

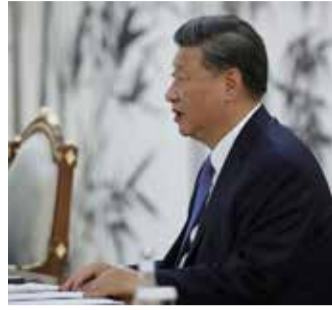
China's Xi skips dinner with Putin, allies as COVID precaution

AFP | Samarkand

Chinese leader Xi Jinping stayed away from a dinner attended by 11 heads of states at a regional security summit in line with his delegation's COVID-19 policy, a source in the Uzbek government told Reuters yesterday.

Xi, who is making his first foreign trip since the beginning of the pandemic, is attending a meeting this week of the China- and Russia-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in the Uzbek city of Samarkand.

However, he was absent from group photographs published late on Thursday when the leaders, including Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Tayyip Erdogan,



Chinese President Xi Jinping talks to Russian President Vladimir Putin during their meeting

went for dinner.

An Uzbek government source confirmed Xi's absence and said the Chinese delegation cited its COVID-19 policy as the reason.

In Beijing, the Chinese foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Third 'armed bank withdrawal' in a week in Lebanon



Lebanese policemen enter a bank from a window that was broken by depositors to exit the bank, in Beirut (file photo)

AFP | Beirut

A Lebanese man carrying a gun and a jerrican of fuel withdrew his frozen savings at gunpoint yesterday, the third such incident in the crisis-hit country this week.

When a branch of the Byblos bank opened in the southern town of Ghaziyeh, a depositor, reported to be in his 50s, stormed the premises with his adult son.

He threatened bank employees with a gun, which a Lebanese TV channel said may have been a toy, and demanded his savings.

"He emptied a jerrican of fuel on the floor," a bank security guard told an AFP reporter.

The man walked away with around \$19,000 and turned himself in to the police moments later as a crowd formed in front of the bank to support

The raids are seen as mostly acts of desperation by Lebanese depositors who do not have criminal records and are trying to settle bills, drawing wide sympathy from the general public

him.

It was the latest in a series of heists in Lebanon, where the savings of depositors have been devalued and trapped in banks for almost three years amid a crippling economic crisis.

They are usually acts of economic desperation by depositors with no criminal record trying to settle bills, and have drawn wide sympathy among the general public.

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India's Modi assails Putin over Ukraine war

Narendra Modi tells Vladimir Putin now 'is not an era of war'

● Xi cautions on foreign meddling

Reuters | Samarkand

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi told Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday that now was not the time for war, directly assailing the Kremlin chief in public over the nearly seven-month-long conflict in Ukraine.

Locked in a confrontation with the West over the war, Putin has repeatedly said Russia is not isolated because it can look eastwards to major Asian powers such as China and India.

But at a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), concerns spilled out into the open.

"I know that today's era is not an era of war, and I have spoken to you on the phone about this," Modi told Putin at a televised meeting in the ancient Uzbek Silk Road city of Samarkand.

As Modi made the remark, Russia's paramount leader since 1999 pursed his lips, glanced at Modi and then looked down before touching the hair on the back of his head.

Putin told Modi that he understood the Indian leader had concerns about Ukraine, but that Moscow was doing



Oleg Kotenko, the Commissioner for Issues of Missing Persons under Special Circumstances uses his smartphone to film the unidentified graves of civilians and Ukrainian soldiers in the recently retaken area of Iziom

everything it could to end the conflict.

"I know your position on the conflict in Ukraine, the concerns that you constantly express," Putin said. "We will do everything to stop this as soon as possible."

He said Ukraine had rejected negotiations. Ukraine has said it will fight until it drives all Russian troops from its land. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says he will never accept a "peace" that allows Russia to keep Ukrainian land.

The war in Ukraine, triggered when Putin ordered troops to invade on Feb. 24, has killed tens of thousands of soldiers, touched off the worst confron-

tation with the West since the Cold War and sent the global economy into an inflationary spiral.

India has become Russia's No. 2 oil buyer after China as others have cut purchases following the invasion.

