

EU

'Gender balance'

Tusk urges 'Parliament' confirm Von der Leyen

BRUSSELS, July 4, (RTRS): The outgoing chairman of European Union national leaders on Thursday urged the European Parliament to approve Germany's Ursula von der Leyen as the next head of the bloc's executive after some in the assembly criticised her nomination.

Donald Tusk addressed the assembly after three days of messy talks between the 28 member states finally produced a deal on a new leadership for the EU, with von der Leyen to lead the European Commission and France's Christine Lagarde the European Central Bank.

"For the first time, we achieved perfect gender balance in the top positions. Europe is not only talking about women, it is choosing women," Tusk told the assembly, which will vote on von der Leyen in mid-July.

"I hope it will inspire the European Parliament in its decisions.

The other positions at the helm of the European Parliament and EU diplomacy, as well as Tusk's soon-to-be-vacant post, went to Italian lawmaker David Sassoli, Spain's acting foreign minister Josep Borrell and Belgium's liberal caretaker prime minister, Charles Michel, respectively.

The leaders' tortuous deliberations highlighted the splintering of the pro-European centre in the EU and its implications for future decision-making in the world's largest trading bloc with its half a billion people.

While the EU leaders have given solid representation to women and produced a balance between the conservative, socialist and liberal factions, the Greens, who also did well in May's European Parliament elections have been left out.

There was also no post for any of the bloc's increasingly assertive ex-Communist eastern members.

Tusk said candidates from the east and from Green parties should be represented in the second-tier jobs yet to be filled.

The leaders' summit also bypassed the European Parliament's preferred candidates to lead the Commission, which policies member states' budgets, proposes laws for the bloc and negotiates trade deals around the world.

That upset some in the assembly, heralding an uphill battle for von der Leyen, who needs to be confirmed in her new job by an absolute majority of the 751 EU lawmakers.

"At the end of the day, national interests got the better of the European Parliament," Green lawmaker Philippe Lamberts told the assembly in the French city of Strasbourg.

Von der Leyen can, however, rely on the support of the main centre-right and liberal groupings in the assembly, as well as other lawmakers, meaning she is likely to eventually be confirmed.

She can then begin the challenge of trying to forge common platforms among the increasingly fractious EU member states on a range of testing issues.

Slovak Commissioner Maros Sefcovic told the assembly that these included fighting climate change, agreeing on the bloc's budget for 2021-27 and deepening euro zone integration.

Sefcovic, currently the bloc's energy chief and likely to retain a senior portfolio in the next European Commission, said: "Europe must very clearly commit to a path of climate neutrality by 2050."

A push by the wealthier western EU states has so far been blocked by the poorer east, where economies are more reliant on coal and nationalist governments less willing to shake up the industry and perhaps upset voters.

Also on Von der Leyen's list will be relations with the increasingly assertive United States, China and Russia, and with Britain, so far unable to negotiate its way out of the EU to the satisfaction of its parliament.

The European Union's outgoing chief executive, Jean-Claude Juncker, welcomed his designated replacement in Brussels on Thursday. His spokesman said they had met as "true Europeans who have known each other for years".

Despite an unprecedented surge in the recent European Parliament elections, the Greens were overlooked for the legislature's presidency and indeed for any of the bloc's other top jobs.

The Greens tapped into growing public concerns over global climate risks to win 74 seats in the European Union legislature - up from 52 and their best showing yet.



Von der Leyen



Two bees collecting nectar from a sunflower on a sunny day in Weisskirchen, Germany on July 4. (AP)



Russian President Vladimir Putin is flanked by Archbishop Georg Gaenswein (left), as he arrives in the courtyard of San Damaso for his private audience with Pope Francis at the Vatican on July 4. Putin is scheduled to meet with Pope Francis at the Vatican and Italian leaders. (AP)

Japan

Abe's constitutional reform hopes at stake

Japan upper house poll begins

TOKYO, July 4, (Agencies): Campaigning began on Thursday for Japan's July 21 upper house election, with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's ruling bloc expected to keep a majority but perhaps with fewer seats, clouding hopes of achieving his goal of revising the pacifist constitution.

Abe, who took office in December 2012 pledging to restart the economy and bolster defence, is pushing his Liberal Democratic Party-led coalition as the best bet for political stability and highlighting his diplomatic expertise including warm personal ties with US President Donald Trump.

Abe is also highlighting his call to revise the post-war constitution to further legitimise Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF), as its military is known. "We have pledged in our party platform to inscribe the SDF in the constitution," Kyodo news agency quoted Abe as saying in his first campaign speech in the northeastern region of Fukushima.

