

Russia-West 'Alienation' Alarming: German President



German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier stresses the need for dialogue as post-Cold War tensions peak.

FRANKFURT AM MAIN (AFP) -- German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier Sunday voiced alarm over the growing "alienation" between Russia and the West, stressing the need for dialogue as post-Cold War tensions peak.

Speaking to the Bild am Sonntag newspaper, Steinmeier said last month's poisoning of a former Russian spy in England, which Britain and its allies blame on Moscow, was "a very serious incident".

"But we should be at least as worried about the galloping alienation between Russia and the West, the consequences of which stretch far beyond this case," the former foreign minister said.

Moscow vehemently denies involvement in the nerve agent poisoning of former double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, which triggered a wave of tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions between Russia

and Western countries.

A dispute over Western intervention in Syria has dramatically added to the tensions in recent days.

Defying Russian warnings, the United States, France and Britain carried out airstrikes on Syria for an alleged deadly chemical attack on the town of Douma.

Russia on Saturday failed to win UN backing for a resolution that would have condemned the "aggression" against Syria.

Steinmeier said while it was right to pressure Russia, "we can't abandon direct dialogue". He also cautioned against demonizing an entire nation.

"Independently of Putin, we can't declare the whole of Russia, the country and its people, as our enemy," he said, warning there was "too much at stake".

On Syria, Steinmeier said there could be no improvement on the ground until U.S. President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin engaged with each other in a constructive manner to try to negotiate a solution.

"Of course you can't do it without the regional neighbors in the end, but everything begins with the U.S. and Russia," he was quoted as saying. "Putin and Trump owe it to the world to take the first step."

UN Blacklists Myanmar Military Over Violence



Myanmar's de facto head of state Aung San Suu Kyi has refused to speak up against the military's atrocities, particularly in Rakhine state.

UNITED NATIONS (AP) -- A new United Nations report has put Myanmar's armed forces on a UN blacklist of government and rebel groups "credibly suspected" of carrying out assault and other acts of violence in conflict for the first time.

An advance copy of Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' report to the Security Council, obtained by The Associated Press, says international medical staff and others in Bangladesh have documented

that many of the almost 700,000 Rohingya who fled from Myanmar "bear the physical and psychological scars of brutal assault".

The UN chief said the assaults were allegedly perpetrated by the Myanmar Armed Forces, known as the Tatmadaw, "at times acting in concert with local militias, in the course of military 'clearance' operations in October 2016 and August 2017".

"The widespread threat and use of violence was integral to this strategy,

serving to humiliate, terrorize and collectively punish the Rohingya community, as a calculated tool to force them to flee their homelands and prevent their return," Guterres said.

Myanmar doesn't recognize the Rohingya as an ethnic group, insisting they are Bengali migrants from Bangladesh living illegally in the country. It has denied them citizenship, leaving them stateless.

The recent spasm of violence began when Rohingya insurgents launched a series of attacks last August 25 on about 30 security outposts and other targets. Myanmar security forces then began a scorched-earth campaign against Rohingya villages that the UN and human rights groups have called a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

"Violence was visited upon women, including pregnant women, who are seen as custodians and propagators of ethnic identity, as well as on young children, who represent the future of the group," Guterres said.

"This can be linked to an inflammatory narrative alleging that high fertility rates among the Rohingya represent an existential threat to the majority population."

Heavy Snow, Tornadoes, Rain Hit Central U.S.

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) -- A storm system stretching from the Gulf Coast to the Great Lakes has buffeted the central U.S. with heavy snow, tornadoes, rain and hail, forcing flight cancellations, creating treacherous road conditions and killing at least three people, including a sleeping 2-year-old Louisiana girl.

In the Upper Midwest, all flights were grounded most of Saturday at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport as heavy snow made it difficult to keep runways clear and planes deiced. Nearly 470 flights were canceled before crews were able to open one runway shortly after 10 p.m., according to a spokesman. Blizzards conditions also forced the airport in South Dakota's biggest city, Sioux Falls, to remain closed

for a second straight day.

The Minnesota Twins home game against the Chicago White Sox was snowed out Saturday, marking the first back-to-back postponements of baseball games in the stadium's nine seasons. Sunday's game was also called off because of the storm, which by Saturday night had buried Minneapolis under more than 13 inches of snow (33 centimeters). The Yankees and Tigers were rained out Saturday in Detroit.

Authorities closed several highways in southwestern Minnesota, where no travel was advised, and driving conditions were difficult across the southern half of the state. The National Weather Service predicted that a large swath of southern Minnesota, including Minneapolis and St. Paul, could

get up to 20 inches of snow (51 centimeters) by the time the storm blows through on Sunday.

