



Floods have inundated towns along the rivers Elbe and Danube with many people forced to evacuate as the water reached levels not seen since the Middle Ages. In the Czech Republic, zoos have been evacuated and thousands have fled their homes ahead of rising floodwaters. PHOTOS: AFP

Turkey's deputy PM acts to defuse protest

Roy Gutman

Istanbul | With Turkey's combative Prime Minister **Recep Tayyip Erdogan** overseas, his deputy has apologised for what he cited as a heavy-handed use of force against youthful protesters in Istanbul, which has led to four days of clashes across the country.

Acting Prime Minister **Bulent Arinc** also ordered security authorities to stop using tear gas except in self-defence and, acting on the instructions of Turkish President **Abdullah Gul**, took responsibility on behalf of the government for the calamitous handling of a peaceful protest.

The reaction of the protesters to the destruction of Gezi Park near Istanbul's Taksim Square to build a shopping mall was "legitimate, logical and justified", Arinc said on Tuesday. "Excessive use of violence against people who were acting out of environmental concerns was wrong and unjust."

"I apologise to those citizens," he added, promising to meet the organisers of the original protest and to support a referendum by the Istanbul municipality on the future of the project.

Arinc's remarks were in startling contrast with Erdogan's, who had

Key points

Turkey's deputy Prime Minister has apologised for heavy-handed use of force.

Two of the country's trade unions have launched strikes in sympathy.

denounced the protesters a day earlier as looters and extremists who were operating "arm-in-arm with terrorists". It was unknown whether Erdogan had been consulted beforehand.

Arinc also made it clear that the government was aware that many of the policies Erdogan's Islamist Justice and Development Party had championed during his 10 years as prime minister, including recent restrictions on the sale of alcohol, were unpopular in the country's large cities. "I would like to express this in all sincerity: everyone's lifestyle is important to us, and we are sensitive to them," he said.

Arinc's speech came as two major trade unions launched nationwide sympathy strikes with the demonstra-

tors. The Confederation of Public Workers' Unions, which represents workers in education, health, municipal services, energy, mining and transport, began its two-day strike with a march up the Istiklal, Istanbul's main pedestrian street, toward Taksim Square, the main venue for political rallies in the country. Members chanted, "Taksim is ours, Istanbul is ours", and "government, resign".

The Confederation of Progressive Workers Unions announced a walkout in solidarity with its sister union beginning Wednesday. The two unions have goals that are completely different from those of the organisers of the Gezi Park protest, with the Confederation of Public Workers' Unions primarily concerned about job security.

The question that couldn't be answered Wednesday night was whether Erdogan was on board when his deputy apologised on his behalf. In an attempt to avert Erdogan's wrath Arinc clearly sought cover by going first to Gul, who has won wide public respect for his common-sense approach to major political issues.

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Death toll rises as record floods ravage central Europe

Kim Traill

Vienna | Much of central Europe remains in a state of emergency as record high rainfall in the region continues to swell rivers, causing massive floods and ravaging low-lying areas of Germany, Switzerland, Poland, Austria and the Czech Republic.

There have been at least 11 reported deaths as a result of the floods, with many more missing as floodwaters in some places reach levels not seen since the Middle Ages.

Slovakia and Hungary are now bracing themselves as the bursting Danube surges towards Bratislava and Budapest, while residents of Saxony in eastern Germany are reinforcing flood-defence barriers in preparation for the Elbe River to flood the historic city of Dresden.

The southeast Bavarian town of Passau, straddling a confluence of three rivers – the Ilz, Inn and Danube – has been one of the worst affected so far. As the rivers broke their banks on the afternoon of June 3, water levels rose to 12.89 metres, a record not seen since 1501. Stranded residents were rescued by boat as water gushed into the streets of the old city, causing extensive damage and forcing local authorities to shut down the town's electricity supply.

German Chancellor **Angela Merkel** flew over the worst affected areas of Bavaria, Saxony and Thuringia – describing the floods as "an event of historic proportions".

Declaring her government would "stand by the side of people who are suffering", she pledged €100 million (\$137 million) in emergency aid to the victims. "The damage and loss of income is a long-term matter," said Merkel – who stands for re-election in four months. "That's why our support will not cease."

The German army has deployed

around 4000 soldiers to the south and east of the country to assist local authorities and volunteers to reinforce dykes.

As the Danube floodwaters moved downstream into Austria, residents of Upper and Lower Austria were forced to evacuate from vulnerable villages and towns. Thousands of volunteers, soldiers, emergency and Red Cross workers raced to put sandbags and metal barriers in place along the riverbank. Despite their efforts, many towns along the river were inundated, including the historic monastery town of Melk. In places, only roofs were visible in the swirling brown waters.

Shipping on the normally busy river has been suspended.

In the Austrian Alps, the railway line between Salzburg and Switzerland was affected by avalanches as the Inn River broke its banks. The Austrian meteorological service reported the country had received two months' worth of rain in just two days.

In the Czech Republic, the Vltava River swelled to critical levels, forcing officials to close the underground metro system and shut down the central sewerage treatment plant.

More than 7000 people had to be evacuated from the Vltava region as areas north and south of the capital were submerged. The zoo and horse-racing track were also flooded. Tigers had to be tranquilised and relocated.

Now the Elbe is rising fast and towns along its banks are preparing for the worst. Tens of thousands of Czechs have fled to shelters, hoping there won't be a repeat of the devastating floods of 2002, which caused 17 deaths in the Czech Republic and billions of dollars worth of damage.

Meteorologists and officials, however, are pessimistic, warning that river levels could very well rise higher this time around.

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