

NATO Sparked New Cold War: Russia

TEHRAN (Press TV) - Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has slammed NATO's "unfriendly" policies on Moscow, saying strained ties between the two sides have deteriorated into a "new Cold War" era.

Speaking during a panel discussion at the Munich Security Conference on Saturday, Medvedev described NATO's anti-Moscow policies as "unfriendly and not transparent."

"We can say it even more clearly: We have slid into a new period of Cold War," he said.

The Russian premier further criticized the NATO military buildup as well as EU attempts to increase its influence deep into formerly Soviet Union states in East Europe since the end of the Cold War.

"European politicians thought that creating a so-called belt of friends at Europe's side, on the outskirts of the EU, could be a guarantee of security, and what's the result?" he asked, replying, "Not a belt of friends but a belt of exclusion."

Earlier this week, NATO defense ministers agreed to a plan to beef up the Western military alliance's

presence in East Europe, citing perceived threats from Russia.

The initiative envisions a multinational force stationed in Eastern European member states of NATO on a rotational basis.

Russia has on many occasions slammed NATO's military expansion near its borders, saying such a move poses a threat to both regional and international peace.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Medvedev said Moscow is repeatedly facing accusations of making threats either against NATO, against Europe or against the US or other countries.

"Scary movies have been filmed where Russians begin a nuclear war. Sometimes I think: are we in 2016 or in 1962?" he asked.

Relations between Russia and NATO soured after the Crimean Peninsula separated from Ukraine and rejoined the Russian Federation following a referendum in March 2014.

The military alliance ended all practical cooperation with Russia over the ensuing crisis in Ukraine in

April 2014.

The US and its European allies accuse Moscow of destabilizing Ukraine and have imposed a number of sanctions against Russian and pro-Russian figures. Moscow, however, rejects having a hand in the Ukrainian crisis.

The Russian premier reiterated that his country is not pursuing any secret goals in Syria, dismissing accusations that Moscow's air force is pounding civilian positions in its anti-terror campaign in Syria.

"There is no evidence of our bombing civilians, even though everyone is accusing us of this," he said.

The remarks came hours after French Prime Minister Manuel Valls called on Moscow to stop what he called bombing of civilians in Syria.

Russia launched the campaign against the Takfiri Daesh terrorists and other militant groups in Syria last September upon a request from the Damascus government. The air raids have expedited the advances of Syrian forces against militants.

North Korea Lacks Technology for Anti-US Nuclear Strike: Pentagon

WASHINGTON (AFP) - North Korea is committed to striking the United States with a nuclear-armed missile, but it can't do so without outside help, due to shortfalls in its own technology, the Pentagon said Friday.

The report to Congress was written prior to a fourth nuclear test conducted by Pyongyang last month and the launch of a satellite-bearing rocket earlier this month.

North Korea's KN-08 intercontinental ballistic missile "likely would be capable" of striking the continental US if successfully designed and developed, said the report.

However, North Korea has not been able to conduct flight tests on the highly complex system, and its "current reliability as a weapon system would be low."

"The pace of its progress will also depend, in part, on how much technology and other aid it can acquire from other countries," it said.

Pyongyang is testing a separate type of technology to strike the US with intercontinental ballistic missiles launched into space but lacks a re-entry vehicle, the report added.

A test to launch a ballistic missile from a submarine in November ended in failure.

The report, which is required by law, made note of North Korea's Special Operations Forces, saying they are "among the most highly trained, well-equipped, best-fed and highly motivated forces" in the country's military.

Strategic SOF units "appear designed for rapid offensive operations, internal defense against foreign attacks or limited attacks against vulnerable targets in the ROK (South Korea) as part of a coercive diplomacy effort," it added.

"They operate in specialized units, including reconnaissance, airborne and seaborne insertion, commandos, and other specialties."

The international community

has for years tried to rein in North Korea's nuclear ambitions, but the country shocked the world last month when it announced it had successfully tested a hydrogen bomb.

The US Congress earlier adopted tougher sanctions against Kim Jong-Un's regime, following unilateral measures from Japan days earlier. The US also is leading a push for tougher UN sanctions against Pyongyang.

And South Korean firms have abandoned a joint industrial park that helped fund Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program.

The Pentagon report also said North Korea is continuing to sell weapons to other countries, circumventing sanctions by using false documents and intermediaries.

