

[Transcript] Global News Podcast / Ukraine to strengthen positions in embattled Bakhmut

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I'm Andrew Peach, and in the early hours of Tuesday, the 7th of March, these are our main stories. In Ukraine, President Zelensky says he'll strengthen the defence of Bakhmut, despite reports it's about to fall to Russian troops. Turkish opposition parties agree on a single candidate to challenge President Erdogan in elections due in May. And we have a special report on the heroin epidemic in the Seychelles. Also in this podcast, still no education for women and girls in Afghanistan. The Taliban's intentional and calculated policy is to repudiate the human rights of women and girls and to erase them from public life. And we remember the last original member of Linnardskinnet who's died. It's starting in Ukraine where the battle rages on for the city of Bakhmut, despite it having little strategic significance. The head of the Russian Wagner mercenary says they don't have enough ammunition to take control of the city. A spokesman for one of the Ukrainian brigades, Miktha Shandiber, appeared to agree. It is clear that the enemy faces a shortage of ammunition, but he still has some. He wants to destroy our infrastructure, logistics, the paths and accesses to our positions, but he does not have enough resources to do it. On Monday, the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky said he'd instructed his commanders to find the forces to strengthen their positions in Bakhmut. So what's happening on the ground there? Our diplomatic correspondent James Landel gave me this update from Kiev. It's very hard fighting at the moment. There have been reports in recent days that some Russian units have been making assaults with little more than their shovels. They have these small shovels for digging trenches, but they also have sharpened edges that are used as weapons. So clearly the combat is very, very close. There are Russian positions in the north, the south and the east. Ukrainian forces hold some of the center and they have access to the west. There was a meeting in Kiev with President Zelensky and his senior military commanders, and afterwards the president's office put out a statement saying that the generals made the case for continuing the defense of Bakhmut and for shoring up their defensive positions there. So the situation continues as it has done for well over six months now. And it's interesting that the Ukrainians clearly feel there's a reason to hang on in Bakhmut. Do you know what that might be about? Well, the Ukrainians clearly want to use this battle not just to defend territory, not just to deny Moscow some symbolic victory, but also to damage the Russian war machine. They want to inflict

so many casualties on the Russians here that it diminishes their ability and their capability of making further offensives down the line later on this year. Thousands of Russian soldiers are dying to try and seize this city. Many Ukrainian soldiers are dying in its defense, but at the moment the Ukrainians believe the ratio of those casualties is in their favor, and so they think at the moment, at least, it is worthwhile sticking with it. It's a fine balance they're going to have to make.

What about this suggestion from the leader of the Wagner Mercenaries, the Afghani Progosian, that they're running out of ammunition? What do we make of that? It's very hard to know what's happening

on the ground and a lot should be taken with a pinch of salt. But Afghani Progosian has long been critical of the Russian high command in Moscow. Today he's been very vocally criticizing them for the lack of ammunition for his troops. They have long been problems with Russia's supply chains of getting ammunition from distant parts up to the battlefield. You must remember that these mercenaries are at the heart of this fighting, and if they ultimately fail to take back mood, that is a huge reputational risk for Mr Progosian and the Wagner group. So he wants that ammunition

so that he can come in and finish the job, and he's making it very clear to his supposed military masters in Moscow that he hasn't got enough and he wants some more. James Landale with me from Kiev. Opposition parties in Turkey have agreed a joint candidate to compete against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in elections due in May. He is Kamal Kulic-Darulu, the 74-year-old leader of the Secular Republican People's Party. Here's Danny Aberhardt. Much is at stake in Turkey's forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. Kamal Kulic-Darulu will head a disparate anti-Erdogan alliance that's promised to return Turkey to a parliamentary system. In 2018 Turkey switched to the current presidential model, which gave Mr Erdogan sweeping new powers. Opponents accuse him of growing authoritarianism, warning that Turkey risks becoming a dictatorship.

Mr Erdogan, whose roots lie in political Islam, has led the country for twenty years. Polls suggest the race will be tight. The two main contenders offer radically different visions, in substance, but also style. On one hand, the fiery charismatic Mr Erdogan, on the other, the quietly spoken Mr Kulic-Darulu, nicknamed Turkey's Gandhi, who even some of his allies fear lacks drawing power. The Seychelles is known as a tropical paradise, a collection of islands in the Indian Ocean, with a multi-million dollar tourist industry. But the country is battling a drugs epidemic. Based on population, the country has the biggest heroin problem in the world. The Seychelles government is taking a hard line stance, but the problems persist. Joseph Fadi Banan is a former drug user who's lived on the islands all his life, and given the BBC rare access to his community. That's my friend Mimi. We are at the cemetery, visiting her son's grave for the first time. She tells me she tries not to show her pain, but today it overwhelms her.

