

Germany Freezes Arms Sales to Turkey: Tensions Escalate Between NATO Members



German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan are seen during their meeting in Istanbul, May 24, 2016.

ISTANBUL (Dispatches) -- **Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan on Friday condemned comments by Germany's economy minister warning companies off investing in Turkey and said the country should "pull itself together" as a dispute between the NATO allies escalates.**

In a speech in Istanbul, Erdogan also said that a German foreign ministry travel warning against Turkey was baseless and malicious and that the German government should give account for terrorists which he said the country was harboring.

Germany has frozen all arms deliveries to Turkey, a newspaper reported

Friday, amid a row between the NATO partners that has sharply worsened since Ankara arrested several human rights activists.

Berlin stepped up its travel advisory for Turkey on Thursday and warned it would review state guarantees for foreign investment there – measures which Ankara labeled “blackmail and threats”. As part of a sweeping overhaul of bilateral ties, Germany is also “freezing all planned and ongoing arms deliveries to Turkey,” the top-circulation Bild newspaper reported without citing a source.

Chancellor Angela Merkel’s right-hand man, Peter Altmaier, did not con-

firm or deny the report in a ZDF television interview but warned that “we will at any time consider whether further measures are necessary”.

Relations between Turkey and Germany, home to three million ethnic Turks, have been badly strained, particularly since a failed coup a year ago against President Erdogan.

In the months after the July 2016 coup attempt, Germany already blocked 11 separate arms export shipments to Turkey, including handguns, ammunition or weapons components, according to media reports.

Relations sharply deteriorated after a Turkish court Tuesday ordered six rights activists should remain in custody for allegedly aiding a “terror” group, among them German citizen Peter Steudtner.

In the war of words, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble compared Erdogan’s Turkey with the former communist German Democratic Republic (GDR).

“Turkey is arresting people arbitrarily and not respecting even minimal consular standards,” said Schaeuble.

“It reminds me of the way it was in the GDR. When you travelled there, you knew, if something happens to you, nobody can help you.”

Altmaier also confirmed that Berlin would urge Brussels to freeze 4.45 billion euros (RM22.1 billion) in EU funds theoretically earmarked until end-2020 for Turkey, a long-term aspirant for membership to the bloc.

Quake Kills Two, Injures Hundreds in Turkey, Greece



A man stands in front of a damaged building following an earthquake off the island of Kos, Greece on July 21, 2017.

ATHENS (AP) -- **A powerful earthquake sent a building crashing down on tourists at a bar on the Greek holiday island of Kos and struck panic on the nearby shores of Turkey early Friday, killing two people and injuring some 200 people.**

Rescue authorities said two men from Turkey and Sweden died in the collapse at the White Corner Club when the 6.5-magnitude quake struck at about 1:30 a.m., rattling Greek islands and the Turkish Aegean coast in a region where seismic activity is common. The dead vacationers were not named.

Hundreds of revelers were in or

near the popular White Corner Club in the old town of Kos when the building partially collapsed.

At least five other people were seriously injured on Kos as tourists and local residents scrambled out of buildings, some even leaping from balconies. Five of the injured were being transported by helicopter to a hospital on the island of Crete, officials said.

“There was banging. There was shaking. The light was swinging, banging on the ceiling, crockery falling out of the cupboards, and pans were making noise,” Christopher Hackland, a Scottish diving instructor, told the Associated Press.

“There was a lot of screaming and crying and hysterics coming from the hotel. It felt like being at a theme park with one of the illusions, an optical illusion where you feel like you’re upside down.”

Tens of thousands of tourists spent the night outdoors on Kos, many sleeping on sunbeds along beaches as a quake-related sea swell subsided. The quake damaged churches, an old mosque, and the port’s 14th century castle, along with old buildings in the town.

In nearby Turkey, the quake caused cracks on walls of some buildings in the resort of Bodrum, flooded the lower floors of sea-front hotels and restaurants and sent moored boats crashing toward the shore.

Turkish authorities said some 70 people were treated in hospitals in the resort of Bodrum for minor injuries, mostly sustained during panicked flight from their homes. But damage was light and they expect life will soon return to normal. With tourists continuing their holidays.

Several Greek government ministers, as well as rescuers with sniffer dogs and structural engineers traveled to Kos overnight to coordinate the rescue effort. The British Foreign Office warned travelers of the possibility of aftershocks, urging them to follow the advice of the local authorities.

Authorities said there were no reported injuries of refugees and migrants at camps on the island.

Tens of Thousands Rally Against Government in Poland

WARSAW (Reuters) -- **Tens of thousands of Poles protested on Thursday against a new law that allows parliament to appoint Supreme Court judges, defying a European Union warning that the move undermines democracy and the rule of law.**

The bill, sponsored by the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS), was passed by parliament’s lower house earlier in the day after tumultuous debate. That triggered one of the biggest protests since the PiS came to power in late 2015.

