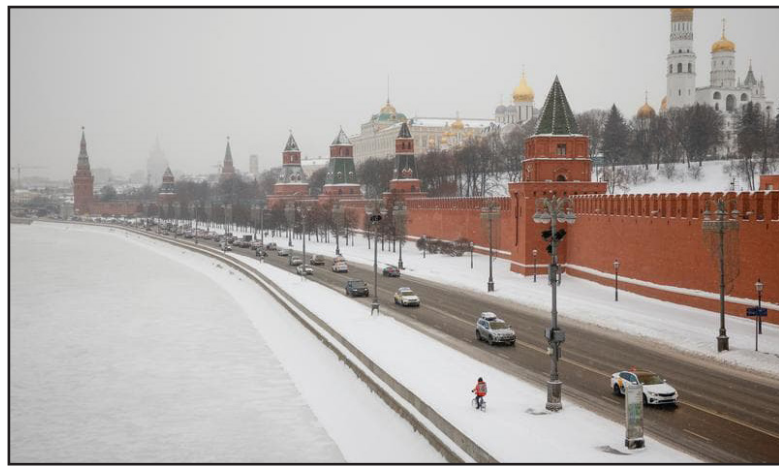


# Russia Vows Response to U.S., European Sanctions



Cars drive along an embankment of the Moskva River near the Kremlin during snowfall in Moscow, January 14, 2021.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- The Kremlin on Friday said it hoped "crazy" calls to sanction Russian business people would not become a reality and that it was planning ways to best protect Russia's interests, its citizens and businesses.

The Kremlin said it was closely following media reports about a possible new round of U.S. sanctions.

Moscow will soon publish a list of U.S. citizens it will take measures against in response to the sanctions, the TASS news agency cited the foreign ministry as saying on Friday.

The Kremlin has shrugged off new Western sanctions over Western-

backed blogger Alexei Navalny as unfounded and pointless, but warned that Moscow will retaliate.

U.S. president Joe Biden's administration sanctioned seven Russian officials on Tuesday, along with more than a dozen government entities.

It coordinated the move with the European Union, which expanded its own sanctions on Tuesday.

Commenting on the U.S. and the EU decisions, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the sanctions against top officials that included a freeze on their bank accounts duplicated Russia's own law that bans them from having financial and other assets

abroad. Speaking with reporters, he said: "These people don't make foreign trips anyway and they don't have the right to open accounts in foreign banks or have any other foreign assets."

At the same time, he added that the U.S. and EU restrictions "represent meddling in Russia's internal affairs" and are "absolutely unacceptable, inflicting significant damage to the already poor ties".

Peskov warned that Russia would now choose a "response that would best serve our own interests", adding that the relevant state agencies would draft their proposals and submit them to the Kremlin.

"The principle of reciprocity in relations between states can't be abandoned," he said.

Navalny fell sick on August 20 during a domestic flight in Russia and was flown to Berlin for treatment two days later.

Navalny was arrested on January 17 upon returning from Germany, where he spent five months recovering from the poisoning.

Last month, Navalny was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison for violating the terms of his probation while convalescing in Germany.

The sentence stems from a 2014 embezzlement conviction. Navalny was last week sent to serve his sentence in a prison outside Moscow.

## Japanese Relieve Pain With Phone Calls to Lost Ones



Kazuyoshi Sasaki, 67, who lost his wife, Miwako, in the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami, reacts as he calls his late wife inside a phone booth at Bell Guardia Kujira-yama in Otsuchi town, Iwate Prefecture, February 27, 2021.

OTSUCHI, Japan (Reuters) -- In a garden on a hill, under the wide boughs of a cherry tree, a white phone booth glistens in the early spring light.

Inside, Kazuyoshi Sasaki carefully dials his late wife Miwako's cellphone number, bending his large frame and cradling the handset.

He explains how he searched for her for days after the devastating earthquake and tsunami a decade ago, visiting evacuation centers and makeshift morgues, returning at night to the rubble of their home.

