

Russia to Target French Troops If They Are Sent to Ukraine



Emergency services at work in a Kyiv residential area that was struck by Russian bombs on May 8, 2024.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia warned France on Wednesday that if France sent troops to Ukraine then they would be seen as legitimate targets by the Russian military.

Macron caused controversy in February by saying he could not rule out the deployment of ground troops in Ukraine in the future. The French leader warned that if Russia wins in Ukraine then Europe's credibility will be reduced to zero.

"It is characteristic that Macron himself explains this rhetoric with the desire to create some kind of 'strategic uncertainty' for Russia," Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told reporters.

"We have to disappoint him - for us the situation looks more than certain," Zakharova said.

"If the French appear in the conflict zone, they will inevitably become targets for the Russian armed forces. It seems to me that Paris already has proof of this."

Zakharova said Russia was already seeing growing numbers of French nationals among those killed in Ukraine.

Russia said on Monday it would practice the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons as part of a military exercise after what the Moscow said were threats from France, Britain and the United States.

Belarus on Tuesday launched drills involving missiles and warplanes capable of carrying tactical nuclear weapons, which close ally Russia has deployed there amid tensions with the West over Ukraine.

The Belarusian maneuvers began a day after Russia announced plans to hold similar drills simulating the use of battlefield nuclear weapons in what it cast as a response to statements by Western officials signaling possibly deeper involvement in the war in Ukraine. It was the first time such an exercise had been publicly announced by Moscow.

The maneuvers, held jointly with Russia, began as Russian President Vladimir Putin was inaugurated to a fifth term on Tuesday, vowing to ensure Russia's security.

Last year, Russia moved some of its tactical nuclear weapons into Belarus, which also borders Ukraine and NATO members Poland, Latvia and Lithuania. Belarus' authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko has relied on close ties with Russia and provided his country as a staging ground for the war in Ukraine.

Ukrainian Energy Minister Herman Galushchenko said that energy facilities across Ukraine came under Russia's massive air strikes early Wednesday.

The attack targeted power generation and transmission facilities in the central Poltava, Kirovograd, and Vinnytsya regions, the western Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk regions, and the southern Zaporizhzhia region, Galushchenko wrote on Facebook.

Equipment at three thermal power plants of Ukraine's largest private energy company DTEK sustained damage during the attack, the company said in a statement.

The air strikes marked the fifth attack on DTEK's energy facilities in less than two months, according to the DTEK's press service.

Russia fired 55 missiles, including 50 cruise missiles and an aeroballistic missile, and 21 drones at Ukraine overnight, said the Ukrainian Air Force, adding that 20 drones and 39 missiles were downed by air defense.

At least two people were wounded in the attack in the Kiev region, while another person was injured in the Kirovograd region, said regional authorities.

Philippine, U.S. Forces Stage Joint Combat Drills in South China Sea



A U.S. trooper in battle gear walk during a joint military exercise on Wednesday, May 8, 2024, in Laoag, Ilocos Norte, northern Philippines.

LAOAG, Philippines (AP) — U.S. and Philippine forces, backed by an Australian air force surveillance aircraft, unleashed a barrage of high-precision rockets, artillery fire and airstrikes Wednesday and sank a mock enemy ship as part of large-scale war drills in and near the South China Sea that have antagonized Beijing.

More than 16,000 military personnel from the United States and the Philippines, along with a few hundred Australian troops and military observers from 14 countries, were participating in annual combat-readiness drills called Balikatan, Tagalog for shoulder-to-shoulder. The drills, which started April 22 and end Friday.

It's the latest indication of how the United States and the Philippines have bolstered a defense treaty alliance that started in the 1950s in Asia.

Marcos has ordered his military to shift its focus to external defense from decades-long domestic anti-insurgency operations.

China has accused the Philippines of setting off the hostilities in the disputed waters by encroaching on what it says are its offshore territories, demarcated by 10 dashes on a map. It says the Chinese coast guard and navy have been forced to take action to expel Philippine coast guard and other vessels from those areas.

