

Russia: Ties With U.S. 'Very Difficult' to Improve



U.S. President Donald Trump (R) and Russia's President Vladimir Putin talk as they make their way to take the "family photo" during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders' summit.

MOSCOW (AFP) — Moscow Wednesday said it would be "very difficult" to improve U.S.-Russia relations, which have plummeted to Cold War lows on accusations of election meddling and crises in Syria and Ukraine.

Deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov accused the U.S. of trying to meddle in Russia's internal affairs

ahead of a presidential election next month, after Washington indicted 13 Russians for an alleged covert effort to interfere in 2016 U.S. polls.

"Paradoxically, the Americans are taking steps towards meddling in our internal affairs and exacerbating tensions in bilateral relations ahead of the presidential election" in Russia March 18, Ryabkov told the news

agency Interfax.

"Despite this, they continue - without any foundation or proof - to reproach us for apparently interfering in their electoral process," he said.

"Of course we in Moscow regret all of this," he said of potential sanctions against the 13 Russians who were indicted last week as part of a U.S. federal government probe.

"It will be very difficult to move relations with the U.S. on from their current state," he said.

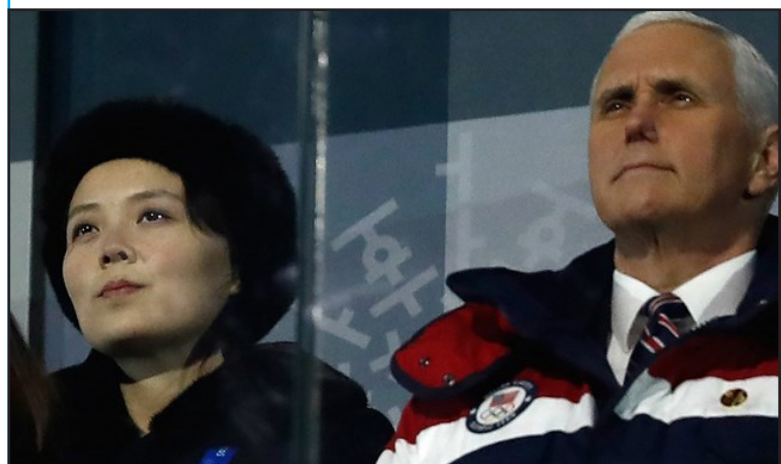
Several U.S. congressional committees and special prosecutor Robert Mueller are investigating allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 election and collusion with the campaign of President Donald Trump.

Moscow has long denied any role in election interference.

The Cold War rivals have clashed over crises in Ukraine, Syria and Iran, with reciprocal expulsions of diplomats last year.

Following Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the war between Kiev and Kremlin-backed rebels, the U.S. has imposed ever stricter sanctions on Moscow.

North Korea Canceled Meeting With Pence: U.S.



In this file photo taken on February 9, 2018 U.S. Vice President Mike Pence (R) and North Korea's Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, attend the opening ceremony of the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games at the Pyeongchang Stadium.

WASHINGTON (AP) — Vice President Mike Pence was all set to hold a history-making meeting with North Korean officials during the Winter Olympics in South Korea, but Kim Jong Un's government canceled at the last minute, the Trump administration said Tuesday.

A potential meeting between Pence and the North Koreans had been the most highly anticipated moment of the vice president's visit to Pyeongchang, South Korea, where he led the U.S. delegation to the opening ceremonies.

Ahead of Pence's visit, Trump

officials had insisted they'd requested no meeting with North Korea, but notably left open the possibility one could occur.

There was no indication that a meeting had indeed been planned - and then canceled on short notice - until Tuesday, more than a week after Pence returned to the United States. The State Department said that Pence had been "ready to take this opportunity" but would have used it to insist Pyongyang abandon its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs.

"At the last minute, DPRK officials decided not to go forward

with the meeting," said State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert, using an acronym for the North's formal name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

North Korea has said that it had no interest in meeting with Pence while he was in Pyeongchang.

"We have no intention to meet with the U.S. side during the stay in South Korea," a Foreign Ministry official was quoted as saying by the North's official news agency on Feb. 8, the day Pence arrived in South Korea. "We are not going to use such a sports festival as the Winter Olympics as a political lever. There is no need to do so."

A Trump administration official said the U.S. had expected the meeting to occur Feb. 10, the last day of Pence's three-day visit to the Olympic Games. The administration did not say exactly how much notice it received from North Korea that the meeting had been called off, nor where the meeting would have taken place or under what conditions.

Nor was it immediately clear whether North Korea scheduled the meeting before the vice president arrived in South Korea or after he had already arrived. The day before landing in Pyeongchang, Pence told reporters that "we haven't requested a meeting with North Korea."

Florida Shooting Survivors Rally in U.S. Capital



Students from Stoneman Douglas High, as they prepared Coral Springs, Fla., to leave for Tallahassee on 20, 2018.

