

# UN Special Rapporteur: Right to Protest 'at Risk' in Europe



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GENEVA (AFP) – Environmental activists are increasingly facing hostility across Europe, a UN expert said, warning that the very right to protest was "at risk" in countries usually considered beacons of democracy.

Michel Forst, the UN special rapporteur on environmental defenders, told AFP in an interview this week that he was deeply troubled by the hardening tone against climate activists in countries including France, Austria, Germany and Britain.

Government ministers have been throwing about terms like "eco terrorists" and "Green Taliban" to describe non-violent activists, he

claimed, also blaming some media reporting for contributing to an increasingly hostile public attitude.

"It creates a sort of chilling effect," warned Forst, an independent expert appointed under the UN's Aarhus Convention -- a legally-binding text that provides for justice in environmental matters.

"Currently, the right to protest is at risk in Europe."

Forst said he had recently visited several European countries after receiving complaints that activists faced treatment that allegedly violated the convention and international human rights law.

Following a visit to Britain, he publicly voiced alarm at the "toxic discourse" and "increasingly severe crackdown" on environmental defenders.

Forst charged that "regressive laws" in Britain were being used to slap climate activists with harsh penalties, with one activist sent to prison for six months for a 30-minute slow march disrupting traffic.

Another activist had been sentenced to 27 months behind bars in the UK, he said.

He also decried harsh sentences in other countries, including Germany.

Forst travelled to France last month following complaints about a crackdown on a drawn-out anti-motorway protest near the southwestern city of Toulouse.

Activists, called "squirrels", who have been squatting in trees destined to be chopped down to make way for the A69 motorway, have accused law enforcement of denying them access to food and water and using floodlights to deprive them of sleep.

Forst said he had been blocked from bringing food to the activists, and was "shocked" by what he found.

"Obviously, deprivation of food, of drinking water, of sleep is clearly against international law," said Forst, a French national.

They are "considered acts of torture in international texts", he added.

## UN Experts: Islamophobia Rising to 'Alarming Levels'

NEW YORK (Anadolu) – Acts of harassment, intimidation, violence, and incitement based on religion or belief have risen to "alarming levels," UN independent experts warned, marking International Day to Combat Islamophobia.

The experts stated that these acts were "shocking our conscience and creating a climate of fear and deep distrust."

The UN General Assembly proclaimed March 15 as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia in 2022, calling for "strengthened international efforts to foster a global dialogue on the promotion of a culture of tolerance and peace at all levels," according to the experts.

"During this holy month of Ramadan, we are appalled at the continued refusal by Israel to allow adequate humanitarian assistance and food aid to be provided to the mainly Muslim civilian population in Gaza despite the widespread hunger and signs of severe malnutrition," they added.

The experts noted that today, "hate entrepreneurs," political parties, armed groups, religious leaders, and even state actors around the world are trampling on respect for diversity of religions and beliefs.

"We urge States to ground their responses to all forms of religious hatred, including Islamophobia, in the universal values, principles, and legal framework of international



Experts say they are 'appalled at continued refusal by Israel' to allow food, humanitarian assistance into Gaza during Ramadan.

human rights," said the experts.

They condemned orchestrated public burnings of the holy Qur'an as deplorable.

"Where advocacy of religious hatred constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence, it must be prohibited by law in accordance with international standards," they emphasized.

The experts highlighted that in too many countries in the lead-up to elections, state and non-state actors fuel religious tensions and promote discriminatory laws and policies against Muslim minorities to gain political advantage.

"Across the world, we have witnessed attacks on mosques, cultural

centers, schools, and even private property belonging to Muslims," they lamented.

They expressed serious concern about Israel's undue restrictions on access to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Al-Quds.

"These restrictions are particularly alarming in the context of monumental loss of life and destruction of a significant number of places of worship in Gaza," said the experts.

"Cultural property is protected in international humanitarian law during armed conflict since it recognizes damage to the cultural property of any people as resulting in damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind," they added.

## Ukraine Strikes Russian City, Refinery Amid Presidential Vote



Russia mounted its deadliest attack in weeks on Friday when its missiles hit a residential area in Ukraine's Black Sea port city of Odesa, killing at least 20 people and wounding more than 70.

MOSCOW (Reuters/AFP) – A Ukrainian missile attack killed two people in western Russia and a separate drone strike set an oil refinery ablaze on Saturday, the second day of an election that President Vladimir Putin has accused Kyiv of trying to disrupt.

