

European Leaders Warn of Bleak Winter Ahead



People wearing protective masks are seen amid the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), in Coventry, Britain October 25, 2020.

MILAN (Reuters) -- European leaders warned of a bleak winter as resurgent COVID-19 infections forced countries to impose new restrictions to try to curb a second wave of the pandemic, with the United States, Russia and France setting new daily records for cases.

More than 42.9 million people are reported to have been infected by the coronavirus globally and 1,151,929 have died, according to a Reuters tally. The United States has the highest number of deaths and infections.

Word that a vaccine being developed by the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca Plc produced immune responses in both elderly and young people offered some positive news as autumn turns to winter in the

Northern Hemisphere and people socialize indoors.

But British Health Secretary Matt Hancock cautioned that the vaccine would not be widely available until next year and said "we're not there yet".

U.S. President Donald Trump, facing a tough re-election battle on Nov. 3, lashed out again at the media after reports that coronavirus is surging across the United States.

"Cases up because we TEST, TEST, TEST. A Fake News Media Conspiracy. Many young people who heal very fast. 99.9%. Corrupt media conspiracy at all time high," Trump said in a Twitter post.

In Europe the picture was unrelentingly

grim as a string of countries reported record increases, led by France, which posted more than 50,000 daily cases for the first time on Sunday, while the continent passed the threshold of 250,000 deaths.

France may even be experiencing 100,000 new infections a day, Professor Jean-François Delfrayssy, who heads a council that advises the government, told RTL radio.

"We are facing very, very difficult months ahead," German Chancellor Angela Merkel told a meeting of leaders from her Christian Democrat party, according to daily Bild.

In Spain, which has had more than a million cases of the disease, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez warned the country was facing an "extreme" situation as he announced a new state of emergency on Sunday, imposing local nighttime curfews and banning travel between regions in some cases.

Russia's daily tally of new COVID-19 infections surged to a record high of 17,347 on Monday as the Kremlin warned the pandemic was beginning to take a greater toll outside Moscow.

With 1,531,224 infections, the country of around 145 million people has recorded the world's fourth largest COVID-19 case load - after the United States, India and Brazil.

Italy, the country worst hit in the early stages of the crisis in March, imposed new curbs, ordering restaurants and bars to close from 6 p.m. and shutting down cinemas, and gyms and imposing local curfews in several regions.

In total, more than 225,300 people have died from the coronavirus in the United States.

China Sanctions U.S. Weapons Makers Over Taiwan Deals



This photograph taken on October 8, 2020 in Saint-Lunaire, France shows a jet motor of Lockheed-Martin C130 military plane under maintenance.

BEIJING (Dispatches) -- China will impose sanctions on Lockheed Martin, Boeing Defense, Raytheon and other U.S. companies it says are involved in Washington's arms sales to Taiwan, a foreign ministry spokesman said on Monday.

Zhao Lijian told journalists that China was acting to protect its national interest, but did not spell out what form the sanctions would take.

The U.S. State Department has approved the potential sale of three weapons systems to Taiwan, including sensors, missiles and artillery that could have a total value of \$1.8 billion, the Pentagon said last week.

Beijing considers Taiwan a wayward province it has vowed to bring under control, by force if necessary.

"To safeguard our national interests, China decided to take necessary measures and levy sanctions on U.S. companies such as Lockheed Martin, Boeing Defense, and Raytheon, and those individuals and companies who behaved badly in the process of the arms sales," Zhao said.

China has imposed sanctions on Lockheed Martin and other U.S. companies in the past for selling weapons to Taiwan, though it is unclear what form the penalties have taken.

The United States, like most countries, has no official diplomatic ties with Taiwan, but Washington is "bound by law" to provide the island with what

it calls the means to defend itself.

The Trump administration has ramped up support for Taiwan through arms sales and visits by senior U.S. officials, adding to tensions in relations between Beijing and Washington, already strained by disagreements over the South China Sea, Hong Kong, human rights and trade.

