

Australia Building Port for U.S. Marines to Face China



U.S. Marines during joint military drills between the United States and Australia

SYDNEY (Dispatches) -- Australia is planning to build a new deep-water port on its northern coast able to accommodate U.S. Marine deployments as part of efforts to counter China's growing presence in the region, the ABC reported Monday.

The national broadcaster quoted multiple defense and government officials as saying the facility would be about 40 kilometers (25 miles) from Darwin, capital of the Northern Territory, which controversially leased its own port to a Chinese operator in 2015.

The Darwin port already includes military facilities and hosts visiting

U.S. ships, but the ABC said the new port would offer large amphibious warships a more discreet and less busy base of operations.

U.S. Marine units of more than 2,000 troops regularly rotate through Darwin as part of the close military cooperation between the two allies.

Both Australia and the United States have been building up their military presence across the western Pacific to counter moves by China to gain influence across the strategically vital region, notably by creating armed outposts on disputed islands in the South China Sea.

As part of that effort, Washington and Canberra recently announced plans to build a joint military base on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, northeast of Australia.

The ABC said the new Australian port at Glyde Point would include commercial and industrial operations in addition to facilities for military activities.

An announcement concerning the port could come in the next few weeks to coincide with the height of the bi-annual Talisman Sabre U.S.-Australian military exercise in mid-July, ABC said.

"The Americans are clearly not withdrawing from the Indo-Pacific, whether it's because of their strategic competition with China or more generally," said Rory Medcalf from the Australian National University.

The Pentagon said in a report last month that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could help the Chinese navy gain access to "selected foreign ports to pre-position the necessary logistics support to sustain naval deployments in waters as distant as the Indian Ocean, Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean."

The project aims to link China by sea and land with southeast and central Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa, through an infrastructure network on the lines of the ancient Silk Road.

China Seeks Front Against U.S. Protectionism



Leaders pose for a group photo during the opening ceremony of the Asean summit at the Athenee Hotel in Bangkok, June 23, 2019.

BEIJING (AFP) -- China said Monday it would seek backing for free trade and multilateralism at the G20 summit this week as it denounced protectionism while it fights a tariffs war with the United States.

A meeting between Xi Jinping and his Donald Trump on the sidelines of the gathering in Osaka, Japan has fuelled hopes for a truce in the increasingly damaging trade war between the world's top two economies.

"Unilateralism and protectionism has damaged global growth... undermined global value chains and dampened market sentiment," Zhang Jun, the Chinese assistant minister of for-

ign affairs, said at a briefing to preview Xi's attendance at the summit.

"China will work with others at the G20 to firmly uphold multilateralism and an open, rule-based global trading order," Zhang said.

But Japan, the European Union and other trading partners have in the past echoed U.S. complaints about the alleged theft of intellectual property and lack of a level playing field for foreign investors in China.

Any attempts to build a united front with China will be tempered by these concerns.

Negotiations to resolve the trade war stalled last month resulting in both

sides exchanging steep tariffs on hundreds of billions in exports.

Chinese vice minister for commerce Wang Shouwen said teams from both sides are now "discussing the next step for communication" ahead of the Xi-Trump meeting.

The two should make compromises and any talks between China and the U.S. have to be based on "mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit and comply with WTO rules", Wang said.

The two leaders are also expected to discuss the fate of Chinese tech giant Huawei, which has suffered a heavy blow after the Trump administration banned US firms from working with it, citing espionage fears.

Wang urged the U.S. to remove "inappropriate and discriminatory" barriers against Chinese companies, saying such moves jeopardize the interests of both Chinese and U.S. companies.

The planned meeting came a week after Xi visited nuclear-armed North Korea, and analysts said any influence he may have on Pyongyang's isolated leader could be used as leverage to win concessions from Trump.

Zhang declined to confirm whether North Korea will be on the agenda for the Trump-Xi head-to-head, saying they were still "finalizing the details".

He also said China will "not allow" a discussion on Hong Kong at the G20 even as Washington said Trump plans to raise the city's mass protests in his meeting with Xi.

'U.S. Deployment Comparable to 1962 Cuba Crisis'



A new S-400 'Triumph' surface-to-air missile system after its deployment at a military base outside the town of Gvardeysk near Kaliningrad, Russia.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- The U.S. deployment of land-based missile systems near Russia's borders could lead to a standoff comparable to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov was quoted as saying on Monday.

Russia has been fiercely critical of U.S. plans to deploy missile systems in eastern Europe, and of Washington's withdrawal from the INF arms control treaty.

The Cuban missile crisis erupted in 1962 when the Soviet Union responded to a U.S. missile deployment in Turkey by sending ballistic missiles to Cuba, sparking a standoff that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.