"It all happened in an instant, I can't forget it even now," he says,

weeping. "I sent you a message telling you where I was, but you didn't check it."

"When I came back to the house and looked up at the sky, there were thousands of stars, it was like looking at a jewel box," the 67-year old says. "I cried and cried and knew then that so many people must have died."

Sasaki's wife was one of nearly 20,000 people in northeastern Japan killed by the disaster that struck on March 11, 2011.

Many survivors say the unconnected phone line in the town of Otsuchi helps them keep in touch with their loved ones and gives them some sol-

ace as they grapple with their grief.

Earlier in the day, Sachiko Okawa calls Toichiro, her late husband to whom she was married for 44 years. She asks him what he has been doing with his days since he was swept away by the tsunami a decade ago.

"I'm lonely," she says finally, her voice cracking, and asks Toichiro to watch over their family. "Bye for now, I'll be back soon."

Okawa says she sometimes feels like she can hear Toichiro on the other end of the line. "It makes me feel a little better."

The 76-year-old, who learned about the hillside garden from friends, often brings her two grandsons here so they can also talk to their grandfather.

"Grandpa, it's been 10 years already and I'm going to be in middle school soon," says Daina, Okawa's 12-year-old grandson, as they all squeeze into the phone box. "There's this new virus that's killing lots of people and that's why we're wearing masks. But we're all doing well."

The phone booth was built by Itaru Sasaki, who owns the garden in Otsuchi, a town some 500 km (310 miles) northeast of Tokyo, a few months before the disaster, after he lost his cousin to cancer.

The phone now attracts thousands of visitors from all over Japan. It is not only used by tsunami survivors, but also by people who have lost relatives to sickness and suicide. Dubbed "the phone of the wind", it recently inspired a film.

## China to 'Resolutely Deter' Meddling in Taiwan, Hong Kong



Chinese Premier Li Keqiang speaks at the opening session of the National People's Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, March 5, 2021.

BEIJING (Dispatches) -- China will "resolutely guard against and deter" interference by external forces in Hong Kong's affairs, Premier Li Keqiang said Friday.

Speaking at the opening of the annual session of China's parliament, the National People's Congress (NPC), Li said China will ensure the implementation of law and enforcement mechanisms to safeguard national security in Hong Kong.

China will improve the systems related to implementing the Constitution and Hong Kong's Basic Law, Li added.

China's parliament will also deliberate a decision to "improve" Hong Kong's electoral system during this annual session, which will end on March 11.

The United States has sanctioned senior leaders of China's parliament for passing the National Security Law for Hong Kong that gives law enforcement officers powers to counter "collusion with foreign forces" among other crimes.

Li reaffirmed China's commitment to continue to "fully and faithfully" implement "One Country, Two Systems", the model of governance promised to Hong Kong allowing some degree of autonomy when it was handed back to Beijing by Britain.

China will also resolutely deter any

separatist activity in Taiwan but is committed to promoting the peaceful growth of relations across the Taiwan Strait, Li said.

Almost all countries around the world recognize China's sovereignty over Taiwan, but Beijing is increasingly worried by "collusion" between Taipei and Washington, Taiwan's main arms supplier.

Li said Beijing stands by the "one China" principle which declares that Taiwan is part of China. China, he said, remains committed "to promoting the peaceful growth of relations across the Taiwan Strait and China's reunification".

"We will promote exchanges, cooperation and integrated development across the Taiwan Strait. Together we can shape a bright future of rejuvenation for our great nation," he said.

Li, however, stressed that China "will remain highly vigilant against and resolutely deter any separatist activity seeking Taiwan independence".

Ignoring China's sovereignty over Taiwan, Washington has removed some of the restrictions on official contacts with Taipei and stepped up arms and military support for Taiwan in recent years.

Chinese President Xi Jinping said Wednesday the United States is the "biggest threat" to his country's development and security.

