

# Warnings of Global Food Crisis

## ON MY WATCH

BY LUCIEN RAJAKARUNANAYAKE

The Ukraine war is moving to a global food crisis which could last for years the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has warned.

African countries could be hit especially hard by wheat and fertilizer shortages, WTO Director General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala told the BBC.

Millions of tonnes of grain are currently sitting in warehouses and in Ukrainian ports, unable to be exported due to the war.

Ukraine is a major global exporter of wheat, contributing to 9% of the global market. It also accounts for a massive 42% chunk of the global sunflower oil market, and 16% of the world's maize.

Because of a Russian blockade of Black Sea Ports, and Russian and Ukrainian mines along the coast, between 20 and 25 million tonnes of wheat are stuck in Ukraine, while global grain prices spiral upwards.

Wheat prices had risen 59% compared with last year, sunflower oil was up 30%, while maize was 23% higher.

The United Nations is leading efforts to try to establish a "grain corridor" with a Turkish Naval escort for tankers leaving Odessa and other Ukrainian Ports.

But Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said Ukraine needs to clear mines from its Black Sea ports. "We state daily that we're ready to guarantee the safety of vessels leaving Ukrainian ports and heading for [Turkish waters], we're ready to do that in cooperation with our Turkish colleagues," he said on Wednesday.

Meanwhile Ukraine has said it needs "effective security guarantees" before it can start shipments, voicing concerns that Moscow could use the potential corridor to attack Odessa from the sea.

Some countries in the Middle East and Africa in particular will feel the threat of food shortages. Libya and Eritrea get more than 40% of their wheat from Ukraine, and Lebanon more than 60%.

But the pain is global; as wheat prices are up a third since Russia continues attacks on Ukraine. The WTO sees no quick fix to the growing food crisis, with warnings that tens of millions of people are at risk of famine, and social unrest erupting in parts of the globe.

A BBC columnist has reported that if an agreement fails to materialize, on food supply in the context of the Ukraine - Russia war, today's hunger pangs and stretched budgets threaten to spill over into a prolonged devastating economic and social crisis, globally.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has formed a Task Force looking at these issues, the WTO Director said. "He's spent a lot of time trying to work with Russia to see if an arrangement can be made, so, we'll keep our fingers crossed," she said. If an agreement can't be made, "this is really going to be a dire situation worldwide", Ms Okonjo-Iweala said.

Thirty five countries in Africa import food from the Black Sea region, while 22 import fertilizer.

"You can imagine what a big impact this is going to have, even just on the African continent," she said. "I hope that we don't go into a really severe food crisis for the next couple of years."

### Ukraine: Battle for East

Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, has said the battle for the Eastern City of Sievierodonetsk will decide the fate of Donbas, and is seeing probably the most difficult fighting since Russia's invasion began.

"Sievierodonetsk remains the epicentre of the confrontation in Donbas," Zelenskiy said in a late-night address to the nation on Wednesday evening, claiming that Ukraine had inflicted "significant losses on the enemy". He corroborated reports of heavy fighting, saying the battle for Sievierodonetsk was "probably one of the most difficult during this war". "In particular the fate of Donbas is being decided there," he added.

However, regional leaders said earlier that Ukrainian Forces had been pushed back to the outskirts of the key frontline city, amid heavy fighting there, and in frontline villages to the South as Russia pursues a breakthrough in Donbas.

The Governor of Luhansk, said most of the city was now in Russian hands and that it was no longer possible to rescue civilians stranded there.

Moscow has intensified its focus on Sievierodonetsk, to the point where Ukraine's Ministry of Defence estimated that Russian Forces had as much as 10 times more military equipment than Ukrainian troops in some areas of the city.

The Ministry of Defence in Moscow said: "The Ukrainian group in the Donbas suffers significant losses in manpower, weapons and military equipment." It said it had caused 480 casualties overnight in fighting in Donbas and elsewhere in the country.

Both sides continue to take heavy

casualties, although precise estimates are impossible to obtain. Ukrainian officials have said 100 or even 150 people a day are being killed in action, while Zelenskiy said overnight that "Russia has been paying almost 300 lives a day" since it launched the invasion on February 24.

