

Israel FM says cutting contact with EU top diplomat over 'apartheid' remarks

AFP | Jerusalem

Israel's foreign minister said yesterday that he was severing all contact with the European Union's top diplomat Kaja Kallas over reported remarks in which she allegedly compared Israel to the apartheid regime that once ruled South Africa.

Diplomatic relations between Israel and the EU have come under heavy strain since the Gaza war erupted in October 2023, as well as over violence by Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank.

Yesterday, Gideon Saar accused EU foreign policy chief Kallas of "acting obsessively and with blatant unfairness" towards Israel.

"Recently, it was published that during her visit to Mexico, she compared Israel to the racist apartheid regime that existed in South Africa," Saar wrote on X.



Black smoke rises from the area of the Russian oil producer Gazprom Neft's Moscow oil refinery

Ukraine sets Moscow refinery ablaze in biggest attack in years

Zelensky calls strikes a justified response to attacks on Kyiv

Talks on implementing US-Iran deal still planned in Switzerland Friday: Bern

AFP | Geneva

Switzerland confirmed yesterday that "initial negotiations" on implementing a US-Iran memorandum of understanding on ending the Middle East war were planned to take place at a Swiss resort complex on Friday.

"Currently, the plan remains for the United States and Iran, along with the mediators Pakistan and Qatar and other involved countries, to meet tomorrow at the Burgenstock for initial negotiations on the implementation of the agreement," the Swiss foreign ministry said.

The announcement lifted a veil of uncertainty that had hung over the meeting at the Burgenstock luxury hotel complex near Lucerne in central Switzerland, initially announced on Tuesday.

At the time, it had been billed as a signing ceremony of the memorandum of understanding agreed by the United States and Iran to end the regional war that erupted on February 28 with US-Israeli strikes.

● **Moscow targeted by drone swarm**

● **Refinery and buildings hit**

● **Airports temporarily shut down**

● **Seventeen people reportedly wounded**

AFP | Moscow

Ukraine yesterday launched its largest drone attack on Moscow in years, sparking fires in and around the capital, hitting a major oil refinery and forcing evacuations at the country's largest airport, officials said.

At least 17 people were wounded in the strikes, which also set a shopping centre and apartment

building ablaze, according to authorities.

AFP reporters saw large columns of black smoke spreading over the capital's southern skyline in dramatic scenes, while drops of rain mixed with soot fell from the sky.

The attack came as Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted Southeast Asian leaders at a summit in the central city of Kazan, about 700 kilometres (435 miles) east of Moscow.

Putin did not comment on the strikes as he spoke at the summit. Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky said they were an "absolutely justified response" to deadly strikes on Kyiv -- including an attack earlier this week on a landmark cathedral and a UNESCO-protected 11th-century monastery.

He wanted Russians to blame Putin for the consequences of Europe's worst war since WWII.

"The main thing is that the people of Russia begin to feel that it is one man, Putin, who is wag-

ing this war, while ordinary people pay the price for everything," Zelensky told reporters, including AFP.

Moscow has hit Ukraine with daily barrages of missiles and drones. Kyiv said yesterday that one person was killed and nine others were wounded in a Russian attack on the city of Dnipro.

Airport closures

It was the second time this month that Kyiv launched a major attack during an international summit, after striking Saint Petersburg at the start of a landmark economic forum near the city.

All of Moscow's airports were shut for hours, leading to hundreds of flight delays.

The country's busiest -- Sheremetyevo -- announced it had evacuated passengers to "safe locations" during the barrage, before it re-opened at around 11:00 am (0800 GMT).



The attack came while Vladimir Putin hosted Southeast Asian leaders at an ASEAN summit in Kazan, 700 km east of Moscow

without specifying damage to the facility.

Authorities announced they had closed traffic on streets nearby.

Another drone crashed into an apartment building, while drone debris sparked a fire at a shopping centre near the capital's suburbs.

One social media video showed smoke pouring from the upper floors of an apartment block, while a woman behind the camera could be heard weeping in distress.

'Long-range sanctions'

Russian air defences shot down around 180 drones on approach to Moscow, Sobyenin said, while the defence ministry reported it had intercepted more than 500 Ukrainian drones across the entire country overnight.

A separate Ukrainian drone strike on Russia's southern Rostov region killed one person, the region's governor said.

Hegseth blasts NATO allies, says US will review forces in Europe

AFP | Brussels

US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth told NATO yesterday the Pentagon will review its force presence in Europe within six months, as he lashed out at allies over defence spending and their response to the Iran war.

"This will be a real review. It will be designed to ensure that NATO is moving fast and irreversibly toward Europe leading, stepping up to take primary re-

sponsibility for the defence of Europe," Hegseth told a meeting of NATO defence ministers in Brussels.

"It's a review that some countries will fail, and others will pass with flying colours."

The Pentagon chief said the move was also aimed at ensuring US "access, basing and overflight are clearly delineated and assured" after some European nations imposed restrictions on US forces during the Iran war.



US Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth

"It was shameful. These allies, they put America's sons and daughters, our sons and daughters, at risk," he said. "There's no excuse for that."

The United States is piling on the pressure ahead of a NATO summit next month as it seeks to make sure that allies make good on a pledge made last year to massively ramp up defence spending. Hegseth said going forward that Washington paying its dues to cover NATO organisa-

tional running costs -- roughly some \$790 million in 2026 -- would be "contingent" on allies reaching spending targets.

"Where other allies do not spend with urgency, our dues contributions will go down," he said.

The broadside from the US defence chief -- who had initially signalled a conciliatory tone -- will send a jolt through NATO allies concerned over US commitment to defending Europe.