

Putin Slams NATO for 'Aggressive' Activities, Rhetoric



Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a wreath-laying ceremony to mark the 75th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of the USSR in Moscow on June 22, 2016

MOSCOW (AFP) - President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday slammed NATO for ratcheting up its rhetoric and its "aggressive actions" close to Russia's border, warning it was forcing Moscow to increase its military capacity.

"NATO is stepping up its aggressive rhetoric and its aggressive actions close to our borders," Putin told lawmakers on the 75th anniversary of the invasion of the USSR by Nazi Germany.

"In these conditions, we are obliged to dedicate special attention to resolving tasks connected with heightening the defense capabilities of our country."

Putin also accused the West of rejecting Russian overtures to help tackle the common foe of "international terrorism" -- as it once ignored the Soviet Union's warnings about Hitler -- as it seeks to isolate Moscow over the Ukraine crisis.

"Once again, as it was on the eve of World War II, (we) are not seeing a positive response," Putin said.

Relations between Russia and the West have slumped to their lowest point since the Cold War over Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and its alleged masterminding of a separatist uprising.

Russian aircraft have also increased tensions recently by launching a series of provocative intercepts of NATO, Swedish and other aircraft.

Fears of Russian expansionism have sent a chill through NATO members such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland and seen the US-led alliance bolster its presence in eastern Europe.

General Ben Hodges, the commander of US ground forces in Europe, warned in a news report

Wednesday that NATO would currently be unable to protect the Baltics against a Russian attack.

"Russia could take over the Baltic states faster than we would be able to defend them," Hodges was quoted as saying in a German-language article by news weekly Die Zeit.

NATO said last week that it would deploy four battalions to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to counter a more assertive Russia, ahead of a landmark summit in Warsaw on July 8-9.

US President Barack Obama will attend the meeting in Poland as part of what will likely be his final presidential trip to Europe.

Obama had announced an increased US troop presence in eastern Europe, with continuous rotations of an additional armored brigade beginning in early 2017.

Russia bitterly opposes NATO's expansion into its Soviet-era satellites and last month said it would create three new divisions in its southwest region to meet what it described as a dangerous military build-up along its borders.

Thousands of NATO troops hit the ground in Poland earlier this month in a massive 10-day show of force as the alliance launched its biggest war games in eastern Europe since the Cold War.

But there has been some disagreement within the bloc, with German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier criticizing NATO for having a bellicose policy towards Russia, describing it as "warmongering".

Sarkozy Calls for French-German Push to Save Europe

BERLIN (AFP) - Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy called Tuesday for Paris and Berlin to make a joint push for "a new European treaty" following Britain's vote on whether to leave the bloc.

After talks with Germany's Angela Merkel, Sarkozy said: "I told the chancellor that to save Europe, there would have to be a French-German initiative in the coming months, with a new treaty that tells 450 million Europeans that we have heard what they are saying, that we understand how they feel."

"I think that the chancellor is ready," he said after a closed-door lunch, adding "that's all

the better as there will soon be elections in France that would be followed by polls in Germany".

Sarkozy also stressed the importance of core EU members France and Germany leading Europe.

"What is the problem today? There is no leadership because in the French-German couple, the 'French' is missing," he said, in a direct attack against President Francois Hollande, who defeated Sarkozy in the 2012 polls.

Hollande is now battling record unpopularity at home and struggling to put down social strife over economic reforms.

Nigeria, Chad Launch Joint Offensive Against Boko Haram



The picture taken on April 3, 2015 shows Nigerian army forces patrolling in pickup trucks near Malam Fatori after the town in northeastern Nigeria was retaken from Boko Haram by troops from Chad and Niger.

TEHRAN (Press TV) - Nigerian and Chadian military forces have launched a joint military operation against Boko Haram Takfiri terrorists along the border between Niger and Nigeria.

Brigadier General Abdou Sidikou Issa, the tactical chief of force for troops based in Niger's troubled Diffa region, said Tuesday that the operations aim to end "the occupation of all the zones" currently seized by Boko Haram.

"Our role is to firmly secure the border," he said.

Regional countries have created a joint military force that plays a key role in helping Nigeria fight the terrorist group.

Back in February, the four littoral nations of Lake Chad - Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon - launched a military campaign, together with a contingent from Benin, to

confront the threat from Boko Haram militants in the region.

Boko Haram started its campaign of militancy in 2009 with the aim of toppling the central government in Nigeria.

The terrorist group has widened its attacks into neighboring countries, notably Cameroon and Chad, in a conflict estimated to have claimed a total 17,000 lives and forced over 2.6 million others to flee their homes.

The terrorists have kidnapped hundreds of men, women and children in their six-year campaign.

The kidnapping of over 200 schoolgirls from Nigeria's northeastern town of Chibok in April 2014 unleashed a wave of international outrage.

The terror group has pledged allegiance to Daesh Takfiri terrorists, who are mainly wreaking havoc in Syria and Iraq.



