

Briefs

Fall of Bakhmut symbolic win for Russia

WASHINGTON: US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Monday that the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut was of more symbolic than operational importance, and its fall would not necessarily mean that Moscow had regained the initiative in the war. The battle for Bakhmut has raged for seven months. A Russian victory in the city, which had a pre-war population of about 70,000 but has now been blasted to ruins, would give Moscow the first major prize in a costly winter offensive. "I think it is more of a symbolic value than it is strategic and operational value," Austin told reporters while visiting Jordan. "The fall of Bakhmut won't necessarily mean that the Russians have changed the tide of this fight," he said, adding that he would not predict whether or when Bakhmut might fall. Russian artillery have been pounding the last routes out of the city, aiming to complete its encirclement, but the founder of the Wagner mercenary force leading the assault has said his troops are being deprived of ammunition by Moscow. Austin said that if Ukrainian forces decided to reposition west of Bakhmut, he would not view that as a strategic setback. Wagner often appears to operate autonomously from the regular army, or even in competition with it - and in a video published over the weekend, Prigozhin complained that the ammunition that Moscow had promised it had not been delivered.—APP

Estonia's Reform Party comes first in elections

Estonia's Reform Party, headed by Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, has secured first place in Sunday's parliamentary election, taking approximately 31.4% of the vote. Nine political parties in all fielded candidates for Estonia's 101-seat parliament or Riigikogu. Over 900,000 people were eligible to vote in the general election, and nearly half voted in advance. Preliminary results suggest that six parties passed the 5% threshold required to become a part of parliament including newcomer Eesti 200, a liberal centrist party. Voter turnout was reportedly 63.7%. With 99% of votes counted EKRE has come in second place with 16.1% while the Centre Party, traditionally favoured by Estonia's sizable ethnic-Russian minority has secured 15%. The initial results mean the Reform Party is in a remarkably strong position to take a leading role in forming Estonia's next government; its support translates into 37 seats in the legislature. But it will need junior partners to form a coalition with a comfortable majority to govern.—Agencies

Greek PM asks court to expedite cases over rail disaster

ATHENS: Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis on Monday asked the country's Supreme Court to prioritise any criminal cases over last week's deadly train crash and to shed light on what led to the country's worst rail disaster. "The Greek people want an immediate and thorough clarification of the criminal incidents related to this tragic accident," Mitsotakis wrote in a letter to the court prosecutor about last week's collision, which killed at least 57 people and triggered widespread public anger. "I ask you to give priority to these cases and, if you deem it appropriate, dedicate an investigation at the highest possible level into what happened" and whether "systemic errors in the rail sector" constituted criminal offences. With the government seeking re-election in April, the move is seen as necessary for Mitsotakis to placate outrage as such probes in Greece can usually take several years.—APP

US supports achievement of peace between Baku, Yerevan

A fresh exchange of fire along the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Karabakh region Sunday killed at least five people, according to reports from the two countries

NEWS DESK

BAKU: The US supports the early achievement of peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Louis Bono, US Senior Advisor for Caucasus Negotiations, who is paying a visit to Baku, told reporters, Trend reports. "The goal of my country is to bring an end to this suffering so that the people of Armenia and the people of Azerbaijan can live together peacefully, they can enjoy mutual peace, but also mutual prosperity. We need to bring it to an end," he said. Bono pointed out that the US not playing a role of a mediator in the peace process. "It is more about a facilitator. What's most important is any agreement reached, language that's put forward but the parties. Because in order for a peace agreement to be sustainable, to be durable, it needs to come from the parties, not from the US, or any-

one else. Our goal is to get parties talking so that they are putting forward the language, they are exchanging proposal," he said. "I will be traveling to Yerevan tomorrow. My goal is to get the parties to reconvene as soon as possible in one format or another. My objective here is to bring the parties together one way or another. I am here to meet with officials from Azerbaijan. Tomorrow I will be meeting with officials from Yerevan in an effort to bring them together as soon as possible. My goal is on the future and to move the parties forward. I left Munich with a feeling of optimism that we have two leaders that are committed to peace. My objective is how do we bring them to this point. This is



about the two states, Azerbaijan and Armenia," he said. While a fresh exchange of fire along the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Karabakh region Sunday killed at least five people, according to reports from the two countries. Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry said two servicemen were killed in an exchange of fire after Azerbaijani troops stopped a convoy it suspected of carrying weapons from the region's main town to outlying areas. It said the convoy had used an