Rashid was a heroin user, and at just 20 years old, he died of liver and kidney failure, most likely caused by contaminated needles. She says the doctor did everything he could, but Rashid died in front of her. Mimi is a heroin user too, and she's now smoking crack cocaine as well. Seychelles may have a reputation for fancy hotels and luxury living, but 25% of islanders live below the poverty line. For many, drugs are an escape. According to the agency for the prevention of drug abuse and rehabilitation, 10% of the Seychelles population is dependent on heroin. It's estimated that two tons of heroin is trafficked into the country every year. Most of it comes from Afghanistan via Iran. Smugglers bring it in on small boats. It's difficult to

police. Seychelles has more than a million square kilometers of territorial waters. This is Seychelles president, Waverham Calhoun. The drug situation is very bad. At this point in time, per capita, as far as consumption of heroin is concerned, Seychelles is number one in the world. And this is not a statistic that gives me personally great pleasure. Communities, villages cannot be controlled by the drug lords, by drug addicts. We have to protect our children. This is why we have taken the approach that we need to disrupt those activities. It's an all-out war on drugs in order for me to save our people. Rehabilitation is a key part of the fight against substance abuse. But in recent years, all residential rehab centers here have closed. Centers like the one that helped me recover have come back to visit. The place is now deserted.

There are rows of empty beds, and I find the one which used to be mine.

This year is exactly nine years since I left the placement.

The memories come flooding back. I remember how tough it was when I first walked in, so today I'm sitting here, I'm off heroin. Trust me, it's a feeling.

I can't even express. It's too much. It's too much. It's too much.

Back then, these rehab centers were helping hundreds of people. But with these programs now closed, there's very little support for those still battling dependency. The president has promised to build a new rehab center. But with around one in 10 Seychelles people trapped in the cycle of dependency, it's a problem that's not easily fixed.

Joseph Faddi-Banan, a former drug user. If you'd like to hear more on that story, you can find the full film by going to the BBC News Africa YouTube page and searching for Seychelles,

Heroin and Me. An unforgivable crime is how Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali-Hammadi, has described the poisoning of thousands of women and girls in schools and universities across the country. His comments, the first he's made publicly about the attacks, have now forced the authorities in Iran to take the poisoning seriously after refusing to acknowledge them. The poisonings began in November in the city of Qom and left hundreds in hospital with breathing problems, nausea and fatigue. At least 5,000 students have been targeted. On Monday, Ayatollah Hamani spoke in Tehran. If there are individuals behind this, the relevant governing bodies, enforcement and information bodies must pursue this and find leads in this crime.

The culprits must face the toughest of punishments.

I spoke to Baron Abassi of BBC Persian and asked her what that punishment could look like.

He said that those involved in this, they must be arrested and brought to justice, and they must be handed down the maximum punishment, which could be the death penalty.

He said that those responsible will not be offered any amnesty. But up to now, the officials have tried to play down all the cases and all the reports of poisoning, saying that it's nothing serious and nobody has died, and that maybe students are just trying to avoid their final exams by pretending to be sick. It seems like a massive shift from the authorities trying to say there isn't really a problem to the supreme leader, suddenly owning the fact that the problem is there and the problem is large. Exactly. Heartbreaking videos of school children being sick has been circulating on social media and pressure is growing on officials to show some kind of responsibility. Yesterday, the president said that the enemies of Iran, as he called it, and also Persian language media based abroad, are responsible for this, and they're blaming, as usual, the foreign enemies of Iran as they describe it.

What we've discussed so far is what's being said about it. What's being done about it? So far, they've said that we are investigating. They haven't published any reports of any kind about what this so-called poison is or how the school children have been getting sick. They said that they're investigating. A parliamentary committee has been formed to follow this up, but we haven't had any official reports about this. They've said that they haven't had any clues. But this has fueled speculation on social media, saying that maybe some hotline groups close to the regime is responsible for this because of the female students' major role in anti-government protests over the past few months. They've said that maybe it's payback for the role in the protest. Maybe some hotline groups are just trying to prevent female students from going to school and they're copying the Taliban in Afghanistan or Boko Haram in Nigeria, who are hotline slummi groups who are opposed to the education of girls.

