

Ukraine Rejects Fall of Bakhmut as Battle Rages



An aerial view shows smoke billowing, in Bakhmut, Ukraine, in still image taken from an undated video obtained from social media.

KYIV (Reuters) -- Ukraine's military said its troops were locked in combat with Russian forces around the administration building of Bakhmut on Monday, and it poured scorn on Russian claims that Wagner fighters had captured the eastern city after months of warfare.

A Ukrainian spokesman said the Russians had raised a victory flag not over the building but over "some kind of toilet".

In Moscow, the Kremlin accused Ukraine of being behind a bomb blast at a cafe in St Petersburg on Sunday that killed a prominent Russian pro-war blogger. Russia said it

had arrested a woman suspected of blowing up the blogger.

The battle for Bakhmut has been one of the bloodiest of the conflict, now in its second year, with many casualties on both sides and much of the eastern city destroyed by bombardments.

Front lines have shifted backwards and forwards in street-by-street fighting.

The head of the Wagner mercenary force, which has spearheaded the Kremlin's campaign to encircle and capture Bakhmut, said on Sunday his troops had raised a Russian flag on the administrative building in the city centre.

Yevgeny Prigozhin acknowledged that Ukrainian troops were still holding some positions.

But he said in videos posted on Telegram: "From a legal point of view, Bakhmut has been taken. The enemy is concentrated in the western parts."

The Ukrainian military said on Monday however that fighting was still going on in Bakhmut as well as in several other towns.

Serhiy Cherevaty, spokesperson for the eastern military command, said the Russian claim to have captured the city was false. Clashes were taking place around the city council building, he said.

"Bakhmut is Ukrainian and they have not captured anything and are very far from doing that, to put it mildly," he told Reuters.

Earlier the Ukrainian military said the Russians were assaulting the city but its defenders were courageously holding on.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, in his Sunday night video address, thanked the soldiers fighting in Bakhmut, Avdiivka and Maryinka. "Especially Bakhmut. It is especially hot there," he said.

Ukrainian military analyst Oleh Zhdanov said fighting had engulfed the centre of Bakhmut. Ukrainian forces had repelled 25 enemy attacks but Russian forces had captured the AZOM metal plant, he said.

Finland's Right-Wing Party Wins Election



(L-R) Chairperson of (C) and chairperson of the Finns Party Riikka Purra, Finnish Prime Minister and chair of the Social Democratic party Sanna Marin, National Coalition Party leader Petteri Orpo, chair of the Center party Annika Saarikko raise their hands in the central Sanomatalo building in Helsinki, Finland, on March 28, 2023.

HELSINKI (Reuters) -- Outgoing Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin was left to consider her future after she conceded defeat in a tight parliamentary election on Sunday that handed her centre-right rival Petteri Orpo the right to try and form a coalition.

Despite gaining three seats, Marin's left wing Social Democratic Party (SDP) came third with 43 of parliament's 200 seats behind Orpo's centre-right National Coalition Party with 48 seats and the nationalist Finns on 46.

That leaves Orpo with an uneasy choice of whether to court Marin's SDP, whose economic policy he wants to replace, or Riikka Purra's nationalists, whose climate-skeptic, euroskeptic and anti-immigration views he opposes.

"Orpo has two options: a right-wing government together with the Finns Party in which case he would struggle to find enough (smaller) allies," said Emilia Palonen, a senior researcher in political science at the University of Helsinki.

"The other option is an alliance (with SDP) and certainly Sanna Marin is

ready to negotiate for that," with her party keen to defend public services and to make sure promised cuts are not excessive, she said.

If Marin, the world's youngest prime minister when she took office aged 34 in 2019, ends up outside of government, she may shift focus to a top job in Brussels, such as the 'Spitzenkandidat', the lead candidate of the European Social

Democrats to head the European Commission, Palonen said.

In the run-up to the election, Orpo campaigned to "fix Finland" and its economy, vowing to curb spending and stop the rise of public debt, which has reached just over 70% of GDP since Marin took office in 2019.

In turn, Marin's Social Democrats rallied voters to support them in their defense of the Nordic welfare model of cradle-to-grave services from free education and affordable healthcare to decent pensions, against Orpo's spending cuts.

While a coalition bridging the left-right divide would not be a first of the kind in Finland, Orpo and Marin might struggle to agree on a joint program for the economy, said Ilkka Ruostetsaari, professor in political science.

During Marin's time as prime minister, Finland faced coronavirus lockdowns, the energy crisis and soaring consumer price inflation, and the country is expected to undergo a mild recession this year.

Ex-Kosovo President Pleads Not Guilty to War Crimes

THE HAGUE (Reuters) -- Former Kosovo President Hashim Thaci on Monday pleaded not guilty to charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity at a trial in a special court in The Hague, where protesters rallied outside in support of the leader formerly feted by the West.

The 10 charges of persecution, murder, torture and forced disappearance of people stem from the 1998-99 insurgency that eventually brought independence from Serbia and made him a hero among many compatriots.

