

Violence Flares in Europe

Four Stabbed in Paris; Policeman Shot Dead in London



French army soldiers rush to the scene after several people were injured near the former offices of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo following an alleged attack by a man wielding a knife in Paris on Sep 25, 2020.

PARIS/LONDON (Dispatches) -- Four people were stabbed on Friday near the former offices of the Charlie Hebdo satirical magazine in Paris that was attacked by militants over five years ago, Prime Minister Jean Castex said, and police said a suspect had been arrested.

A police source had earlier told Reuters that two of the four wounded had life-threatening injuries.

Paris police said one person had been arrested near the Bastille opera house. One police source said a machete had

been found at the scene. Another police source said a meat cleaver had been found there.

Local authorities asked people to avoid the area and said a police operation was under way in a northeastern district of Paris. Deputy mayor Emmanuel Gregoire tweeted that police were hunting a "potentially dangerous" individual.

The Paris metro closed lines in the area.

Fourteen people went on trial in Paris on Sep 2, accused of being accomplices

in the attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices in January 2015 that killed 12 people.

In Britain, a police officer was shot dead in the early hours of Friday by a man who was being held at a custody centre in south London.

Police said the incident occurred at about 2.15 a.m. while the man was being detained at the Croydon Custody Center where arrested suspects are processed. The unnamed officer was treated at the scene and taken to hospital where he died.

A 23-year-old man was detained at the scene of the shooting and was taken to hospital having also suffered a gunshot wound. He is in a critical condition.

Officers did not open fire and the BBC said it was believed the man had turned the gun on himself. A murder investigation is underway, police added.

The shooting of officers is very rare in Britain where the vast majority of police remain routinely unarmed. A 2017 survey found just over a third wanted to carry weapons routinely, but 43% did not.

The last officers to be shot dead while on duty were unarmed police constables Fiona Bone, 32, and Nicola Hughes, 23, who were gunned down by a fugitive in 2012 after responding to a hoax call about a burglary in the northern English city of Manchester.

North Korean Leader Apologizes to South Over Killing



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un reportedly apologized for disappointing President Moon and South Koreans.

SEOUL (Dispatches) -- North Korean leader Kim Jong Un issued a rare apology Friday over what he described as the "unexpected and disgraceful" killing of a South Korean at sea, Seoul's presidential office said.

The message comes with inter-Korean ties in deep freeze as well as a standoff in nuclear negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington.

The fisheries official was shot dead on Tuesday by North Korean soldiers, and Seoul says his body was set on fire while still in the water, apparently as a precaution against coronavirus infection.

Kim was "very sorry" for the "unexpected and disgraceful event" that had "disappointed President

Moon and South Koreans", rather than helping them in the face of the "malicious coronavirus", said Suh Hoon, the South's National Security Adviser.

Suh was reading out a letter from the department of the North's ruling party responsible for relations with the South.

In it, Pyongyang acknowledged firing around 10 shots at the man, who had "illegally entered our waters" and refused to properly identify himself.

Border guards fired at him in accordance with standing instructions, it said.

Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul, said: "Kim Jong Un's supposed apology

reduces the risk of escalation between the two Koreas and keeps the Moon government's hopes for engagement alive."

It was a "diplomatic move" which "avoids a potential fight in the short-term and preserves the option of reaping longer-term benefits from Seoul", he said.

The killing provoked fury in the South, with President Moon Jae-in -- a consistent advocate of better relations with Pyongyang -- saying it was "shocking" and could not be tolerated for any reason.

The man -- who was wearing a life jacket -- disappeared from a patrol vessel near the western border island of Yeonpyeong on Monday, and North Korean forces located him in their waters more than 24 hours later.

The two Koreas are still technically at war after the 1950-53 Korean war ended in an armistice but not a peace treaty.

They were on a path of rapprochement beginning in January 2018 before U.S. intransigence to relieve any of the sanctions on the North effectively killed diplomacy.

U.S. President Donald Trump has held three summits with Kim, with whom he signed an agreement in 2018 to take a step closer to peace by turning the Korean Peninsula into a "land of peace without nuclear weapons and nuclear threats."

The negotiations have gradually halted owing to Trump's refusal to relieve any of the harsh U.S. sanctions on the North in exchange for goodwill measures by Pyongyang.

New Coronavirus Cases Surge in U.S. Midwest

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- The number of novel coronavirus cases in the United States topped 7 million - more than 20% of the world's total - as Midwest states reported spikes in COVID-19 infections in September, according to a Reuters tally.

The latest milestone on Thursday comes just days after the nation surpassed over 200,000 COVID-19 deaths, the world's highest death toll from the virus. Each day, over 700 people die in the United States from COVID-19.

California leads the country with over 800,000 total cases, followed by Texas, Florida and New York.