unauthorized road. Expressing its condolences to the families and relatives of the soldiers, the ministry said that "as a result of the provocation committed by illegal Armenian formations," Alibeyli Shakhriyar Ramiz and Huseynov Eshgin lost their lives. According to the Armenian press, three Armenian police officers also died in the clash. Toivo Khaar, the European Union's Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia, said on Twitter he had returned to Azerbai-

jan's capital Baku for talks on advancing the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, saying the latest incident underscores the need to make progress. "Look forward to substantive meetings with the Azerbaijani leadership to advance the peace process after meetings in Munich. The deadly incident today underscores the urgency of pushing forward with negotiations to achieve stability and peace," Khaar said. Earlier, a statement by the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry said it had received information about the transport of military equipment, ammunition and personnel from Armenia to the Karabakh region through the Khankendi-Khalfali-Turshu road, where a Russian peacekeeping contingent has been temporarily stationed since the aftermath of the fall 2020 conflict in the region and a January 2021 pact with Baku and Yerevan. "On the morning of March

5, in order to cross-check the information received, units of the Azerbaijan Army made an attempt to stop and search the vehicles carrying illegal military transports. Shots were fired from the other side and there were casualties and injuries on both sides as a result of the skirmish," the statement said. The statement further added that Baku brought to the attention of the command of the Russian peacekeeping contingent that fulfillment of the clauses of the Tripartite Declaration of November 2020 between Azerbaijan, Russia and Armenia must be "unconditionally and fully ensured." Noting that the Lachin corridor is the only route that can connect Armenia to the Karabakh region, the statement said it reminded the command of the Russian peacekeeping contingent that the "use of military means and transportation on other routes is absolutely inadmissible."

Zelensky at odds with top general: Report

KIEV: An internal conflict is underway between Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky and General Valery Zaluzhny, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, according to government sources cited by Bild on Monday. Kiev insiders told the German tabloid that the military commander called for a withdrawal from a key Donbass city weeks ago. Zaluzhny advised the president to abandon Artyomovsk, known as Bakhmut in Ukraine, rather than keep defending it as Russian troops threatened to take control of the city, the newspaper reported. However the Ukrainian leader declared the city a fortress, and refused to pull troops back. Russian forces have made notable advances in the fight for Artyomovsk this year. Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the private military company Wagner Group, claimed last Friday that it was "de-facto completely surrounded," with only one road available for possible evacuation. According to US media, Washington has been urging Zelensky to pull out of Artyomovsk and focus on preparing a major counteroffensive for the spring using Western-supplied weapons, but the Ukrainian president fears a morale hit that such a move would cause. The city is part of a 70km Ukrainian defense line created since Kiev initiated the fighting in Donbass in 2014. US officials have assessed that its loss to Russia would not affect the strategic situation.—APP

Protests in Austria, Germany against Ukraine war

BERLIN: Protesters have taken to the streets in Austria and Germany calling for an end to the protracted war in Ukraine that completed one year recently amid a growing anti-war chorus in Europe. People marched in Vienna to protest the deliveries of heavy weaponry to Ukraine by Western countries and to denounce the US-led NATO military alliance's involvement in the devastating war. They also called for the neutrality of Austria, carrying banners and chanting slogans against the Western military alliance and the European Union's arms deliveries to Kiev. "Austria is neutral and we want to stay neutral because we don't want to be involved in any war," Brigitte Fink, a Vienna resident, was quoted as saying by CCTV. "But being a part of the European Union, we are forced to support whatever European Union decides. So if they decide to deliver weapons, we deliver weapons. And we think delivering weapons can never bring peace." The weapon deliveries to Ukraine continue as the West refuses to pay heed to Russia's warnings that it will only prolong the simmering conflict.—DNA

Iran ready for a prisoner swap with Belgium

TEHRAN: Iran on Monday expressed its readiness for a long-awaited prisoner swap with Belgium, days after the European country's Constitutional Court gave the green light for such a move. Following the decision "by the Belgian Constitutional Court, we can now say that the way to implement the agreement has been opened, and the Islamic Republic of Iran certainly welcomes this change," foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani told reporters in Tehran. The move would see Belgian aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele - jailed in Iran for 40 years for several charges including spying - swapped for Iranian official Assadollah Assadi who was convicted in Belgium for masterminding a plot to blow up a 2018 opposition event outside Paris. Under a treaty Belgium and Iran signed in 2022, Vandecasteele would have been eligible to be swapped for Assadi but in December Belgium's constitutional court suspended the implementation of the treaty.—Agencies