Baran Abassi of BBC Persian. South Africa's president, Sibyl Ramaphosa, has appointed a former mayor, Cosensho Ramagopa, to the newly created position of electricity minister in an effort to address the country's long-running power shortages. Here's our Africa editor, Mary Harper. The new minister faces two vast challenges. Power cuts have up to 12 hours a day. The government has declared a national disaster and allegations of high-level corruption at the state-run energy giant Escon. The company's former chief executive recently told the media that senior politicians were looting the firm. The rolling power cuts are strangling the economy. Some say people's fury over the blackouts might even cost the ANC next year's election. Are the new rules on gene editing introduced by China strict enough to stop irreversible damage to human life? A number of scientists, along with legal and ethical experts gathering in London, think they're not. Here's our science correspondent, Palab gosh. Gene editing enables researchers to make precise alterations to a person's DNA at an early embryonic stage, but it's not yet been proven to be safe to use in practice. There was an outcry at claims five years ago by Chinese scientists that he'd created children that had been genetically altered to be resistant to HIV. Dr. Heijian Q was in prison for three years. Chinese authorities have recently introduced strict rules for the use of the technology, setting out requirements for ethical approval, supervision and inspections. But Dr. Joi Zhang, an expert on controls on gene technology in China, told delegates at the Gene Editing Meeting in London that she was concerned that Dr. Hei was able to set up clinical research on another inherited disorder a year after his release from prison. We could actually be looking at a quite simple case of regulatory negligence. Who is keeping an eye on him and what kind of approval he has and needs to seek? Any talk of accountable research or good governance in China would be hypocritical. A spokesperson for the Chinese Academy of Science told the conference that the country had accelerated the introduction of new laws on gene editing and they were in accordance with international standards. But other scientists at the meeting backed the view that China's regulation of gene editing may still fall short, particularly when it comes to keeping an eye on private companies. Others though say it's not an issue only for the Chinese and Western nations too need to keep a close eye on how bioscience firms forge ahead with this exciting but controversial technology.

Still to come in the Global News Podcast?

That's a pity. They only have a confusion I think for the consumer between the real Grier and not so good cheeses with not a lot of taste and a lot of identity.

The US ruling that strips Grier she is of its protected status in Switzerland and France. Since seizing power in 2021 the Taliban have been clamping down on the rights of Afghan women and girls depriving many of an education. A report presented to the United Nations Human Rights Council has said the treatment of females could amount to a crime against humanity. Richard Bennett is the UN's special rapporteur for Afghanistan.

The Taliban's intentional and calculated policy is to repudiate the human rights of women and girls and to erase them from public life. It may amount to the international crime of gender persecution for which the authorities can be held accountable and it is tantamount to gender apartheid.

On Monday universities reopened after a winter break with female students barred from returning. A South Asia regional editor and Barathon aetherargeon told me why.

The Taliban have maintained that they need to create a suitable environment before they can reopen schools especially for teenage girls and also for the universities. They were initially accusing students of not adhering to the strict dress code as well as were not being accompanied by a male relative when they were coming to the university. But many of these students they have rejected this argument saying that they always followed the very strict dress code imposed by the Taliban. But there are some opinion that the hard-line clerics who are very close to the Taliban are supreme leader. They were not in favor of women getting modern education even though the Taliban are saying that they're not ruling out completely reopening at some point but they have not made it very clear when this would happen and in what form this would happen. And when we say create a suitable environment do we know what that looks like and is there any evidence of efforts going on to actually make that happen?

The Taliban have not made it very clear but what we understand is that they want to change some syllabus. They want to adhere to the very hardcore Islamic values and principles which according to the Taliban which are valid. But if you look at other Muslim countries like Turkey or Pakistan or Malaysia the students are going to the universities without any restrictions. So this seems to be the Taliban's version of Islam hardcore Islam saying that women cannot go to the universities under the current circumstances. But you know the universities changed rules according to Taliban's wishes after they seized power in August 2021. For example male and female students were segregated and there were even separate entrances for male students

and female students and next level they were even being taught for example like female teachers teaching female students. So they even had different sessions like one in the morning for male students, one in the afternoon for female students. The universities, the administrations as well as the students going through this extraordinary length of accommodating the Taliban's conditions but the Taliban are yet to spell out exactly what they want and that is why the international community has been putting a lot of pressure on the Taliban and saying that this cannot be accepted. You cannot deny the basic right of women, girls getting education but the Taliban are not budging at the moment. And Barasen Ethiraj in reporting, Saudi activists have expressed concern over an Islamist preacher who's publicly stated that what's happening in Saudi Arabia is contrary to the Islamic values on which the country was founded. Let's get the story from our Arab Affairs editor, Sebastian Usher. In a video posted on Twitter a few days ago, Imad al-Mubayyad expressed his opposition to the opening up of Saudi Arabia