The deaths of a man and a woman were reported by Vyacheslav Gladkov, governor of the Belgorod region where cross-border attacks from Ukraine have become part of daily life.

Dmitry Azarov, governor of the Samara region 850 km (530 miles) southeast of Moscow, near the border with Ukraine, said the Syzran refinery was on fire but an attack on a second refinery had been thwarted.

Ukraine has staged repeated strikes this week on Russian refineries. Russia mounted its deadliest attack in weeks on Friday when its missiles hit a residential area in Ukraine's Black Sea port city of Odesa, killing at least 20 people and wounding more than 70.

Ukrainian authorities have begun mass evacuations of communities in the country's northern Sumy region close to the Russian border after extended periods of intense shelling of the area.

The military administration of Sumy region, writing on the Telegram messaging app, said more than 180 residents of areas near the Velikopysarska community, next to the

border, had been evacuated over the past three days.

Authorities in Sumy have long been issuing daily reports of Russian shelling, but the attacks have intensified.

The regional administration said the areas in question were "the most tense" in Sumy region, with three people killed and 13 wounded over the past five days.

The administration said a total of more than 4,500 residents had been evacuated from 22 villages in Sumy region, but gave no time frame.

The Ukraine war has cast a shadow over voting in a three-day presidential election that is all but certain to hand Putin six more years in the Kremlin.

Aged 71 and in power as president or prime minister since the last day of 1999, he dominates Russia's political landscape and none of the other three candidates on the ballot paper presents any credible challenge.

Overall turnout was nearly 38% by the morning of day two. Some of the highest rates - approaching 70% - were reported in the Belgorod region where the missile strike occurred and in Russian-controlled regions of Ukraine where Kyiv says voting is illegal and void.

Russia's governing party, United Russia, said on Saturday that it was facing a widespread denial of service attack - a form of cyberattack aimed at paralyzing web traffic - and had suspended non-essential services to repel it.

## Tensions Rise in Haiti as Leadership Remains in Balance

PORT-AU-PRINCE (Reuters) – Residents braced for another tense night in Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince, as attacks continued across parts of the city in the aftermath of the resignation of Prime Minister Henry and in the absence of a clear plan to replace him.

"Ariel Henry resigned but we are still in political distress," said resident Claude Atilus. "We must take our destiny into our own hands. I want the political players to rise to the task and commit themselves to organizing the country."

A man walked through the city's Champ de Mars square carrying a white coffin over his head, while further out in the city's sprawling Delmas neighborhood, flaming tires and roadblocks lined the streets.

"The situation is not good for us," said vendor Jean-Phillipe Jean-Louis, adding he was exhausted, prices were exorbitant and working on the streets was dangerous.

"When we merchants go out into the streets looking for money to feed our children and wives, we find nothing," he said.

The United Nations' children's fund has warned of record hunger and life-threatening malnutrition concentrat-

ed in the capital's poorest, most dangerous and busiest neighborhoods, with one in four children nationwide suffering chronic malnutrition, or stunting.

Satellite images showed shipping containers blocking access to heavy cranes at the country's main cargo port, which shut operations after a break-in, and set up around the country's National Palace, the site of heavy shooting last week.

Local media reported police were facing off late on Friday with gangs in the Delmas area, traditionally a stronghold of the G9 alliance led by Jimmy "Barbeque" Cherizier.

Henry, the country's unelected prime minister, said he would step down on Monday as he faced international pressure while stranded in Puerto Rico, as an escalation of fighting in the capital prevented him from returning home.

His resignation is pending the appointment of an interim replacement chosen by a transition council, but the members of the council have yet to be decided and some political groups tapped for representation have rejected the plan, proposed by regional leaders, or been unable to unite their factions.

## News in Brief

**BUDAPEST (Dispatches)** – Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban has threatened to stage a march to Brussels and "occupy" the heart of the EU ahead of the European Parliament elections. "If we want to defend Hungary's freedom and sovereignty, we have no other choice but to occupy Brussels," Orban told his supporters at a rally in Budapest celebrating Hungary's national day, which commemorates the 1848 Hungarian Revolution against the Habsburg monarchy. "We will march to Brussels and bring the change to the European Union ourselves." Orban is at odds with Brussels over a range of issues, ranging from EU regulations targeting local farmers, sending weapons and munitions to the Kiev forces fighting against Russian troops, and maintaining economic ties with Moscow since it launched its "special military operation" in Donbas in 2022. The EU actions are hitting farmers, hurting the middle class, damaging companies, "and on top of all that, (taking) Europe into war" against Russia, Orban said. He insisted that EU policies were benefiting a few and were against the majority of the people it was supposed to serve in Europe. "We will not accept that Brussels left Europeans alone, moreover, it turned against them."

