

Catch up: America and Ukraine discuss how to end war; violent clashes in Syria



Ukraine's president, **Volodymyr Zelensky**, said he is “fully committed” to talks between Ukrainian and American officials in Saudi Arabia next week on ending the war. Marco Rubio, the secretary of state, will lead the American delegation. Earlier, Russian strikes on Ukraine killed at least 20 people and wounded dozens, officials said. The president of **Latvia**, Edgars Rinkevics, said that some European countries should introduce conscription to counter Russian aggression.

The new leader of **Syria**, Ahmed al-Sharaa, called for peace and “national unity” after days of violent clashes between the security forces and supporters of **Bashar al-Assad**, the deposed president. More than 1,000 people have been killed overall, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a war monitor. That number includes about 700 Alawite civilians killed execution-style by pro-government forces in the coastal strip, Mr Assad's [sectarian stronghold](#).

Germany's incoming chancellor said he would welcome talks with Britain and France to share their nuclear weapons. However, Friedrich Merz added that any new arrangement would be “supplementing” the existing American nuclear shield in NATO rather than replacing it. Mr Merz also added that he would like to wrap up talks on forming his new coalition government by Easter, April 20th.

Britain's government outlined plans to reform the **civil service**. Pat McFadden, a cabinet minister, told the BBC that under-performing officials would be given incentives to leave and performance-related pay will be introduced. He said overall civil service numbers “would and can become smaller”, but denied any comparisons to Elon Musk's assault on federal bureaucracy in America, arguing that he just wanted a bigger “bang for our buck”.

France, Britain, Germany and Italy said they support an Arab-backed plan for the reconstruction of **Gaza**. The proposal has been rejected by Israel and Donald Trump, who wants to turn the war-ravaged enclave into the “**Riviera of the Middle East**”. Meanwhile Israel and Hamas signaled they were preparing for the next stage of ceasefire negotiations, as mediators sought to extend a fragile truce.

Iran's Supreme Leader, [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](#), said he would not negotiate under “bullying”. His comments follow **Donald Trump's** letter proposing the talks. Mr Khamenei accused America of imposing new demands on Iran's missile programme. During his first term America's president abandoned a nuclear pact with Iran, which he said was too generous, but failed to secure a stricter agreement.

Cyclone Alfred tore through **Australia's** Queensland state, causing flash flooding and leaving more than 300,000 people without power. The storm, which was downgraded to a “tropical low” on Saturday, made landfall near Brisbane, the state's capital. One man

died in floodwaters in the state of New South Wales. Tropical cyclones [are becoming more damaging](#) because of climate change.

Figure of the day: 40%. The percentage by which Britain's government is slashing the aid budget to boost defence spending.
[Read the full story here.](#)

Ukrainian and American officials meet in Saudi Arabia



On Monday Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, will land in Saudi Arabia for a long-planned trip to meet the country's crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman. Mr Zelensky had initially planned to travel to the kingdom last month, but postponed his visit after Saudi Arabia hosted America and Russia in their first high-level peace talks since the invasion of Ukraine. Ukraine was not invited.

Things might be different this time around. Mr Zelensky indicated that his team would meet with [American officials](#) led by Marco Rubio, the secretary of state, in Saudi Arabia to discuss ending the war. Steve Witkoff, Donald Trump's special envoy, says the delegations will discuss a "framework" for peace. Mr Zelensky, however, will not attend the talks. Instead he will focus on strengthening Ukraine's economic ties with Saudi Arabia. Mr Zelensky is planning on signing a raft of economic agreements with other countries in the region, too. If he gets sight of a good peace deal, too, it could be a productive trip.

Germany's export industries fear the worst



On Monday Destatis, Germany's statistics agency, will publish figures for the country's trade balance in January. They will likely show a surplus for the export-oriented economy. Even so, German industry is deeply concerned about Donald Trump's threat to slap a 25% tariff on European imports; America is Germany's most important trade partner. Last week's one-month postponement of similar [tariffs](#) against Canada and Mexico gives scant comfort.

Last year Germany's trade surplus with America reached a record level owing to higher exports and lower imports, a consequence of the weakness of Germany's domestic demand. Mr Trump has singled out for his wrath Germany's car industry, which accounts for a big chunk of the country's exports to America. The Kiel Institute for the World Economy calculated that Mr Trump's proposed tariffs would lead to a decrease in car production of 4%. This would be a big blow at a time when the [German car industry](#), in particular, is struggling.

Ceasefire negotiations between Israel and Hamas



An Israeli delegation will arrive in Doha on Monday for mediated talks with Hamas on a possible extension of the [ceasefire in Gaza](#). The talks were to have started weeks ago, but the Israeli government has demanded that any resolution of the war must include Hamas' expulsion from the coastal strip.

Israel's alternative to extending the two-month ceasefire is a renewed military offensive, which its generals warn will be even more devastating for Hamas than the last. However, before he gives the orders for a new attack, Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, is under pressure from Donald Trump to return first to the talks with Hamas. The American president has taken the cause of the 59 Israeli hostages still being held in Gaza to his heart, and is insisting that Mr Netanyahu and Hamas try again to reach a deal for their release before any more fighting.

A pandemic-era star fades



BioNTech, a German biotech firm, reports its annual results on Monday. The pandemic-era star, which developed the first vaccine against covid-19 with Pfizer, another pharma giant, now faces tougher times as demand for the jabs has plunged. Since 2022 its share price has fallen by 27%, while an index of big pharma firms has climbed 20%. To revive its fortunes, BioNTech is banking on new uses for its [messenger-RNA technology](#), the backbone of its covid vaccine.

The pivot away from covid shots is proving rocky. On March 4th America's drug regulator halted trials of BioNTech's experimental malaria vaccine. A day later, a German court ruled that it and Pfizer infringed a covid vaccine patent held by Moderna, an American rival. The Trump administration is another worry. The health secretary, Robert F. Kennedy junior, is a prominent [vaccine sceptic](#). But analysts believe he cannot unilaterally change vaccine guidelines without legislative approval. BioNTech, and its investors, will be hoping they are right.

Watches get smart on health



Smartwatches of the type sold by Apple, maker of the iPhone, are a status symbol. But new research suggests they could help save lives, too. Scientists at Aalto University, Stanford University and Texas A&M University say the wrist-worn gizmos could help to quell the spread of [pandemic-causing viruses](#) such as SARS-CoV-2, which was behind covid-19. Using data such as heart rate and skin temperature gathered by smartwatches from prior peer-reviewed studies, the researchers concluded that devices can detect with 88% accuracy whether someone is suffering from covid-19 four to five days before symptoms appear. For flu, accuracy rises to 90%, 24 hours before symptoms.

Pre-existing data suggest people reduce social contact dramatically once they know they're ill. Isolation helps pandemics fizzle out. So when the next global virus arrives, the researchers say, governments should consider sending everyone a smartwatch. Starting at \$230, Apple Watches aren't cheap—but for governments they could prove cheaper than other interventions.

Daily quiz



The Economist

We will serve you a new question each day this week. On Friday your challenge is to give us all five answers and, as important, tell us the connecting theme. Email your responses (and include mention of your home city and country) by 1700 GMT on Friday to QuizEspresso@economist.com. We'll pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners on Saturday.

Monday: What must be at least 50 metres long and 25 metres wide to be used in the Olympics?

**I don't go out of my way to be outrageous,
I just go out of my way to look at things.**

Dave Allen