A spokesman for Boeing said in an emailed statement that the company's partnership with China's aviation community had long-term benefits and that Boeing remained committed to it.

Lockheed Martin said in an emailed statement that all of its international military sales are strictly regulated by the U.S. government, and that its presence in China is limited.

The State Department said last week it had approved the sale of 135 air-to-ground missiles, in a move welcomed by Taiwan.

A statement from the U.S. State Department last week said the SLAM-ER missiles would help Taiwan "meet current and future threats".

The missiles provide "all-weather, day and night, precision attack capabilities against both moving and stationary targets" on the ground or ocean, the statement added.

Also approved was the sale of six MS-110 air reconnaissance pods and 11 M142 mobile light rocket launchers, taking the value of the three arms packages to \$1.8 billion.

Japan, U.S. Begin Military Drills in Show of Force



Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force soldiers watch U.S. MV-22 Osprey aircrafts on board of the helicopter destroyer JS Kaga during Keen Sword at mid-sea off south of Japan, October 26, 2020.

ON BOARD JS KAGA (Dispatches) -- Japan and the United States on Monday began air, sea and land exercises around Japan in a show of force against China.

The Keen Sword exercise is the first big drill since Yoshihide Suga became Japan's prime minister last month with a vow to continue the military build-up aimed at countering China, which claims Japanese-controlled islands in the East China Sea.

Keen Sea, which is held every two years, involves dozens of warships, hundreds of aircraft and 46,000 soldiers, sailors and marines from Japan and the United States. Running until Nov. 5 it will include cyber and electronic warfare training for the first time.

"The security situation around Japan has become increasingly severe. This gives us the opportunity to demonstrate the strength of the Japan-U.S. alliance," General Koji Yamazaki, Japan's top military commander said on board the Kaga helicopter carrier in waters south of Japan.

Japan's biggest warship was accompanied by U.S. aircraft carrier the USS Ronald Reagan and its escort destroyers. The 248 meter (814 ft) Kaga, which was returning from patrols in the South China

Sea and Indian Ocean, will be refitted as early as next year to carry F-35 stealth fighters.

Suga this month visited Vietnam and Indonesia as part of Japan's efforts to bolster ties with key Southeast Asian allies. That followed a meeting in Tokyo of the "Quad", an informal grouping of India, Australia, Japan and the United States that Washington sees as a bulwark against China's growing regional influence. Beijing as denounced it as a "mini-NATO" aimed at containing it.

Japan has grown particularly concerned about an uptick in Chinese naval activity around the disputed islands in the East China Sea that Tokyo claims as the Senkaku and Diaoyu in Beijing.

Accompanying Gen Yamazaki on the Kaga, Lieutenant General Kevin Schneider, commander of U.S. Forces Japan pointed to recent activity by China that worried Washington and Tokyo, including new security laws in Hong Kong that sought to stem crippling riots in the territory, China's alleged military build-up in the South China Sea and what he alleged as harassment of Taiwan by the Chinese military over the past few months. China has said it intentions in the region are peaceful.

News in Brief

NEW DELHI (Reuters) -- India and the United States will sign a military agreement on sharing of satellite data during the current visit by U. S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper, the Indian defense ministry said on Monday, deepening strategic ties. The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement on Geospatial Cooperation (BECA) will allow India access to topographical, nautical and aeronautical data for better accuracy of weapons like missiles and drones. Esper and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo landed in New Delhi for a top-level security dialogue on Tuesday, seen as part of efforts to counter China's growing assertiveness in the region. "The two ministers expressed satisfaction that agreement of BECA will be signed during the visit," the Indian defense ministry said following Esper's talks with Defense Minister Rajnath Singh.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- The Kremlin said on Monday that U.S. Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's assessment of Russia as the biggest threat to U.S. national security was wrong and encouraged hatred of Russia. The comments come just over a week before Biden faces Donald Trump in the Nov. 3 U.S. presidential election. Biden is ahead in the polls. "We absolutely do not agree," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on a conference call, when asked to comment on Biden's assessment. "We can only regret that absolute hatred of the Russian Federation is spread in this way." Moscow's ties with Washington have been at cold-war lows since 2014. Putin, who has praised Trump in the past for saying he wanted better ties with Moscow, has said Russia will work with any U.S. leader, while noting what he called Joe Biden's "sharp anti-Russian rhetoric".

