

Russia Mulls Cutting U.S. Diplomatic Staff



The Russian Foreign Ministry building in Moscow

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia's Foreign Ministry does not rule out ordering the United States to cut its diplomatic staff in Russia to 300 people or below, the RIA news agency cited Georgy Borisenko,

the head of the ministry's North America Department, as saying on Wednesday.

In July, Moscow ordered the United States to cut the number of its diplomatic and technical staff working

in Russia by around 60 percent, to 455, part of a diplomatic row.

The figure of 455 was meant to mirror the total number of Russian diplomats working in the United States, but also included Russian nationals working at the United Nations in New York, Borisenko told the agency.

"The fact that in the summer we took into account the people working for Russia's mission at the UN, this was good will," Borisenko told RIA.

"If they haven't appreciated this, we have the full right to reduce ... the number of U.S. diplomats," he said, saying Moscow could stop taking Russian UN staff into account when calculating what parity between the two countries meant.

"In this case, the number of American personnel in Russia should decline to a level of 300 or below."

U.S. Jets Overfly Korean Peninsula in New Provocation

SEOUL (Dispatches) -- The U.S. has flown two supersonic heavy bombers over the Korean Peninsula in a show of force against Pyongyang, staging the first nighttime joint aviation exercises with Japan and South Korea.

Two B-1B Lancers based in Guam flew a mission in the vicinity of the Sea of Japan late Tuesday, the U.S. Pacific Air Forces said in a statement.

South Korean defense authorities on Wednesday said the bombers staged a simulated air-to-ground missile firing drill with two South Korean fighters over the Sea of Japan (East Sea).

The four aircraft then flew across the peninsula and staged another round of a firing exercise over the Yellow Sea before the two B-1Bs returned home, the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said.

The B-1Bs also conducted exercises with Japan's Air Force in what the U.S. statement called a "sequenced bilateral mission."

Tensions in Korean Peninsula have soared in recent months with Pyongyang launching a flurry of missiles and conducting its sixth and most powerful



In this June 20, 2017 file photo, U.S. Air Force B-1B bombers, top, and second from top, and South Korean fighter jets F-15K fly over the Korean Peninsula, South Korea.

nuclear test last month following a series of U.S. threats.

The exercises came as a U.S. nuclear-powered fast-attack submarine, the USS Tuckson, made a call in South Korea's

southern port of Jinhae, the U.S. Pacific Command said.

It did not say when the Hawaii-based submarine with a crew of around 150 would depart the peninsula.

The last flight by U.S. bombers was 17 days earlier when four U.S. F-35B stealth fighter jets and two B-1Bs flew over the peninsula.

The North's missile and nuclear capabilities have made significant progress under leader Kim Jong-Un, who on Saturday told party officials that the country's atomic weapons were a "treasured sword" to protect it from aggression.

UK Muslim Women Speak Out on Prejudice

LONDON (Dispatches) -- From a jaded TV chat show host to a Mideastern actress who longs to be cast as a ghostbuster, not endless Takfiri brides, the stories in Sabrina Mahfouz's anthology of British Muslim women all do one thing: challenge stereotypes. Mahfouz, a poet and playwright, brought together 22 women, with roots ranging from Pakistan to Palestine, to lift the lid on their minds and lives, which are often invisible in Britain.

"There is such a narrow perception in the UK of who a person of Muslim heritage can be, act, think or look like and I wanted to challenge that in any way that I could," London-born Mahfouz told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"At a time of such extreme Islamophobia, the more literature can do to challenge this destructive narrative, the better."

More than three percent of Britain's 65 million population are Muslim, with the highest proportion living in London, government data shows.

Police said hate crimes against Muslims rose after a series of Takfiri militant attacks, including an attack on London Bridge and during a music concert by U.S. singer Ariana Grande in Manchester in northern England.

"The Things I Would Tell You" includes poetry, essays and short stories from award-winning novelists, such as Leila Aboulela and Kamila Shamsie, emerging

talents and new writers.

Journalist Triska Hamid describes the frustrations young Muslim women have finding love via Islamic dating apps that allow them to swipe through photos, chat online and meet up.

The poems of Sudanese-born Asma Elbadawi, 27, who successfully lobbied the International Basketball Federation to allow players to compete in hijab, reflect on the dual identities of many immigrants in Britain.