China's trade in goods with BRI countries doubled in past ten years

DNA

BEIJING: "From 2013 to 2022, the volume of trade in goods between China and BRI countries has doubled from US \$1.04 trillion to US \$2.07 trillion, with an average annual growth rate of 8%," said Mr. Chen Chunguang, Assistant Minister of Commerce, China said in a press conference held here, according to Gwadar Pro. In the same period, China's cumulative bilateral investment in BRI countries exceeded US \$270 billion, he added. He briefed the audience that fruitful results have been achieved since BRI was put forward ten years ago. By the end of 2022, Chinese companies had invested a total of

\$57.13 billion in overseas economic and trade cooperation zones in BRI countries, creating 421,000 jobs. From 2013 to 2022, over half of China's contracted projects abroad are in BRI countries, with the total value of new contracts signed and the total turnover of completed projects in BRI countries exceeding US \$1.2 trillion and US \$800 billion respectively. Mr. Chen said in the next step China will continue to deepen and consolidate economic and trade cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. "The government will deepen its involvement in international industrial cooperation and optimize two-way investment structures. China aims to promote the

signing of free trade agreements with more countries and accelerate the development of a free trade zone network covering the entire BRI-related region," he said. Green development, digital economy, and blue economy will be put high on the agenda of China's cooperation with BRI countries, he shared. China will make cooperation greener in infrastructure, energy, industry, and trade. "Silk Road E-commerce" pilot zones will be set up to foster a new mode of business. Data shows that despite the pandemic restrictions, trade volume has been on an upward trajectory in the past 3 years. In 2022, Pakistan's exports of seafood to China increased by 42%, rice by 53%. In

the first nine months of 2022, Pakistan's exports to China were nearly 20% higher than in the entire year of 2018, showcasing the catalyzing effect of the China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement (CPFTA). Meanwhile, China remains Pakistan's largest trading partner during the first quarter of the ongoing fiscal year 2022-23 and the leading investor in Pakistan in the first five months of FY 2022-23, contributing 23.83%, or \$102.5 million to its FDI. It is expected as special economic zones (SEZs) under the umbrella of CPEC are being established, they will attract more FDI for Pakistan in the near future not only from China, but also from other countries.

Afghan universities reopen, but women still barred

KABUL: Male students trickled back to their classes Monday after Afghan universities reopened following a winter break, but women remain barred by Taliban authorities. The university ban is one of several restrictions imposed on women since the Taliban stormed back to power in August 2021, and has sparked global outrage - including across the Muslim world. "It's heartbreaking to see boys going to the university while we have to stay at home," said Rahela, 22, from the central province of Ghor. "This is gender discrimination against girls because Islam allows us to pursue higher education. Nobody should stop us from learning." The Taliban government imposed the ban after accusing women students of ignoring a strict dress code and a requirement to be accompanied by a male relative to and from campus. Most universities had already introduced gender-segregated entrances and classrooms, as well as allowing women to be taught only by female professors or old men. Several Taliban officials say the ban on women's education is temporary, but despite promises, they have failed to reopen secondary schools for girls, which have been shuttered now for over a year. They have wheeled out a litany of excuses for the closure - from a lack of funds to the time needed to remodel the syllabus along Islamic lines. The reality, according to some Taliban officials, is that the ultra-conservative clerics advising the country's supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada are deeply sceptical of modern education for women. Since taking power the Taliban authorities have effectively squeezed women out of public life.—Agencies

EU's solutions for Ukraine don't work: Hungarian FM

BUDAPEST: The first step in bringing peace to Ukraine should be to stop people from being killed and establish a ceasefire as soon as possible, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto said on Sunday, during an interview with Sweden's SVT. The diplomat dismissed the idea of supplying Ukraine with weapons, currently being done by a number of NATO countries, as a viable method to achieve peace. Asked why Hungary refuses to send weapons to Kiev, Szijarto pointed to the devastating consequences of the war, and how Western arms have only exacerbated the conflict. "Look at the infrastructure, look at the people, look at the number of people leaving the country, look at their former houses, look at the damage, the energy infrastructure. This country is being demolished, destroyed. I don't think that would be of interest to anyone," he said. Szijarto stated that Hungary, as opposed to other European countries, sees the first priority in the Ukrainian conflict as being to "stop killing people," and suggested that the only way to achieve that is to enter discussions that would hopefully lead to a sustainable peace agreement. He also noted that the solutions that were being offered in Europe "simply did not work" because everyone is too invested into the "war psyche." As for sanctions, the minister pointed out that they have also failed to achieve an effect. "We have introduced packages of sanctions already. Did it bring us any closer to a solution? No.—DNA

