 with the aim of carving out a homeland for Kurds, who account for around 20 percent of Turkey's 85 million people.

But more recently, the group has called for more autonomy, and cultural and linguistic rights, rather than independence.

Delhi bans refuelling of 15-yr-old old cars

AFP, New Delhi

Cars more than 15 years old will soon be barred from refuelling in New Delhi, the city's government said yesterday, as part of measures to reduce the Indian capital's hazardous pollution levels.

New Delhi is regularly ranked as one of the most polluted cities in the world and is blanketed in acrid smog each year.

The pollution is primarily blamed on agricultural burning by nearby farmers to clear their fields for ploughing, as well as factories and traffic fumes.

Diesel and petrol cars older than 10 and 15 years respectively are not allowed to ply on Delhi roads but many have been found flouting the rules.

Delhi's environment minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa told reporters that the decision to stop fuel for the old cars was made at a “marathon meeting” on air pollution to “find out the diseases and its remedies”.

“We have decided to stop giving fuel to vehicles more than 15 years old after March 31, 2025,” he said.

Avalanche kills four in India; five still missing

AFP, Dehradun

At least four people died from their injuries in India after an avalanche hit a remote border area, officials said Saturday, as rescuers deployed helicopters to search for the remaining five missing.

A total of 55 workers were buried under snow and debris after the avalanche hit a construction camp on Friday near Mana village on the border with Tibet in the northern Himalayan state of Uttarakhand.

In a statement issued Saturday, the

Indian army said 50 people were initially rescued, but among them four succumbed to their injuries.

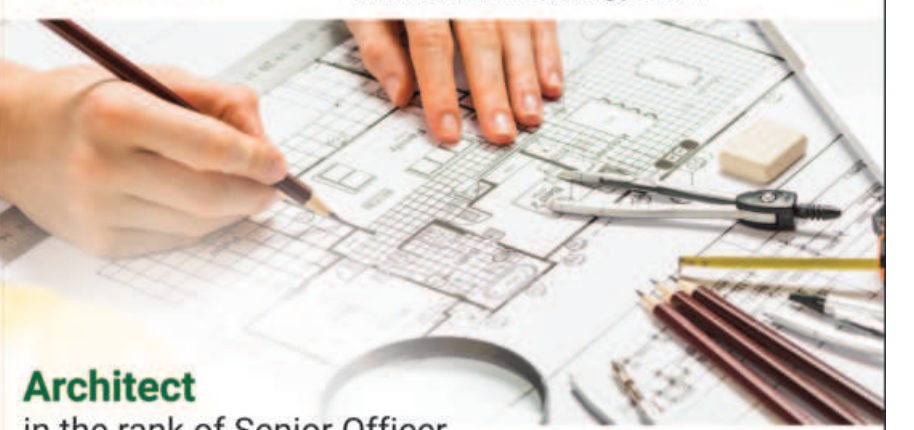
“Unfortunately, four injured persons have been confirmed as fatal casualty,” they said.

Five workers were still missing, the army said, adding that six choppers had been deployed into rescue efforts as the “roads are blocked”.

Uttarakhand state chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami said the rescue teams were “continuously engaged in relief efforts”.

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Prices rise as bottled oil in short supply

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this newspaper had bottled soybean oil.

Several shops were selling non-bottled soybean oil for around Tk 190 a litre. Rice bran oil and sunflower oil were available at most of the shops.

The maximum retail

price of bottled soybean oil is Tk 175 a litre. But businessmen take advantage of the supply shortage and sell edible oil at higher prices, said several shopkeepers in Karwan Bazar and Savar.

Muhammad Gofran of Cumilla General Store

in Karwan Bazar said he received some bottles in the afternoon, but those were sold out within 10 minutes.

Nasir Uddin, a shopkeeper from Khilkhet, was at Karwan Bazar last night, frustrated after failing to buy bottled soybean oil for his shop.

Rakib Hasan, manager of AT Enterprise, a distributor of edible oil, said his firm has been in need of around 2,000 cartons of oil, but received only 50 after waiting for three days.

Bottled soybean oil was being sold for more than the retail price in

Tejturi bazar, Kazipara and Shewrapara.

Non-bottled oil in the Bhasantek and Korail areas was being sold for Tk 200 per litre.

In Chattogram city, the picture was similar in Kazir Dewri and Khatunganj markets.