

Russia: West's Attempts Could Lead to Ukraine Destruction



Ukrainian servicemen stand in position on the front line with Russia-backed separatists in the Donetsk region on Feb. 16, 2021.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- **Russia warned Thursday that that any attempts spearheaded by the West to start a new military conflict in Ukraine's war-torn east would culminate in the destruction of Ukraine.** Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov raised the alarm after Ukraine's commander-in-chief accused Moscow of building up forces near their shared border and claimed that pro-Russian separatists were systematically violating a ceasefire in the eastern Ukrainian region of the Donbass. Lavrov stressed that most of Ukraine's military appeared to understand the danger of a "hot conflict" in

Donbass, and said, "I very much hope that they will not be incited by politicians, who in turn will be incited by the West, led by the United States." "Russian President Putin said this not long ago, but this statement is still relevant today, that those who would try to start a new war in Donbass, will destroy Ukraine," Lavrov added. The Kremlin said earlier in the day that recent Russian troop and military hardware movements near Russia's borders with Ukraine were aimed at ensuring Moscow's own security and posed "no threat" to anyone. "There is increased activity on the perimeter of Russia's borders by NATO,

other alliances, individual countries - it all obliges us to be vigilant," the Kremlin underlined. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba also said he had spoken to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which monitors the effects of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, about Russia's "systemic aggravation" of the security situation in Ukraine and Crimea. Moreover, a NATO official claimed that Moscow was undermining peace efforts in the restive Ukrainian region. "Allies shared their concerns about Russia's recent large scale military activities in and around Ukraine. Allies are also concerned about Russian violations of the July 2020 ceasefire that led to the death of four Ukrainian soldiers last week," the NATO official told Reuters. "Russia's destabilizing actions undermine efforts to de-escalate tensions." Kyiv and Moscow have traded blame in recent weeks for a spike in violence in the Russian-speaking eastern Donbass region, where Ukrainian troops and pro-Russian forces have fought a conflict that has killed 14,000 people since 2014 by Ukraine's estimate. The armed confrontations began when a wave of protests in Ukraine overthrew a democratically-elected pro-Russia government and replaced it with a pro-West administration. The majority in those areas refused to endorse the new administration.

Activists Urge Probe Into French War Crimes in Mali



The area around Mali's village of Bounti, where a French airstrike took place on January 3, 2021, in an image taken by UN investigators in January.

NEW YORK (Dispatches) -- **Human rights activists are demanding France open an investigation into an airstrike that killed at least 19 civilians in central Mali, after a United Nations report contradicted claims by French officials that the target of the January 3 raid was an "armed terrorist group".** According to a report released this week by the United Nations Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (Minusma), France's account of targeting and killing dozens of fighters from the Katiba Serma armed group in the village of

Bounti was heavily disputed. Instead, the UN body found that the strike, conducted by Reaper drones, hit a wedding party attended by more than 100 guests. Five men, understood to be - but not confirmed to be - part of the armed group, were in attendance. The report also came just days after local officials said a French airstrike had killed six civilians in northern Mali, including teenagers who were hunting. The French military immediately rejected those claim, too. France's outright rejection of the UN report has outraged human rights activists who have intensified calls for accountability.

"It is not a luxury to launch an investigation into an incident where there are massive civilian casualties," said Jonathan Pedneault, a conflict and crisis researcher at Human Rights Watch. "This new UN report simply highlights the very important need for France to open a judicial investigation into this incident; interview all the people who were in the chain of command and have a proper understanding of what was known at the time of attack in terms of the nature of the gathering in terms of the presence of legal targets, ie: members of the Katiba, and evaluate whether the necessary precautions were taken before the strike was called," he told Middle East Eye. "The only way to do that is launch an actual investigation to determine a) if there was indeed war crimes and b) to then establish the responsibilities and hold those people accountable." Hours before the report was released, France refused to accept the UN's findings and called into question the report's methodology. France also refused to tell Minusma how it reached its conclusion that the gathering was an appropriate military target. "The only concrete sources on which this report is based come from local testimonies," the French Defense Ministry said in a statement.