### India: Major diplomatic clash

India is facing a major diplomatic outrage from Muslim-majority countries after top officials in the governing Hindu nationalist party made derogatory references to Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, drawing accusations of blasphemy across some Arab nations, leaving New Delhi trying hard to contain the damaging fallout.

At least five Arab nations have lodged official protests against India. Pakistan and Afghanistan also reacted strongly to the comments made by two prominent spokespeople from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Anger has poured out on social media, and calls for a boycott of Indian goods have surfaced in some Arab nations. In India, it has led to protests against Modi's party in some parts of the country.

The controversial remarks (not published in the main media due to the offensive language) follow increasing violence targeting India's Muslim minority carried out by Hindu nationalists, emboldened by Modi's and BJP's support for such moves.

The anger and opposition has been growing since last week after the two spokespeople for the BJP Government, Nupur Sharma and Naveen Jindal, made remarks that were seen as insulting Islam's Prophet Muhammad and his wife Aisha.

Indian Muslims are often targeted for everything from their food and clothing style to inter-religious marriages. Rights groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have warned that attacks could escalate. They have also accused Modi's governing party of looking the other way, and sometimes enabling hate speech against Muslims, who comprise 14 percent of India's 1.4 billion people; but are still numerous enough to be the second-largest Muslim population of any nation.

The BJP took no action against them until Sunday, when a chorus of diplomatic outrage began with Qatar and Kuwait summoning their Indian ambassadors to protest. The BJP suspended Sharma and expelled Jindal, and issued a rare statement saying it "strongly denounces insult of any religious personalities," a move that was welcomed by Qatar and Kuwait.

Later, Saudi Arabia and Iran also lodged complaints with India, and the Jeddah-based Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) said the remarks came in a "context of intensifying hatred and abuse toward Islam in India and systematic practices against Muslims."

India's Foreign Ministry on Monday rejected the comments by the OIC as "unwarranted" and "narrow-minded." On Sunday, India's embassies in Qatar and Kuwait released a statement saying the views expressed about the Prophet Muhammad and Islam were not those of the Indian Government and were made by "fringe elements."

Qatar's Foreign Ministry said it expected a public apology from the Indian Government, and Kuwait warned that if the comments go unpunished, India would see "an increase of extremism and hatred." The Grand Mufti of Oman described the "obscene rudeness" of Modi's party toward Islam as a form of "war." Riyadh said the comments were insulting and called for "respect for beliefs and religions." And Egypt's Al-Azhar Mosque, the Sunni world's foremost institution of religious learning, described the remarks as "real terrorism (that) can plunge the entire world into severe crises and deadly wars."

India maintains strong relations with Gulf countries, which rely on millions of migrant workers from India and elsewhere in South Asia, to serve their tiny local populations and drive the machinery of daily life. India also depends on oil-rich Gulf Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, to power its energy-thirsty economy.

The remarks also led to anger in India's neighbour, Pakistan, and in Afghanistan. On Monday, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry summoned an Indian diplomat and conveyed Islamabad's "strong condemnation," a day after Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said the comments were "hurtful" and "India under Modi is trampling religious freedoms and persecuting Muslims." India's Foreign Ministry responded by calling Pakistan "a serial violator of minority rights" and said it should not engage "in alarmist propaganda and attempting to foment communal disharmony in India." "India accords the highest respect to all religions," a ministry spokesperson said.