Poisoning of students 'unforgivable' crime

TEHRAN: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Monday termed the serial poisoning of schoolgirls a "big and unforgivable sin," calling on the authorities to "seriously pursue the matter." "If it is proven that the students were poisoned, the perpetrators of this crime should be severely punished. There will be no amnesty for these people," he said, in a video released by his office. His remarks came as cases related to serial poisoning of schoolgirls continue to be reported from different cities across Iran even as investigations continue to find the cause of the mysterious illness. A report in the Persian-language Etemaad newspaper on Saturday put the total number of poisoning cases at more than 2,000 since November last year, when the first cases were reported. The report said a total of 125 schools in different Iranian cities,



including the capital Tehran, have reported cases of this mysterious illness so far, sending ripples of shock across the country. Last week, Shahrar Heidari, a member of the Iranian parliament's internal security and foreign policy commission, cited a "reliable source" as saying that "nearly 900"

schoolgirls had been poisoned. The first cases of these serial poisonings were reported last November when at least 18 schoolgirls from one of the schools in the central Iranian city of Qom were transferred to a hospital. The students complained of symptoms such as nausea, headache, breathing problems, cough and body pain. It followed similar incidents in other girls' schools in the city. Cases reported from several cities in recent weeks, the wave has spread to cities and provinces including Tehran, Ardabil, Isfahan, Khurramshahr, Kermanshah, Azerbaijan, Bandar Abbas, Urmia, Ahwaz, Zanjan, Mashhad etc with hundreds of schoolgirls admitted to hospitals, according to local media reports. In most recent cases, at least 30 students from three schools were transferred to medical centers in central Zanjan city on Sunday for symptoms of poisoning, reports said.—APP

Weapons smuggling in Sweden out of control

LONDON: Sweden has one of the highest rates of firearm-related violence in Western Europe, a result of an ever-increasing number of gangs and criminal networks responsible for the high inflow of illegal firearms to Sweden, according to experts. Despite one of the world's strictest gun laws, the country still faces significant firearm-related bloodshed, with many experts calling for additional policies to combat the illegal flow of firearms and gang criminality. According to a 2021 report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Serbian pistols, and Yugoslav-era hand grenades are fueling the country's rising gang violence that is partially due to the legacy of the currently dissolved, so-called "Yugoslav mafia" that dominated Stockholm's criminal underworld through the 1990s. At the time, Serbian war crimes suspect Zeljko Arkan Raznatovic effectively dominated significant parts of the urban criminal economy in Sweden, another report, published in 2021 by the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, said. However, recent reports suggest that while Balkan weapons greatly contribute to ever-escalating firearm smuggling in the



Scandinavian country, there are other factors also playing a significant part. For instance, there are fears among the country's experts that criminal networks may have access to weapons allegedly shipped from Ukraine, according to reports by the local Sveriges Radio. In Sweden's second-largest city, Gothenburg, arms smugglers have been requested to acquire weapons from war-torn Ukraine for further sale to criminal gangs in the country, the radio broadcaster said. Weapons smuggling expert at the Swedish Customs Service Jesper Liedholm expressed fears that criminals may have access to more powerful weapons to smuggle in Sweden and that any type of weapon provided to Ukraine as Western aid may also come back to the country, it added. But Mathias Stahle, a journalist and an author of the book Vapensmederna

(The Gunsmiths: The Men Who Are Arming Sweden's Criminals), told Anadolu that while the Moscow-Kyiv war is still ongoing, he does not think that there is "a lot of leakage of weapon from Ukraine today." However, he added that "one day, the war will end, and then, those weapons, they need to go somewhere, someone will want to make money from them." Sweden may not be the only Scandinavian country where criminals may have access to weapons that are meant for Ukraine, as last October, the Finnish National Bureau of Investigation said weapons sent to Ukraine may have found their way back to criminals in Finland. Out of control Ardavan Khoshnood, a criminologist and a political scientist researching violent crimes and gang violence in Sweden at Lund University, told Anadolu that in Sweden, weapons smuggling is out of control. According to Khoshnood, hundreds of various types of weapons, including automatic guns, semi-automatic weapons, grenades, and also explosives, get smuggled into the country daily, from various countries, mostly from Eastern Europe, due to high demand by many gangs and criminal networks in Sweden.—Agencies