Putin told Chinese President Xi Jinping on Thursday he understood that Xi had concerns about the situation in Ukraine but praised Beijing's leader for a "balanced" position on the conflict.

'Colour revolutions'

Xi, on his first trip outside China since early 2020, did not mention the war in Ukraine in public.

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I know that today's era is not an era of war, and I have spoken to you on the phone about this

NARENDRA MODI

The Chinese leader said the world had entered a new period of turmoil and that partners such as Putin and Central Asian leaders should prevent foreign powers from instigating "colour revolutions".

"The world has entered a new period of turbulent change, we must grasp the trend of the times, strengthen solidarity and cooperation, and promote the construction of a closer community of destiny with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," Xi said.

"We should support each other's efforts to safeguard security and development interests, prevent external forces from staging colour revolutions, and jointly oppose interference in the internal affairs of other countries under any pretext."

Xi criticised "zero-sum games and bloc politics", a veiled reference to the United States which Beijing has criticised in the past for leaning on allies to counter China's spectacular rise to the status of a superpower in waiting.

Ukraine says hundreds of bodies found in mass burial site

Reuters | Kyiv

Ukrainian officials said they had found a mass burial site with hundreds of bodies in territory recaptured from Russian forces, in what President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called proof of war crimes by the invaders.

Zelenskyy told Reuters in an interview many Ukrainians were also buried in other sites in the northeast and appealed for foreign powers to step up weapons supplies, saying the outcome of the war hinged on their swift delivery.

"As of today, there are 450 dead people, buried. But there are others, separate burials of many people. Tortured people. Entire families in certain territories," Zelenskyy said in his presidential office yesterday.

The head of the pro-Russian administration which abandoned the area last week dismissed the accounts of the burials outside the city of Iziom and accused Ukrainians of stage-managing atrocities. "I have not heard anything about burials in Iziom," Vitaly Ganchev told Rossiya-24 state television.

Outside the city yesterday, men in white overalls were digging out bodies at the site in a forest where around 200 makeshift wooden crosses were scattered among trees. Some 20 white body bags could be seen.

"We are at the site of the mass burial of people, civilians who were buried here, and now



Ukrainian servicemen guard a mass grave site during an exhumation

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As of today, there are 450 dead people, buried. But there are others, separate burials of many people. Tortured people. Entire families in certain territories

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKIY

according to our information they all have the signs of violent death," Kharkiv Governor Oleh Synehubov said at the site.

"There are bodies with hands tied behind (their backs). Each fact will be investigated and will be properly and legally evaluated," Synehubov said.

If the numbers of bodies are confirmed, the site in Iziom, a former Russian front-line stronghold, would be the big-

gest mass burial found in Europe since the aftermath of the 1990s Balkan wars.

Russian President Vladimir Putin did not immediately respond to the accusations, and has yet to comment on the battlefield setback suffered by his forces this month. Ukrainian officials say 9,000 sq km (3,400 sq miles) have been retaken, about the size of the island of Cyprus.

But Putin defended his operations in Ukraine, saying yesterday he had sent his troops into Ukraine to prevent Western plans to break up Russia.

Speaking at a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and discussing the war publicly for the first time since Ukraine routed Russian troops in the Kharkiv region last week, Putin threatened strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure, and said: "We will see how (Ukraine's counteroffensive) ends"



If the numbers of bodies are confirmed, the site in Iziom, a former Russian front-line stronghold, would be the biggest mass burial found in Europe since the aftermath of the 1990s Balkan wars

Russia regularly denies targeting civilians during what it calls its "special military operation" in Ukraine and has said in the past that accusations of human rights abuses are a smear campaign.

In Kupiansk, a northeastern railway junction city whose partial capture by Kyiv's forces on Saturday cut Russia's supply lines and led to the swift collapse at the front, small units of Ukrainian troops were securing a nearly deserted ghost town.

A formerly Russian-occupied police station had been hastily abandoned. Russian flags and a portrait of Putin lay on the floor amid broken glass. Records had been torched. Behind the steel doors of the station's jail cells there was blood on the floor and stains on the mattresses