The storm was expected to persist through Sunday in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan before moving into New York state and New England.

Up to 18 inches (46 centimeters) of snow had fallen by early Saturday in parts of northern Wisconsin, with another 14 inches (36 centimeters) expected by Sunday evening. Winds of up to 55 mph (88.5 kph) caused blowing and drifting snow, along with ice shoves in Green Bay.

The National Weather Service also warned of potential coastal flooding along Lake Michigan in Wisconsin and Illinois, which Chicago residents were warned that waves could reach as high as 18 feet (5.5 meters).

Over 100,000 Rally Against Orban in Hungary



People attend a protest against the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban in Budapest, Hungary, April 14, 2018.

BUDAPEST (Reuters) -- Tens of thousands of Hungarians protested in Budapest against what organizers said was an unfair election system that gave Prime Minister Viktor Orban a landslide victory at the polls after a "hate campaign" against immigrants.

Orban won a third straight term in power in Sunday elections after his anti-immigration campaign message secured a strong majority for his ruling Fidesz party in parliament, giving him two-thirds of seats based on preliminary results.

In a Facebook post before the rally, organizers called for a recount of ballots, free media, a new election law, as well as more efficient cooperation among opposition parties instead of the bickering seen in the run-up to the vote.

The protest was among the biggest in Hungary in recent years, similar in size to a mass rally prompted by Orban's plan to tax internet use four years ago and a pro-government demonstration called by Orban supporters shortly before the election.

Fidesz received 49% of national party list votes and its candidates won 91 of 106 single-member constituencies, most of them in rural areas. Leftist opposition candidates carried two-thirds of the voting

districts in Budapest.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has said the election did not offer opposition parties a level playing field amid a host of problems marring a vote that nonetheless generally respected fundamental rights.

In their Facebook post, the rally's organizers said: "Fidesz's election system and the government's hate campaign have pushed the majority into a one-third (parliamentary) minority."

Protesters marched from the Opera House, a 19th century Neo-Renaissance palace on a majestic downtown avenue, to Parliament by the Danube River, waving Hungary's tricolor flag and the European Union flag, accompanied by whistles and horns blaring.

Organizers of the event estimated the size of the crowd at over 100,000 people, which briefly took on a festival-like atmosphere as a pop singer took the stage to perform an opening song blasting Orban's "pseudocracy."

In the election campaign Orban projected himself as the defender of Hungary's Christian culture against Muslim migration into Europe, an image which resonated with millions of voters, especially in rural areas.

Thousands Protest Jailing of Catalan Leaders in Barcelona



Thousands of marchers wave pro-Catalan independence flags during a protest in Barcelona on April 15, 2018. Police put attendance at 315,000 while the organizers said 750,000 people had turned out to take part in the protest.

BARCELONA (AFP) -- Thousands of people marched in Barcelona on Sunday to protest the jailing of nine Catalan separatist leaders facing trial on "rebellion" charges.

Many chanted "Freedom for the political prisoners" as they massed on the Parallel Avenue, one of the city's main streets, wearing yellow scarves, sweaters or jackets, the color chosen to show solidarity with the jailed leaders.

The march was called by a platform set up in March to "defend Catalan institutions" and "the rights and fundamental freedoms" of its citizens.

The protest was backed by the Catalan branches of Spain's two largest trade unions, the CCOO and the UGT, sparking unease among union members who oppose independence for the wealthy northeastern region.

"There have been tensions (among union members) just like in the rest of the Catalan society," the secretary general of the Catalan branch of UGT, Camil Ros, told AFP on Saturday on the eve of the march.

"But it is not a separatist protest. It is time to build bridges and the Catalan problem cannot be solved through the courts but by dialogue and politics," he added.

The demonstration comes ten days after a German court dismissed an extradition request for Catalonia's ousted separatist president Carles Puigdemont on grounds of rebellion and released him on bail.

Spanish prosecutors last week handed over new information to Germany they hope will prove the use of violence which would justify the rebellion charge against Puigdemont and their extradition request.

Puigdemont is also accused of misuse of public funds for staging an independence referendum in Catalonia on October 1 despite it having been ruled unconstitutional by the courts.

Across Catalonia people are wearing yellow ribbons or displaying posters of yellow ribbons from their balconies and windows in sign of support for the nine jailed separatist leaders, who they consider to be "political prisoners".

Spain's justice minister, Rafael Catala, has called the use of yellow ribbons "insulting", arguing there are no political prisoners in Spain, instead there are "politicians in prison".

