

The United Nations warned that the war in Ukraine has helped to stoke a global food crisis that could last years if it goes unchecked, as the World Bank announced an additional US\$ 12 bn in funding to mitigate its "devastating effects".

UN Secretary General António Guterres said shortages of grain and fertilizer caused by the war, warming temperatures and pandemic-driven supply problems threaten to "tip tens of millions of people over the edge into food insecurity", as financial markets saw share prices fall heavily again on fears of inflation and a worldwide recession.

Speaking at a UN meeting in New York on global food security, he said what could follow would be "malnutrition, mass hunger and famine, in a crisis that could last for years", as he and others urged Russia to release Ukrainian grain exports.

He said he was in "intense contact" with Russia and other countries to try to find a solution.

"The complex security, economic and financial implications require goodwill on all sides for a package deal to be reached," he said of his discussions with Moscow, Ukraine, Turkey, the US, the European Union and others. "I will not go into details because public statements could undermine the chances of success."

Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and international economic sanctions on Russia have disrupted supplies of fertilizer, wheat and other commodities from both countries, pushing up prices for food and fuel, especially in developing nations. Together Russia and Ukraine produce 30% of the world's wheat.

Before the invasion in February, Ukraine was seen as the world's bread basket, exporting 4.5m tonnes of agricultural produce per month through its ports - 12% of the planet's wheat, 15% of its corn and half of its sunflower oil.

Due to the war, food prices have skyrocketed. The UN's food and agricultural price index reached an all-time high of almost 160 points in March before falling 1.2 or 0.8% in April. Cereal and meat price indices also hit record highs in March. A year ago wheat was trading in Chicago at US\$674c per bushel. Today it fetches US\$1,242c per bushel in a near-doubling of the price driven and compounded by the lack of supply.

"Let's be clear: there is no effective solution to the food crisis without reintegrating Ukraine's food production," Guterres said. "Russia must permit the safe and secure export of grain stored in Ukrainian ports."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who chaired the summit, echoed the call along with World Food Programme head David Beasley. Beasley said: "The world is on fire. We have solutions. We need to act and we need to act now."

Soaring energy prices have also played a part in the current crisis by making it more expensive to produce fertilizer and to run farm equipment. Russia is the world's top supplier of certain fertilizers and natural gas.

The fertilizers are not subject to the Western sanctions, but sales have been disrupted by measures taken against the Russian financial system while Moscow has also restricted exports, diplomats say.

Guterres also said Russian food and fertilizers "must have full and unrestricted access to world markets".

INDIA BANS WHEAT EXPORTS

India, the world's second-largest wheat producer, has banned exports of the grain with some exceptions, a move that could compound a worldwide shortfall worsened by the war in Ukraine and exacerbates an already dire forecast for hunger across the globe.

The war has interrupted wheat production in Ukraine and Russia, which are major suppliers. Fighting and blockades in the Black Sea have disrupted transport of the grain. And poor harvests in China, along with a heat wave in India and drought in other countries, have further snarled global supply, the *New York Times* reported.

India has about 10 percent of the world's grain reserves, according to data from the United States Department of Agriculture, a large surplus resulting from its heavy subsidizing of its farmers. It has been seen for months as a country that could help make up for global supply shortages.

The wheat export ban, announced in a Commerce Ministry notice dated Friday, appeared to be an about-face from earlier statements from Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Indian leader told President Biden in April that the country was ready to supply the world from its reserves. He also urged domestic wheat producers to seize the opportunity, saying that Indian officials and financial institutions should support exporters.

But agricultural experts said that an ongoing heat wave and rising temperatures could affect the harvest this year, which could be a factor in why the government changed course and imposed a ban on the exports.

The Commerce Ministry notice on Friday said that wheat exports were immediately banned, with some exceptions, because a sudden spike in the crop's price had threatened India's food security. Limited exports will be allowed at the request of individual governments whose own food supply is vulnerable, the notice said.

Meanwhile, the price of wheat has

WARNING ON GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS

ON MY WATCH

BY LUCIEN RAJAKARUNANAYAKE



Australia goes to polls today. Main contenders: Australian Prime Minister and Liberal Party Leader Scott Morrison (Right) and Opposition and Labor Party Leader Anthony Albanese



World Food Programme Head David Beasley



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken



UN Secretary General António Guterres



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov

hit record highs globally in the wake of the war in Ukraine and India's recent decision to ban exports. India was supposed to fill the gap in supply caused by the disruptions in Eastern Europe, but it has food security concerns of its own due to rising global prices as well as a heatwave that has damaged crops and reduced output.

UKRAINE WAR

The war in Ukraine continues with Russia pushing its military moves in the East and South of Ukraine. It has established control over Mariupol, from where hundreds of Ukrainian troops have finally surrendered.

