

U.S., South Korea Launch Military Drills



South Korean and U.S. soldiers watch from an observation post during a joint live firing drill at the Seungjin Fire Training Field in Pocheon, on April 26, 2017.

SEOUL, South Korea (Dispatches) -- U.S. and South Korean troops kicked off their annual drills Monday that come after President Trump and North Korea exchanged warlike rhetoric in the wake of the North's two intercontinental ballistic missile tests last month.

The Ulchi Freedom Guardian drills are largely computer-simulated war games held every summer and have drawn furious responses from North

Korea, which views them an invasion rehearsal. Pyongyang's state media on Sunday called this year's drills a "reckless" move that could trigger the "uncontrollable phase of a nuclear war." U.S. and South Korean militaries launched this year's 11-day training on Monday morning. The exercise involves 17,500 American troops and 50,000 South Korean soldiers, according to the U.S. military command in South Korea and Seoul's Defense Min-

istry.

No field training like live-fire exercise or tank maneuvering is involved in the Ulchi drills, in which alliance soldiers, mostly senior officers, sit at computers to practice how they engage in battles and hone their decision-making capabilities.

North Korea typically responds to South Korea-U.S. military exercises with weapons tests. During last year's Ulchi drills, North Korea test-fired a submarine-launched ballistic missile that flew about 310 miles in the longest flight by that type of weapon. Days after the drills, the North carried out its fifth and biggest nuclear test to date.

Last month, North Korea test-launched two ICBMs at highly lofted angles, and outside experts said those missiles can reach some U.S. parts like Alaska, Los Angeles or Chicago if fired at normal, flattened trajectories.

Earlier this month, Trump pledged to strike at North Korea with "fire and fury." North Korea responded to the threat with a pledge to launch missiles toward the American territory of Guam before its leader, Kim Jong Un backed off, saying he would first watch how Washington acts before going ahead with the missile launch plans.

Europe on Terror Watch After Marseille Car Crash



Armed soldiers on the scene after a van rammed into two bus stops in Marseille, Aug. 21, 2017.

PARIS (Dispatches) -- At least one person was killed and another injured in Marseille on Monday when a car crashed into two bus shelters in different parts of the French city, police said. Police advised the public to avoid the Old Port area where the driver, a 35-year-old man, was arrested.

"At the moment we have no information on the motives of this individual," a police official told Reuters.

The driver first hit a bus shelter around 8:15 a.m. (0615 GMT) in the 13th arrondissement — or district — in the poorer northern part of the city, before hitting a second bus shelter an hour later in the 11th arrondissement, several km (miles) south. The incident comes as Spanish police hunt for the 22-year-old driver who plowed a van into a crowd in Barcelona on Thursday.

Spanish police said Monday that they have identified the driver of the van that mowed down pedestrians on the busy Las Ramblas boulevard in Barcelona, killing 13.

Police in Catalonia announced the identification on Twitter, without giving his name.

But Catalonia's regional interior minister Joaquim Forn told local radio that "everything suggests the van driver is Younes Abouyaaqoub."

The Moroccan remains at large, and police said Sunday that they did not know if he was still in Spain.

Spanish authorities had previously said they hoped Monday to identify all victims of the deadly attack in Catalonia and the members of the terror cell behind it, as a manhunt deepened for one suspect still at large.

With the 12-person cell dismantled, police were hunting Abouyaaqoub, and warned he could be at large outside Spain.

Investigators believe the terror cell comprised at least 12 men, some of them teenagers.

The suspected extremists had been preparing bombs for "one or more attacks in Barcelona", regional police chief Josep Lluís Traperó told reporters, revealing that traces of triacetone triperoxide (TATP) - a homemade explosive that is a Daesh hallmark - had also been found.

The suspects accidentally caused an explosion at the house on the eve of Thursday's attack in Barcelona - an error that likely forced them to modify their plans.

Instead, they used a vehicle to smash into crowds on Barcelona's Las Ramblas boulevard as it was thronged with tourists, killing 13 people and injuring about 100.

Several hours later, a similar attack in the seaside town of Cambrils left one woman dead. Police shot and killed the five attackers in Cambrils, some of whom were wearing fake explosive belts and carrying knives.

Daesh claimed responsibility for the attacks, believed to be its first in Spain.

Juncker: EU Cannot Rely on U.S. Forever

VIENNA (Dispatches) -- European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker says the EU cannot turn to the United States forever when it comes to its defense issues, urging the 28-nation bloc to cut its reliance on Washington's military support.

"It becomes clear that we cannot rely on American defense support in the long run," Juncker told Tiroler Tageszeitung, an Austrian daily.