of a kind of entertainment that not so long ago would never have been permitted there. His comments were framed as advice for the crown prince and the head of the Saudi entertainment authority. Such dissent from the current line in the kingdom is dangerous. Mr. Al-Mubayyad swiftly posted another video rowing back on his criticism. That was four days ago. Activists say he's not been heard from since. Saudi securities announced that an unidentified man has been arrested for posting video content, which it said contained false information that undermined public order. Activists believe the unnamed man is Imad al-Mubayyad. If so, it would be another instance of how severely criticism of government policy is punished under the leadership of Muhammad

bin Salman. The World Bank has suspended talks over its future engagement with Tunisia following President Kai Said's recent criticism of sub-Saharan migrants. The head of the bank, David Malpass,

said Mr. Said's remarks had triggered racially motivated harassment and even violence.

At a U.S. State Department media briefing in Washington on Monday, spokesman Ned Price said the Biden administration was also concerned by the Tunisian leader's remarks. These remarks are not in keeping with Tunisia's long history of generosity and hosting and protecting refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, and were disturbed by reports of violence against these very migrants. We urge Tunisian authorities to meet their obligations under international law. We encourage Tunisian authorities to coordinate with international humanitarian organizations to facilitate the safe and voluntary return of migrants who wish to return to their countries of origin.

Over the weekend, thousands of Tunisians defied an official ban on protests to call on the president to release recently-detained critics and retract his controversial remarks on migrants. Really Clubby spoke to the freelance journalist Alicia Valkman in Tunis and asked about the police response to those demonstrations. There was a very heavy police presence. It wasn't

actually aggressive, but one of the chiefs of staff took a loud hailer and pretty much tried to shout down the crowd and the speakers. There was a lot of debate and a lot of people were crowding around and trying not to cooperate with the police. The police were trying to disperse people and it sort of dissipated. But the thing is that people are getting quite fed up with this sort of endless cycle of arrests and crackdowns. And at the same time, the president is finding absolutely no solutions for the economy whatsoever. Speaking of the protests, the involvement of the influential labour union over the weekend, is it significant? Tell us about that. Yes, there was a very large demonstration on Saturday by the labour union UGTT. It was estimated to be about between four and

six thousand. And this is the first time in a long time that the UGTT have actually marched. They've been somewhat ambivalent toward Kayside over the last 18 months. But this is the first time that they've really amassed a big amount of their membership to march against the president and demand that he release some of their imprisoned members and that he does something about the economy, which is just going into a complete spiral and causing Tunisian's extreme hardship. Is the president listening though? Is this pressure likely to evoke any reaction from him? He's certainly listening, but he's refusing to enter into dialogue whatsoever. He's basically concentrating on taking more and more power into his hands and eliminating opposition. That seems to be his go-to political plan. It's all about get rid of anybody who criticizes him, anybody who's competition, but still do absolutely nothing about actually running the country.

Last week, I spoke to a student who was affected by the crackdown on migrants. And the president, we know, has blamed illegal migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, but this student was there legally. What's the reaction to this in Tunisia? It's split. There's certainly, unfortunately, a very racist vein within the country, and there is a very strong racist nationalist movement through the Nationalist Party. However, a lot of people have rallied in support of Black sub-Saharan people because a lot of people there working legally, studying legally, and one section are economic migrants and undocumented, mostly because it's incredibly difficult to get documented.

A former Mexican beauty queen and her partner who fled Spain after stealing 45 bottles of fine wine had been captured in the Balkans and sentenced to prison. The wine was valued at over \$1.7 million. Here's David Bamford. The couple, named only as Tatiana and Estanislao, had checked into the exclusive Atreus Hotel in the Spanish city of Caceres. After enjoying a 14-course restaurant meal, they raided the wine cellar and fled before dawn. At least one of the bottles of wine, stuffed into their backpacks, had a unique 19th-century vintage, total value over \$1.75 million. After a nine-month police hunt across Europe, they were arrested at the Croatian border and returned to Spain. The court sentenced them to four years each in prison. The town of Gruyere in Switzerland will forever be associated with cheese, but now the US appeals court has declared that Gruyere is a generic style of cheese and so can come from anywhere, not just Gruyere. It's like cheddar, which is unprotected too. Herve Hallen organises cheese tastings in Paris, so what does he make of that decision? That's a pity. They only have a confusion, I think, for the consumer between the real Gruyere that is made with raw milk, with local races, or very beautiful cheeses that has an identity and preserve the traditions. And we will find some, I'd say, not-so-good cheeses made with pasteurized milk with not a lot of taste and not a lot of identity in it.