All Midwest states except Ohio reported more cases in the past four weeks as compared with the prior four weeks, led by South Dakota and North Dakota. South Dakota had the biggest percentage increase at 166% with 8,129 new cases, while North Dakota's new cases doubled to 8,752 as compared to 4,243 during the same time in August.

Many cases in those two states have been linked to the annual motorcycle rally in Sturgis, South Dakota, that annually attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors.

According to a Reuters analysis, positive cases rose in half of the 50 U.S. states this month. Ten states have reported a record one-day increase in COVID-19 cases in September, including

Montana, South Dakota and Utah on Thursday.

New cases rose last week after falling for eight consecutive weeks. Health experts believe this spike was due to reopening schools and universities as well as parties over the recent Labor Day holiday.

A study by researchers from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Indiana University, the University of Washington and Davidson College said recent reopening of college and university campuses for in-person instruction during late summer this year could be associated with more than 3,000 additional cases of COVID-19 per day in the United States in recent weeks.

U.S. confirmed cases are the highest in the world followed by India with 5.7 million cases and Brazil with 4.6 million.

The United States is currently averaging 40,000 new infections per day. Top U.S. infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci has said he would like to see the number to fall below 10,000 per day before flu season starts in October.

Health officials and President Donald Trump have presented different views about the nation's health crisis. Trump, who is seeking re-election to a second term on Nov. 3, early this month had claimed that the United States was "rounding the corner" on the crisis. Fauci contradicted the claim the next day, saying the statistics were disturbing.

Official: WHO Gives Blessing to China's Vaccines



A booth displaying a coronavirus vaccine candidate from China National Biotec Group (CNBG) is seen at the 2020 China International Fair for Trade in Services (CIFTIS) in Beijing, September 4, 2020.

BEIJING (Reuters) -- The World Health Organization gave China its support and understanding to start administering experimental coronavirus vaccines to people while clinical trials were still underway, a Chinese health official said on Friday.

China launched its emergency program in July, having communicated with the WHO in late June, according to Zheng Zhongwei, a National Health Commission official.

Hundreds of thousands essential workers and other limited groups of people considered at high risk of infection have been given the vaccine, even though its efficacy and safety had not been fully established as Phase 3 clinical trials were incomplete.

"At end-June, China's State Council approved a plan of COVID-19 vaccine emergency use program," Zheng told a news conference.

"After the approval, on June 29, we made a communication with the relevant representatives of the WHO Office in China, and obtained support and understanding from WHO," Zheng said.

WHO's representative in China did not immediately respond to a request

for comment.

WHO chief scientist Soumya Swaminathan said in Geneva this month that national regulatory authorities could approve use of medical products within their own jurisdictions in the current emergency situation, but described that as a "temporary solution".

The long-term solution lay in completion of Phase 3 trials, the WHO official said.

Beijing has not publicly released full details of its emergency use program.

At least three vaccination candidates, including two developed by state-backed China National Biotec Group (CNBG) and one from Sinovac Biotech, all in Phase 3 trials overseas, are included in the emergency use program.

A fourth experimental vaccine developed by CanSino Biologics were approved to be used in the Chinese military in June.

China's annual production capacity of COVID-19 vaccines is expected to reach 610 million doses by end-2020 and 1 billion doses by 2021, Zheng said.

In China, the vaccine price will be affordable for the general public, Zheng added.

Fears of Child Trafficking in UK Amid Pandemic



Scottish police in the streets of Glasgow, Scotland, June 27, 2020.

LONDON (Thomson Reuters Foundation) -- More than 1,000 people were arrested and dozens of suspected victims of modern slavery identified in a crackdown on the drug trade in Britain, police said on Friday, as concerns grow about a rise in child trafficking during the coronavirus pandemic.

Police said 69 possible trafficking victims were referred to government bodies for support following a series of raids this month to disrupt the so-called County Lines drug trade, by which criminal gangs move drugs from cities into rural areas.

The operation was the biggest of its kind to-date and led to the seizure of more than 1 million pounds (\$1.28 million) worth of drugs and at least 500,000 pounds in cash, police said.

Thousands of children in Britain are estimated to be used to carry drugs into the countryside from urban areas, and many are trapped by debt bondage or threats of violence and rape, authorities say.

The number of suspected British child slaves referred to the government last year for support rose by two-thirds to 2,360, and most were believed to be victims of the drug trade.

The number of children suspected to have been trafficked by drug gangs hit a record high during Britain's coronavirus lockdown, which started in March and was eased in July.

About 377 such children were identified between April and June, up from 182 in the previous quarter, official data shows.

Crime experts and campaigners warned earlier this year that more children could fall prey to drug traffickers due to factors such as school closures and reduced contact with social services.

Researchers at the National Centre for Gang Research and Nottingham University said drug dealers were increasingly using social media to groom and recruit children from their homes.

Charities said children caught up in the trade must be identified as victims and protected rather than prosecuted.

"Too often, young people do not get the support they need, or are seen as having chosen to get involved in crime when they were manipulated and coerced," said James Simmonds-Read, a national program manager for The Children's Society.

