EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

In dire straits

Amidst the rising death toll of Palestinian civilians, the matter of humanitarian aid delivery remains unsolved. Tensions over the possible spread of warfare grow in the region as international players attempt to mediate.

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No excuse for war crimes

In the context of the bombing of a hospital in Gaza that left hundreds of Palestinians dead and sparked immense grief and outrage internationally, US President Joe Biden traveled to Israel on Wednesday. *La Libre* calls it the "most perilous trip of his mandate", considering anger is reaching new heights after the strike that occurred on Tuesday. The shooting sparked numerous condemnations and angry demonstrations in Tehran, Amman, Istanbul, Tunis and Beirut, while both Israel and Palestine are blaming the other for the tragic bombing. The Palestinian Red Crescent denounced a "war crime", which caused "hundreds" of civilian victims, "including women, children, health personnel". UN Secretary General António Guterres called for an "immediate humanitarian ceasefire" while European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stressed that "nothing excuses a strike on a hospital full of civilians," adding that "those responsible will have to be held accountable". Iranian President Ebrahim Raïssi declared a day of "public mourning" on Wednesday and predicted that the attack on the hospital would backfire on Israel and its allies. Biden, who is in Israel to support the US ally and to try to unblock the entry of emergency aid to Gaza, said he was "outraged and deeply saddened by the explosion".

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Port in the storm

The Rafah crossing on the Egyptian border with Gaza, now refuge for around a million Palestinians who were forced to flee their homes, according to UN estimates, remains the only possible access point for bringing in the urgently needed humanitarian aid, reports *Westdeutsche Zeitung*. During an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths underscored the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza, pointing out the extreme water shortage and crumbling health care system that suffered another unthinkable blow as the Al-Ahli Clinic was hit — an attack widely condemned as a violation of international humanitarian law. Following the visit of US President Biden to Israel and diplomatic talks, Egyptian President Al-Sisi expressed readiness to allow up to 20 trucks through the Rafah border crossing, allegedly damaged earlier by Israeli shelling and in need of repairs, while the Israeli government declared it would not hinder the delivery of food, water and medicine to Gaza, provided it would not reach Hamas. The growing concerns of an escalation due to continued Israeli shelling of Gaza and Hezbollah positions in Lebanon, resumed shelling of Israeli towns by Hamas, and numerous incidents in the West Bank only exacerbate the urgency of the aid delivery.

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Overstepping boundaries

An emergency European Council summit on Tuesday was convened for more than a statement of continued support for Israel and Ukraine, writes *Wyborcza* – there has been consistent division amongst EU Member States about how to respond to current events in the Middle East, as some, including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, initially failed to call on Israel to respect humanitarian law in their assault on Gaza. Ireland, France, EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell and European Council President Charles Michel have called out the president for overstepping her remit by involving herself in EU foreign policy and applying a German sensitivity to Israel that may not be universal. The summit also finalised the EU's statement, confirming Israel's right to defend itself but with an emphasis on rule of law and protecting innocent lives – according to one official, "the maximum of what could be achieved" from the EU27. Von der Leyen's side argues that she should be more discreet with her approach to Israel rather than resorting to "megaphone diplomacy" against an ally. EU aid funds will continue to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, under scrutiny for irregularities or terrorist involvement. Officials have not confirmed details of EU citizens held hostage by Hamas but some say that it is the largest hostage crisis in recent European history. Meanwhile, the EU continues to lobby Egypt to accept Gazan refugees.

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On the warpath

Following the order to leave northern Gaza issued by the Israeli authorities to over 1.1 million Palestinians on Friday, IDF tanks, soldiers and heavy equipment have already been positioned on the border with the Palestinian territory, waiting for a "political decision" to begin a large-scale ground offensive in the Gaza Strip, according to *Tageblatt*. Amidst growing concerns over the wider spread of the warfare in the region, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan noted key risks currently posed by the involvement of Iran and the emergence of a second front between Israel and Lebanon. Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian of Iran, which supports Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the pro-Iran Hezbollah militia in Lebanon with money and weapons, stated he could not guarantee non-intervention if Israel goes through with the ground offensive. On the Lebanese side, Hezbollah militia had claimed responsibility for several rocket attacks on northern Israel in recent days while Israel had attacked targets in the south of the country. Despite the Arab allies' wish to prevent further escalation of the war, communicated by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken after numerous meetings with politicians in the region, the deterioration of the humanitarian situation and growing international criticism of Israel's disproportionate attacks on Palestinian civilians only adds fuel to the fire, with the US deploying a second aircraft carrier to the eastern Mediterranean Sea and Saudi Arabia halting the rapprochement talks with Israel.

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The European Movement International
Place du Luxembourg 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

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