TUNIS (AFP) -- Dozens of Libyan delegates Monday opened a political dialogue via videoconference as a step towards holding elections after a landmark ceasefire agreement between warring factions in the North African country. The UN mission in Libya said the political talks, which it is brokering, would pave the way for a "direct, in person meeting" of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) on November 9 in the Tunisian capital.

The goal of the LPDF would be to "generate consensus on a unified governance framework and arrangements that will lead to holding national elections", it said. On Friday, Libya's rival administrations signed a "complete and permanent ceasefire agreement with immediate effect" after five days of talks in Geneva. Libya has been wracked by conflict for nearly a decade, since the overthrow and killing of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in a NATO-backed uprising in 2011. It has since been dominated by armed groups and divided between two bitterly-opposed administrations: a UN-recognized Government of National Accord based in the capital Tripoli and another in the east backed by military strongman Khalifa Haftar.

BANGKOK (Reuters) -- Describing themselves as "human beings, not dust", thousands of Thai protesters demanding reforms of the monarchy marched to the German embassy in Bangkok on Monday to put pressure on King Maha Vajiralongkorn, who spends much of his time in Germany.

Germany has said it would be unacceptable for King Maha Vajiralongkorn, 68, to conduct politics there and Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said the European country continued to look into his behavior during long sojourns in Bavaria. Months of student-led protests that began by demanding the removal of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, 66, a former military ruler, have become the biggest challenge in decades to a monarchy that the Thai constitution says must be revered. A statement read at the German embassy from "the People" accused the king of interfering in Thai politics and said that having failed to get "the royal puppet" to listen - a reference to Prayuth - they had come to "the puppet owner".

BAMAKO (Reuters) -- Mali's interim prime minister said on Monday he was open to talks with takfiri militants whose insurgency has made vast swathes of the country ungovernable, but former colonial power France signaled opposition to the idea. Ousted former president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita said earlier this year that his government was prepared to negotiate with Al-Qaeda-linked militants. National talks in the aftermath of the August coup that overthrew Keita endorsed that policy. "The conclusions of the inclusive national talks ... very clearly indicated the necessity of an offer of dialogue with these armed groups," Ouane said at a news conference in Bamako with French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian who is on a two-day visit.

LAGOS (Reuters) -- The judicial panel investigating police brutality and the shooting of protesters in Lagos convened on Monday, promising neutrality and justice. Independent investigations into police abuses were a core demand of the protesters who demonstrated nationwide for more than two weeks. Peaceful protests turned violent on Oct. 20, when witnesses and groups such as Amnesty International said soldiers opened fire at protesters, killing some. The army denied its troops were there. Chair Justice Doris Okwobi said the panel was independent from government and would ensure justice for victims of police brutality and "for those affected by the unfortunate incident of the shootings by the military." Protest leaders have told Reuters many are afraid of government retribution if they speak about the shootings.

Russia Offers Not to Deploy Missiles in Europe



Above, a closed missile base near Everglades City, Florida on April 8, 2010, which was designed to launch unconventional or nuclear tipped missiles in reaction to any Russian attack.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- The Kremlin on Monday proposed that Russia and the United States agree not to deploy certain land-based missiles in Europe and introduce mutual verification measures to build trust following the demise of the INF nuclear arms control treaty.

The United States withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty last year, accusing Moscow of violating it, a charge denied by the Kremlin.