## Dassault Mulls Plan B as European Fighter Talks Stutter



Visitors attend the unveiling ceremony of the full-scale jet fighter model of the Systeme de Combat Aerien Futur (SCAF), the French-German-Spanish new generation Future Combat Air System (FCAS), during the 53rd International Paris Air Show at Le Bourget Airport near Paris, on June 17, 2019.

PARIS (Reuters) -- The chief executive of French planemaker Dassault Aviation raised the prospect of an alternative plan on Friday if talks between France, Germany and Spain on a joint fighter plane break down, but said he still believes in the project.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron first floated the venture in 2017 but it has become mired in mistrust and differing visions between Berlin and Paris as well as corporate infighting over workshare, people close to the talks have said. Spain's decision to join the project last year further slowed discussions.

"I don't believe it's in mortal danger but I'm not going to tell you that the patient is not in difficulty," Dassault's CEO Eric Trappier said of the project formally launched in 2019.

"The head of a company must always have a Plan B in mind. He does everything to ensure Plan A succeeds, everything. But the day Plan A doesn't work you need a Plan B," he told a news conference when asked what would happen if the talks failed.

Trappier said Dassault had accepted

that European planemaker Airbus would have a larger overall share under an equal three-way split agreed by the partners, since it represents the military aircraft industries of both Germany and Spain.

But that did not mean all parts of the work could be split equally with no clear leadership, he added.

A key stumbling block concerns the control of technologies like flight controls, for which France claims the upper hand since Dassault builds fighter planes and business jets on its own and Airbus has its civil engineering offices in Toulouse.

"If nobody is running flight controls it's not possible, it won't work: you have to have someone in charge," Trappier said.

He played down a separate dispute over access to know-how, saying Dassault and Airbus had a shared industrial understanding of the way intellectual property is protected. That discussion is mainly being conducted at a political level, he added.

Trappier said a merger between FCAS and the BAE Systems-led Tempest project involving Britain, Sweden and Italy was "not on the agenda".

## News in Brief

PARIS (Reuters) -- A French cabinet minister urged EU countries on Friday not to use the Russian or Chinese COVID-19 vaccines unless they are approved by the bloc's medicines regulator, warning of a risk to the bloc's unity and public health. After a fitful start to the European Union's vaccination campaign which has left the bloc lagging other countries such as Britain, some member states in central Europe have already bought or are considering buying Russian or Chinese shots. Asked whether each EU member state was now simply doing "what they wish themselves", European Affairs Minister Clement Beaune told RTL radio: "If they were to choose the Chinese and/or Russian vaccine, I think it would be quite serious." "It would pose a problem in terms of our solidarity, and it would pose a health risk problem, because the Russian vaccine is not yet authorized in Europe," he said. The EU has so far dealt with vaccine procurement centrally, through the executive European Commission. But Sputnik V has been approved or is being assessed for approval in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

TOKYO (Dispatches) -- A Japanese civil society group has lodged a protest with the government over repeated, irregular low-altitude flights by U.S. military helicopters, demanding thorough investigation and action. A petition was submitted to the Japanese government on Thursday by the citizens group Japan Peace Committee, urging action to put an end to such illegal flights. The petition states that the U.S. military flights cause noise pollution and carry the risk of death and destruction in the event of an accident. "We call for thorough investigation into the truth of what is going on, and strongly request that the U.S. government cease the flights immediately," the group said in the petition submitted to the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense. Local media in Japan saw several occasions reported about U.S. military helicopters flying over densely populated areas of central Tokyo, much below the altitude set under Japan's Civil Aeronautics Act.

