

Russia, US Trade Accusations in Maritime Encounter



WASHINGTON (AFP) - Washington and Moscow on Tuesday accused each other of conducting dangerous maritime maneuvers after two warships sailed closely past each other in the Mediterranean Sea earlier this month.

Russia's defense ministry said the USS Gravelly, an American destroyer, crossed the path of the Russian frigate Yaroslav Mudry on June 17, coming "dangerously close."

The US Navy committed a "gross violation of international rules on the prevention of collisions at sea," violating a maritime agreement signed by the US and Soviet authorities in 1972, Moscow said.

A US defense official later gave a completely different account, saying the Russian ship

had deliberately maneuvered to approach the USS Gravelly.

The Russian frigate also displayed an international sign showing her maneuverability to be restricted when she first positioned herself about two miles (three kilometers) from the Gravelly, the official said.

"The maneuvering demonstrates that (the Yaroslav Mudry) was not in fact restricted in her ability to maneuver, and was thus intentionally displaying a false international signal," he added, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Russia insisted its frigate was in international waters and not "conducting dangerous maneuvers" in regard to the American destroyer.

US officials said the two ships

passed within 315 yards (288 meters) of each other. The Russians put the distance at just "60 to 70" meters.

The Pentagon has reported a number of cases of Russian jets buzzing US planes and ships in the Baltic Sea in recent months with tensions between the two sides at their highest point since the Cold War over the crisis in Ukraine.

In April, the US Navy released video footage of Russian aircraft over the Baltic Sea flying very close to another destroyer, the USS Donald Cook, including in a "simulated attack profile."

Russia's defense ministry used the contested incident in the Mediterranean Sea to hit back at the United States.

The Pentagon "has recently accused with great perseverance Russian pilots and marines of lacking professionalism," it said.

"But this incident shows that US (sailors) allow themselves to forget basic rules of maritime safety."

Relations between Russia and the West nosedived over Moscow's annexation of Crimea from Kiev in March 2014 and its support for a pro-Kremlin insurgency in eastern Ukraine.

"These actions have the potential to unnecessarily escalate tensions between countries, and could result in a miscalculation or accident which results in serious injury or death," the US defense official said.

Sweden, Kazakhstan, Ethiopia, Bolivia Elected to U.N. Security Council

UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) - Sweden, Kazakhstan, Ethiopia and Bolivia were elected to the United Nations Security Council on Tuesday for 2017-18, but further voting was due to take place to decide the final seat with Italy and the Netherlands almost locked in a tie.

After three rounds of voting by the 193-member U.N. General Assembly, The Netherlands had 96 votes,

while Italy had 94. Countries need more than two-thirds of the vote to win a seat.

The General Assembly elected Sweden with 134 votes in favor, Ethiopia with 185 and Bolivia with 183 in the first round of voting. Kazakhstan beat Thailand with 138 votes in favor in the second round of voting.

The new members will replace

Angola, Malaysia, New Zealand, Spain and Venezuela on the council from Jan. 1, 2017.

The council is made up of 10 elected members - five voted on each year - and five permanent veto-powers who are the United States, Britain, France, China and Russia. The council is the only U.N. body that can make legally binding decisions.

Hundreds Hold Anti-Brexit Protests in UK



Demonstrators march onto College Green outside The Houses of Parliament at an anti-Brexit protest in London, June 28, 2016. (AFP photo)

LONDON (Press TV) - Hundreds of people across the UK have held demonstrations to protest against Brexit and its supporters following last week's historic referendum.

In the June 23 referendum, about 52 percent of British voters opted to leave the EU, while roughly 48 percent of the people voted to stay in the union. More than 17.4 million Britons said the country should leave the bloc, as just over 16.14 million others favored remaining in the EU.

The pro-European Union rally was held Tuesday although it had been officially called off over "safety fears".

Protesters angry at the leading Leave campaigners in the referendum - former London mayor Boris Johnson and Ukip leader Nigel Farage - chanted "Down with Boris" and swore at "Farage."

"It started with the idea of bringing 20 friends together in London Fields park in East London, and now we have over 50,000 people who want to stand together in London," Jessica Rodgers, an event organizer, wrote on Facebook.

Liberal Democrat leader Tim Farron, who has promised to make

the UK a member of the EU again, said the Brexit vote "is reversible".

"In politics, as in life, two things are always the case for me: One, if you lose, you have the grace to accept the defeat, but you never, ever, ever give up," said Farron, addressing the crowd in Trafalgar Square.

"We as a community must stand together, this is reversible. The people of Britain are decent, outward-looking people. We will carry on direct campaigning."

Also, conservative business minister Anna Soubry, a Remain campaigner, said "people are angry, not just the young. People of all ages across the country are angry. And I am so sorry because I don't know what the solution is to it."

More than one million people in Britain have signed a petition to call for a second referendum. The petition on the British parliament website gathered some 1,130,000 signatures on Saturday less than 24 hours after it was launched.

The result of Thursday's referendum caused some people who voted for Leave to feel regret and call the electoral services, asking if they could change their decision.

News in Brief

LONDON (The Guardian) - The Irish government has urged Britons to take some time to think before applying for an Irish passport as it warned that a surge in applications threatened to place major pressure on the system for processing them.

A spike in interest in Irish passports has occurred in Northern Ireland, Britain and elsewhere in the past few days, according to Ireland's foreign minister, Charlie Flanagan, who said there was no urgency for UK citizens to apply.