Since October 16, the leaders of Catalonia's two largest pro-independence groups, Jordi Sanchez of the ANC and Jordi Cuixart of Omnium Jordi Cuixart, have been in jail while they await their trial for rebellion.

Catalonia has been in political limbo since Spain's conservative central government imposed direct rule on the region after it unilaterally declared independence in October.

Fresh regional elections will be triggered if a new leader is not elected by May 22.



SYDNEY (Dispatches) -- More than 500 firefighters have been working in "very high temperatures" to tackle a wildfire which has threatened homes on the southwestern outskirts of Sydney. As Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull said the situation was "worsening", emergency warnings were placed in a number of suburbs along the Georges River. Fire crews fought through the night as the flames burned about 1,000 hectares of bushland. "This huge blaze has been fought in very high temperatures, very high winds, unseasonal conditions, and has been done so in a way which has seen, to date, no injuries and no serious damage to property," Turnbull said. Hundreds of people were evacuated from their homes on Saturday night, with the flames burning within metres of properties in Holsworthy and Wattle Grove. The fire has already burned out about 1,000 hectares of bushland.

PYONGYANG (AP) -- North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has met with a high-ranking Chinese diplomat in Pyongyang, amid a flurry of diplomacy following Kim's recent surprise visit to Beijing. Song Tao, who heads the ruling Communist Party's International Department, led an art troupe to Pyongyang to attend an arts festival, according to China's Foreign Ministry. Kim made an unannounced trip to Beijing last month ahead of potentially breakthrough meetings with South Korean President Moon Jae-in and U.S. President Donald Trump. Kim said during his meeting with Song on Saturday that he and Chinese President Xi Jinping "reached important consensus" in Beijing, according to China's official Xinhua News Agency.

TOKYO (AFP) -- Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi Sunday began a visit to Japan described as a major step forward in improving frosty relations, as Tokyo tries to stay involved in a flurry of international diplomacy over North Korea. Wang met his Japanese counterpart Taro Kono in talks expected to touch on economic relations, territorial disputes in the East China Sea and ways to push the North to give up its nuclear weapons. "I would like to regard (Wang's visit) as a major step forward in our efforts towards improving Japan-China relations," Kono told Wang at the start of their meeting at the Iikura Guest House. Wang said his visit was China's answer to "positive" messages and policies by Japan. "We are also faced with some complex and sensitive elements," Wang said, a veteran Japan expert who is a former ambassador to Tokyo. "But together with Japan's efforts... we would like to bring China-Japan relations back on a path of sustainable and normal development."

PARIS (AP) -- French authorities say 63 people have been arrested and nine police officers injured as protests took place in two cities amid simmering anger at President Emmanuel Macron's labor law changes. Interior Minister Gerard Collomb denounced the violence and damage to stores and public buildings at the edges of Saturday's protests in Nantes in western France and Montpellier in the south. Collomb called for calm as another protest is planned Sunday at Notre-Dame-des-Landes in western France. Other protests Saturday around France were largely peaceful. Train workers were marching during on-and-off strikes over Macron's railway labor reform plan, strikes that have disrupted traffic nationwide. Macron is going on national television Sunday night to explain his reforms to the French economy. He says he's making the country more competitive globally while workers fear losing job protections.

YANGON (AFP) -- Myanmar's government said it repatriated the first family of Rohingya out of some 700,000 refugees who fled to Bangladesh to escape a brutal military campaign, despite UN warnings that a safe return is not yet possible. The stateless Muslim minority has been massing in squalid Bangladesh camps since the Myanmar army launched a ruthless crackdown on the community in northern Rakhine state last August. The UN says the campaign amounts to ethnic cleansing, but Myanmar has denied the charge, saying its troops targeted Rohingya militants. Bangladesh and Myanmar were supposed to begin repatriation in January but the plan has been repeatedly delayed as both sides blame the other for a lack of preparation. According to a Myanmar government statement posted late Saturday, one family of Rohingya refugees became the first to return earlier in the day.

LONDON (Telegraph) -- Europe will see its first genetically engineered patients using a groundbreaking gene-splicing therapy this year after regulatory approvals. The biotech company Crispr Therapeutics is hoping to cure the disease beta thalassaemia, a devastating blood disorder which reduces the production of haemoglobin, the protein which carries oxygen to cells. Without sufficient oxygen, sufferers can be left with bone deformities, severe anaemia, slow growth, fatigue and shortness of breath. The disease is caused by a genetic mutation in the HBB gene, but scientists are confident that they can alter the body's code to fix the problem and restore healthy levels of haemoglobin.