

Russia Alarmed by U.S. 'Weaponization' of Space



Russia says U.S. military build-up in space especially after the appearance of weapons there would have a destabilizing effect on international security.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- Russia Wednesday expressed alarm over U.S. President Donald Trump's call for the United States to dominate space exploration and his plan to create a separate branch of the military called a Space Force.

Russian foreign ministry Maria Zakharova said at a briefing that Russia "noted the U.S. president's instructions... to separate space forces from the air

force," saying "the most alarming thing about this news is the aim of his instructions, namely to ensure (U.S.) domination in space."

Trump Monday said at a speech in the White House that "America will always be the first in space" and "we don't want China and Russia and other countries leading us."

He also called for the Pentagon to create a new "Space Force" that would

become the sixth branch of the American military, although this requires Congressional approval to take effect.

Zakharova warned that the U.S. is "nurturing plans to bring out weapons into space with the aim of possibly staging military action there."

"This is not based on guesswork, this is understanding the realities," she insisted.

U.S. military build-up in space "especially after the appearance of weapons there, would have a destabilizing effect on strategic stability and international security," Zakharova warned.

Russia takes a "diametrically opposite position" that space must be used for "peaceful aims," she said.

While Russia has a branch of the military called "space forces," their activities are "purely defensive," she stressed.

Space research is one of the few areas where Russia and the U.S. continue international cooperation.

Both NASA astronauts and Russian cosmonauts are crew members on the International Space Station and the orbiting laboratory is reliant on space launches from Russia's Baikonur cosmodrome.

Germany Warns of 'Irreparable Damage' to U.S.-Europe Ties



In this May 26, 2017 file photo, German Chancellor Angela Merkel (2nd right) talks with President Donald Trump, accompanied by European Council President Donald Tusk (1st left) and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (2nd left) at a G7 meeting in Taormina, Italy.

BERLIN (Dispatches) -- German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier expressed concern that Europe's relations with the United States could suffer irreparable damage, and urged Washington not to view the world as a boxing ring "in which everyone fights everyone".

His comments follow President Donald Trump's decision to impose import tariffs on metals from the European Union and his criticism of Germany's political leadership.

"I am less worried about the future of American democracy than about the future of our transatlantic partnership," Steinmeier, who twice served as German foreign minister, said in the text of a speech for delivery in Los Angeles.

"But the damage of today's shock could be more profound, long-term - and above all irreparable," he added.

Trump took aim on Monday at Germany, where Chancellor Angela Merkel's coalition is embroiled in a row over immigration policy.

"The people of Germany are turning against their leadership as migration is rocking the already tenuous Berlin coalition. Crime in Germany is way up. Big mistake made all over Europe in allowing millions of people in who have so strongly and violently changed their

culture!" he wrote on Twitter.

Merkel rebuffed on Tuesday Trump's assertion that refugees were behind any surge in crime in Germany, pointing to statistics that showed the rate was in fact down.

"My answer is that the interior minister presented the crime statistics a short while ago and they speak for themselves," Merkel told a news conference when asked about a recent flurry of tweets from Trump.

"We are seeing a slight positive development. We must always do more to fight criminality. But they were very encouraging numbers," she added.

Statistics published last month showed that overall crime fell 9.6% in Germany in 2017.

Steinmeier said: "I believe America needs partners ... But America can only recognize such a partnership if it sees the 'West' as more than a point of the compass and in the world more than a boxing ring in which everyone fights everyone."

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said it was "not the American president's role to speculate - as he did yesterday - that the German people would march towards the chancellery to remove Mrs Merkel."

"Mr Trump may govern the USA, he doesn't govern Europe," he added.

Over 190 Missing After Ferry Sinks in Indonesia



A woman cries as she finds out her family is one of missing passengers at Lake Toba ferry port in the province of North Sumatra, after a boat overturned.

SIMALUNGUN, Indonesia (AFP) -- Up to 192 passengers are missing after a ferry sank into the depths of a volcanic lake in Indonesia, police said Wednesday, almost tripling initial estimates - but the search-and-rescue agency cautioned it was still unclear how many people were aboard the vessel when it capsized.

The wooden boat, which sank Monday on Sumatra's Lake Toba, a popular tourist destination, was thought to be operating illegally, with no manifest or passenger tickets.

The situation has sparked confusion - and different estimates from various agencies - about the

number of people on board.