The crisis was defused when Soviet ships headed for Cuba turned back in the face of a U.S. naval blockade. Eventually, the Soviet Union agreed to remove its missiles from Cuba; in return, the United States promised not to invade Cuba and, secretly, said it would remove the U.S. missiles from Turkey.

"If things get as far as an actual deployment on the ground of these sorts of systems, then the situation won't just get more complicated, it will escalate right to the limit," RIA news agency quoted Ryabkov as saying.

"We could find ourselves in a situation where we have a rocket crisis close not just to the crisis of the 1980s but close to the Caribbean crisis," Ryabkov said, using the standard Russian term for the Cuban missile crisis.

Russian President Vladimir Putin made similar remarks in February, when he warned that Moscow would match any U.S. move to deploy new nuclear missiles closer to Russia by stationing its own missiles closer to the United States, deploying faster missiles or both.

Earlier that month, the United States said it would withdraw from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia in six months unless Moscow ended violations of the landmark 1987 arms control pact. Russia denies any violations.

Russia Warns Georgia of Painful Consequences



Protesters attend a rally against a Russian lawmaker's visit near the parliament building in Tbilisi, Georgia June 22, 2019.

TBILISI/MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia on Monday served notice to ex-Soviet Georgia it faces painful consequences if anti-Russian protests are not brought under control.

Violent protests broke out in front of Georgia's parliament building last week after Russian lawmaker Sergei Gavrilov addressed the Georgian parliament from the speaker's chair, speaking in Russian.

That unleashed simmering resentment among many Georgians, who feel angry and humiliated that they have to maintain friendly ties with Moscow even though Russia briefly invaded their country in 2008 and still backs two breakaway regions of Georgia.

Georgia's president, French-born Salome Zourabichvili, blamed a "fifth column" loyal to Moscow for stirring up the trouble, while Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday that "Russophobia hysteria" was being artificially whipped up in Georgia.

When the protests first erupted on Thursday, police used tear gas and rubber bullets to prevent crowds of protesters from storming Georgia's parliament. Hundreds of people were injured, some seriously.

The protests have quickly developed into a double crisis: pitting Moscow

against Tbilisi and pitting the protesters in Georgia against their own government, which has for years tried to smooth over differences with Moscow.

In a move that the anti-government protesters hailed as a victory, the ruling Georgian Dream party said that for the 2020 parliamentary election, the country would switch from a mixed electoral system to a proportional system, with no threshold for parties to get into parliament.

The switch was scheduled to happen anyway in 2024, but the protesters had been demanding that the change be brought forward. A proportional system is likely to make it harder for Georgian Dream to maintain its dominance in parliament without building a coalition.

"This is your first success, first victory," Elene Khoshtaria, a leader of the European Georgia opposition party, said at a briefing, addressing her remarks to the protesters.

She said that the other demand of protesters, the interior minister's resignation, should be also fulfilled. Protests outside parliament are expected to continue on Monday.

Protests continued on Monday. Hundreds of cars and motorbikes drove in the city center, waving national flags and sounding their horns.

News in Brief

BERLIN (Reuters) - Two Eurofighter warplanes belonging to the German armed forces crashed in northeastern Germany on Monday, several media outlets reported, with some saying that the pilots of the jets escaped the crash by ejecting. A spokeswoman for the interior ministry of the eastern state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern said: "I can confirm that there was an accident involving two aircraft in northern Germany." Two media outlets reported that the pilots of the Eurofighters - made by Airbus, BAE Systems and Leonardo - were yet to be located. Meanwhile, the German government will ban exports of German-produced small arms to countries outside NATO and the European Union, the Funke group of newspapers cited government sources as saying. It said the new guidelines for arms exports were due to be approved by the German cabinet on Monday.

ADDIS ABABA (Reuters) -- The man accused of trying to seize control of Ethiopia's northern Amhara region was shot dead on Monday, a senior government official said, and a number of other plotters have been arrested. The government accused General Asamnew Tsige of masterminding gun attacks on Saturday night that killed five people including the national army's chief of staff and Amhara's state president. Asamnew was shot on Monday near Amhara's capital Bahir Dar, the prime minister's press secretary, Negussu Tilahun, told Reuters. He declined to give any other details. The reasons behind the attempted coup in the state remain unclear, although it may have been a reaction from Asamnew to a plan by state officials to rein him in after they were alarmed by reports of his ethnic rhetoric and recruitment of militias. Saturday's violence unfolded in two separate attacks. Army chief of staff Seare Mekonnen and a retired general were shot by Seare's bodyguard at his residence in the national capital Addis Ababa. Amhara state president Ambachew Mekonnen and an adviser were killed in the region's main city Bahir Dar. Amhara's attorney general was also shot, and died of his wounds on Monday, state media reported.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- As Democratic presidential hopefuls prepare for their first 2020 primary debate this week, 74 medical and public health groups aligned on Monday to push for a series of consensus commitments to combat climate change, bluntly defined by the organizations as "a health emergency." The new climate change agenda released by the groups, including the American Medical Association and the American Heart Association, comes amid early jostling among Democratic candidates over whose environmental platform is more progressive. The health organizations' policy recommendations, while a stark departure from President Donald Trump's approach, represent a back-to-basics approach for an internal Democratic climate debate that has so far revolved around the liberal precepts of the Green New Deal. "The health, safety and well-being of millions of people in the U.S. have already been harmed by human-caused climate change, and health risks in the future are dire without urgent action to fight climate change," the medical and public health groups wrote in their climate agenda, shared with The Associated Press in advance of its release.