Police efforts to tackle drug gangs have been hampered by inconsistent treatment of victims and inadequate support for children caught with drugs, a police watchdog found in January.

The ex-head of the Metropolitan Police's anti-slavery squad told the Thomson Reuters Foundation last year that police faced a challenge in trying to judge whether a child found dealing drugs should be treated as a suspect or a victim.

News in Brief

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia has started withdrawing troops from Belarus who took part in joint "Slavic Brotherhood" military exercises, Interfax news agency cited the Ministry of Defense as saying on Friday. Russian paratroopers who parachuted into Belarus on Wednesday were loading equipment and personnel onto military trains for departure from the city of Brest, the ministry said. The joint exercises have been a symbol of Russian support for Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who had himself sworn in for a new five-year term this week. Russia said on Friday that the European Union's decision not to recognize Lukashenko as the legitimate president of Belarus contradicted international law and amounted to indirect meddling in the country. Russia is a close ally of Belarus and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on Friday that the move not to recognize him would complicate the EU's dialogue with Belarus, but not affect Belarusian ties with Moscow.

TAIPEI (Reuters) -- Taiwan's armed forces have held anti-landing drills on one of its offshore islands close to China amid rising tensions with Beijing, the island's defense ministry said on Friday, showing images of a cannon firing and soldiers loading the guns. China has stepped up its military activities near Taiwan which it claims as its own territory, including flying fighter jets across the unofficial mid-line of the sensitive Taiwan Strait, which combat aircraft normally don't breach. China says it has been reacting to what Beijing has called "collusion" between Taiwan and the United States, and to protect China's sovereignty, responding to U.S. Undersecretary for Economic Affairs Keith Krach's visit last week to Taipei. Taiwan's Defense Ministry said the drills to repel a landing took place on the Matsu archipelago, which lies just offshore the Chinese city of Fuzhou. The drills took place across the archipelago involving the use of cannons and machine guns, the ministry added, accompanied by pictures of the exercises.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny is likely to remain in Germany for weeks as he still requires lengthy treatment to help him recover from alleged poisoning, his spokeswoman has said. The 44-year-old Kremlin critic was discharged on Wednesday from a Berlin hospital after he fell violently ill in Siberia. "Navalny's recovery process will naturally take a long time," his spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh said in an online broadcast late Thursday. "He is staying in Germany for now, he will undergo rehabilitation there. It's clearly not a question of a few days and probably not a couple of weeks," she said. Navalny wrote in a post on Instagram on Wednesday about the after-effects of poisoning, saying he cannot throw a ball with his left hand and is struggling to write. He said he was seeing a physiotherapist every day, working to regain balance and control of his fingers, and may attend a rehabilitation center.

ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan (AFP) -- Turkmenistan's strongman leader approved constitutional changes on Friday including the creation of a potentially powerful new position in parliament, fueling speculation that he plans to hand power to his son. President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov signed off on changes including the creation of an upper house of parliament, with the head of the new chamber positioned to become acting president if the head of state is unable to fulfil his duties, the state information agency said. Berdimukhamedov's son Serdar is widely believed to be in pole position to head up the senate-like body, paving the way for a potential hereditary succession. Berdimukhamedov pledged that the new legislature would "bring the activity of democratic institutions to a new level" and said that lawmakers would be elected to the restructured parliament next year, after the changes enter force.

NEW DELHI (AFP) -- Angry farmers took to the streets and blocked roads and railways across India on Friday, intensifying protests over major new farming legislation they say will benefit only big corporates. The plight of farmers is a major political issue in India, with some 70 percent of rural households depending primarily on agriculture, and thousands of farmers killing themselves in recent years because of debt and drought. The legislation passed by parliament in chaotic scenes on Sunday means that farmers no longer have to sell to state-controlled markets at fixed prices, freeing them to supply to any buyer they choose and getting rid of middlemen. Critics say the changes will leave farmers at the mercy of large corporations by taking away their bargaining power. On Friday, hundreds of farmers from the northern states of Punjab and Haryana -- the biggest producers of wheat and rice -- blocked highways and railway tracks, shouting anti-government slogans.

DUK PADIET, South Sudan (Reuters) -- Severe flooding in South Sudan has forced more than 600,000 people to flee their homes since July, the United Nations said, after months of torrential rains caused the Nile to burst its banks. The impoverished East African nation is struggling to recover from a five-year civil war and was already suffering severe food shortages. Scientists say the unusual rains are caused by a cyclical weather pattern that has been exacerbated by climate change. The coronavirus pandemic is also complicating the response, said United Nations humanitarian coordinator for South Sudan Alain Noudéhou. Costs for delivering aid have risen with the need to protect aid workers and families are forced to squeeze together on thin slivers of land. "With the flooding, people had to move to higher ground and there's not much higher ground," he said on Thursday during a visit to flood-hit areas.