

Tens of thousands march against Serbia's leadership following shootings



People march during a rally against violence in Belgrade, Serbia, Friday, May 12, 2023. **DARKO VOJINOVIC/AP**

Tens of thousands of people marched through the Serbian capital, Belgrade, and blocked a key bridge Friday in the second large protest since two mass shootings that rattled the Balkan country and killed 17 people, including many

children. Protesters gathered in front of the Parliament building before filing by the government's headquarters and onto a highway bridge spanning the Sava River, where evening commuters had to turn

their vehicles around to avoid getting stuck. At the head of the column was a black banner reading "Serbia Against Violence," Reuters reported. As the demonstrators passed the government buildings, many chanted

slogans decrying Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic whom they blame for creating an atmosphere of hopelessness and division in the country that they say indirectly led to the mass shootings. Pro-government media criticized the bridge blockade, with the Novosti daily newspaper reporting that "harassment has begun, hooligans have blocked the bridge." But opposition politician Srdjan Milivojevic told television station N1 that "this is a battle for survival." He said, "If the president does not understand his people, it's time he resigned." Police did not intervene. As night fell and the crowd started to disperse, organizers promised to hold more protests unless their demands are met. Ahead of the protest, Vucic, who holds nearly all the levers of power, said it amounted to "violence in politics" and the "harassment" of citizens. But he said police wouldn't get

involved "unless people's lives are in danger." "What gives them the right to block other people's normal lives?" said Vucic, who accused opposition leaders of "abusing the tragedy" following the shootings that deeply rattled the nation and triggered calls for change. "They are harassing citizens and not allowing them to travel," Vucic insisted. "But we don't like to beat protesters, like France and Germany do." The rally came nearly a week after an earlier protest in Belgrade that also drew thousands and demonstrations in smaller towns and cities around the country. At that protest, demonstrators demanded the resignations of government ministers and the withdrawal of broadcast licenses for two private TV stations which are close to the state and promote violence. They often host convicted war criminals and crime figures on their programs.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Blasts rock Khartoum



AFP - Air strikes pummeled Khartoum Saturday, with representatives of Sudan's warring factions meeting in Saudi Arabia for talks to prevent a "humanitarian catastrophe" as the fighting entered a fifth week. More than 750 people have been killed and hundreds of thousands displaced since fighting erupted on April 15 between army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his deputy turned rival Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, who commands the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces.

UN: At least 500 believed to have died in Mali massacre

AP - Malian forces backed by foreign military personnel are believed to have killed at least 500 people over several days in a village last year, the U.N. said Friday, significantly raising the death toll from what already has been called the worst single atrocity in Mali's decade-long fight against extremist groups. The new report from the U.N. Human Rights Office details the violence that took place in the village of Moura in central Mali over the course of five days, and raises a previous toll of 300 dead given by Human Rights Watch. U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk called the findings "extremely disturbing." "Summary executions, rape and torture during armed conflict amount to war crimes and could, depending on the circumstances, amount to crimes against humanity," Turk said.

Russia acknowledges retreat from north of Bakhmut, Wagner boss calls it a 'rout'

Moscow acknowledged on Friday that its forces had fallen back north of Ukraine's battlefield city of Bakhmut after a new Ukrainian offensive, in a retreat that the head of Russia's Wagner private army called a rout. The setback for Russia, which follows similar reports of Ukrainian advances south of the city, suggests a coordinated push by Kyiv to encircle Russian forces in Bakhmut, Reuters reported. In three days of counter-offensive activity, the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the Bakhmut sector have captured 17.3 sq. km of territory, Serhiy Chervatyi, spokesman for the "east" group of Ukrainian

forces, said on the Telegram messaging app. Both sides are now reporting the biggest Ukrainian gains in six months, although Ukraine has given few details and played down suggestions a huge, long-planned counteroffensive has officially begun.