ALMATY (Reuters) -- The Kazakh government ordered the evacuation of a town of 44,000 on Monday after a series of blasts at a nearby munitions depot killed one person and injured dozens, the Central Asian nation's authorities said. The blasts occurred at a military base near Arystan in the former Soviet republic's southern Turkestan province, which houses a large Soviet-era storage facility for explosive munitions. The cause of the fire which led to the explosions was unclear. Similar incidents in the area, in 2009, 2014 and 2015, were blamed on negligence and failure to observe safety regulations. Videos posted by local residents showed frightened people staring at a giant cloud of smoke and dust rising from the site, accompanied by thunder-like noise of more munitions exploding. Another video showed agitated soldiers screaming profanities as they run out of the military base in full gear, stepping on shattered glass. They can be seen stopping two cars on a nearby highway and ordering the drivers to take away several civilian women they had escorted out of the facility. The soldiers drop to the ground as more explosions are heard. Provincial governor Umirzak Shukeyev told a briefing that one person has been killed and 31 injured. The authorities warned locals against trying to return to the town because unexploded shells could turn its streets into minefields.

LONDON (Reuters) -- Jeremy Hunt, one of the two candidates vying to replace British Prime Minister Theresa May, said on Monday that rival Boris Johnson was a coward for avoiding public head-to-head debates on what to do about Brexit. "On the question of debates, he is being a coward," Foreign Secretary Hunt said. "It is cowardice not to appear in head-to-head debates." Hunt, 52, said it was disrespectful for Johnson to have turned down the opportunity for a head-to-head debate on Sky television. Sky has cancelled the debate as Johnson declined to take part. "People need to know what you're going to do and you need to answer those questions," Hunt said. "I promise Boris Johnson the fight of his life and he's going to have that and he's going to lose." Johnson, 55, is the favorite to win a vote of 160,000 Conservative Party members who will decide who will be the next prime minister. Betting markets give him a 79% implied probability of winning the top job, down from 92% last week.

Sudan Junta Rejects Ethiopia Plan to End Crisis

KHARTOUM (Dispatches) -- Sudan's military has rejected a proposal by Ethiopian mediators, already accepted by the opposition coalition for the creation of a civilian transition body, and instead thanked Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both of which are accused of backing the junta's crackdown against civilians.

The ruling Transitional Military Council (TMC) said Ethiopia and the African Union (AU) should be unified in their efforts to mediate between the council and an opposition coalition on the structure of the country's transitional government.

Back in April, Sudan's military announced that it had unseated Omar al-Bashir and later imprisoned him. It then set up the TMC to rule the country and promised to hand over after elections.

But protests have continued, with people demanding that more civilians be on the council than military figures during the transition period.

Peaceful protests turned violent earlier this month, when the military started cracking down on demonstrators and using force to disperse sit-ins in the capital Khartoum.

The ruling generals and the coalition have also been holding talks for several weeks, but have so far failed to find a way out of the crisis.

Ethiopian mediators on Saturday suggested that a ruling sovereign council would be made up of seven civilians and seven members of the military, with one additional seat re-

served for an impartial individual.

TMC spokesman Lieutenant General Shams El Din Kabbashi said on Sunday the council had rejected Ethiopia's proposal, but had agreed in principle to the African Union's plan, details of which were not immediately known.

"The African Union's initiative came first," said Kabbashi, adding that the council had not studied the Ethiopian initiative, which he described as unilateral.

"We asked the mediators to unite their efforts and submit a joint paper as soon as possible to return the parties to negotiations," Kabbashi added.

Meanwhile, deputy head of the military council Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo head both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, saying they have provided the country with assistance without interfering in its affairs.

Dagalo, currently the second most powerful man in Sudan, has had close ties with both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, since his country joined a Saudi-led war against Yemen more than four years ago.

He has been overseeing Sudan's more than 10,000 ground troops in Yemen.

Back in May, the general met Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in a visit to the kingdom. Reports said Riyadh pledged to continue supporting the military if Khartoum agrees to keep its forces in Yemen.

Dagalo said on Friday that Khartoum deployed some 30,000 troops to join the coalition in Yemen.