Pakistan Halts Trade With India Over Kashmir Status

ISLAMABAD (Reuters) -- **Pakistan's cabinet on Thursday put off allowing imports of cotton and sugar from neighboring India until Delhi reviews its 2019 move to revoke the Kashmir region's special status, the foreign minister said.** In an effort to cool local demand and prices, Pakistan's Economic Coordination Committee (ECC), the country's top economic decision-making body, gave the go-ahead on Wednesday for the imports, which would have ended nearly two years of trade suspension between the nuclear-armed rivals. "It was a consensus opinion, including the prime minister, that as long as India doesn't review the Aug. 5, 2019, unilateral steps it took, it wouldn't be possible to normalize relations with India," Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said of the cabinet meeting, chaired by Prime Minister Imran Khan, which had to endorse the ECC's decision for trade to start. He said the cabinet decided to defer the decision. It wasn't immediately clear why Pakistan would defer a decision within a day. The ECC approval came only after Khan had seen and authorized the proposal to import sugar from India, according to a commerce ministry summary

seen by Reuters. India and Pakistan have fought three wars over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir. Both control parts of the region but claim all of it. The developments have come amid a gradual thawing between the two neighbors after their militaries released a rare joint statement last month, announcing a ceasefire along the Kashmir border. Pakistan was one of the leading buyers of Indian cotton until 2019, when Islamabad banned imports of goods from India after New Delhi revoked the special status of its portion of the Kashmir region. Pakistani buyers have already been making inquiries about buying Indian sugar and cotton, which is being offered at lower prices than supplies from other countries, Indian dealers said. The traders say they have been offering Indian white sugar at \$410 to \$420 a tonne on a free-on-board (FOB) basis, far lower than the domestic price of \$694 quoted in Pakistan. According to a commerce ministry document seen by Reuters, Pakistan's cotton industry has been grappling with a shortage, requiring the import of 5 million to 6 million bales of cotton to meet the shortage this financial year.

Johnson: COVID Situation in France 'Very Sad'



A medical crew from Angers hospital prepares to take away a COVID-19 patient on a stretcher after his transfer by helicopter from the Ile de France region to Angers hospital, France, March 15, 2021.

LONDON (Dispatches) -- **UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has warned of the possible spread of what he described as the "very sad" COVID-19 situation in France to the United Kingdom.** "I'm afraid you can see what's happening in France... It's very sad actually - it's very very sad," Johnson said Thursday. "When they get it in France and they get it bad, two or three weeks later it comes to us." According to France's Health Ministry, 50,659 new coronavirus cases were reported in the country on Thursday and 308 new related deaths were recorded in hospitals, bringing the total tally of fatalities in hospitals to 69,904. French President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday ordered France into its third national lockdown in an attempt to prevent hospitals being overwhelmed, despite his previous defiance of the advice of scientists and his pledges of keeping the euro zone's second largest economy as open as possible. It was Macron's "Waterloo," far-right leader Marine Le Pen said, using an expression the French use to mean a definitive defeat. "Unfortunately it is the French people who suffer the consequences of these delays, of his pride, and of his inconsistent decision-making, with a heavy

price on their daily lives," tweeted Le Pen, who is expected to be Macron's main challenger in 2022 presidential election. Macron has been accused by opponents and parts of the public of behaving like a monarch who surrounds himself with a loyal inner court and listens to few others since he took power in 2017. "This lockdown, which you won't even call by its name, is a symbol of the arrogance with which the president and his government has wrapped itself up in," Damien Abbad, from the main opposition conservative party, told the lower house. The World Health Organization's European head on Thursday criticized Europe's coronavirus vaccine campaign as "unacceptably slow" as only 10% of the region's population have received a single dose, and 4% have completed a full course. Also on Thursday, World Health Organization epidemiologist Maria van Kerkhove warned of a "very serious situation" in Brazil, which has become an epicenter of the pandemic. "Indeed there is a very serious situation going on in Brazil right now, where we have a number of states in critical condition," she told a briefing, noting that many hospital intensive care units are more than 90% full.

At Least 48 Killed After Train Derails in Taiwan



Rescue workers at the site where a train derailed in eastern Taiwan on Friday, killing at least 51 people.

TAIPEI (Reuters) -- **A Taiwan express train with almost 500 aboard derailed in a tunnel on Friday, killing at least 48 passengers and injuring 66 in the island's worst rail disaster in almost four decades.** Images from the scene showed carriages in the tunnel ripped apart by the impact, with others crumpled, hindering rescuers in their efforts to reach passengers, although by mid-afternoon no one was still trapped. The crash, north of the eastern city of Hualien, killed the driver of the train carrying many tourists and people heading home at the start of a long weekend traditional holiday to tend to family graves. Taiwan media said many people were standing as the train was so crowded, and were tossed about by the crash impact. Media showed pictures of survivors being led out of the tunnel. The train, travelling from Taipei, the capital, to the southeastern city of Taitung, came off the rails after apparently hitting a truck that had slid off a road from a nearby construction site. At the site, Transport Minister Lin Chia-lung told reporters that it had been carrying about 490 people, high-

er than an earlier figure of 350 provided by fire authorities. The official Central News Agency said the truck was suspected to have slid off the sloping road into the path of the train, as its handbrake had not been engaged, and added that police had taken in its driver for questioning. The fire department showed a picture of what appeared to be wreckage of the truck beside the derailed train, with an aerial image of one end of the train still on the track next to the construction site. Passengers in some train carriages still in the tunnel had to be led to safety, the railway administration said. Images showed an injured passenger carried away on a stretcher, with her head and neck in a brace, while others gathered suitcases and bags in a tilted, derailed carriage as some walked on the roof of the train to leave the tunnel. The accident came at the beginning of a long weekend for the traditional Tomb Sweeping Day holiday. Taiwan's mountainous east coast is a tourist destination. The railway that snakes down from Taipei hugs the coast and is known for its tunnels, in one of which the crash took place. The link to Taipei opened in 1979.