The vote came a day after the EU gave its largest formerly communist member state a week to shelve judicial reforms that Brussels says would put courts under direct government control.

If Warsaw’s nationalist-minded PiS does not back down, the government could face fines and even a suspension of voting rights, although other euroskeptics in the EU, notably Hungary, will likely veto strict punishment.

In the best-case scenario, Poland will see its clout in Brussels wane further, damaged by mounting frustration among its EU peers arising from bitter disputes over issues such as migrant quotas and nature conservation.

“We will ... not allow them to trample European values,” Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz, leader of the Polish People’s Party (PSL), told a crowd in Warsaw. “We will not allow ourselves to be pushed out of the European Union.”

A crowd in front of the Presidential Palace, carrying Polish and EU flags responded by chanting, “Free Poland, European!” “Free Poland, European!”

Sources close to the Presidential Palace told Reuters that President Andrzej Duda was on vacation on the Baltic seacoast.

Warsaw City Hall estimated the crowd at more than 50,000, while police put it at 14,000. Tens of thousands demonstrated in other Polish cities.

Nine Ukrainian Troops Killed in Donbass



This file photo shows Ukrainian troops firing at pro-Russian militia targets.

KIEV (Dispatches) -- **Nine Ukrainian troops have been killed in clashes with pro-Russian militias and a mine blast in the volatile eastern border frontline in the bloodiest incident in recent months.**

According to the Ukrainian military on Thursday, shelling by militias has killed six servicemen and wounded two more around the de facto breakaway capital of Donetsk over the past 24 hours.

Three more soldiers were killed and three injured when their vehicle hit a landmine northwest of the second biggest breakaway city of Lugansk, it added.

Meanwhile, a news agency affiliated to pro-Russian forces said three civilians had been wounded in shelling of residential areas by Ukrainian forces.

Sporadic clashes have continued since a deal brokered by Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany went into effect in 2015.

On Tuesday, pro-Russian forces fighting against Kiev announced the creation of a new “state” called Malorossiya that they said would take the place of Ukraine and have its capital in Donetsk.

Malorossiya was the term used during the Russian tsarist era to identify the

area which is currently part of Ukraine.

The proposed country would be founded after a referendum. A constitution presented by regional pro-Russian leader Alexander Zakharchenko said representatives from the self-declared Donetsk and Lugansk “People’s Republics” and other regions had agreed to declare the establishment of a new state.

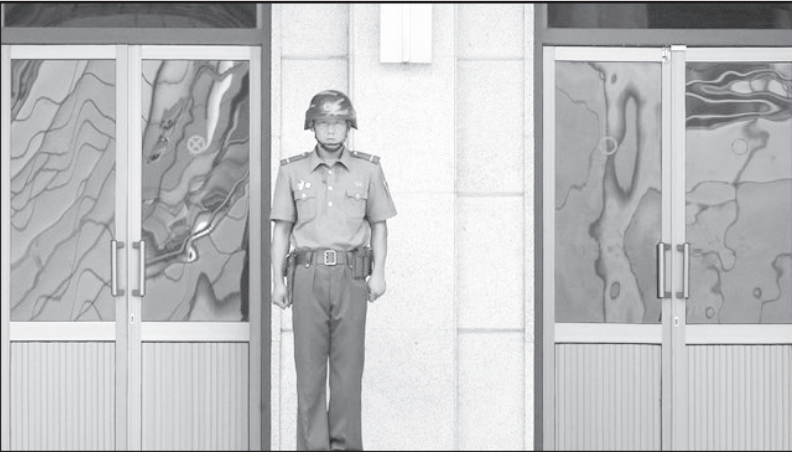
The surprise proposal elicited immediate reaction from Ukraine’s pro-Western authorities in Kiev. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said on Tuesday that he would “restore sovereignty over Donbass and Crimea,” and predicted that the Malorossiya project would fall apart.

Ukraine launched an all-out offensive against the Donbass region in 2014 after its residents sought to join Russia, leading to a protracted conflict which has claimed the lives of some 10,000 people.

While Russia has refused to annex the region, it has warned of military action if Ukraine attempted to suppress the ethnic Russian-speaking people in the Donbass region.

The U.S. and its allies in Europe blame Russia for the uprising in Donetsk and Lugansk but Moscow denies direct intervention in the conflict.

South Korea Seeks Military Talks With North



In this July 19, 2017 photo, a North Korean army soldier stands guard at the border villages of Panmunjom in Paju, South Korea.

SEOUL (Dispatches) -- **South Korea on Friday urged North Korea to accept its offers for talks as Pyongyang continued to ignore Seoul’s proposal for a military meeting to ease animosities along their tense border.**

South Korea’s Defense Ministry said it has become difficult to hold the meeting Seoul had originally proposed for Friday and called for the North to “quickly accept” the overture for talks.