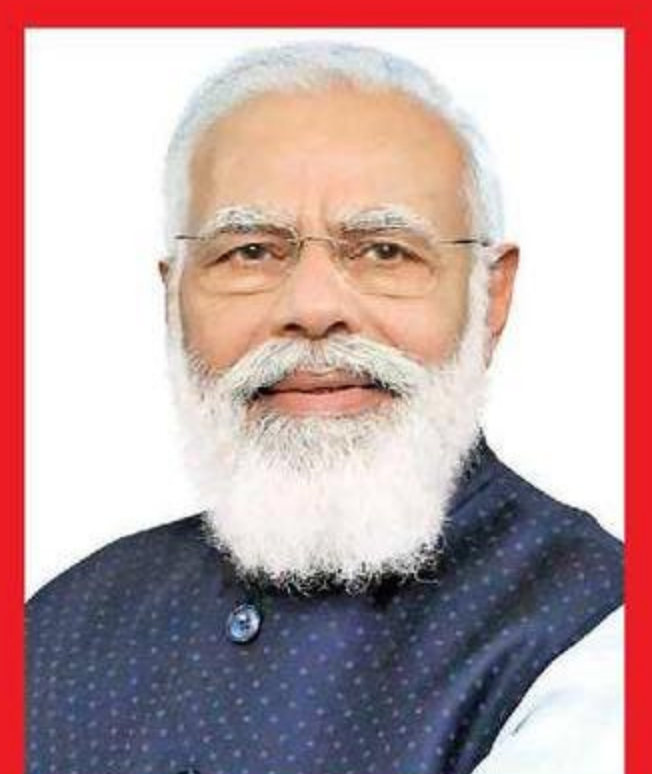
Russia - Ukraine conflict has triggered global hunger



UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres



UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi



South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov

Criticism also came from Kabul, in Afghanistan, stating the Indian Government should not allow "such fanatics to insult ... Islam and provoke the feelings of Muslims."

Last week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said India was seeing "rising attacks on people and places of worship," eliciting a response from New Delhi, which called the comments "ill-informed."

### North Korea - Missiles

South Korea and the US launched eight missiles on Monday, in response to a volley of ballistic missiles fired by North Korea the previous day, as Pyongyang continues to escalate its missile tests.

South Korea's President Yoon Suk-yeol said his government would respond sternly to any provocation from its Northern neighbour. "We will make sure there isn't a single crack in protecting the lives and property of our people," he said.

Speaking at a war memorial event in Seoul, he added that North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes "are reaching the level of threatening not only peace on the Korean Peninsula but also in Northeast Asia and the world."

The US and South Korea regularly hold joint military exercises, which often anger North Korea. Early on Monday, hours after North Korea had fired several missiles off its East coast, the two allies launched eight surface-to-surface Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) - one from the US and seven from South Korea.

Analysts say the moves are South Korea showing off its muscle, with the aid of US weaponry.

It is the second retaliatory display from the US and South Korea in as many weeks, with a similar move made last week after Pyongyang fired a series of missiles in the immediate aftermath of US President Joe Biden's visit to the region.

Such displays had been rare under South Korea's previous administration. President Yoon, who was inaugurated last month, has pledged to take a more hardline approach on North Korea.

The isolated Communist State North Korea, has test-fired dozens of missiles in recent months, including an intercontinental ballistic missile for the first time in five years.

The UN prohibits North Korea from ballistic and nuclear weapons tests, and has imposed strict sanctions after previous tests.

Over the past months, North Korea has been testing weapons with increasing frequency. And in the past few weeks, South Korea and the United States have agreed to respond more strongly and bolster their defense.

Washington's real challenge is to convince North Korea to return to nuclear talks. The United States' nuclear envoy on North Korea said in Seoul on Friday that he had made very clear to the North they were ready to talk, but the North had shown no interest.

Instead, North Korea appears to be preparing to conduct its first nuclear test in more than four years.

Tensions between the two Koreas could be about to escalate further.

It is North Korea's 18th round of missile launches this year - a show of force that U.S. and South Korean officials say could soon include a nuclear weapons test.

The North Korean launches came after the United States and South Korea held a major military exercise in the waters off Japan's coast.

The three-day exercise, which involved the nuclear-powered USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier, was meant to bolster the allies' capabilities against North Korea's provocations, South Korea's military said.

South Korea's new conservative President, Yoon Suk Yeol, has called for larger joint military exercises to deter the nuclear-armed North Korea.

North Korea is prohibited from any ballistic missile activity under a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions.

North Korea has said it does not acknowledge the U.N. resolutions.

### Boris Johnson: In danger

Although UK PM Boris Johnson and his allies claimed the failure of the No

Confidence vote on him as a victory, many Conservative MPs, including some of his supporters, believe the attempted coup is the beginning of the end for his three-year premiership.