"North Korea uses a worldwide network to facilitate arm sales activities and maintains a core, but dwindling group of recipient countries including Iran, Syria and Burma," it said.

UN Peacekeepers Prepare for Central African Republic Vote

BANGUI, Central African Republic (AP) — Thousands of U.N. peacekeepers fanned out across Central African Republic on Saturday, delivering voting materials to polling stations and stepping up security ahead of a historic presidential runoff election.

Voters are choosing Sunday between two former prime ministers who have campaigned on promises of unifying the country torn apart by more than two years of sectarian violence between Muslim and Christian communities.

Bangui is a city awash in weapons, and many have feared that tensions around the vote could re-ignite rivalries between the militias still living among civilians in the capital.

Lt. Gen. Balla Keita, force commander of the U.N. mission known as MINUSCA, said he was confident the vote would be peaceful. At least 2,000 peacekeepers and police are on hand in the capital, Bangui, while 8,000 others are patrolling in the provinces.

"Right now we are comfortable with the level of securitization," he said. "We are optimistic that everything will

go well with the elections. But we know maybe there still could be issues and that with elections there could be sore losers."

On Saturday, peacekeepers helped deliver materials to a polling station in the predominantly Muslim enclave of PK5, where only three months earlier residents could not leave because Christian militia fighters had encircled the periphery in an attempt to thwart attacks on Christian neighborhoods.

Now merchants sit outside, selling fabrics and other wares, while young men carry high stacks of hard-boiled eggs for sale in the streets. Jasmin Menengamokobou, a 29-year-old Christian who has long lived in PK5, said residents of the beleaguered neighborhood are eagerly awaiting Sunday's election.

"We are ready to vote and we want peace to return to the country," he said as he stuffed foam mattress cushions into bright blue and yellow velour covers at the shop where he works. "Everyone has lost family during this crisis but if we focus on this we will never have peace."

Germany and Poland Want Britain to Stay in EU: Merkel

BERLIN (Reuters) - Poland and Germany both want Britain to remain a member of the European Union and will do everything to try and reach a compromise with Prime Minister David Cameron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said on Friday.

"We both agree that we want to do everything to make it possible

for Britain to stay in the European Union," Merkel told a joint news conference in Berlin with Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydlo

She said Germany and Poland see it as "desirable" that Britain remains part of the EU, adding that they would do everything to find a compromise with Britain that respects EU principles.

Hungarians Protest State's Grip on Education

BUDAPEST (AFP) - Thousands of Hungarians angry at the state's tight grip on public education rallied Saturday in Budapest, in one of the biggest street protests against Prime Minister Viktor Orban in recent years.

Soon after coming to power in 2010, his rightwing government launched sweeping reforms of the public education system, which it said was too liberal and had failed children.

It brought schools under the control of a state agency KLIK, introduced a national curriculum, centralised teaching material, and imposed minimum hours for pupils.

But teachers have long slammed the changes for taking place without professional consensus, a charge often levelled at Orban whose powerful supermajority won six years ago allowed him to rewrite the constitution.

Among Saturday's crowd -- estimated at over 10,000 by an AFP photographer, despite pouring rain -- demonstrators held banners reading "Free country! Free school!" and chanted "Orban get out!"

The teachers' movement began November 27 when the board of a prestigious high school in the eastern city of Miskolc posted an open protest letter online.

"The whole education system is in danger, everything has turned to chaos," it read. Since then, more than 700 schools and 30,000 teachers and parents put their names to the letter.

Last week, some 5,000 teachers,

parents and students marched through Miskolc.

"There are daily problems like not getting enough chalk, teachers are overburdened, as are the children, they have to spend more time learning than an adult does working," Oliver Pilz, a teacher at the Miskolc high school, told AFP Saturday.

The rally was the biggest anti-government demonstration since 2014 when street protests drew tens of thousands outraged by a planned tax on Internet usage.

The protests forced the government into a rare U-turn and led to a sharp drop in approval ratings for the ruling Fidesz party.

However, Orban now enjoys strong public support again mainly due to his hardline approach to the migration crisis, which included building fences on Hungary's southern borders in 2015 to keep refugees out.

The 52-year-old strongman has nevertheless appeared rattled by the scale of the teachers' movement.

Known for usually sticking with his loyal allies, he demoted the state secretary for education February 6.