The International Criminal Court on Tuesday sent a 42-member team to Ukraine to probe alleged war crimes since the Russian invasion in what it called the largest such deployment in its history. Peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine have stagnated, officials said on Tuesday, with both sides trading blame and Moscow indicating a return to talks may be difficult. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said he believed no peace deal can be made if negotiators try to "transfer the dialogue" to focus on what the west had to say instead of the immediate situation in Ukraine. That ruled out chances for progress in talks, he added. "We always say that we are ready for negotiations ... but we were given no other choice," Lavrov said.

France's President, Emmanuel Macron, promised his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, that French arms deliveries to Kyiv would intensify in the coming days. Zelenskyy said he had a "long and meaningful" conversation with Macron where they discussed "the course of hostilities, the operation to rescue the military from Azovstal and the vision of the prospects of the negotiation process".

The EU's Foreign Policy Chief, Josep Borrell, said Russian Forces may have suffered "impressive losses" since their invasion of Ukraine. He told reporters: "If it is true that Russia has lost 15% of their troops since the beginning of the war, this is a world record of the losses of an Army invading a country." Borrell also said all EU member states will support Finland and Sweden in joining NATO.

NATO EXPANSION

Sweden and Finland have formally

submitted their applications to join NATO, in one of the biggest geopolitical consequences to date of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, personally accepted the Nordic neighbours' membership applications at the headquarters of the 30-member, US-led defensive military alliance in Haren, in the north-east of Brussels.

"I warmly welcome the requests by Finland and Sweden to join NATO. You are our closest partners," Stoltenberg said, hailing the occasion as "a historic step" and "a good day at a critical time for our safety".

Sweden's ambassador to NATO, Axel Wernhoff, and his Finnish colleague Klaus Korhonen handed over the application letters from the two Nordic countries, signed by their respective foreign ministers, shortly after 8 am on Wednesday.

"The security interests of all allies have to be taken into account and we are determined to work through all issues and reach rapid conclusions," Stoltenberg said. "All allies agree on the importance of NATO enlargement. We all agree that we must stand together and we all agree that this is an historic moment which we must seize."

NATO ambassadors are expected to discuss the applications this week and could give the green light on opening formal talks with the pair on their requests. However, the accession process requires the unanimous approval of all the alliance's members, and Turkey has already said it will not support the applications.

NATO accession - including ratification by all member states - usually takes between eight and 12 months, but the alliance has said it wants to move quickly given the threat from Russia hanging over the Nordic countries' heads. Canada has said it expects to ratify Finland and Sweden's accession protocol within a few days.

Ankara says its objections are based on what it describes as Sweden and Finland's support for members of Kurdish militant groups, and their decisions in 2019 to impose arms export embargoes on Ankara over Turkey's military operations in Syria.

Helsinki, Stockholm and the other western allies have said they are optimistic they can overcome Turkey's objections. Many analysts believe the

Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who faces elections next year, is seeking concessions for domestic political advantage and is unlikely ultimately to veto the applications.

Swedish Prime Minister Andersson and Finnish President Niinistö told a joint press conference in Stockholm on Monday that the Nordic neighbours, which have abandoned decades of military non-alignment in the wake of Russia's onslaught on Ukraine, would go through the accession process "hand in hand".

The Finnish Parliament voted overwhelmingly on Monday to back the Helsinki government's decision to apply for NATO membership, while Andersson confirmed on Monday after a parliamentary debate in Stockholm that Sweden would do likewise.

Finland shares an 810-mile (1,300km) border with Russia and has maintained strict policies of neutrality then non-alignment since the end of the Second World War, viewing NATO membership as a provocation of Moscow.

Sweden has stayed out of military alliances, and has not fought a war, for more than 200 years.

However, Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 has led to a profound change in both countries' thinking, with public support for NATO accession in Finland trebling to about 75% and surging to between 50% and 60% in Sweden.

LEBANON

Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah group and its allies lost their parliamentary majority, according to full legislative results announced by the interior ministry on Tuesday.

The Shi'ite Muslim movement and factions that support its possession of arms won around 62 of Parliament's 128 seats in Sunday's election, a reversal of the 2018 result when they secured a majority of 71.

In the first election since Lebanon's devastating economic collapse and the Beirut port explosion of 2020, reform-minded political newcomers won 12 seats, an unexpectedly strong breakthrough into a system long dominated by the same groups.

Hezbollah opponents including the Saudi-aligned Lebanese Forces - a Christian faction - gained ground, claiming to have overtaken the Hez-

lah-allied Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) as Lebanon's biggest single Christian party.

The results leave Parliament split into several camps, none of which have a majority, raising the prospect of political paralysis and tensions that could delay badly needed reforms to steer Lebanon out of its economic collapse.

In one of many startling results, a political newcomer dislodged the Hezbollah-allied Druze politician Tala Arslan, heir to one of Lebanon's oldest political dynasties.

Other prominent Hezbollah allies to lose seats included Sunni Muslim politician Faisal Karami, scion of another Lebanese political dynasty, the final results showed.

While the 2018 election pulled Lebanon closer into the orbit of Shi'ite Muslim-led Iran, this result could open the way for Saudi Arabia to reassert influence in a country that has long been an arena of its regional rivalry with Tehran.