Global nuclear arms control architecture has come under further strain

since then as the former Cold War foes have been unable to agree on a replacement to New START, another major arms control pact that is due to expire in February 2021.

On Monday, the Kremlin suggested "de-escalation" measures, such as allowing Russia to conduct checks on the U.S. Aegis Ashore system in Europe, and the United States to check Russia's 9M729 missiles in facilities in the exclave of Kaliningrad.

"We propose all interested sides to consider concrete options for mutual verification measures to remove exist-

ing concerns," the Kremlin said in a statement on its website.

The INF pact had prohibited land-based missiles with a range of 310-3,400 miles, reducing the ability of both countries to launch a nuclear strike at short notice.

President Vladimir Putin said Monday the United States "grave mistake" in abandoning the landmark nuclear treaty with Moscow threatens the world with the risk of another nuclear arms race.

"We consider the U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty, as a result of which it has ceased to operate, a serious mistake that increases the risks of unleashing a missile arms race," Putin said.

The president said the INF was a key element "in maintaining predictability and restraint in the missile-related sector throughout Europe," due to tensions between NATO and Russia.

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty was signed toward the end of the Cold War in 1987 by then U.S. president Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

It banned all land-based missiles with ranges of between 500 and 5,500 kilometers and included missiles carrying both nuclear and conventional warheads.

The INF, seen as a milestone in ending the Cold War arms race between the two superpowers, led to the elimination of 2,692 missiles from both sides, ridding Europe of land-based nuclear missiles.

Third Ceasefire Attempt in Karabakh Collapses

BAKU/YEREVAN (Dispatches) -- A third attempt at halting weeks of fighting over Karabakh collapsed quickly on Monday with Armenia and Azerbaijan trading accusations of violating the U.S.-brokered ceasefire within minutes.

As fighting over the Azerbaijani region enters its second month, international mediators are scrambling to bring a stop to frontline clashes and shelling of civilian areas that have left hundreds dead.

The latest "humanitarian ceasefire" was announced by Washington on Sunday, after truces brokered by Russia and France fell apart over previous weekends.

It took less than an hour after the ceasefire was due to begin at 8:00 am (0400 GMT) for the first accusations to be made.

Azerbaijan's foreign ministry said Armenian forces had shelled the town of Terter and nearby villages in "gross violation" of the truce.

Armenia's defense ministry said Azerbaijani forces had violated the truce with artillery fire on combat positions in various parts of the frontline.

Karabakh's separatist forces claimed Azerbaijan was continuing to shell civilian areas and had fired missiles at a village in its Martuni district. Correspondents on the ground, however, reported a calm night in Khankendi which Armenians call Stepanakert.

Azerbaijan and Armenia have been locked in a bitter conflict over Karabakh since Armenian separatists backed by Yerevan seized control of the mountainous province in

a 1990s war that left 30,000 people dead.

Karabakh's self-declared secession has not been recognized internationally, even by Armenia, and it remains a part of Azerbaijan under international law. The current fighting broke out on September 27.

In an address to the nation, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said Armenia had "immediately violated" the ceasefire on Monday. "I have ordered our military to show restraint and not give in to provocation," Aliyev said.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said on Twitter that "despite several provocations, the ceasefire is being maintained. "The Armenian side will continue to strictly adhere to the ceasefire regime," he said.

After enduring heavy shelling at the start of the fighting, the main city of Khankendi has been quieter in recent days.

AFP journalists in the city on Monday said the night had been calm. There were fewer sounds of fighting coming from the frontline on Monday morning than in previous days, though rounds of shelling could be heard in the distance.

More than 1,000 people have been reported dead in the fighting, mainly Armenian separatists but also dozens of civilians. Azerbaijan has not released any figures on its military casualties.

Russia, France and the United States are leaders of the "Minsk Group" which has failed since the 1990s to bring about a negotiated settlement to the conflict.