NAYPYITAW (Reuters) -- Police in Myanmar on Friday opened fire on protesters against last month's military coup, killing one man, as international condemnation rained down on the junta ahead of a United Nations Security Council meeting to discuss the crisis. The violence took place as the military lost a tussle over leadership of its UN mission in New York and the United States announced new sanctions targeting military conglomerates after the deaths of dozens of civilian protesters. Activists demanding the restoration of the government of Aung San Suu Kyi held more demonstrations in several towns and cities, with a crowd of thousands marching peacefully through the second city of Mandalay. "The stone age is over, we're not scared because you threaten us," the crowd chanted. Police opened fire and one man was killed, witnesses and a doctor told Reuters by telephone.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- The Kremlin on Thursday urged France and Germany to use their influence with the Ukrainian government to make sure that events in the part of eastern Ukraine controlled by Russian-backed rebels did not "cross a dangerous line". Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that Moscow was seriously concerned by a rise in violence on the contact line between the rebels and Ukrainian government forces. Ukraine pushed back against the remarks, saying Russia should instead order the forces it controls in Donbass to observe the ceasefire, and blamed Moscow for obstructing progress in new prisoner swaps and troop withdrawals. Russian-backed forces seized a swathe of eastern Ukraine in 2014, including the industrial cities of Donetsk and Luhansk.

GENEVA (Reuters) -- World Health Organization officials said on Friday the risk of an Ebola outbreak spreading from Guinea to its neighbors was "very high" and that some neighboring countries were not prepared for outbreaks or for future vaccination campaigns. WHO's Guinea representative, Georges Alfred Ki-Zerbo, told a virtual briefing that 18 cases had been identified and four of those people had died. So far, 1,604 people have been vaccinated against Ebola in the new outbreak in Guinea, the first resurgence of the virus there since a 2013-2016 outbreak - the world's worst - which spread to several other West African countries and killed thousands of people. The Ebola virus causes severe vomiting and diarrhea and is spread through contact with body fluids.

WELLINGTON (Reuters) -- A powerful series of undersea quakes struck north-east of New Zealand on Friday, but tsunami waves that forced many people on the country's North Island to flee to high ground passed without causing substantial damage. Officials had warned that waves could reach three meters (10 feet) above high tide levels after the quakes - the strongest a magnitude 8.1 - but the threat had passed by the afternoon, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) said. "It's hard not to feel like our country is having a run of bad luck, when you have an earthquake, tsunami and pandemic to contend with all in one day," New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said. Video footage posted on social media showed surges of water entering a marina in Northland and on the North Island's East Cape region.

## South Korea Seeks Solution of U.S. Military Costs

SEOUL (Reuters) -- South Korea is seeking to iron out remaining differences and sign a deal with Washington on sharing costs for stationing 28,500 American troops in the country, its chief envoy said on Thursday.

Jeong Eun-bo made the comment as he arrived in Washington for the first face-to-face talks on Friday with U.S. envoy Donna Welton since President Joe Biden's administration took office in January. They held their first video conference last month.

The negotiations had been gridlocked after former U.S. President Donald Trump rejected Seoul's offer to pay 13% more, for a total of about \$1 billion a year, and demanded as much as \$5 billion.

South Korean sources have raised hopes the Biden administration will agree to a deal close to their proposal. Seoul currently pays Washington about \$920 million a year.

"There are issues that we are trying to resolve as much as possible through this upcoming face-to-face meeting," Jeong said in televised remarks to reporters in Washington. Jeong said he was hoping the meeting would be the "last round of negotiations," but added further discussions

might be needed. "We will be working to strike a deal as early as we can," he added.

Both sides are "very close" to agreement, the Yonhap news agency said, citing the U.S. State Department.

Seoul has also been pursuing a multi-year deal to head off "operational disturbances" that had arisen as the allies renew it every three five or years, Jeong said.

After the last pact expired at the end of 2019 without a new one, some 4,000 South Koreans working for the U.S. military were placed on unpaid leave, prompting the two countries to scramble for a stopgap agreement to let them return to work.

Jeong's visit comes as the Biden administration is conducting a review of its North Korea policy and Washington and Seoul are arranging the first trip to South Korea by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

Japan's Kyodo News reported the two Cabinet officials would travel to Japan and South Korea from March 15 to 17, citing unnamed Tokyo officials. Seoul's presidential office said on Friday that both sides were discussing their visit but that no details had been set.