"Our parents picked a better life for us over being with our families," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation, describing how her parents moved from Khartoum to Bradford when she was just a year old.

While most British Muslims were born overseas, the majority identify as British, according to the Muslim Council of Britain, the country's largest umbrella Islamic group.

Women are the main targets of anti-Muslim prejudice, accounting for six out of ten complainants, according to Iman Atta, director of Tell MAMA, a British organization that monitors such incidents.

In addition to enduring abuse for wearing Islamic clothing like headscarves and face veils, Muslim women often face a triple economic disadvantage, according to a 2016 parliamentary report, being female, Muslim and from an ethnic minority group.

Spain Threatens to Suspend Catalonia's Autonomy



Catalan President Carles Puigdemont signs a declaration of independence at the Catalan regional parliament in Barcelona, October 10, 2017.

MADRID (AFP) -- Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy on Wednesday threatened to suspend Catalonia's regional autonomy after the region said it had a mandate to split from Madrid.

In a televised address Rajoy said that he had asked Catalan leaders to confirm if they had declared independence, "which is a requirement for any measure the government can adopt under Article 155 of the constitution."

Article 155 allows Madrid to impose central authority over its semi-autonomous regions.

Spain's government vowed to examine "all options" Wednesday in a crisis cabinet meeting hours after Catalonia's leaders said they had a mandate to declare independence but put it on hold, plunging the country into uncertainty.

Rajoy has vowed to do everything in his power to prevent the region's independence in a dispute that has hurled Spain into its deepest political crisis in decades.

He has refused to rule out imposing direct rule over the semi-autonomous region -- a move many fear could lead to unrest.

Rajoy called an emergency meeting after Catalonia's president Carles Puigdemont announced on Tuesday that he had accepted the mandate for "Catalonia to become an independent state" following a banned referendum earlier this month.

But in a parliamentary speech that left many confused, Puigdemont immediately called for Catalonia's independence to be suspended to allow for negotiations with the central government.

On Wednesday, a government source who refused to be named said "all options" were on the table as the crisis talks were under way.

At stake is the future of a region of 7.5 million people deeply divided over

independence, one of Spain's economic powerhouses, whose drive to break away has raised concern for stability in the European Union.

Crowds of thousands gathered outside the parliament building in Barcelona on Tuesday evening, waving Catalan flags and banners screaming "democracy" in the hope of witnessing a historic night in a region that remains deeply divided over independence.

But Spain's political establishment rounded on Puigdemont following his declaration, and support among separatists in Catalonia was mixed.

The government stuck to its stance that it would not accept mediation or any talks until Catalan leaders drop their independence bid.

Following his declaration to parliament, Puigdemont and his allies signed an independence declaration outside the chamber, but its legal validity was unclear.

Spain and Catalonia now enter into the unknown, as Madrid has repeatedly said independence is not up for discussion.

Catalonia pressed ahead with an independence referendum on October 1 that the central government said breached Spain's constitution.

Spanish police cracked down on the polls, beating some voters as they closed down polling stations.

Around 90% of those who cast ballots voted for independence but the poll was poorly monitored and many Catalans opposed to secession boycotted it.

The crisis has caused deep uncertainty for businesses in one of the wealthiest regions in the eurozone's fourth-largest economy.

A string of companies have already moved their legal headquarters -- but not their employees -- from Catalonia to other parts of the country.



GENEVA (AFP) -- Myanmar's "systematic" crackdown on the Rohingya is aimed at permanently expelling the minority Muslim community from their home in Rakhine state, the United Nations said Wednesday.

The UN report, which is based on interviews with refugees who have fled to Bangladesh, details a campaign by Myanmar's military to terrorize the Rohingya through atrocities that range from indiscriminate killings to rape.

"Brutal attacks against Rohingya in northern Rakhine State have been well-organized, coordinated and systematic, with the intent of not only driving the population out of Myanmar but preventing them from returning to their homes," the UN said.

More than half a million people have fled, UN figures show.

TOKYO (AFP) -- Mount Shinmoedake in southern Japan erupted for the first time in six years Wednesday, shooting a plume of ash several hundred meters into the air and sparking warnings to local residents.

People were ordered to stay away from the volcano after it rumbled to life at 5:34 a.m. (20:34 GMT Tuesday) as Japan's Meteorological Agency said air blasts caused by the eruption could shatter windows.