The Philippines has repeatedly cited a 2016 international arbitration ruling based on the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea that invalidated China's claim over virtually the entire South China Sea on historical grounds.

China did not participate in the arbitration complaint filed by the Philippines in 2013, and has rejected the ruling and continues to defy it.

U.S. Probe Finds Widespread Sexual Misconduct at FDIC



WASHINGTON (Reuters) — The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation must make sweeping changes to address widespread sexual harassment and other misconduct, according to an independent report released that raises questions about the future of the banking regulator's leadership.

The report, prompted by a Wall Street Journal investigation, cited accounts from more than 500 people, including some who alleged FDIC Chair Martin Gruenberg had engaged in bullying and verbal abuse.

Overall, the report by law firm Cleary Gottlieb paints a picture of an agency at which sexual harassment, racial discrimination and bullying were pervasive at every level and tolerated by senior leaders for years, while complaints about misconduct were met with retaliation.

Underscoring the agency's toxic culture, officials tasked with addressing the problems exposed by the WSJ reports were themselves the subject

of misconduct claims, the Cleary Gottlieb report found.

The findings sparked renewed calls for the ouster of Gruenberg, a Democrat who has been a senior leader at the agency for nearly two decades.

Some employees described Gruenberg as "harsh" and "aggressive", as well as prone to losing his temper, the report said. In speaking with investigators, Gruenberg said he never recalled acting inappropriately. The report said some employees reported positive interactions with him and saw his nature as more "prosecutorial."

In a statement to staff, Gruenberg said the report was "sobering" and he vowed to implement its recommendations.

The report recommends the appointment of new officials devoted to changing the FDIC's culture and hiring an independent third party to assist in the transition, although it did not consider whether top leaders should resign.

News in Brief

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Europeans focus more on curbing immigration than on climate change and less than 15% of those interviewed across the globe consider climate issues to be among the top three priorities for their government, according to a global study on Wednesday. "Many European countries have seen a sharp rise in the share of people who say that 'reducing immigration' should be a top government priority," said the study commissioned by the Denmark-based think tank Alliance of Democracies Foundation. Germany was in the lead with 44% when it comes to people wanting their government to focus on reducing immigration, while nearly a quarter of the Germans surveyed said fighting climate change was a priority. Globally, 33% believe climate change is one of the world's three main challenges, but only 14% say fighting it should be among the top three priorities for their government.

ELDORADO DO SUL, Brazil (Reuters) — Rescuers rushed to evacuate people stranded by devastating floods across the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, with at least 90 dead, thousands left homeless, and desperate survivors seeking food and basic supplies. On the outskirts of Eldorado do Sul, 17 kilometers from the state capital of Porto Alegre, many people were sleeping on the roadside and told Reuters they were going hungry. Entire families were leaving on foot, carrying belongings in backpacks and shopping carts. The flooding has hampered rescue efforts, with dozens of people still waiting to be evacuated by boat or helicopter from stricken homes. Small boats crisscrossed the flooded town searching for survivors.

ISLAMABAD (Reuters) — A court in Pakistan granted on Wednesday a request by the wife of former prime minister Imran Khan to shift to jail, her lawyer said, instead of house arrest ordered by the government because of security concerns. Bushra Bibi, detained at Khan's hilltop mansion in Islamabad since the couple's January conviction on charges of illegally selling state gifts, had challenged the house arrest, her lawyer Naeem Panjutha posted on social media platform X. Through her lawyers Bibi had filed an appeal in the Islamabad High Court, asking to be shifted to the jail. The court ordered authorities to shift her to Adyala jail in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, where Khan, 70, a former cricket superstar, is serving his 14-year sentence, his party said in a statement.

SKOPJE (Reuters) — Polls opened in North Macedonia on Wednesday in parliamentary and presidential elections in which the rightist opposition is expected to gain ground against a ruling party that has failed to progress talks to join the EU and stamp out corruption. No polls have been published ahead of the vote, but a stronger-than-expected showing from the opposition VMRO-DPMNE party in the first round of presidential elections last month suggests that voters are frustrated with the ruling Social Democrats. In a school in the predominantly Albanian western town of Tetovo, where election-related incidents happened in the past, six police officers were seen guarding the entrance to the polling station.