News in Brief

TUNIS (Reuters) -- Three suspected militants, including an Asian woman and local leader in Daesh, were killed in Tunisian mountains near the Algerian border in two police operations, a security official said on Thursday. Six years ago a Daesh militant shot dead 39 foreigners on a beach in Sousse, triggering an exodus of tourists and severely damaging Tunisia's economy. Since then Tunisia has grown more effective in preventing and responding to attacks, but sleeper cells still pose a real threat, especially with the return of jihadists from Syria, Iraq and Libya. "Our forces killed a terrorist, as his Asian wife blew herself up, killing also her baby in Saloum mountain," said Colonel Houssein Jebbli, an official in National Guard. He added that Hamdi Dhoubi, a local leader in Jund El Khilafah, an affiliate branch of Daesh was also killed in an ambush in Mghila mountains.

PEMBA, Mozambique (Reuters) -- A boat carrying 1,200 survivors of a deadly attack by Daesh-linked insurgents in northern Mozambique reached safety in the port of Pemba on Thursday, some of them crying on arrival after spending days hiding in the bush. Aid workers were at the crowded port to give food to those disembarking from the green and white ferry, while police and soldiers kept control of crowds of people excited to see relatives rescued during the attack that began last week in Palma, a Reuters reporter at the port said. Many people were believed to have scattered into dense forest or to have attempted to escape by boat, aid workers said. Takfiri insurgents have been increasingly active in the surrounding province of Cabo Delgado since 2017, although it is unclear whether they have a unified aim or what specifically they are fighting for.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- **Denuclearization will remain at the center of U.S. policy toward North Korea and any approach to Pyongyang will have to be done in "lockstep" with close allies, including Japan and South Korea, U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Thursday. Price made the comments at a regular briefing ahead of a meeting on Friday between U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan and his counterparts from Japan and South Korea as the Biden administration concludes a review of its policy towards North Korea. Price said the meeting would be an opportunity to share "where we are in terms of our review" and for them to share their perspectives. Sullivan was to meet his Japanese counterpart Shigeru Kitamura and South Korea counterpart Suh Hoon at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis on Friday. The Biden administration has been simultaneously signaling a hard line on denuclearization and sanctions in its North Korea policy, while making diplomatic overtures that administration officials say have been rebuffed by Pyongyang.**

CARACAS (Reuters) -- Venezuela on Thursday said two of its soldiers were killed by a land mine during operations against armed groups along the Colombian border that have forced the displacement of thousands of civilians. The explosion "left nine members of the military injured, who are now receiving medical attention ...," the defense ministry said in a statement. During the operations troops dismantled nine camps, including one that produced coca paste, which is used to make cocaine, the ministry said. Nine suspected fighters had died and 31 people arrested, it said. On March 22 Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's government said two soldiers were killed in clashes with "irregular armed groups" in Apure. Armed forces began an operation last week, with Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez saying the country would defend itself from irregular groups, while respecting human rights.

NAYPYITAW (Reuters) -- **Opponents of military rule in Myanmar marched, observed strikes and sought alternative ways to communicate after most users were cut off from the internet on Friday, undaunted by the bloody suppression of protests during the past two months. Hundreds of people have been killed demonstrating since the Feb. 1 coup, and many people have been using social media to publicize the security forces' excesses and to organize against military rule. The authorities, who have already shut down mobile data, ordered internet providers from Friday to cut wireless broadband, depriving most customers of access. In response, anti-coup groups have shared radio frequencies, mobile apps such as maps that work without a data connection, and tips for using SMS messages as an alternative to data services to communicate. Violent incidents are occurring regularly in different parts of the country between the security forces and people set against military rule.**

MADRID (Reuters) -- A regional office of Spain's leftist Unidas Podemos party was hit by a fire-bomb attack on Friday, police said. The attack took place in Cartagena in southeastern Spain. The blaze damaged the exterior of the building. Podemos accused right-wing elements of carrying it out. "The street terrorism of the far-right will not intimidate us," party leader Pablo Iglesias, who is standing as a candidate in regional elections in Madrid on May 4, said on social media. Police said no arrests had been made after the attack, which took place in the early hours of Friday morning.