“Easing the military tension between the South and North and restoring the military dialogue channel are very urgent tasks for peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula,” the ministry said in a statement.

North Korea has yet to respond to South Korea’s proposal to hold the military meeting and a separate meeting next month to resume the temporary reunions of families separated by the 1950-53 Korean War.

If realized, the talks would be the first inter-Korean dialogue since December 2015. Ties between the Koreans have worsened since over North Korea’s expanding nuclear and missile programs, but South Korea’s new liberal President Moon Jae-in, who took office in May, has expressed a desire to reach out to the North.

Despite North Korea apparently pass-

ing over the Friday meeting, some experts say North Korea is likely to agree to the military talks at some point as it has been calling for the suspension of loudspeaker propaganda broadcasts at the border the two Koreas began after the North’s fourth nuclear test in January 2016. It’s possible that the North is taking time mulling its options and could potentially make a counter-proposal seeking more concessions from the South in exchange for opening dialogue, the experts say.

The prospects for a Red Cross meeting on the family reunions are murkier as the North has been tying the issue to its demands for the South to send back 12 women and their male manager who worked at a North Korean-run restaurant China before ending up in the South last year. Pyongyang has insisted that the workers were abducted to the South, an accusation Seoul denies.

“The government proposed the military and Red Cross meeting because it considered peace in the Korean Peninsula and humanitarian issues as urgent,” said Eugene Lee, a spokeswoman at Seoul’s Unification Ministry. “We need to remain calm and take one step forward at a time, without fretting too much about how the North reacts each time.”

News in Brief

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- **The International Monetary Fund on Thursday approved in principle a \$1.8 billion standby loan arrangement for Greece, making a conditional commitment to help underpin the country’s long-running bailout program for the first time in two years.**

But the IMF’s approval-in-principle means the fund will not make any money available until after it receives “specific and credible assurances” from Greece’s European lenders to ensure the country’s debt sustainability. The approval is also conditional on Greece keeping its economic reforms on track. The current bailout, Greece’s third since 2010, is now shouldered exclusively by European institutions.

CANBERRA (AP) -- Australia was disappointed that hundreds of its rejected refugees would not begin resettling in the United States this month under a deal that predates President Donald Trump’s administration, an official said Friday.

President Barack Obama’s administration agreed to accept up to 1,250 refugees among hundreds of asylum seekers - mostly from Iran, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka - who have been languishing for up to four years in immigration camps on the impoverished Pacific island nations of Papua New Guinea and Nauru. Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton said Australia wanted the refugees to start moving in July, but the United States had already filled its 50,000 refugee quota for the current fiscal year.

LONDON (Reuters) -- **Violent crimes such as murder and knife attacks surged by 18% in England and Wales in the past year, the sharpest rise for a decade, according to official figures released Thursday.**

The increase comes amid heated rows about police funding and a fall in the number of officers, with opponents accusing Prime Minister Theresa May’s government of putting the public at risk by slashing budgets. Statistics from the 44 police forces showed there were more than 1.1 million violent crimes in the year to March 2017 with large increases also in robbery and sex crimes, while overall nearly 5 million offenses were recorded, up by 10% from the year before.

ABIDJAN (Reuters) -- Gunmen, some of them in military uniforms, attacked the base of an elite security unit in Ivory Coast’s main city, and stole stocks of weapons as part of a series of overnight clashes, the defense minister said Thursday.

The raid late Wednesday in Abidjan was the latest outburst of violence after several months of military mutinies. It came just hours after the government reshuffled key security posts, and two days before Ivory Coast hosts an event that will bring in thousands from around the French-speaking world.

SAO PAULO (Dispatches) -- **A Brazilian judge has ordered assets of former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to be frozen and sold.**

Judge Sergio Moro put the value of the assets of Lula, as he is widely known, at \$4.3 million. Lula’s assets include three apartments, a plot of land, two vehicles and two bank accounts with more than the equivalent of \$190,000. Lula, a leftist leader who is topping polls for the 2018 election, on Thursday told supporters protesting his conviction for corruption charges that his political opponents were persecuting him in the courts. “Since they’re not able to defeat me through politics, they want to defeat me with lawsuits,” he said.

BANGKOK (Reuters) -- Thailand’s Supreme Court has set Aug. 25 as the date for a verdict in the trial of the country’s former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra, who is accused of wasting billions of dollars on a rice subsidy scheme.

Yingluck, overthrown in a 2014 military coup, faces up to 10 years in jail if found guilty in the trial which has been going on for 18 months. Friday was the last day for witness hearings. Yingluck can make a closing statement on Aug. 1, the court said. Yingluck and her Puea Thai Party say the trial is politically motivated, aimed at discrediting a populist movement that has helped the Shinawatra clan win every election since 2001.