

Russia Unveils Missile System to Counter U.S. Claims



Foreign military attaches and journalists attend a briefing by the Russian Defense Ministry as the 9M729 land-based cruise missile, right, in Kubinka outside Moscow, Russia, Wednesday, Jan. 23, 2019.

MOSCOW (AFP) - Russia on Wednesday unveiled a missile system that Washington claims is in violation of a key arms control treaty, in a last-minute bid to counter U.S. criticism and save the Soviet-era agreement.

President Donald Trump has threatened to walk away from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty (INF), with Washington claiming that Russia's 9M729 ground-based missile system violates the deal.

Moscow has repeatedly denied the system

contravenes the treaty and, to prove its point, on Wednesday showed off the missile at Patriot Park, a sprawling theme park near the town of Kubinka just outside Moscow.

Standing next to the system, a Russian defense ministry official detailed the missile's features to assembled foreign media and foreign military officials.

Russian defense and foreign ministry officials insisted the range of the missile system was allowed under the agreement.

Mikhail Matveevsky, Russia's chief of artillery and missile troops, said its

maximum range is 480 kilometers (300 miles), while he said the INF treaty only bans missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers (310 to 3,400 miles).

"Russia was in compliance and continues to be in strict compliance with the stipulations of the treaty and does not allow any violations," he said.

Matveevsky said Moscow was presenting the information in the interests of "voluntary transparency".

Washington has said it would not be satisfied with Moscow's offer of a "static display" of the missiles, because they would not show whether they breach the treaty.

The U.S. says the missile system should be destroyed in a verifiable manner if Russia wants to keep the INF alive.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, also in attendance, said Moscow decided to unveil the missile after talks with U.S. officials in Geneva this month resulted in "complete failure".

Last month Washington gave Russia a 60-day deadline -- which ends on February 2 -- to dismantle the 9M729 or the U.S. would begin the six-month process of formally withdrawing from the treaty.

Ryabkov said that because Washington's claims were unsubstantiated the agreement would remain in force even if the U.S. tries to withdraw.

He said the U.S. continued to work on missiles banned by the treaty and was expanding its production facilities at home. "The treaty must be preserved," Ryabkov said. "It is for the American side to make the choice."

South Korea Warns Japan Over 'Intimidating' Patrol Flight



A police officer stands guard near Japan and South Korea national flags in Tokyo June 22, 2015.

SEOUL (Reuters) - A Japanese patrol aircraft made an "intimidating" pass over a South Korean warship on Wednesday, in what South Korea's military said was a "clear provocation" toward a friendly neighbor.

The aircraft made its flight just over the South Korean navy vessel in waters off the southwest coast of the Korean peninsula, even after the aircraft determined the ship's identity, the South Korean military said.

"Today's low-altitude flight was a clear provocation against a ship of a friendly country, and we cannot

help but doubt Japan's intentions and strongly condemn it," General Suh Wook, of South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a news briefing.

South Korea's defense ministry said it called in a defense official from Japan's embassy to lodge a protest.

"If this behavior is repeated again, we will sternly respond according to our military's rules of conduct," Suh said.

Japanese government and defense force spokesmen were not immediately available for comment.

South Korea's Yonhap news agency quoted Japan's chief cabinet secretary,

Yoshihide Suga, as saying he was aware of the South Korean announcement and it was important the two countries maintained communication.

The two U.S. allies share a bitter history that includes Japan's 1910-45 colonization of the Korean peninsula and the use of comfort women, Japan's euphemism for girls and women, many of them Korean, forced to work in its wartime brothels.

The rows over wartime history have long been a stumbling block for relations between the neighbors, sparking concern about regional efforts to rein in North Korea's nuclear program.

Wednesday's encounter follows a December feud over a Japan complaint that a South Korean destroyer locked a targeting radar on a Japanese surveillance plane.

South Korea denied it, saying the plane needlessly approached the ship, which was on a normal rescue mission.

There have been two other flights by Japanese aircraft near South Korean vessels since Friday, which prompted a South Korean request to Japan to top such incidents, Suh said.

