Blinken in Brussels as Trump win raises alarm over Ukraine

AFP – US top diplomat Antony Blinken will meet with NATO and EU officials Wednesday to urgently discuss ramping up support for Ukraine before Donald Trump reclaims the White House – potentially jeopardising future aid.

After landing in Brussels late Tuesday, the secretary of state's one-day visit will see him meet NATO chief Mark Rutte, European Union diplomacy boss Josep Borrell, his successor Kaja Kallas and Ukraine's Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiga.

The emergency trip comes as Trump's election victory, coupled with a political crisis in Germany, heightens fears about the future of assistance for Ukraine at a key point in the fight against Russia's invasion.

Trump has in the past voiced admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin and scoffed at the $175 billion the United States committed for Ukraine since the start of the war in 2022.

The 78-year-old tycoon, who will be inaugurated on January 20, spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky after winning re-election following a first stint as president between 2017 and 2021.

He has boasted he can end the war in a day, likely by forcing concessions from Ukraine, although his newly named national security advisor, Mike Waltz, said Trump may also pressure Putin.

The Washington Post reported the Republican leader also held a phone call with Putin and discouraged an escalation by Russia. The Kremlin denied the report.

The US election came as Ukraine was already bracing for the impact of thousands of North Korean troops whom US intelligence agencies say have been sent to fight for Russia – a potentially major escalation in the conflict.

US media reported Trump might pick Republican Senator Marco Rubio to replace Blinken as secretary of state.

Rubio is seen as more supportive of Kyiv but has also said Washington should show "pragmatism" rather than sending billions of dollars more in weapons as the war hit a "stalemate".

– 'As long as it takes' –

The Biden administration has made clear it plans in its remaining weeks to push through the more than $9 billion of remaining funding appropriated by Congress for weapons and other security assistance to Ukraine.

Mark Cancian, senior advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, expected the United States to focus in particular on sending vehicles, medical supplies and small-arms ammunition, which Ukraine needs and the United States can provide.

"Between now and the end of the administration, they're going to try to ship everything they can that's available," Cancian said.

Despite Kyiv's pleas it seems unlikely, however, that Washington will lift its veto on Ukraine's use of long-range missiles to strike deep into Russian territory.

Both Ukraine and Moscow have seen a spike in drone attacks. The New York Times reported that Russia has amassed 50,000 troops, including North Koreans, to attempt to dislodge Ukrainian forces who seized parts of Russia's Kursk region several months ago.

“The situation on the battlefield is difficult. And that’s why we must keep working every day,” Kallas, who is to take over as the EU’s top diplomat next month subject to parliament’s green light, told lawmakers on Tuesday.

“Today, tomorrow and for as long as it takes and with as much military, financial and humanitarian help as needed.”

Trump in his first term aggressively pushed Europe to step up defence spending and questioned the fairness of the NATO transatlantic alliance – robustly defended by Biden.

“Whatever approach the US leadership takes towards Ukraine, Europe will have to step up, and we will have to take the lead in supporting Ukraine’s defense efforts and macro financial stability,” said Olena Prokopenko of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

“Unfortunately, Donald Trump’s win comes at arguably the worst possible time in terms of Europe’s political and economic shape and its ability to promptly coordinate”.

Reports: AFP