He added that the European Union is steadily recovering from the crises it has faced since 2015, including the mass influx of refugees and the surprise election of Donald Trump as U.S. president.

Juncker, who is a strong advocate of creating an EU army, has repeatedly called for separating European forces from NATO, a Western military alliance led by the United States.

His calls intensified after Trump raised uncertainties over his commitment to European security.

The senior European official advised the 28-nation bloc back in June against "outsourcing" its defense issues.

"The protection of Europe can no longer be outsourced. Even our biggest military powers — and I could count them on one, maximum two — cannot combat all the challenges and threats alone," he said at the Prague Defense and Security Conference.



Estonian soldiers take part in NATO military exercises in this file photo.

Calls for creating a European army have also been voiced by other EU officials.

"In the end, there will be a European army," said Hans-Peter Bartels, the German parliament's Commissioner for the Armed Forces in June.

The German official said eventually the EU will be organized and eliminate "disorganized, technically fragmented, and duplicate structures," calling on EU states to organize their military forces sooner and create a single military force.

An EU plan to create a European army has been the subject of media

debate over the past months.

The plan, drawn up by the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini, foresees the creation of a new European military and operational structure.

In March, the EU created a joint military headquarters in Brussels, dubbed the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) facility.

Many see the formation of the MPCC as the first step towards the creation of a European army led from the EU headquarters in Brussels.

President Buhari: Calls for Nigeria Breakup Crossed Red Line

ABUJA (Dispatches) -- Separatists calling for the breakup of Nigeria have crossed a red line and the country's unity is not negotiable, President Muhammadu Buhari said on Monday in his first speech since returning home after three months of medical leave in Britain.

Ethnic tensions have surfaced in the last few months amid calls for a separate southeastern state, known as Biafra, while some in the restive southern Niger Delta oil hub have called for independence and Boko Haram militants seek a Takfiri state in the northeast.

Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation with 180 million people, split roughly equally between Christians and Muslims and about 250 different ethnic groups who mostly live peacefully side-by-side.

In a televised speech, broadcast two days after his return on Saturday, Buhari said he followed events in Nigeria on a daily basis during his absence and was concerned by discussions over the possible dissolution of the country.

"I was distressed to notice that some of the comments, especially in the social media have crossed our national red lines by daring to question our collective existence as a nation," said Buhari.

"Nigeria's unity is settled and not negotiable. We shall not allow irresponsible elements to start trouble," he said, adding that some ethnic violence was "fueled by political mischief makers".

Buhari, a 74-year-old northern Muslim who took office in May 2015, handed over power to his deputy, Christian southerner Yemi Osinbajo, when he traveled to Britain on May 7 for treatment of an unspecified ailment.

Osinbajo held talks in June with regional leaders in an effort to quell tension after activists demanded the eviction of Igbo people from the north over their calls for the creation of a separate Biafra state.

The tensions echoed the build up to a civil war over the secession of Biafra in 1967 which ended with Nigeria's victory in 1970, after an estimated 1 million people died.

Buhari also said Nigeria's security agencies should not let successes achieved against militant group Boko Haram in the last 18 months "be a sign to relax", adding that Nigeria would "reinforce and reinvigorate" the fight against the Takfiris. Bomb attacks and raids by Boko Haram in the northeast have increased in the last few months, killing at least 170 people since June 1, according a Reuters tally. Buhari had said in December 2016 that the group's main base had fallen.

Nigeria, an OPEC member which has Africa's biggest economy, is in its first recession in 25 years which was largely caused by low oil prices and the impact of attacks on energy facilities last year in the Niger Delta.

Buhari said it was in the interest of Nigerians to come together to face the challenge of economic security.

Fears of Genocide as Central Africa Violence Rises



Antibalaka fighters walk in Gambo, southeast Central African Republic, on August 16, 2017.

BANGUI (AFP) -- Thirteen people have been killed in a town in Central African Republic, a local doctor said Sunday, as the toll from sectarian violence that has sparked fears of genocide continued to rise.

The clashes took place in Bria, in the centre of the country 450 kilometers (280 miles) from the capital Bangui, between a majority Muslim rebel group and a predominantly Christian militia called the anti-Balaka.

"Thirteen bodies were found on Saturday after violent fighting between self-defense forces and parts of Abdoulaye His-sene's FPRC," Michel Ambapo told AFP, referring respectively to the anti-Balaka and a faction of the rebel coalition known as the Seleka.

"At least 20 wounded were admitted to hospital, most of them combatants on both sides and several civilians," the doctor added.

All told, the number of deaths in the city since fighting erupted several days earlier "is around 30," Ambapo said.

The UN's peacekeeping force, known as MINUSCA, did not report a toll.