Defense officials from the two sides have been meeting but Japan had decided to halt the talks, Japanese media reported on Monday.

The two countries' foreign ministers are due to meet later on Wednesday on the sidelines of an international conference in Davos, Switzerland.

No Sign of End in U.S. Government Shutdown

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - There was no sign of quick relief for 800,000 federal workers going without pay because of the partial government shutdown as the U.S. Senate scheduled votes on competing proposals to end the month-long impasse that both faced long odds.

Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said he planned to hold a vote on Thursday on a Democratic proposal that would fund the government for three weeks but does not include the \$5.7 billion in U.S.-Mexico border wall funding demanded by President Donald Trump.

Its prospects appeared grim. The House of Representatives has passed several similar bills, but Trump has rejected legislation that does not include border wall funding. McConnell previously said he would not consider a bill the Republican president refused to sign.

McConnell also planned to hold a vote on legislation that would include

border wall funding and relief for "Dreamers," people brought illegally to the United States as children, a compromise Trump proposed on Saturday.

Many Democratic leaders dismissed the deal as a "non-starter" and said they would not negotiate on border security before reopening the government.

Democrats have said they would not trade a temporary restoration of the immigrants' protections from deportation in return for a permanent border wall they view as ineffective. In 2017, Trump moved to end the Dreamers' protections, triggering a court battle.

Yet Trump appeared to lose that bargaining chip after the U.S. Supreme Court on Tuesday declined to consider an administration appeal of lower-court rulings that allowed for Dreamers' continued protections.

The hundreds of thousands of federal workers who are furloughed or working without pay are struggling to

make ends meet as the shutdown, the longest in U.S. history, enters its 33rd day on Wednesday.

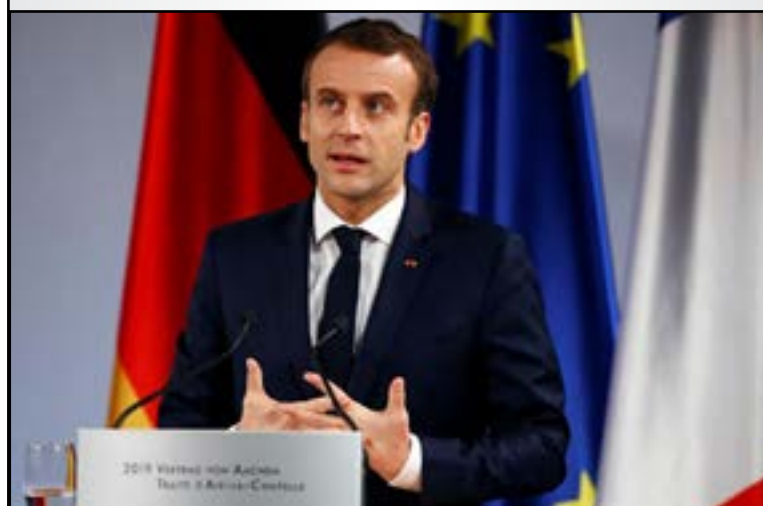
Many employees as well as contractors were turning to unemployment assistance, food banks and other support. Others began seeking new jobs.

The FBI Agents Association said on Tuesday that investigations of possible financial crimes, drugs and terrorism were being hindered by a lack of funds.

Trump planned to move forward on delivering his State of the Union address next Tuesday, despite House Democratic Speaker Nancy Pelosi's recommendation that he delay it since government agencies responsible for providing security were affected by the shutdown.

"Those concerns were addressed by the Department of Homeland Security and the United States Secret Service. At this point, we're moving forward," White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders told reporters on Tuesday.

Italy's Salvini Hopes French Will Not Choose Macron



French President Emmanuel Macron speaks during a signing of a new agreement on bilateral cooperation and integration, known as Treaty of Aachen, in Aachen, Germany, January 22, 2019.

ROME (Reuters) - Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini said on Wednesday he hoped the French people would not choose President Emmanuel Macron's party in European parliament elections later this year, drawing a sharp response from officials in Paris.