TALLAHASSEE, Fla (AP) — Students who survived the Florida school shooting prepared to flood the Capitol Wednesday pushing to ban the assault-style rifle used to kill 17 people, vowing to make changes in the November election if they can't persuade lawmakers to change laws before their legislative session ends.

About 100 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School students arrived at a Tallahassee high school to extended applause late Tuesday after a 400-mile (640-kilometer) trip on three buses. They told the 500 students and parents waiting for them that they are fighting to protect all students.

"We're what's making the change. We're going to talk to these politicians tomorrow. We're going to talk to them the day after that. We're going to keep talking, we're going to keep pushing until something is done because people are dying and this can't happen anymore," said Alfonso Calderon, a 16-year-old junior. "You guys are what we're trying to protect."

Despite their enthusiasm and determination, the students and their supporters aren't likely to get what they really want: a ban on AR-15s and similar semi-automatic rifles. Republican lawmakers are talking more seriously about some restrictions, but not a total ban.

Instead, they're discussing treating assault-style rifles like the one suspected gunman Nikolas Cruz is accused of using in the Valentine's Day attack more like handguns than long guns. That could mean raising the minimum age to purchase the weapon to 21, creating a waiting period and making it more difficult for people who exhibit signs of mental illness from buying the weapon even without a diagnosis.

Democrats attempted to get a bill to ban assault rifles and large-capacity magazines heard on the House floor on Tuesday. Republicans, who dominate the chamber, easily shot it down. Students who were at the Capitol ahead of their classmates who arrived late Tuesday found Republicans steered the conversation away from gun restrictions.

Scores of Girls Missing After Boko Haram Attack



Catholic faithful seen in prayer during Ash Wednesday observance at the Holy Rosary Catholic Church in Wuse Zone 2, Abuja, Nigeria February 14, 2018.

KANO, Nigeria (AFP) — Fears grew in northeast Nigeria Wednesday about the fate of potentially scores of girls who have not been seen since a Boko Haram attack on their school two days ago.

Takfiri militants stormed the Government Girls Science Secondary School in Dapchi, Yobe state, Monday evening. Locals initially said the girls and their teachers fled the attack.

The militants gained worldwide notoriety in April 2014 when they abducted 276 girls from their school in Chibok, in neighboring Borno state. A total of 112 are still being held.

Monday's incident sparked fears of a repeat and Wednesday morning some 50 parents and guardians gathered at the school demanding information.

"Our girls have been missing for two days and we don't know their whereabouts," Abubakar Shehu, whose niece is among those missing, told AFP.

"Although we were told they had run to some villages, we have been to all these villages mentioned without any luck. We are beginning to harbor fears the worst might have happened.

"We have the fear that we are dealing with another Chibok scenario."

According to school staff, there were 710 students at the state-run boarding

school, which caters for girls aged 11 and above.

Inuwa Muhammad, whose 16-year-old daughter, Falmata, is also missing, said it was a confused picture and that parents had been frantically searching surrounding villages.

"Nobody is telling us anything officially," he said. "We still don't know how many of our daughters were recovered and how many are still missing. "We have been hearing many numbers, between 67 and 94."

Police in the state, which is one of three in the northeast Nigeria worst-affected by the Boko Haram insurgency, said they have no reports of abductions following the attack.

Yobe's education commissioner, Muhammad Lamin, said the school had been shut and a roll call of all the girls who have returned was being conducted. "It is only after the head-count that we will be able to say whether any girls were taken," he said.

Some of the girls had fled to villages up to 30 kilometers away through the remote bushland, he added.

Boko Haram has used kidnapping as a weapon of war since its insurgency began in 2009, seizing thousands of women and young girls, as well as men and boys of fighting age.

News in Brief

BEIJING (Dispatches) — Eleven Chinese warships have entered the East Indian Ocean this month, in what seems to have been a show of strength amid a rivalry in the region with India and a crisis in the Maldives. A fleet of Chinese destroyers and at least one frigate, a massive amphibious transport dock, and three support tankers sailed into the Indian Ocean in February, reports said. "If you look at warships and other equipment, the gap between the Indian and Chinese navy is not large," it said.

Reports did not say when exactly the fleet had been deployed or for how long, but Indian defense sources said on Tuesday that a Chinese flotilla of a destroyer, frigate, and tankers did enter the region around February 10 after conducting some drills in the South China Sea. The flotilla, which according to the sources was well over 3,500 kilometers away from the Maldives, went back through the Lombok Strait after several days. "Indian satellites, warships, and long-range maritime surveillance aircraft like P-8I kept close tabs on the Chinese flotilla, which was in international waters towards Australia." The Times of India quoted a defense source as speaking on condition of anonymity.

MADRID (AFP) — A Spanish court Wednesday issued an arrest warrant valid only in Spain for a former Catalan lawmaker who moved to Switzerland to avoid being jailed while she is investigated over her role in the region's secession drive. The Supreme Court "ordered the arrest" of Anna Gabriel, who failed to turn up on Wednesday before a judge for questioning, it said in its ruling. The arrest warrant only applies "nationally", a court spokesman told AFP.