Indonesia's disaster agency, separate to the search-and-rescue body, originally said some 80 people were on the boat along with dozens of motorcycles when it overturned and sank.

Police said in a statement Wednesday there were as many as 178 people missing, which if confirmed would make it one of Indonesia's worst maritime disasters.

The estimates have been based on local people reporting missing relatives who they believed could have been on the ship.

"But many people got on the boat without a ticket so it's unclear how

many were on board," Muhammad Syaugi, the head of the search-and-rescue agency, told AFP.

So far, at least three bodies have been found and another 18 people rescued, according to the local disaster agency, as the search turned to recovering victims - including those still trapped inside the sunken boat.

The search-and-rescue agency said search operations would continue for at least a week given the size of the enormous body of water, which fills the crater of a supervolcano that is believed to have erupted tens of thousands of years ago.

It is one of the deepest lakes in the world and covers some 1,145 square kilometers.

On Wednesday the size of the search was increased to around 400 personnel.

Survivor accounts said the boat started shaking as it struggled to navigate strong winds and high waves about halfway into the 40-minute trip from an island in the middle of the lake to shore.

Muslim-majority Indonesia has been celebrating the Islamic festival of Eid since Friday and millions go on holiday during the festivities, with Lake Toba a key destination.

The deadly disaster came days after more than a dozen people were killed in an unrelated maritime accident that underscored Indonesia's woeful boat safety record.

Italian Minister's Roma Census Plan Sparks Outcry



Italian Roma meet the right-wing Lega Party leader, Matteo Salvini, in the camp of Via Germagnano on February 1, 2018.

ROME (AFP) -- Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini defended his plans to count the Roma community living in the country and deport those without legal status, despite outrage at home and abroad.

"I'm not giving up and I'm pushing ahead! The Italians and their safety first," Salvini tweeted, after opposition MPs slammed the idea of a census as "racist" and "fascist."

Salvini -- already under fire over refusing to let a ship carrying 630 refugees land in Italy last week -- had floated the plan on national television on Monday.

A census would allow the authorities to "see who, how (they live) and how many there are," he argued.

It would then allow the authorities to study the possibility of expelling Roma of foreign nationality without the proper documentation, he said.

Condemnation of his proposal was rapid and widespread, with not only the opposition parties but also members of the newly-established ruling coalition adding their voices.

Deputy prime minister Luigi Di Maio -- leader of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement that makes up the coalition alongside Salvini's League -- said any census based on ethnicity would be "unconstitutional."

It is the first time that Di Maio has spoken out against his coalition partner and fellow deputy prime minister Salvini since the new government was sworn in on June 1.

The plan also drew the ire of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

"No one is planning to create files or conduct a census on the basis of ethnicity, which would be unconstitutional because it is clearly discriminatory," Conte said in a statement Tuesday.

He also called for checks to ensure Roma children had access to school services, "since they are often kept out of compulsory education courses."

The European Union also weighed in on the controversy.

EU Commission spokesman Alexander Winterstein told journalists that "as a general rule, we cannot deport a European citizen based on ethnic criteria."

Confronted with the backlash on Tuesday, Salvini sought to clarify his plans.

"It is not our intention to record or take anyone's fingerprints," he said, according to a statement from his far-right League party.

"Our goal is a recognition of the situation of Roma camps. We intend to protect thousands of children who are not allowed to attend school regularly."

News in Brief

KIEV (Reuters) -- Ukrainian opposition leader and political veteran Yulia Tymoshenko said on Wednesday she would run for president in elections due next year. "I will run for the presidency of Ukraine," she said during a question-and-answer video posted on her official Facebook page.

Tymoshenko led an opinion poll conducted in May by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation and the Kiev-based Razumkov think-tank, with support among likely voters of 13%. Incumbent President Petro Poroshenko came fourth in the poll.

SEOUL (AFP) -- New pipelines could be laid to bring Russian gas through North Korea to the South and even on to Japan following the diplomatic thaw with Pyongyang, Seoul's leader suggested Wednesday.

President Moon Jae-in was speaking to Russian news media before a three-day visit to Moscow starting Thursday, with the presidential Blue House releasing the transcript. Russia and South Korea agreed in 2008 to lay gas pipelines through the North to bring Russian natural gas to the South. But the project failed to take off due to tensions over the North's nuclear weapons program.

Restoring inter-Korean railroads and linking them to trans-Siberian railways would also enable overland transport from trade-dependent South Korea to Europe, Moon added.

