

Trump Proposes Bigger Budget for Pentagon, Nuclear Arsenal



(file photo) The Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis arrives to join the annual Key Resolve military exercise conducted by South Korea and the U.S., at a port in Busan, South Korea, March 13, 2016.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. President Donald Trump has proposed a military budget that is the largest since 2011 and focused on beefing up the country's nuclear defenses and countering the growing strength of China and Russia.

The proposal, part of Trump's budget request for the U.S. government, would provide the Pentagon \$617 billion and an additional \$69 billion to fund ongoing wars in fiscal year 2019. That is \$74 billion more than in the budget for the previous fiscal year.

Critics, however, say that the proposed spending increase falls short of what Trump had promised during the 2016 presidential campaign, when he frequently depicted the U.S. military as underfunded.

The budget documents specifically highlighted "reversing the erosion of the U.S. military advantage in relation to China and Russia," which was a focal point of the National Defense Strategy unveiled by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis in January.

Funds for the maintenance of

the U.S. nuclear arsenal also increased.

On top of the Pentagon's \$686 billion budget request was an additional \$30 billion for non-defense agencies including the Department of Energy, which maintains the country's nuclear weapons.

The budget request for the National Nuclear Security Administration, a semi-autonomous wing of the Department of Energy, was \$15.09 billion, an increase of nearly \$1.2 billion from last year's proposal.

The Department of Energy said the money was needed to modernize and restore the country's nuclear weapons complex. The Trump administration has called for an expansion of the U.S. low-yield nuclear weapons capability.

The budget request must be passed by Congress, which controls federal purse strings and rarely enacts presidential budgets.

Mackenzie Eaglen, an analyst at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank, said "this modest year-on-year increase will not allow the military to pursue anything resembling a rebuild along the lines touted by candidate Trump on the campaign trail to rapidly grow the Army, build a 350-ship Navy, and increase the combat Air Force."

North Korea Warms to South Korea, Volume Down on Border Propaganda

SEOUL (Reuters) - North Korea's leader said he wants to boost the "warm climate of reconciliation and dialogue" with South Korea after his high-level delegation returned from a visit to the South, as his foes reiterated the need to keep up maximum pressure and sanctions.

Kim Jong Un gave instructions for measures aimed at more inter-Korean engagement after his younger sister Kim Yo Jong led a three-day visit to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, North Korea's state media reported on Tuesday.

It did not specify what those instructions were.

The United States has appeared to endorse deeper post-Olympics engagement between the two Koreas that could lead to talks between Pyongyang and

Washington. South's President Moon Jae-in said on Tuesday the United States is open to talking with North Korea, Moon's spokesman told a briefing.

"The United States sees inter-Korean dialogue in a positive light and has expressed its openness for talks with the North," Moon told Latvian President Raimonds Vējonis, according to the spokesman.

U.S. officials also want tough international sanctions to be ramped up to push North Korea to give up its nuclear program.

That sentiment was repeated by Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Tuesday, who said Moon had agreed it was necessary to keep up maximum pressure on North Korea.

Last year, North Korea conducted

dozens of missile launches and its sixth and largest nuclear test in defiance of U.N. resolutions as it pursues its goal of developing a nuclear-armed missile capable of reaching the United States.

Japanese officials took pains to stress there was no daylight between Japan, the United States and South Korea on their approach to dealing with North Korea.

The United States' "fundamental policy" aimed at denuclearization of the Korean peninsula has not changed, said a senior Japanese diplomat in a briefing to lawmakers.

"The goal is denuclearization and the process is dialogue for dialogue, action for action, so if North Korea does not show actions, the United States and Japan will not change their policies," he said.

South Africa Declares Drought a 'National Disaster'

CAPE TOWN (AFP) - South Africa on Tuesday declared a "national disaster" over a drought that has ravaged parts of the country and threatened to leave homes in Cape Town without running water.

The government said it had elevated the drought to a "national disaster" after reassessing its "magnitude and severity".

Cape Town is in the grip of a three-year-long drought as sparse winter rains have failed to bring relief, and dam levels have dropped dangerously low.

Rains over the weekend raised hopes that the situation would improve, but the downpours were neither heavy nor long enough to have an impact on the situation.

The statement, published in the official government gazette, means that the national government is now responsible

for tackling the issue and ensuring relief efforts.

South Africa's second city is now facing the prospect of having to turn its taps off under a so-called "Day Zero" scenario to conserve the city's remaining water supplies.

Most Cape Town residents would be forced to queue at communal taps at 200 water points -- likely under police or military guard -- to collect a daily ration of 25 litres (6.6 US gallons), half the amount allowed now.

At the start of February, the target for personal daily water usage was slashed from 87 litres to 50 litres.

A single toilet flush uses nine litres. It is hoped that usage cuts will buy the city time to find a solution -- or for the rains of the southern winter to refill depleted

dams.

Reducing household use, which accounts for 70 percent of water consumption, has been prioritized over slashing industry's usage.

On Tuesday, the predicted date for "Day Zero" was pushed back to June 4 after consumption cuts.

The widespread drought has gripped swathes of the nation's south and west.

Opposition Democratic Alliance leader Mmusi Maimane praised residents of Cape Town, a tourist magnet, for significantly slashing their water consumption.

The drought facing Cape Town is the worst in 100 years.