Germany's military aid package

Also in a post on the Telegram app on Saturday, the Ukrainian president's chief of staff said Germany will provide a new 2.7 billion euro (\$2.97 billion) military aid package to Ukraine, including 30 Leopard tanks. Andriy Yermak said Berlin would also provide four Iris-T air defence systems,

20 Marder armoured personnel carriers, 200 reconnaissance drones, 100 armoured vehicles and a large quantity of munitions. Russian Defence Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said Ukraine had launched an assault north of Bakhmut with more than 1,000 troops and up to 40 tanks, a scale that if confirmed would amount to the biggest Ukrainian offensive since November. The Russians had repelled 26 attacks but troops in one area had fallen back to regroup in more favourable positions near the Berkhivka reservoir northwest of Bakhmut, Konashenkov said. Yevgeny Prigozhin, head

of the Wagner forces that have led the campaign in the city, said in an audio message: "What Konashenkov described, unfortunately, is called 'a rout' and not a regrouping". In a separate video message, Prigozhin said the Ukrainians had seized high ground overlooking Bakhmut and opened the main highway leading into the city from the West. "The loss of the Berkhivka reservoir - the loss of this territory they gave up - that's 5 sq km, just today," Prigozhin said. Russian-installed officials said two missiles hit an industrial complex in Luhansk, in Russian-occupied territory around 100 km (60 miles) behind



the front. Video posted on the internet showed huge columns of smoke above the city. The strike, just beyond the range of the main battlefield rockets Ukraine has previously deployed, came a day after Britain announced it was sending longer-range cruise missiles.

Ukrainian servicemen ride atop of a tank on a road to the frontline town of Bakhmut, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Donetsk region, Ukraine May 12, 2023. **SOPHIA GATILOVA/REUTERS**

Turkey's fateful day ...

Muharrem Ince, another presidential candidate, pulled out of the race on Thursday, in a potential boost to the main opposition candidate's chances of beating the current president. Erdogan's ruling party, which has been in power for nearly two decades and repeatedly sailed to re-election, now faces mounting challenges despite its significant strengths that attract some voters. The government's failure in tackling the crisis caused by the February earthquake as well as

several economic challenges including high inflation rates, a weak currency, its fierce foreign policy, and the restriction of civil liberties are the most important criticisms directed at Erdogan's performance. On the other hand, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, focusing on Erdogan's costly foreign policy and especially, Turkey's proximity to Russia and its distance from the West, has promised closer relations with Western countries. He has even accused the Russian president of meddling in Turkey's elections in re-

cent days. Kilicdaroglu's secular party has always been inclined towards the West. In recent days, several polls have been published predicting the results of the presidential elections. According to a survey by the Areeda Survey Research Center, Erdogan will win 51.3% of the vote, while Kilicdaroglu, the candidate of the main opposition bloc, may garner 44.2% of the vote. Also, the ASAL center poll predicts that Erdogan will get 50.6%, and Kilicdaroglu 46.3% of the votes. However, according to the

survey conducted by the SAROS research and news institute, after the resignation of Muharrem Ince, Erdogan received 46.9% of the votes, Kilicdaroglu 51%, Sinan Ogan, and a minor candidate, remains at 2.91%. The Metropoll survey also forecasts that the election will be extended to the second round because Kilicdaroglu may win 49.1% and Erdogan may win 46.9%. In the second round, Kilicdaroglu will win with 51.3%. In an exclusive interview with Iran Daily, Hassan Beheshtipour, an international relations expert, predicted that Kilicdaroglu will win the election in the first round by

a small margin. He said that if the election extends to the second round, the chances of Kilicdaroglu will be higher because a large part of the Turkish people has mobilized to remove Erdogan after 20 years. Beheshtipour, however, added: "Turkey has cooperated with both the East and the West to secure its interests. In the Ukraine war, for example, Turkey cooperates with both Russia and Ukraine at the same time." According to the expert, Turkey's main policies will not change significantly with the handing over of the government, but it is the country's tactics that will

undergo change. He also highlights the importance of Turkish parliamentary elections, which have been overshadowed by the presidential elections. According to him, the Parliament plays an important role in the party structure of Turkey, and if the AKP maintains the majority in the Parliament and Kilicdaroglu becomes the president, then the situation in Turkey will become complicated. Beheshtipour also highlighted the consequences of the recent massive earthquake in Turkey, the economic inefficiency of the government, and the authoritarianism of Erdogan in the last

6 years along with his fierce foreign policy indicated by Turkey's military presence in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Azerbaijan as some of the issues that caused dissatisfaction with Erdogan among the Turks. However, the expert emphasizes that whether any of the main candidates get chosen in the Turkish elections would not be a problem for Iran because Turkey has had good relations with Iran in the past years, during Turkey's both periods of secular and Islamist rule. According to Beheshtipour, Iran can continue to have good cooperation with both sides.