While the numbers of people turning up to the office in London that processes applications for Irish passports had reduced on Monday, British citizens motivated by last week's referendum vote were still turning up on Tuesday.

They ranged from one woman who said that she and her family had voted in favour of Britain leaving the EU, but now feared for the economic consequences, to others who had voted to stay.

ALGERIA (Dispatches) - Algeria has foiled a planned terror attack by the Daesh Takfiri group on a shopping mall east of the country, an Algerian newspaper reported Wednesday.

El Massa, a government newspaper, reported that militants linked to Daesh had plans to carry out the attack on Park Mall in Setif, located about 300 kilometers (186 miles) south of the capital, Algiers.

The paper claimed that the mall is frequented by people during the holy month of Ramadan, saying it attracts about 40,000 shoppers a year.

The report said the group behind the plot had lost eight key members in a clash with the Algerian army in late May near Setif, adding that the group was linked to the Daesh terrorists operating in neighboring Libya.

The group was also planning other attacks during Ramadan, but the government managed to foil them, the report said.

MANNILA (Dispatches) - Philippine president-elect Rodrigo Duterte takes office this week looking to end the domination of "Imperial Manila" with a radical shift to federalism that he says is vital to fighting poverty and ending a deadly Muslim separatist insurgency.

Duterte, who won last month's elections in a landslide, has vowed to have the constitution rewritten to achieve his bold plans -- which would see power devolved from the central government in the capital to newly created states governing the current 81 provinces.

"It (the current system) is an excuse for them to hang onto power in Imperial Manila. They have always been there in one single office, running the Philippines," Duterte said in a speech during the election campaign.

Such comments are typical fare for Duterte, an anti-establishment figure who relentlessly rails against the elites who have mostly ruled the Philippines since independence from the United States after World War II.

Ulanbatur, Mongolia (Dispatches) - People in Mongolia have gone to the polls in parliamentary elections, as the central Asian country is struggling with its worst economic crisis which began in 2008.

Mongolians started casting their ballots on Wednesday to elect a new national government for their seventh general elections since 1990, when they changed state socialism to democracy.

According to the General Election Commission of Mongolia, 498 candidates are racing for 76 seats of the parliament, known as the State Great Khural. The contest is mainly between the ruling Democratic party (DP), which put the country on its present democratic course, and the opposition Mongolian People's Party (MPP), which is a leftover from the Soviet era. Additionally, ten more parties and three other coalitions, along with 69 independent candidates, some of whom are celebrities, including singers and wrestlers, are also vying to make their way into the parliament to form, or have a share in forming, the upcoming government.

Kremlin Dents Turkish Hopes for Quick Restoration of Ties

MOSCOW/ANKARA (Reuters) - The Kremlin sought to dampen Turkey's hopes for a swift restoration of normal relations on Tuesday, a day after Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan expressed regret over the downing of a Russian warplane last year.

The Russian jet was shot down, with the loss of the pilot, in November while taking part in the Kremlin's military campaign in Syria. Ankara said it acted lawfully because the plane had crossed into Turkish air space; Moscow denied that happened.

The incident triggered Russian sanctions against Turkey that have damaged trade and tourism.

After writing to Russian President Vladimir Putin to voice his regret on Monday, Erdogan said he believed Ankara would normalize relations with Moscow "rapidly". But the Kremlin struck a more cautious tone on Tuesday.

"One should not think it possible

to normalize everything within a few days, but work in this direction will continue," spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on a conference call.

"President Putin has expressed more than once his willingness to maintain good relations with Turkey and the Turkish people," Peskov said. "Now a very important step has been made."

Putin and Erdogan will hold a telephone conversation at Moscow's initiative on Wednesday, Peskov said.

Putin has said an apology from Erdogan was necessary to repair relations. Erdogan spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said the Turkish president had expressed regret over the shooting in a letter to Putin, but added that this was not an apology.

Even as ties between the two countries improve, Kalin added, sticking points over Syria and other issues would continue.

"In the coming period, Turkey's ties

with Russia will enter a normalization phase. Our policies on Ukraine, Syria and Crimea will not change, we don't agree with Russia on these areas but we will continue to discuss these issues," he told reporters.

In the Syrian conflict Russia backs President Bashar al-Assad while Turkey and its Western allies support groups opposed to him.

Ankara said it shot down the plane because it entered Turkish airspace, an allegation Moscow denies. The Russian pilot ejected from the plane but was killed by gunfire from rebels on the ground in Syria as he parachuted down to earth.

As well as an official apology, Moscow has also said it wants Turkey to pay compensation for the incident, in which the Russian pilot ejected but was killed by rebel gunfire on the ground in Syria as he parachuted down to earth.

Kalin said Turkey may pay aid to "relieve Russian pain" over the

shooting but he said that would not constitute compensation, which would require a legal ruling or an agreement.

Turkey says legal proceedings are underway against an individual allegedly responsible for the killing of the pilot.

Turkey has been hard hit by the Russian sanctions, particularly in its key tourism sector. Data on Tuesday showed that tourist arrivals in Turkey saw their biggest drop in at least 22 years in May, with the number of Russians down by more than 90 per-

cent.

Turkey's expression of regret to Russia on Monday came as it also announced the restoration of diplomatic ties with Israel after a six-year rupture.

Both moves appear to be aimed at mending Turkey's sense of isolation on the world stage, though Kalin denied they represented a big policy shift on Ankara's part.

"Solving these issues allowed us to return to the normal format. Turkish foreign policy is not going through a grand revision," he said.

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