Sean Amores is the senior vice president of the National Milk Producers' Federation in the US and has been talking to Evan Davis. We're thrilled that the judges in the end reached the conclusion that Gruyere is generic and so consumers won't be facing elevated price costs moving forward because you'll continue to be able to have that product supplied from a variety of companies here in this market. Where do they make American Gruyere? Some in Wisconsin. There's some produced in other Upper Midwest areas, including some also in the

Northeast. Can you tell the difference between a Swiss Gruyere and a Wisconsin version?

I'd say I can tell they're all Gruyere quite clearly. Anybody's cheese is going to taste a bit different from one company to another. I think you'd probably find the same between different cheddar's made by different British producers in the exact same way.

It's good you mentioned cheddar, of course, which has been a generic cheese now for longer than anyone remembers. But Europe is full of these so-called geographical indications, which are restrictions on who can call Parma ham, Parma and Parmesan cheese and the like.

Is the US a bit more reluctant to adopt these European geographical names?

Well, I'd say the US is more in favor of open competition and a fair landscape and preserving that for generic products. You mentioned, of course, the geographical indications are broadly enamored across much of Europe. Frankly, we think that other EU countries would do well to take a page out of the United Kingdom's book on this. You mentioned earlier that cheddar isn't restricted. It hasn't been. Anytime we've talked to our British counterparts, they've said that they have no plans to restrict it in the future. We think that's a pretty common sense approach.

It's the one we take in the US for a lot of these other varieties, whether it's Gruyere today or Parmesan or feta or cheddar. That approach lets companies compete for consumers' taste buds on the merits of their products, not on how successful they are at getting a policy monopoly on use of the term. It's part of the problem here, Shauna, that America doesn't make as good a cheese as Europeans. There aren't geographical indications that would be worth anything in Europe from the United States. Craft sliced cheese is just not going to cut it when you compare it to beautiful European cheeses. Those are fighting words. Happy you're on the line with me and not some of our cheesemakers who would take that quite personally. We make an awful lot of fantastic cheese in the US. Certainly some of it is cheese slices for use on things like burgers or other food service uses, but a large amount of it as well is just as good and frankly goes toe to toe in international competitions with European cheeses as well. No, this is not a matter of quality being only on one side of the Atlantic. It's a matter of one side of the Atlantic standing for free competition and the other standing for restrictions and policy monopolies to advantage one special group of producers. We make a lot of fantastic products, a number of high quality cheddars. Parmesan, particularly in Wisconsin, that's in the past even beat out Italian Parmigiano Reggiano in a global competition for best Parmesan and a number of other products, whether that's Spantina, Asiago, Feta, Munster, Monterey Jack. It really is a pretty diversified industry here.

Which is your favorite cheese, Shanna? I'm partial to Parmesan.

Shaul and Morris with Evan Davis. He was the last remaining original member of the American rock band Linnard Skinnet. Now, Gary Rossington has died at the age of 71. The guitarist had appeared on all their albums and co-wrote Sweet Home Alabama in 1974. Our media correspondent, David Silato, looks back at his life. Originally conceived as a way of giving the vocalist, Bonnie Van Zant a bit of a rest, the epic Free Bird became the band's defining song, and it began with Gary Rossington's Sly Guitar.

Gary Rossington from Jacksonville, Florida was one of the original members of the band, which have been named after a PE teacher who had objected to his long hair. Their big break was supporting the hoe. It was only two weeks, but it just changed everything for us. We never seen so many people, especially the play in front of them. It was like crazy. That's when we first started drinking. We never drank, and it scared us so bad we started drinking and we got a bottle from

the hoe. It was his riff that turned into another of their hits, Sweet Home Alabama.

But this was a group that had more than its share of misfortune. Gary Rossington was in the 70s seriously injured in a plane crash that killed three members of the band. There was also a near fatal car crash, drug addiction, and in recent years heart attacks. But he continued to perform. His last concert was in February, ending of course with Free Bird.

And that's all from us for now. There will be a new edition of Global News to download later.

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