PARIS (AFP) — At least 3,000 people sleep rough on the streets of Paris, according to figures from the city's first ever homelessness census which authorities warned Wednesday were likely a serious underestimate. Some 1,700 Parisian volunteers and 300 officials carried out the census last Thursday night, going street by street counting the number of people huddled in sleeping bags in doorways or camped out in tents. They also surveyed homeless people about their housing and health problems, collecting data that Socialist Mayor Anne Hidalgo hopes will allow authorities to design better policies to help those on the streets. Deputy mayor Bruno Julliard, unveiling the results, warned that the figure of 2,952 people sleeping rough - added to 672 in emergency winter shelters - was a low estimate.

WASHINGTON (AFP) — The annual cost of cybercrime has hit \$600 billion worldwide, fueled by growing sophistication of hackers and proliferation of criminal marketplaces and cryptocurrencies, researchers said Wednesday. A report produced by the security firm McAfee with the Center for Strategic and International Studies found theft of intellectual property represents about one-fourth of the cost of cybercrime in 2017. The researchers said ransomware is the fastest-growing component of cybercrime, helped by the easy availability of marketplaces offering hacking services. The global research report comes days after the White House released a report showing cyberattacks cost the United States between \$57 billion and \$109 billion in 2016, while warning of a "spillover" effect for the broader economy if certain sectors are hit. Globally, criminals are using the same tools for data or identity theft, bank hacks, and other cyber mischief, with anonymity preserved by using bitcoin or other cryptocurrency.

HAVANA (AFP) — Cuban President Raul Castro received a bipartisan delegation of U.S. lawmakers Tuesday, who are visiting the island with the alleged "acoustic attacks" against U.S. diplomats on their agenda. "During the meeting they discussed matters of interest to both countries," the Cuban government said in a statement. The delegation, led by Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, arrived in Cuba Sunday to address various issues including the mysterious supposed attacks in Havana. The issue has hit U.S.-Cuba relations, with Washington withdrawing half of its diplomats from Cuba and expelling 15 officials from the Cuban Embassy in the U.S. capital. The Cuban Foreign Ministry's U.S. director, Carlos Fernandez de Cossio, met with the congressmen Monday assuring them that "no evidence that attacks occurred against US diplomats in Cuba exists," according to his deputy Johana Tablada.

KOLKATA (AFP) — Indian police said Wednesday they have arrested two men over the gang rape of a mentally ill woman in West Bengal state who required surgery after enduring the violent assault. The 27-year-old woman remains in a critical condition after being abducted Saturday evening from a carnival and taken to a field where she was assaulted with an iron bar. She was found naked and bloodied the next day and rushed to hospital where she underwent emergency surgery. "Two men, aged 50 and 54, were arrested on Tuesday," Anju Sharma, a West Bengal police director general, told AFP. A local court ordered they be held in police custody, Sharma said. The brutality of the crime has generated shock even in a country where violent sexual assaults remain persistently high.

France Unveils 'Repressive' Immigration Bill

PARIS (AFP) — The French government was set to unveil a tough new immigration bill Wednesday that is proving one of the most divisive of Emmanuel Macron's young presidency.

The legislation, which criminalizes illegal border crossings and aims for quicker deportation of those deemed economic migrants, has sparked widespread anger from NGOs who have branded it repressive.

The government says the law balances "efficiency" with "humanity", offering faster asylum to refugees found to have fled conflict or repression.

But it has opened divisions in the left-right coalition that newcomer Macron set up when he came to power in May, with even some members of his Republic On the Move (LREM) party breaking ranks to criticize it.

"The most vulnerable will be punished," Jean-Michel Clement said, a lawmaker who joined the centrist LREM after switching from the Socialists. "It's not forbidden to put a little humanity into a draft law."

Some workers at France's refugee protection office Ofpra were going on strike to protest the bill Wednesday, branding it "an unequivocal departure from France's tradition of asylum".

They were to join staff at the asylum court who have been on strike for nine days over their working condi-

tions, with immigration lawyers also raising concerns over aspects of the draft law.

The bill was to be presented to the cabinet Wednesday before being tabled in parliament in April.

While left-wingers see it as too punitive the right have labeled it too lax.

Macron has come under pressure to toughen his stance after winning power in an election in which far-right leader Marine Le Pen won 34% of the vote, capitalizing on concerns over immigration.

The infamous "Jungle" migrant camp in Calais was razed in 2016 but young Africans and South Asians continue to head to the coast hoping to stow away on trucks crossing to Britain, while others are camped out on the streets of Paris.

France received a record 100,000 asylum applications last year.

Liberation newspaper noted that while polls showed voters backing tougher laws the relocation of thousands of migrants to towns and villages nationwide in 2016 went off largely without hitch.

"The French say they are worried, wary and want conservative migration policies. But once they get to know refugees they also want them to be welcomed," the paper wrote in an editorial.