**NEW YORK (AP)** – Former U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says he will not be backing Donald Trump in the 2024 election.

"It should come as no surprise that I will not be endorsing Donald Trump this year," Pence said in an interview with Fox News Channel, weighing in for the first time since the former president became the presumptive GOP nominee. Pence ran against Trump for their party's nomination but dropped his bid before voting began last year. The decision makes Pence the latest in a series of senior Trump administration officials who have declined to endorse their former boss's bid to return to the Oval Office. While Republican members of Congress and other GOP officials have largely rallied behind Trump, a vocal group has continued to oppose his bid. It also marks the end of a metamorphosis for Pence, who had long been seen as one of Trump's most loyal defenders but broke with his two-time running mate by refusing to go along with Trump's unconstitutional scheme to try to remain in power after losing the 2020 election.

**PESHAWAR (Reuters)** – Militants attacked a military post in Pakistan near Afghanistan early on Saturday using a vehicle laden with explosives as well as bombs, killing seven security force members, Pakistan's military said. The incident in northwest Pakistan was carried out by six attackers, the military's media wing said in a statement, without naming the militant group responsible for the attack. "The terrorists rammed an explosive laden vehicle into the post, followed by multiple suicide bombing attacks, which led to collapse of portion of a building, resulting into Shahadat (martyrdom) of five," the statement said, adding that another two security force members were killed in later fighting with the militants. Residents in Waziristan, an area bordering Afghanistan in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, told Reuters an explosion shook doors and damaged windows during the attack.

**BRASILIA (AP)** – Top military leaders in Brazil have alleged that former President Jair Bolsonaro presented them with a plan to reverse the results of the 2022 presidential election, according to court documents. The filings offer some of the first evidence that Bolsonaro was directly involved in an effort to subvert the vote, which he narrowly lost to left-wing candidate Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. The documents contain testimony from the former commanders of the country's army and air force, both of whom said they refused to accept the right-wing president's plan. Instead, they alleged they warned Bolsonaro that any attempt to overturn the election results could lead to his arrest. The allegations emerge as part of several probes Bolsonaro faces before Brazil's Supreme Court, including an investigation that seeks to determine his involvement in a 2023 attack on key government buildings, shortly after Lula's inauguration. Friday's court filings contain a federal police report, in which former army commander Marco Antonio Freire Gomes described Bolsonaro holding several unscheduled meetings at the presidential palace after the second round of voting in 2022.

**BRUSSELS (Reuters)** – The European Commission proposed an easing of a series of rules on leaving land fallow or rotating crops, offering concessions to farmers who have protested with tractor blockades across Europe over the past few months. The European Union executive said it was sending its proposals to the 27 EU member governments and the European Parliament to reflect on how to improve the position of farmers in the food supply chain. It said the list of possible actions would be discussed by national agriculture ministers, who are next due to convene in Brussels on March 26. EU Agriculture Commissioner Janusz Wojciechowski had been due to present the reforms on a visit to his native Poland earlier on Friday, but said this was delayed due to a dispute over the timing of some changes. Polish farmers have been among those that have staged weeks of protest across the EU to press a series of demands, including removing restrictions placed on them by the EU's Green Deal plan to tackle climate change, as they say they cannot afford them.

**LONDON (AFP)** – Two senior UK lawmakers have become the latest from the ruling Conservatives to announce that they will stand down at the next election, as Rishi Sunak's party appears headed for defeat. Armed Forces Minister James Heappey said he had made the "painful decision" not to fight his seat in the nationwide vote, expected in the second half of this year. His announcement came after Brandon Lewis, a former chairman of the Tories who was also Northern Ireland and justice secretary, said he would not be a candidate. At least 66 Conservatives and former Conservatives have now announced they are leaving Parliament at the election – the most since Labour's landslide win under Tony Blair in 1997. The most high-profile of them is former Prime Minister Theresa May, who revealed last week that she would step down after 27 years as an MP. The retirements add to a growing feeling in Westminster that the election will see the Tories kicked out of government after 14 years in power.