Thaci and three co-defendants, all principle leaders of the KLA guerrilla Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and later in peacetime politics, all pleaded not guilty shortly after hearings got underway.

"I understand the indictment and I am fully not guilty," Thaci, 54, said in court. Dressed in a dark pinstripe suit, he looked pale and grayer after two years in detention.

More than 13,000 people, the majority of them members of Kosovo's 90% ethnic Albanian majority, are believed to have died during the insurgency, when it was still a province of Serbia under then-strongman president Slobodan Milosevic.

The trial, conducted by international judges and prosecutors, began with opening statements by the prosecution followed by defense lawyers and a representative of Kosovo's war Victims Council over the ensuing three days.

In the Hague, protesters carried banners bearing Thaci's image. Another protest in Kosovo on Sunday attracted thou-

sands of supporters.

Thaci resigned as president shortly after his indictment in 2020 and was transferred to detention in The Hague.

The defendants targeted political opponents, ethnic Serbs and Roma, during and just after the conflict, prosecutor Alex Whiting said in an opening statement. Prosecutors said there were hundreds of detainees held across Kosovo in terrible conditions and over 100 were murdered. Most victims were Kosovo Albanians.

"Why the crimes were committed? The evidence will show to gain power," Whiting said.

The four defendants are charged with participating in a "joint criminal enterprise ... that carried out widespread or systematic attacks" on KLA opponents.

The trial is likely to be lengthy as prosecutors said they would need two years to present their evidence.

During his time as a KLA leader and as a coalition politician, Thaci worked closely with many Western leaders. Joe Biden, when he was U.S. vice president, called him "the George Washington of Kosovo" and Thaci was en route to a meeting at Donald Trump's White House when his indictment was announced.

The trial began two weeks after the world's permanent war crimes tribunal, the International Criminal Court (ICC), also based in the Hague, issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin, for the alleged crime of deporting Ukrainian children.

Death Toll Rises After Tornadoes Hit U.S. Mideast, South



A destroyed home in the aftermath of a tornado in Wynne, Ark., April 1, 2023.

WYNNE, Ark. (AP) -- Residents across a wide swath of the U.S. raced to assess the destruction from fierce storms that spawned possibly dozens of tornadoes from the South and the Midwest into the Northeast, killing at least 32 people.

The storms tore a path through the Arkansas capital and also collapsed the roof of a packed concert venue in Illinois, stunning people throughout the region with the scope of the damage.

The number of deaths continued to grow Sunday.

"While we are still assessing the full extent of the damage, we know families across America are mourning the loss of loved ones, desperately waiting for news of others fighting for their lives, and sorting through the rubble of their homes and businesses," President Joe Biden said in a statement.

Biden earlier declared broad areas of the country major disaster areas, making federal resources and financial aid available for recovery.

Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders in Arkansas, where at least five people were killed, already had declared a state of emergency and activated the National Guard.

Confirmed or suspected tornadoes in 11 states destroyed homes and businesses, splintered trees and laid waste to neighborhoods.

The National Weather Service con-

firmed Sunday that a tornado was responsible for damage to several homes near Bridgeville, Delaware. One person was found dead inside a house heavily damaged by the storm Saturday night, Delaware State Police reported.

It may take days to confirm all the recent tornadoes. The dead included at least nine in one Tennessee county, five in Indiana and four in Illinois.

Other deaths from the storms that hit Friday night into Saturday were reported in Alabama and Mississippi.

Residents of Wynne, Arkansas, a community of about 8,000 people 50 miles (80 kilometers) west of Memphis, Tennessee, woke Saturday to find the high school's roof shredded and its windows blown out. At least four people died.

Tennessee recorded at least 15 deaths, including nine fatalities in McNairy County, east of Memphis, according to Patrick Sheehan, director of the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency.

Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee drove to the county Saturday to tour the destruction and comfort residents. He said the storm capped the "worst" week of his time as governor, coming days after a school shooting in Nashville that killed six people including a family friend whose funeral he and his wife just attended.

Gang Violence Flares Up in Crime-Plagued Marseille



Police take part in an anti-drug operation in the Cite des Oliviers, a northern neighborhood of Marseille.

MARSEILLE (AFP) -- At least three people were shot dead and another eight were wounded during an overnight flare up in drug gang violence in the crime-plagued French port of Marseille, police said Monday.

Three separate shooting incidents have increased fears that tit-for-tat violence between rival gangs is spiraling after a series of fatal shootings over the last month.

Regional police chief Frederique Camilleri told AFP on Monday that a turf war was underway rooted in the notorious Paternelle housing estate in northern Marseille.

"This estate is linked to almost all the killings in Marseille over the last months, with two sides that are fighting over the dealing spots and which have probably entered into a cycle of vendettas," she said.

Most of the victims were "extremely low" in the networks which control the narcotics trade, she said, with the city serving as an important gateway for drugs such as cocaine and marijuana into Europe.

Two young men in their early 20s suffered fatal gunshot wounds overnight, two of them in the Castellans neighborhood in northern Marseille where around 50 bullet casings were

found by police, the local prosecutor's office said.