Opposition parties are focusing on what they call a threat to voter finances, including a potential hit on spending from an October rise in the sales tax to 10% and strains in the public pension system in the shrinking, fast-

ageing population.

Media surveys show the LDP running well ahead of the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan and others in the fragmented opposition camp but with some tight races.

Upper house elections are held every three years for half the chamber's seats and members' terms run six years. Reforms last year will take to 245 the number of upper house seats, from 242, and 124 will be contested in this round.

Abe has said the goal is for the LDP and its smaller coalition partner, the Komeito, to keep a majority of total seats, so the two parties only need to win 53 seats to add to the 70 they have that are not being contested.

Other party executives have said the ruling bloc should aim to win a majority, or 63, of the seats up for grabs.

Winning a two-thirds majority needed for constitutional revision will be tough, as the ruling bloc and like-minded allies would need to take 86 of the seats up for grabs, according to the Yomiuri newspaper.

Abe has acknowledged he is still haunted by a crushing LDP defeat in a 2007 upper house poll that triggered his resignation two months later, ending a rocky one-year term as premier.

Abe has led his party to victory in five national elections since returning as LDP leader in 2012, and is on track to become Japan's longest-serving premier if he remains in office until November.

But the victories have been aided by a fragmented opposition and low voter turnout, a pattern that could be repeated.

Also:

TOKYO: Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said Wednesday that Japan cannot give South Korean exports preferential treatment because the country is not abiding by an agreement regarding wartime issues that Japan insists have been resolved.

Abe was objecting to criticism over escalating tensions between the two neighbors amid disputes over Koreans forced to work as laborers during World War II.

He was defending a decision announced Monday to impose restrictions on Japan's exports of semiconductor-related materials to South Korea. As of Thursday, exports of some materials used in manufacturing computer parts, including fluorinated polyimides used for displays, must apply for approval for each contract.

later this month, its foreign office said on Thursday, a visit that could help to ease tensions between the two countries.

Trump late last year accused Pakistan of not doing "a damn thing" for the United States despite billions of dollars in aid, angering Islamabad which has long been at odds with Washington over the war in Afghanistan.

By February, Trump said the United States had developed a "much better" relationship and may set up some meetings with Pakistan.

Khan accepted an invitation to visit Washington and will meet Trump on July 22, the foreign office said in a statement.

"The focus will be to refresh the bilateral relationship," it said.

Pakistan and the United States are officially allies in fighting terrorism but they have a complicated relationship.

Washington depends on Pakistan to supply its forces in neighbouring Afghanistan, where 14,000 US troops are deployed, but

ties are strained by allegations that Pakistan offers safe havens to the Afghan Taliban, which Islamabad denies. (RTRS)

**Court sentences 9 to death:** A court in Bangladesh has sentenced nine opposition activists to death and 25 others to life in prison for an attack on a train carrying political leader Sheikh Hasina 24 years ago.



Khan



Hasina

The main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, led by Hasina's archrival and former prime minister Khaleda Zia, rejected Wednesday's verdict, calling it politically motivated.

The current prime minister and then-opposition leader, Hasina was riding a passenger train attacked at Pakshi Rail Station on Sept 23, 1994. The attackers fired shots and hurled bombs at the train, injuring scores of people, though Hasina was unhurt.

The Paban district trial court also Wednesday sentenced 13 other people to 10 years in jail in a case filed under the Explosives Substances Act of 1908.

The prosecution and local Awami League leaders voiced satisfaction the offenders had been convicted even after the completion of the trial took 24 years.

BNP's Pabna unit office secretary Jahurul Islam said all of the convicts are leaders and activists of the party and its associate bodies. (AP)

Subcontinent

**'Retirement age should rise':** The Indian government on Thursday warned in a study that its population is going to start to age and it needs to be prepared to merge schools and raise the retirement age.

While India should be set to benefit from the so-called "demographic dividend" over the next decade as its working population is set to increase by about 9.7 million a year between 2021-31, that will quickly fade as the nation's fertility rate plunges below replacement level.

The conclusions in the study, "India's Demography at 2040: Planning Public Good Provision for the 21st Century," will have major implications for many companies, particularly those that have been eyeing consumer demand from India's young population. It said the number of children in the 5-14 age bracket will decline significantly, leading to the need for school mergers and less focus on building new ones.

Already states such as Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have fewer than 50 students enrolled in more than 40 percent of their elementary schools, according to the study, which was included in the government's annual Economic Survey.

It also said that policymakers need to prepare for an increasing number of elderly people, estimating there will be 239.4 million Indians over the age of 60 in 2041 against 104.2 million in 2011. (RTRS)

**Pakistan PM to meet Trump:** Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan will meet US President Donald Trump in Washington

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