The region in which Cape Town, known as the "Mother City" is located, seasonally receives rains in the southern hemisphere winter season running from around June through August.

Erdogan Warns Greece, Cyprus Over Gas Search, Aegean Islets



Turkey's President and leader of ruling Justice and Development Party Recep Tayyip Erdogan addresses the members of his ruling party at the parliament in Ankara, Turkey, Tuesday, Feb. 13, 2018.

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan issued a warning Tuesday to neighboring Greece, Cyprus and international companies exploring for gas in the eastern Mediterranean not to "step out of line" and encroach on Turkey's rights.

Meanwhile, Greek authorities said a Turkish coast guard vessel rammed a Greek coast guard boat off a couple of uninhabited islets in the Aegean Sea over which the two NATO allies nearly went to war in 1996. There were no injuries.

Erdogan made the warning in an address to legislators of his ruling party as Turkish warships continued to impede a rig from reaching a location off of Cyprus where Italian energy company Eni is scheduled to drill for gas.

"We recommend that foreign companies don't allow themselves to be an instrument of issues that

surpass their limits and strength, by trusting the Greek Cypriot side," he said. "Their show of strength lasts only until they see our ships and our planes."

Turkey opposes the drilling, which it says disregards the rights of breakaway Turkish Cypriots. It also claims as its own part of the area Cyprus has designated for exploratory drilling.

The Cypriot government says it has a sovereign right to drill, and that if the search is successful, any income would be shared equitably if the island is reunified.

Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades refrained from direct comment on Erdogan's statements, but said Turkish naval activity should cause no public alarm.

European Commission spokesman Margaritis Schinas said EU authorities are monitoring the incident in the Aegean closely.

UN Urges Australia to Take Responsibility for Refugees



The UN refugee agency is accusing Australia of abandoning hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, saying it must take responsibility for the mess it's created with its "offshore processing" system.

GENEVA (Reuters) - The United Nations called on Australia on Tuesday to take responsibility for around 800 refugees and asylum seekers stranded in a detention center on Papua New Guinea where it said many lack medical and mental health care.

The refugees - many from Afghanistan and Pakistan, along with Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar - were removed from a holding camp in the remote Papua New Guinea island of Manus in November when Australia decided to close it.

Australia's government - whose policy of holding asylum-seekers in offshore camps has bipartisan political support - has said the center that the group was moved to on the island was adequate and that the Papua New Guinea government

was responsible for running it.

But Rico Salcedo, UNHCR regional protection officer, told journalists on Tuesday that the Canberra government had a duty under international law to take responsibility for the 800 who had been seeking sanctuary in Australia.

"What stood out the most from this mission ... was a pervasive and worsening sense of despair among refugees and asylum seekers," he said by video link from Canberra after returning from a trip to Manus Island.

"Australia remains ultimately responsible as the state from whom refugees and asylum seekers have sought international protection for their welfare and long-term settlement outside of Papua New Guinea," he added.



JOHANNESBURG (Dispatches) - South Africa's ruling party decided on Tuesday to sack Jacob Zuma as head of state, two sources said, after marathon talks over the fate of a leader whose scandal-plagued years in power darkened and divided Nelson Mandela's post-apartheid 'Rainbow Nation'.

The decision by the African National Congress's (ANC) national executive followed 13 hours of tense deliberations and one, short face-to-face exchange between Zuma and his presumed successor, deputy president Cyril Ramaphosa.

MOSCOW (AP) — Human error may be to blame for the crash of a Russian plane that killed 71 people, Russian investigators said Tuesday, noting that the plane's pilots failed to turn on the heating unit for its measuring equipment, resulting in flawed speed data.

After studying An-148's flight data recorder, the Interstate Aviation Committee said that Sunday's crash near Moscow occurred after the pilots saw varying data on the plane's two air speed indicators.

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Ukrainian opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili says he will continue to rally people against the nation's authorities from abroad, following his deportation from the country.

Saakashvili was deported from Ukraine to Poland on Monday after being detained by armed, masked men at a restaurant in Kiev and rushed to the airport.

At a news conference in Warsaw Tuesday he described the deportation as having taken place by force and against international laws.

LONDON (AP) — The House of Commons said police investigated an incident at Britain's parliament in London.

Authorities referred all questions Tuesday to the Metropolitan Police, who did not have any immediate comment.

Britain's Press Association quoted an unnamed police office at Parliament describing the incident as being related to a suspicious package and saying that specialist officers are examining it.

THE HAGUE (AFP) - A Dutch court on Tuesday upheld an appeal by anti-cigarette campaigners and barred the use of public spaces in cafes and bars reserved for smokers.

Despite a general ban on smoking in restaurants, pubs and bars introduced in 2008, more than 25 percent of small cafes in the Netherlands still have an enclosed inside corner where patrons can legally light up, under an exception to the legislation.

But the court in The Hague found that such spaces were "in conflict" with the World Health Organization's framework convention to regulate tobacco use, which the Netherlands has signed and which entered into force in 2005.

LONDON (AP) — The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control says the number of measles cases across the continent tripled last year and is continuing to cause new outbreaks due to low immunization rates.

In an update published this month, the agency said more than 14,400 cases were reported by 30 countries last year — compared with about 4,600 cases the year before. European officials said the spike was due to epidemics in Romania, Italy, Greece and Germany.