SKOPJE (AFP) -- The Macedonian parliament ratified Wednesday a historic accord with Greece to rename the small Balkan nation the Republic of North Macedonia in a bid to end a 27-year row between the two neighbors. "We have a deal that clearly defines our identity, our Macedonian language forever," Prime Minister Zoran Zaev told lawmakers ahead of the vote, urging them to back the agreement.

A total of 69 MPs in the 120-seat assembly supported the accord, while the nationalist opposition deputies were not present during the vote. The agreement's adoption by parliament clears the way for a referendum to be held at a later date. If the public back the name change, the government will then have to change the constitution - a key Greek demand before its own parliament is asked to ratify the deal.

The nationalist party VMRO-DPMNE, the main Macedonian opposition, has repeatedly said it will not support the change of "Macedonia's constitutional name", arguing it erodes the country's identity.

BEIJING (Reuters) -- Chinese President Xi Jinping offered high praise to visiting North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, lauding the "positive" outcome of his historic summit with U.S. President Donald Trump and promising unwavering friendship.

Meeting Kim on his third trip to China this year, and just a week after Kim met Trump in Singapore, Xi said China was willing to keep playing a positive role to promote the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. Kim's visit was the latest in a flurry of diplomatic contacts, and unlike during his previous two visits to China, the government announced his presence while he was in the country rather than waiting for him to leave.

LONDON (AP) -- At least 450 people had their lives shortened by a British hospital's institutionalized practice of administering opioids without medical justification between 1989 and 2000, an independent panel concluded Wednesday after years of campaigning by family members who demanded answers into the deaths of loved ones.

The panel chaired by Liverpool Bishop James Jones found another 200 patients were "probably" similarly affected at Gosport War Memorial Hospital in southern England, but records were missing and clinical notes were not found. "There was a disregard for human life and a culture of shortening the lives of a large number of patients by prescribing and administering 'dangerous doses' of a hazardous combination of medication not clinically indicated or justified," Jones said in the report. "They show too that, whereas a large number of patients and their relatives understood that their admission to the hospital was for either rehabilitation or respite care, they were, in effect, put on a terminal care pathway."

LUSAKA, Zambia (AFP) -- At least 10 people were killed when a mine dump collapsed in Zambia's second-largest city and copperbelt mining hub Kitwe on Wednesday, police said. "So far we have retrieved 10 dead bodies and seven bodies of those injured," said Copperbelt province police commissioner Charity Katanga. A mineral exploration drilling team drills holes to identify the location and the quality of gold deposits at the Segilola Gold Project site in the village of Iperindo-Odo Ijeha, near the city of Ilesha, on May 29, 2018.

Nigeria is working to diversify its economy, which has been dependent on the oil and gas sector for decades, through formalizing the artisanal mining sector.

Austria's Kurz Seeks to Avert New Refugee 'Catastrophe'

VIENNA (AFP) -- Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz Wednesday raised the specter of a 'catastrophe' similar to the events of 2015 if Europe does not agree a common response on migration.

Kurz's comments came as he and his ministers held a special joint session in the Austrian city of Linz with their Bavarian counterparts from the German CSU party, which is currently locked in a battle over migration policy within the government of Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin.

"We can't wait until we have a catastrophe like the one in 2015," Kurz said, referring to the migrant crisis of 2015-16, which saw more than 150,000 people seek asylum in Austria, a country of 8.7 million.

A row over migration policy in Germany between Merkel and her CSU interior minister Horst Seehofer has shaken the stability of the government in Berlin.

Kurz insisted he didn't want to take sides in an "internal German debate" but welcomed the fact that immigration was once again being discussed by EU leaders ahead of a summit later this month.

"If the discussion in Germany has an upside, it's that there's now a new dynamic on the European level, and that there's now a bigger chance that we finally see action in the EU," Kurz said.

Without naming Merkel he also aimed a shot across her bows by making clear what he thought were the results of her decision to

welcome refugees to Germany in 2015.

Those who opened the borders in 2015 "are responsible for the fact that we have border controls between Austria and Bavaria, between Austria and Hungary, between Austria and Italy, and that the situation could get even worse", he said.

Kurz, who hails from the Center-right People's Party (OeVP) went into coalition with the far-right Freedom Party (FP0e) after an election last year in which both parties made a clampdown on immigration a central theme.

Kurz was foreign minister under the previous government and often boasts of his actions to close the "Balkan route" for migrants in 2016.