"The ash plume reached a height of 300 meters (1,000 feet) when the volcano erupted," an agency official told AFP, adding that the eruption would continue and "become more active."

Ash deposits would spread as far as two kilometers from the crater, the agency warned.

Authorities raised its alert to level three, meaning that locals should avoid approaching the volcano. They detected 90 small tremors on Oct. 5 near the mountain, which featured in the 1967 James Bond film "You Only Live Twice".

Japan, with scores of active volcanoes, sits on the so-called Pacific "Ring of Fire" where a large proportion of the world's earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are recorded.

NAIROBI (Reuters) -- The Kenyan parliament passed an amendment on Wednesday to the country's election laws, saying that if one candidate withdraws from a repeat presidential election, the other one would automatically win.

The amendment was heavily criticized by the opposition, whose legislators boycotted the vote.

Opposition leader Raila Odinga withdrew from a repeat presidential vote scheduled for 26 October on Tuesday, citing concerns over fairness and transparency. The law must now be signed by the president.

PARIS (Reuters) -- French public sector workers went on strike against President Emmanuel Macron's plans to cut jobs and toughen pay conditions, forcing airlines to cancel hundreds of flights and disrupting school activities.

Civil servants, teachers and nurses marched through cities across France, from Toulouse in the south to Strasbourg in the east, before the day's biggest rally in Paris. It is the first time in a decade that all unions representing more than 5 million public workers have rallied behind a protest call.

As in other recent demonstrations, the number of protesters appeared low. While unions said some 400,000 people turned out across the country, the Interior Ministry put the figure at 209,000.

The Economy Ministry said just 14% of state civil servants had been on strike and just 9.5% in local administration.

LONDON (Reuters) -- At least 20,000 girls around the world are married off illegally each day, with child marriage often deeply rooted in tradition despite being outlawed in a growing number of countries, according to new analysis released Wednesday.

About 7.5 million girls become child brides every year in countries where early marriage is banned, the World Bank and global charity Save the Children said in a report.

More than a fifth are in West and Central Africa, where 1.7 million illegal child marriages occur each year, the highest rates in the world, the report said.

The figures show the challenges in enforcing anti-child marriage laws, since the practice can often be entrenched in community traditions and religious customs, the report said.

BERLIN (Reuters) -- German Chancellor Angela Merkel appointed Jan Hecker, her refugee policy coordinator, as her new foreign policy adviser, as she braced for tricky talks on a new coalition government next week, where immigration is likely to be a key issue, a government spokeswoman said. Merkel, humbled in last month's national election by a surge of the anti-immigrant far right, is seeking to put together a three-way coalition of her conservatives, the pro-business Free Democrats and the environmentalist Greens - a combination previously untested at the federal level.

Members of her conservative bloc resolved their own differences and agreed to limiting migration on Monday, paving the way for talks to begin with the other parties.

At Least 13 Dead in Prison Riot in Mexico

MONTERREY, Mexico (AFP) -- Mexican security forces used lethal force Tuesday to put down a prison riot in clashes that left at least 13 inmates dead, authorities said.

Unrest at the prison in Cadereyta in northeastern Nuevo Leon state broke out in the morning and was put down. But it flared again later as inmates started fires that sent up huge columns of black smoke visible from far away.

One prisoner died in that fire. Prisoners then took three guards hostage, and when talks with them went nowhere, security forces were sent in, said Aldo Fasci, a spokesman for the Nuevo Leon government, told reporters.

Police stormed the prison and inmates threw stones and struck them with iron bars, Fasci added.

Use of nonlethal force proved insufficient as some 250 inmates battled the security forces.

In the evening, "lethal force was used to prevent the killing of the three guards and so far the toll is 13 dead,"



Police guard the main entrance gate of the Cadereyta prison where a brawl among the prisoners left several wounded on October 10, 2017 in Cadereyta, Nuevo Leon, Mexico.

said Fasci. Another 26 people were injured.

Cadereyta is on the outskirts of Monterrey, the third largest city in Mexico.

Mexican jails are often rocked by

riots, killings and escapes, especially those controlled by drug gangs. Most are overcrowded.

In 2016, a vicious fight between rival gangs left 49 dead in the Topo Chico jail, also in Nuevo Leon.