With so many of his party - more than 140 - having voted against him, the Prime Minister has effectively lost his majority support in Parliament, with the risk that his government is paralysed.

Johnson is theoretically safe from another leadership challenge for a year under the rules of the 1922 Committee - but Theresa May was forced to leave office just six months after winning a confidence ballot, having been terminally damaged despite winning by 200 votes to 117.

The proportion of MPs who voted against Johnson is even greater than the votes against May in 2018 and Margaret Thatcher in 1990. Thatcher resigned a week later.

Speaking after the result, Johnson insisted it was an "extremely good, positive, conclusive, decisive result" that would allow him to "move on to unite and focus on delivery". He also claimed he had "won a far greater mandate" from colleagues than he did in his 2019 leadership election, although critics cast doubt on that claim. Johnson also declined to rule out calling a snap election, although he said he was "not interested" in that idea.

Many rebel MPs said Johnson should quit for the good of the party and the country. Sir Roger Gale, one of Johnson's leading critics, said a "prime minister of honour" should realize he had lost the support of a sizable number of his MPs. He suggested rebels would continue to oppose Johnson remaining as Prime Minister.

The scale of the rebellion means some Government Ministers and aides must have voted against Johnson in the secret ballot, while remaining publicly supportive.

One former Cabinet Minister said he believed Johnson could soon face other attempts to oust him if the Tories lose in two by-elections on June 23, or the Prime Minister is found by a Parliamentary inquiry to have misled the House of Commons.

Keir Starmer, the Labour Leader, said the Conservative party "believes the British public now have no right to expect honest politicians", while Ed Davey, the Liberal Democrat leader, said Tory MPs have "narrowly voted to keep a lawbreaker and liar in No 10".

The confidence vote was triggered early on Monday morning after more than 54 Tory MPs - 15% of the total - submitted no-confidence letters to Graham Brady, chair of the 1922 Committee that represents backbenchers.

Johnson had embarked on a last-minute bid to win over colleagues but a number of Tory MPs said they were surprised by the lack of effort put into the operation.

He blamed the "media-driven focus on the leadership of the Conservative party" and tried to turn the debate on to Brexit by claiming a vote against him would lead to a "hellish groundhog day" about rejoining the EU single market.

"Let us refuse to dance to the tune of the media, let us refuse to gratify our opponents by turning in on ourselves," he said. "Let's show this country that we understand that this is a moment to unite and serve. If we can do that then believe me, whatever they may say about me I will lead you to victory again and the winners will be the people of this country."

### Refugees to Rwanda

Human Rights groups have submitted papers at the High Court in London to get an injunction to halt next week's planned deportation of asylum seekers from the United Kingdom to Rwanda, a scheme that has drawn widespread criticism.

Britain's Government announced in April that it had struck a deal to send potentially tens of thousands of asylum seekers to the East African nation in a bid to undermine people-smuggling networks, and stem the flow of migrants risking their lives by crossing the English Channel in small boats from France.

The first flight taking the migrants to Rwanda is expected next week.

Charities Care4Calais and Detention Action, along with the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), which represents civil servants in Britain's Interior Ministry, have said that lawyers had submitted papers seeking a judicial review of the scheme, and an injunction to block the June 14 flight.

"It's vital that new government policies respect and uphold the laws that we all, as a society, have agreed to follow," said James Wilson, Deputy Director of Detention Action. "That's why we're seeking an injunction to keep this plane to Rwanda from leaving the runway."

There was no immediate comment from the UK Home Office.

Concerns over immigration were a big factor in the 2016 vote for Britain to leave the European Union, and Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been under pressure to deliver on his promise to "take back control" of Britain's borders.

Last year, more than 28,000 migrants and refugees made the crossing from mainland Europe to Britain.

In November, 27 people drowned when their small rubber dinghy deflated, and many others needed to be rescued from the narrow seaway, one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

Under the government scheme, anyone who has arrived in Britain illegally since January 1 could be relocated to Rwanda, whose own human rights record has been criticized by humanitarian groups.

Most migrants and refugees who cross from mainland Europe to Britain, especially from France, are those who have come there from Asian and African countries that have major political and economic disputes and clashes in their homelands.