A 16-year-old boy died just north of the historic centre of the city in the gritty La Joliette district, while another with him is fighting for his life in intensive care, local police said. A 14-year-old was also wounded at the scene.

Last year, 32 people were shot dead in gang violence in Marseille, the highest level since 2016, according to the local prosecutor's office.

In just three months, 13 have died so far this year, including the latest victims, according to a toll from AFP. While the southern port city is renowned for its spectacular Mediterranean setting, its northern districts are some of the most deprived urban areas in France.

The Paternelle housing estate is composed of a series run-down low-rise buildings where drugs are openly sold and the police are unwelcome.

French President Emmanuel Macron unveiled a 1.5-billion-euro (\$1.6-billion) plan to help Marseille tackle crime and deprivation in September 2021, calling such efforts a "duty of the nation".

During a three-day visit to the city, Macron called drug networks "parasites" and said traffickers would now be "harassed" by the authorities.



MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia said on Monday it had arrested a woman suspected of blowing up a prominent war blogger in a St Petersburg cafe the previous day as nationalist politicians and commentators accused Ukraine of the crime and called for retribution. Maxim Fomin, a well-known Russian military blogger and cheerleader for Russia's invasion of Ukraine who called himself Vladlen Tatarsky, was killed on Sunday in what appeared to be the second assassination on Russian soil of a figure closely associated with the conflict. The woman arrested - Darya Trepova - was a Russian citizen who had previously been detained for protesting against the war in Ukraine, the state news agency TASS said. With over 500,000 followers on the Telegram messaging service that is popular in Russia, Tatarsky - who had himself fought in Ukraine in the past - mixed ultra-nationalist messaging with criticism of the way Russia is prosecuting what it calls its "special military operation" in Ukraine. More than 30 people were injured in the blast which killed him. Some Russian commentators saw the bombing as the latest sign that violence related to the war in Ukraine is increasingly spilling onto Russian territory.

SOFIA (Reuters) -- Bulgaria looked set on Monday for lengthy and difficult coalition talks after a parliamentary election, the fifth in two years, again failed to produce a clear winner. A bloc led by the centre-right GERB party of former prime minister Boyko Borissov won 26.5% of votes in Sunday's election, while a pro-Western reformist bloc led by We Continue the Change (PP) had 24.9%, according to preliminary results based on 96% of ballots counted. The nationalist Revival party, which is sympathetic to Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Ukraine war, took third place with 14.4%, up several percentage points from the previous election last October. The ethnic Turkish MRF was in fourth place with 13% and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), heir to the once powerful Communist Party, had 9%. Bulgaria's prolonged political deadlock, caused mainly by personal animosity among leaders of the two main blocs, has already forced the country to delay its target date for adopting the euro, and it has yet to approve a budget bill for 2023.

SURAT, India (Reuters) -- Indian opposition leader Rahul Gandhi Monday lodged an appeal against his conviction for defamation, hoping to overturn a judgment that resulted in his expulsion from parliament a year before a general election is due. The court accepted his petition and posted it for hearing on April 13. Gandhi, 52, was found guilty of defamation last month in a case brought by a state lawmaker from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) after comments Gandhi made in a 2019 speech were deemed to be insulting to the prime minister and other people surnamed Modi.

MANILA (Reuters) -- The office of the Philippine president on Monday identified the four additional bases the United States will have access to under an existing defense agreement to expand military cooperation. The announcement comes amid concern over China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea and tension over Taiwan. The sites under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) will be in Isabela and Cagayan, on the island of Luzon, facing north towards Taiwan, and on Palawan, near the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

SEOUL (AFP) -- Firefighters were scrambling Monday to contain wildfires across South Korea as a dry spell led to blazes in multiple regions, including on a mountain popular with hikers in central Seoul. A fire broke out Sunday morning on Mount Inwang, a popular outdoor destination in Seoul's Jongno district, and spread rapidly due to strong winds, the city government said in a statement. About 120 households were forced to evacuate, but no deaths or injuries were reported, it added. Firefighters using helicopters were still struggling to extinguish smoldering fires early Monday, the statement said, although the main blaze was put out Sunday evening. Authorities planned to investigate the cause of the fire once it was completely extinguished. Yonhap news agency reported. On Monday, firefighting authorities were also battling strong winds and smoke in an effort to contain wildfires across Chungcheong province, south of Seoul.

KUALA LUMPUR (AFP) -- Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said Monday that Malaysia was prepared to negotiate the South China Sea dispute with Beijing to safeguard the country's energy exploration efforts. China claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea -- a strategic waterway through which trillions of dollars in trade pass annually -- despite an international court ruling that Beijing's assertion has no legal basis. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei all have overlapping claims in the sea, while the United States sends naval vessels through it to assert freedom of navigation in international waters. Anwar -- who was on a visit to Beijing recently -- said the "sensitive" issue was raised at a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping as Malaysia's state energy firm Petronas has its largest oil platform in the disputed area, as well as several exploration projects.