SYDNEY (AFP) - A piece of debris that washed up on an island off Australia's south coast was not from missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, officials said Wednesday as they confirmed there are no plans to extend the underwater search for the plane.

The item was found earlier this month among seaweed and driftwood and resembled part of a plane, with the words "Caution No Step" visible, according to footage on Australia's Channel Seven.

The Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB), which is coordinating the search, examined the debris and dismissed it as being from the jet that vanished in March 2014 with 239 people on board.

"Information received from the manufacturer indicates the item is not consistent with the manufacturing specifications of a Boeing commercial aircraft," the bureau said in a statement.

LOS ANGELES (TIME) - Two wildfires that together burned 7 square miles and drove several hundred people from their homes in foothill suburbs of Los Angeles were growing fast and surging closer to each other.

Aggravated by triple-digit heat that hastened similar fires from the Pacific Coast to New Mexico, the two blazes erupted Monday near Azusa and Duarte and gave a big scare to homeowners before burning mostly away from the cities and toward the Angeles National Forest.

Charlie Downing, out of breath and with his shirt off because of the heat, said when he first smelled fire and felt heat that he ran outside of his house in Duarte and was astonished by size and nearness of the flames.

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) - A senior U.S. diplomat was in Venezuela on Tuesday to meet with officials to jumpstart dialogue between the normally hostile governments as the socialist-run nation is torn apart by daily food protests and a campaign to oust President Nicolas Maduro.

Thomas Shannon, a career diplomat with extensive experience in Latin America, flew to Caracas after weeks of looting and hunger riots in Venezuela. The riots led to hundreds of arrests and several deaths.

State Department spokesman John Kirby said Shannon, who now serves as undersecretary of state for political affairs, hoped to foster dialogue about the social, economic and political challenges facing the oil-rich country. He was to meet with leading opposition figures and was also expected to meet with Maduro and other government representatives.

CANBERRA (Dispatches) - A huge snake that has lived in the roof of an Australian home for 10 years has tried to upgrade to the master bedroom.

Trina Hibberd, from Mission Beach in Queensland, woke on Monday to find the 5.2m scrub python named Monty stretched from her lounge room to her bedroom.

Monty managed to turn on a light and knock over a lamp before snake-catcher Dave Goodwin arrived.

Mr Goodwin induced the snake to wrap around his forearm before capturing it inside a plastic home-brewing jug.

He told the BBC the 40kg snake was "choking [his] arm to death" before he transferred it into the tub.

China's Top Paper Lambasts U.S. Aircraft Carrier Deployment

BEIJING (Reuters) - China's top newspaper strongly criticized the United States on Wednesday after it deployed two aircraft carriers on a training mission in East Asia where military tensions have risen amid China's growing assertiveness.

The U.S. carriers John C. Stennis and Ronald Reagan began joint operations in seas east of the Philippines at the weekend in a show of strength ahead of an international court ruling expected soon on China's expansive territorial claims in the contested South China Sea.

"The U.S. picked the wrong target in playing this trick on China," the People's Daily, the

official newspaper of the ruling Communist Party, said in a commentary.

It was published under the pen name "Zhong Sheng," a Chinese-language homonym for the phrase "voice of China" that is often used to express the paper's views on foreign policy.

"Behind this misjudgment is Washington's anxiety and arrogance, and it is the true expression of its hegemonic nature," the paper added.

The U.S. Navy chief said on Monday the deployment was a signal of the U.S. commitment to regional security, adding that he hoped it would deter any attempts to destabilize the region.

The U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) said the carriers started their dual operations on Saturday, including air defense drills, sea surveillance, defensive air combat training and long-range strikes.

PACOM said the United States last conducted a dual carrier operation in the Western Pacific in 2014. Two carriers operated in the South China Sea and East China Sea in 2012.

China claims most of the energy-rich South China Sea through which about \$5 trillion in ship-borne trade passes every year. Neighbors Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam also have claims.

Lightning Strikes Kill At Least 90 in India

NEW DELHI (CNN) - Lightning strikes killed at least 90 people Tuesday in four Indian states as monsoon rains swept across much of the country.

"Lightning strikes are common during monsoons, but there have been more strikes than usual this year," said Vyas Ji, principal secretary in Bihar, where a record 57 people died Tuesday from the strikes -- the most of any state in the country.

In 2014, 2,582 people died in lightning strikes, according to the government, making lightning the leading killer among all natural disasters in India.

Here's a breakdown of deaths reported in other states Tuesday:

- Seventeen people died in Uttar Pradesh, according to Anil Kumar, relief commissioner for the state government.
- Ten died in Jharkhand, according to Col. Sanjay Kumar

Srivastava, state director of disaster management.

• Six people died in Madhya Pradesh, according to Maithili Sharan, additional director general of Madhya Pradesh police.

The seasonal monsoon rains have been highly anticipated in India, which has been mired in drought for two years. The country's agricultural sector heavily depends on the rains.