Relations between Italy and France, generally close allies, have worsened since the far-right League and anti-establishment 5-Star Movement formed a coalition government in Italy last year and took aim at pro-European Union Macron's En Marche (On the Move) party.

France has already summoned Italy's ambassador this week after Salvini's fellow deputy prime minister, Luigi Di Maio, accused Paris of creating poverty in Africa and generating mass migration to Europe.

"Macron may no longer be our interlocutor (in the future)," Salvini said in an interview with Italian state-owned radio RAI. "His support is less than 20 percent. I hope the French people can shortly make different choices," he said, referring to May's European elections.

Salvini's comment triggered an angry reaction from France's foreign ministry.

"These unfounded statements should be read in the context of domestic Italian politics. They are unacceptable," foreign ministry spokeswoman Agnes von der Muhll said in a daily online briefing.

Italy's ambassador had been reminded of the "boundaries" that should be observed for Franco-Italian relations to remain friendly and cooperative, the spokeswoman added.

On Tuesday, Salvini said France was not interested in stabilizing war-torn Libya, a staging point for smugglers who send migrants toward Europe on unsafe boats, because French energy interests there clash with Italy's.

Salvini, who is the leader of the League party, also said he is not concerned about the effect the dispute will have on the government's effort to save troubled airline Alitalia.

Italian newspapers have reported that the French-Dutch airline Air France-KLM is in talks with Rome to take a stake in the carrier.

"There are other (players) in a position to take a share of Alitalia's capital," Salvini said.

British Lawmakers Move to Prevent No-Deal Brexit



An EU flag gets in the face of two bystanders outside the Houses of Parliament in London, January 17, 2019.

LONDON (Reuters) - An attempt by British lawmakers to prevent a no-deal Brexit was gaining momentum on Wednesday after the opposition Labor Party said it was highly likely to throw its parliamentary weight behind the bid.

The United Kingdom, in the deepest political crisis since World War Two, is due according to law to leave the European Union at 2300 GMT on March 29, yet it has no approved deal on how the divorce will take place.

Prime Minister Theresa May is battling to break the deadlock after last week's crushing defeat of her two-year attempt to forge an orderly divorce raised the prospect of an exit without a deal.

In a step that could overturn centuries of constitutional convention, some lawmakers are trying to grab control of Brexit from the government in an attempt to prevent what they say would be an economically disastrous no-deal departure.

The opposition Labor Party looks set to back one such attempt, an amendment proposed by Labor lawmaker Yvette Cooper that could result in May being given until Feb. 26 to get a deal approved by parliament or face a parliamentary vote on delaying Brexit.

John McDonnell, the second most

powerful figure in the party, told the BBC the amendment was sensible, and that Labor was "highly likely" to back it. At least nine Conservative lawmakers have also publicly said they will support it, suggesting that it has a good chance of passing.

As the United Kingdom's tortuous two-and-a-half year crisis over EU membership approaches its finale, the possible outcomes for the world's fifth largest economy still include a no-deal Brexit, a last-minute deal, a delay or a snap election.

May has said thwarting Brexit would threaten social cohesion because it would undermine faith in British democracy, while police have said the "febrile" atmosphere could be exploited by far-right extremists.

Parliament will vote on Jan. 29 on different options put forward by lawmakers, potentially opening a way out of the stalemate.

If the Cooper amendment is passed, it would effectively give parliament the power to set May a deadline of Feb. 26 to get a deal through parliament.

If May fails, parliament would be given a vote on asking the EU for a postponement of the Article 50 deadline to prevent Britain leaving without a deal on March 29. It proposes a nine-month extension, to Dec. 31.

John McDonnell, the second most



HONG KONG (Dispatches) -- Hong Kong on Wednesday presented a bill to lawmakers that prescribes jail terms of up to three years for disrespecting the Chinese national anthem. Besides imprisonment, the measure would fix a maximum fine of HK\$50,000 (\$6,370) for those who publicly and intentionally disrespect the anthem, the "March of the Volunteers". It also extends to schoolchildren, including pupils of international schools, who would be legally required to learn the anthem. Small rival groups taunted each other outside the Legislative Council, shouting and chanting through loud hollers. Waving the red Chinese flag, pro-Beijing demonstrators held up banners that read: "Safeguard national dignity," and "Support the national anthem law." Booming the anthem at soccer matches in Hong Kong has emerged as a form of political protest in the past few years, seized upon by young people keen to demonstrate their frustration at Beijing's perceived creeping influence.