BERLIN (Euronews) — A Berlin senator and former mayor of the German capital has been attacked by a man in a local library in the latest of a spate of assaults on German politicians. Franziska Giffey, a well known figure in Germany's centre-left SPD, was briefly treated in hospital after she was hit on the head and neck with a bag "filled with hard contents", police said. Politicians and campaign workers have been targeted in recent days, especially in eastern Germany. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the attacks were "outrageous and cowardly... Violence does not belong in a democratic debate". Last Friday, a lead SPD candidate in next month's European elections was seriously hurt while putting up posters in Dresden.

PARIS (AFP) — April marked another "remarkable" month of record-breaking global air and sea surface temperature averages, according to a new report by the EU's climate monitor published on Wednesday. The atmospheric phenomenon that contributes to increased heat, said the EU's Copernicus Climate Change Service, pointing to human-caused climate change for exacerbating the extremes. Since June last year, every month has been the warmest such period on record, according to Copernicus. April 2024 was no exception, clocking in at 1.58 degrees Celsius above the 1850-1900 pre-industrial average.

UK PM Suffers Further Blow as Second Conservative Lawmaker Defects to Labour



British MP Natalie Elphicke speaks during the Ministerial Statement on Migration and Economic Development Partnership at the House of Commons in London, Britain, December 19, 2022.

LONDON (AP) — British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was accused Wednesday of leading a "chaotic" government as another one of his Conservative lawmakers defected to the main opposition Labour Party ahead of a looming general election.

In a stunning move just ahead of weekly prime minister's questions, Natalie Elphicke crossed the floor of the House of Commons to join the ranks of Keir Starmer's Labour Party, which appears headed for power after 14 years.

"We need to move on from the broken promises of Rishi Sunak's tired and chaotic government," said Elphicke, who represents the constituency of Dover in southern England which is at the front-line of migrant crossings from France. "Under Rishi Sunak, the Conservatives have become a byword for incompetence and division."

Elphicke is the second Conservative lawmaker to defect to Labour in two weeks after Dan Poulter quit in anger over

the government's handling of the National Health Service.

The defection of Elphicke is particularly surprising as she was widely considered to be on the right of the Conservative Party and has been hugely critical of Labour in the past. But she has recently been increasingly disapproving of the government's approach to migrant crossings.

Elphicke was elected in 2019, taking over the Dover seat that had been held by her then-husband Charlie, who was jailed for two years after being found guilty in 2020 of sexually assaulting two women.

Starmer welcomed Elphicke to the Labour benches as well as Chris Webb, the party's new lawmaker in Blackpool South in northwest England following his big victory in a special election last Thursday.

Last week, the Conservatives suffered a historic drubbing in local elections, losing nearly half of its candidates, while Labour made gains and won most of the key mayoral races it fought, including in London.

China, Serbia Sign Agreement to Build 'Shared Future'

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — China and European Union candidate Serbia signed an agreement on Wednesday to build a "shared future," making the Balkan country the first in Europe to agree on such a document with Beijing.

After meeting in Belgrade, Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Serbian President Vucic announced they would "deepen and elevate the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Serbia," and "build a new era of a community with a shared fu-

ture between China and Serbia."

Xi launched the term "community for shared future" over 10 years ago. While it may not denote a specific initiative, experts believe it has an underlying significance as another term for an alliance.

"Eight years ago, Serbia became China's first comprehensive strategic partner in the Central and Eastern European region, and today Serbia is the first European country to build a community of destiny with China, fully reflecting the strategic, special

and high level of China-Serbia relations," Xi said during a press conference after signing the agreement.

Vucic said the two countries "are moving from strategic relations, through which we had managed to raise our bilateral ties, to the joint future of our two countries."

Xi arrived in Serbia to a warm welcome on Tuesday evening from France, where he had a high-stakes state visit dominated by trade disputes and Russia's war in Ukraine.