BIDEN - ON BUFFALO SHOOTING

President Joe Biden has called out what he branded the "poison" of white supremacist ideology behind a deadly mass shooting in Buffalo, New York, and said that racism is being stoked for political gain.

Speaking in the city where a white teen is accused of murdering 10 African Americans in a neighborhood supermarket, Biden said: "What happened here is simple and straightforward terrorism. Domestic terrorism."

"White supremacy is a poison running through our body politic and it's been allowed to fester right in front of our eyes," Biden said, condemning "those who spread the lie for power, for political gain and for profit."

In a searing speech that also called for restrictions on ownership of assault-style rifles, Biden listed the victims, fighting tears as he recounted how one of the dead, named as 53-year-old Andre Mackniel, had been buying a birthday cake for his three-year-old son when the gunman entered the store.

Biden's harshest comments were directed at what he described as the "perverse ideology" of white supremacists that police say inspired the shooting.

In a manifesto, the alleged mass killer referred to the so-called "replacement theory" which claims the exist-

ence of a leftist plot to overwhelm the white population with non-white immigrants.

Biden described "a hate that through the media and politics (and) the internet has radicalized angry, alienated, lost and isolated individuals into falsely believing that they will be replaced - that's the word, replaced - by 'the other.'"

"No more. I mean no more. We need to say as clearly and forcefully as we can that the ideology of white supremacy has no place in America," he said to applause.

Payton Gendron, the 18-year-old murder suspect, planned the shooting for months - and scoped out the location ahead of time, according to a stream of posts attributed to him on social media sites.

Gendron first wrote about killing Black people in December and decided to target the Buffalo store based on its large surrounding African American population, according to US media analysis of hundreds of pages of messages.

Earlier Tuesday, Biden and his wife Jill Biden laid a bouquet at a makeshift memorial outside the supermarket where the slaughter took place.

A strong breeze tugged at balloons and flowers piled under a tree while the Bidens paid their respects, the president making the sign of the cross before giving way to a delegation of elected officials laying their own bouquets.

Biden then went into private meetings with relatives of the victims and first responders, where the White House said he was offering "condolences and comfort."

The replacement narrative is a conspiracy theory that has spread from the furthest fringes of society to surprisingly mainstream areas, in regular talk shows on TV.

The White House has steadfastly refused to join some who directly blame several prominent Republicans for promoting the theory and, by extension, bearing responsibility for violent white supremacist attacks.

However, Biden's strong comments in Buffalo left little doubt that he was referring not just to the actual shooter but the powerful voices spreading the ideology.

"Democracy is in danger like it hasn't been in my lifetime," he said. "Hate and fear have been given too much oxygen by those who pretend to love America. They don't understand America."

"Now's the time for people of all races, of every background, to speak up as a majority of America and reject white supremacy," he said. "We can't allow them to destroy the soul of the nation."

AUSTRALIA POLLS

Australia is counting down to its next federal election on May 21. The environmental crisis is high on voters' minds and smaller parties and independents are gaining momentum by riding a wave of disillusionment over the conservative coalition's lack of climate action.

With a hung Parliament looking likely, the minor players could force the traditional parties to do more to tackle global warming. Climate Change is an increasingly hot-button issue since the country's devastating bushfires of 2019-20, and also the rights of women.

Australians will vote for all the seats in the House of Representatives, and just over half the seats in the Senate. The result in the House of Representatives - where the prime minister sits - will decide which party forms the next government.

The Liberal-National Coalition holds 76 seats in the House of Representatives, which makes it the ruling political group.

Labor holds 68, and the seven other seats are held by minor parties and independents. Scott Morrison has been the prime minister since 2018, having taken over from Malcolm Turnbull.

He is being challenged by Labor Leader Anthony Albanese, one of Australia's longest-serving politicians and was briefly deputy prime minister under Kevin Rudd in 2013.

Mr. Albanese has recently edged from the political left to the centre, and is basing his campaign on "small targets" - modest policy proposals.

Australia's economy grew strongly throughout the pandemic, and is projected to grow a further 4.25% this year. The unemployment rate has fallen to 4% - its lowest level since 2008.

However, many people are concerned about the rising costs of fuel, electricity and other goods.

Added to this, Australia has just raised interest rates for the first time in a decade - putting pressure on borrowers and those with mortgages.

Climate Change is an increasing worry because Australia has recently seen some of its worst ever bushfires and floods. Both major parties have committed to net zero emissions by 2050. However, both of them have also pledged support to Australia's coal mining industry. This may push environmentally aware voters towards parties such as the Greens.

The treatment of women is emerging as a major issue in this election campaign. Last year, hundreds of thousands of Australians took part in protests over the treatment of women. A recent review has suggested that one in three staff working in Parliamentary offices have experienced sexual harassment. Mr Morrison made a formal apology on behalf of the Parliament, but his party has been criticized for its response to misconduct allegations.

Labor says it wants to reduce the "boys' club" culture of Parliament, but the party has also faced accusations of bullying.