He also allegedly accused the teachers of being directed by "external forces", at a closed-doors party meeting last week.

The new state secretary has pledged to reform KLIK and invited teachers to talks, but unions have called the moves cosmetic, are insisting on a system overhaul and are threatening strike action.

Rebels in Eastern Congo Kill 6, Kidnap 14 in Village Attack

KINSHASA, Congo (AP) — Rebels in northeast Congo killed six civilians and kidnapped 14 others, a local activist group reported Saturday, the latest attack in a region the United Nations says is facing deteriorating security.

The Center of Study for the Promotion of Peace, Democracy and Human Rights, based in the eastern city of Goma, said the attack occurred Friday evening in a village 7 kilometers (4 miles) east of Eringeti town.

A statement from the group blamed the Allied Democratic Forces, a rebel group with origins in neighboring Uganda. The Allied Democratic Forces have killed at least 500 people since ramping up attacks in the region in October 2014, according to the U.N. The highly secretive group is made up mostly of Islamic extremists who want to establish Shariah law in

Uganda, according to Congo's U.N. mission.

Congo's army and the U.N. have launched an operation against the group, but the U.N. envoy for Congo told the Security Council last month that there had nonetheless been "a significant deterioration" in the security situation in eastern Congo, particularly in the Beni and Lubero areas of North Kivu province.

Eastern Congo is home to multiple rebel groups.

In Friday's attack, some Allied Democratic Forces rebels attacked Congo army positions while others targeted civilians and looted and burned homes, according to the Goma civic organization, which cited sources in the area. The group's statement said kidnapped civilians were forced to carry looted goods in the direction of Virunga National Park.



AIPEI (Reuters) - The death toll at a building that collapsed from a strong earthquake in southern Taiwan reached 114 as rescue efforts came to an end on Saturday, a week after the temblor hit.

"The search and rescue has come to an end," said Tainan Mayor William Lai, in remarks carried live on local television, identifying the last individual to be pulled out from the rubble as Hsieh Chen-yu, who was part of the fallen building's management committee.

All of those believed missing in the building have now been accounted for, city officials said.

The 6.4-magnitude quake struck at early dawn on Feb. 6 at the beginning of the Lunar New Year holiday, with almost all of the dead found in Tainan's toppled Wei-guan Golden Dragon Building.

TEHRAN (Press TV) - Thousands of people held a demonstration in Athens, Greece, on Saturday to show solidarity with farmers who have blocked dozens of highways and border crossings in recent weeks to protest the government's proposed pensions program.

Police said demonstrators gathered at Syntagma Square outside the parliament building.

The protesters, including members of the leftist Pame trade union, expressed support for the farmers who arrived in the capital from the countryside on Friday, when about 10,000 protesters waving black flags marched through Athens behind a column of tractors.

Earlier Friday, protesters clashed with police in front of the Greek Agriculture Ministry and on a motorway outside the city.

Dozens of farmers spent Friday night camped out at Syntagma Square, lighting a fire in front of the parliament.

TEHRAN (Press TV) - EU states are reportedly set to restrict passport-free travel in the Schengen zone by resorting to an unprecedented emergency measure to deal with a huge influx of refugees.

EU policy makers plan to declare that Greece is helping the inflow of refugees into other European states by failing to sufficiently control its frontier, the Associated Press said Friday, citing confidential data.

Such an announcement would enable Schengen Area states to make use of an emergency provision under Article 26 of the open-travel agreement, which allows them to tighten border controls for up to two years.

The Schengen area allows passport-free movement through 26 countries, most of them in the EU, and is regarded as one of the major European achievements in its efforts to strengthen unity.

TEHRAN (Press TV) - Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has declared a cabinet reshuffle following the resignation of three ministers and ahead of the departure of two others.

The reshuffle was announced by the Australian premier — who was voted into office in September 2015 — on Saturday. He introduced six new ministers ahead of upcoming elections in September.

"This is transition, this is change, this is renewal and it's very... important," Turnbull said in a press conference. He said the changes revitalize the government through the promotion of younger ministers.

Turnbull said he did not foresee any further changes in his cabinet before the next polls.

The cabinet changes were prompted by separate statements issued by Trade Minister Andrew Robb as well as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Infrastructure and Regional Development Warren Truss announcing plans to retire from politics following the next elections.