On Saturday, sources reported fatal clashes had taken place in several areas of the country in previous days.

They included more than a dozen fatalities in the southeastern town of Zemio, Jean-Alain Zembi, a priest, told AFP.

Six aid groups wrote to the United Nations last Tuesday, describing the former French colony as "on the brink of catastrophe".

We "request your office take immediate action to prevent the country collapsing into another full-blown conflict", the letter said, adding that "at least 821 civilians have been killed since the start of the year."

One of the world's poorest nations, Central African Republic was pitched into a war between Muslim and Christian militias in 2013, unleashed when President Francois Bozize, a Christian, was overthrown by the Seleka.

The Seleka in turn were ousted by a military intervention led by France, which was followed bloody reprisals by the mainly Christian anti-Balaka.

Groups on both sides are now fighting for control of natural resources, including gold and diamonds, as well as regional influence. Half a million people, in a country of 4.5 million, have fled.

On August 7, UN aid chief Stephen O'Brien warned that the situation was such that he saw "early warning signs of genocide."

News in Brief

MOSCOW (AFP) -- Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday appointed deputy foreign minister Anatoly Antonov as the country's new ambassador to the United States, replacing Sergei Kislyak.

"By presidential decree, Anatoly Ivanovich Antonov is appointed Russian Ambassador to the United States," the Kremlin said in a statement.

Relations between Moscow and Washington have fallen to a post-Cold War low, driven by accusations of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections.

Kislyak has been at the eye of the storm over his meetings with senior campaign aides to Donald Trump during the presidential race.

Antonov, 62, has served as a deputy foreign minister since December. Previously he served as a deputy defense minister. He has a reputation as a hardliner and is seen as a tough negotiator, including over weapons control issues with the U.S.

HELSINKI (Reuters) -- An 18-year-old Moroccan asylum seeker will appear in court on Tuesday over a knife attack in the city of Turku that killed two women and wounded eight people in what police suspect is Finland's first terrorism-related assault.

The court on Monday named the suspect as Abderrahman Mechkah. Police said he may appear via video link from hospital after he was shot in the leg and arrested on Friday.

Police said the suspect appeared to have targeted women. The crimes are being treated as murder and attempted murder with terrorist intent, the court said. Police have requested that Mechkah be detained during preliminary investigations.

NAIROBI (Reuters) -- South Sudan has grounded planes belonging to United Nations peacekeepers in a dispute over control of the airport in the capital Juba, a government spokesman said on Monday.

The move threatens to further delay the deployment of the latest 4,000 peacekeepers to be assigned to the African country, where civil war broke out in 2013.

"It was because the forces that were brought went to the airport to control the airport, which is not part of their mandate," President Salva Kiir's spokesman Ateny Wek Ateny said, explaining the decision to stop U.N. flights.

"They cannot come here to control our airport. It is our airport and if they wanted to cooperate with us, they must refrain from (deploying in) places they are not authorized."

VATICAN CITY (Dispatches) -- Pope Francis is demanding countries to greatly improve their welcome to migrants and stop any collective expulsions, saying migrants' dignity and right to protection trumps national security concerns.

Francis' politically pointed message Monday was for the Catholic Church's 2018 world refugee day, celebrated Jan. 14. It comes amid mounting anti-migrant sentiment in Europe following waves of migrant arrivals and extremist attacks.

In the message, Francis demanded governments welcome, protect, promote and integrate migrants.

He demanded an increased and simplified process of granting humanitarian and temporary visas and rejected arbitrary and collective expulsions as "unsuitable."

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines (AP) -- Abu Sayyaf militants killed nine people and wounded 16 others in an early morning attack Monday on a southern Philippine village which may have been in retaliation for a series of battle setbacks, officials said.

At least 20 Abu Sayyaf militants opened fire on villagers and burned five houses and a village hall in the attack on Tubigan village in Maluso town on Basilan island, military and police officials said. Among the dead were villagers and a militiaman.

Government militiamen were surprised by the dawn attack but later managed to put up resistance with extra troops and drive the attackers away after two hours of heavy fighting, the military said. The militants fled and were being pursued by government forces.

RIO DE JANEIRO (AFP) -- Brazil's army went into action again Monday to support police in raids on some of Rio de Janeiro's most violent favelas -- but reportedly not before a rogue soldier managed to tip off the drug gangs.

In the third such operation in just over two weeks, marines, army soldiers, air force personnel, police and agents from the elite federal intelligence service launched raids at dawn in seven neighborhoods, the Rio state security office said.

A year after the world applauded Rio's successful staging of the Olympics, Brazil's second biggest city is in deep financial difficulty and the demoralized police are struggling to contain well-armed drugs gangs based in the favelas.