DETROIT (AP) -- Schools are closed across the Midwest and Detroit's main airport has been shut down as a major snowstorm crawls across the region. The National Weather Service issued weather advisories and warnings Wednesday across several northern U.S. states, from the Dakotas to Michigan and much of the Northeast. Crews are working to reopen Detroit Metropolitan Airport, which closed late Tuesday and stranded travelers amid icy conditions. In Indiana, 51 passengers had to get off a plane after it slid on ice and stopped in a snowbank at Fort Wayne International Airport. No one was injured. Forecasters say up to 10 inches of snow could fall in parts of Wisconsin, where dozens of schools closed. Hundreds more schools and several universities in Kansas and Missouri are also closing or starting late after the storm hit the region.

VATICAN CITY (AP) -- Pope Francis said Wednesday that fear of migration is "making us crazy" as he began a trip to Central America amid a standoff over President Donald Trump's promised wall at the U.S.-Mexico border and a new caravan of migrants heading north. Francis was asked by reporters about the proposed border wall Wednesday on the way to Panama, where he is looking to leave the sex abuse scandals buffeting his papacy behind. Francis responded: "It is the fear that makes us crazy." The Roman Catholic Church's first Latin American pope and the son of Italian immigrants to Argentina, Francis has made the plight of migrants and refugees a cornerstone of his papacy. Francis' trip, the first in a year packed with foreign travel, comes at a critical moment in the papacy as the Catholic hierarchy globally is facing a crisis in credibility for covering up decades of cases of priests molesting young people. The pope is expected to soon rule on the fate of former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the high-powered U.S. archbishop accused of molesting minors and adults. And he is hosting church leaders at the Vatican next month on trying to chart a way forward for the global church.

BERLIN (Reuters) -- Fewer people applied for asylum in Germany last year, Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said on Wednesday, putting the second yearly slide in a row down to restrictive measures introduced by the government after a record influx in 2015. Immigration remains a contentious topic in Germany, four years after Merkel's 2015 decision to welcome a record 890,000 asylum applicants, mainly Muslims fleeing conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. The latest figures show that Chancellor Angela Merkel's government has met its target to limit the number of asylum seekers to between 180,000 and 220,000 a year. About 162,000 asylum applications were registered in 2018, a 13 percent drop from the 186,000 requests recorded a year earlier. The applicants included 32,000 infants under the age of one who were born in Germany to asylum-seeking mothers, Seehofer said. Syrians remained by far the largest group of applicants with 46,000, followed by Iraqis and Afghans, who numbered 18,000 and 12,000 respectively.

ATHENS (Reuters) -- Greek lawmakers began the final steps on Wednesday toward ratifying an historic accord on a name-change for neighboring Macedonia, as a bitter row rumbled with opponents who say it harms Greece's national identity. Parliament opened a two-day debate on ratifying the so-called Prespes Agreement, a UN mediated deal between Athens and Skopje changing the latter's name to Republic of North Macedonia. The deal, aimed at settling a 28-year old dispute between the two countries over the use of the term "Macedonia", has triggered strong opposition among many Greeks, angered at what they see as an attempt by their neighbors to appropriate Greek identity. Parliament is expected to ratify the name accord as Leftist Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras appears to have secured the support of at least 151 lawmakers in the 300-seat house. However, the latest opinion poll conducted for Proto Thema newspaper on Jan. 20 showed 66 percent of respondents against the agreement.

BERLIN (Reuters) -- There could be a "security disaster" if Britain does not have a transition period replete with rules after quitting the European Union, a newspaper cited an unnamed senior official at the German interior ministry as saying. The online version of Germany's Die Zeit newspaper also cited a paper from the Interior Ministry as saying that a disorderly Brexit would alter cooperation on joint security databases such as Europol information and analysis systems as well as the Schengen information system.