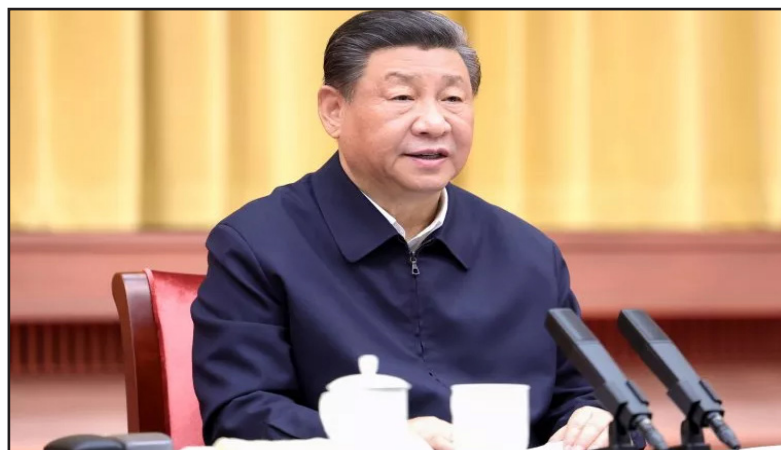


Xi Proposes New Peace Plan in Ukraine-Russia War



Chinese President Xi Jinping chairs a symposium on March 20.

BEIJING (Dispatches) - Chinese leader Xi Jinping has laid out four principles that he says are imperative to finally achieve peace between Russia and Ukraine.

Xi has proposed his new peace plan during a meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, which marked the 10th anniversary of what Chinese-state-owned outlet Xinhua called an "all-round strategic partnership" between Berlin and Beijing.

Xi also listed four key principles to ensure that peace is reached between Kyiv and Moscow: to focus on peace and stability rather than "selfish" gains, to cool down the situation in Ukraine rather than "add fuel to the fire," to establish conditions for restoring peace rather than aggravating the situation, and to reduce the negative impact that the war is having on the world economy.

Xinhua also reported that China "is not a party to the Ukraine crisis, but has consistently promoted talks for peace in its own way."

Beijing presented a 12-point peace plan over a year ago that offered vague principles for ending the war in Ukraine. The plan was ill-received by Ukrainian and Western officials last spring.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, however, said earlier this month that he believed China's original proposal for reaching peace with Ukraine was the most "reasonable" one that has been presented, telling reporters on April 4. "The most important thing for us is that the Chinese document is based on an analysis of the reasons for what is happening and the need to eliminate these root causes. It is structured in logic from the general to the specific."

Ukraine has released its own 10-point peace plan ending its war against Russia, which includes calls for a cease-fire and restoration of Ukraine's territory to Kyiv's control, including the Crimean Peninsula.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, however, has demanded that

Ukraine accept the "new territorial realities." Moscow occupies large swaths of Ukraine's southern and eastern territories, and Putin has repeatedly dismissed the idea that Ukraine is a sovereign state.

The latest development in the battlefield, three Russian missiles crashed into Ukraine's historic city of Chernigiv on Wednesday, killing 17 people, as officials pleaded for more air defense systems from allies.

Pools of blood formed on the street at the scene of one strike where rescuers searched for survivors in the rubble and carried away the wounded on stretchers, official images showed.

Buildings and cars across the centre of the northern city were destroyed in the strike.

President Volodymyr Zelensky, who has urged allies to send more missiles to thwart Russian aerial attacks, said Ukraine lacked the weapons it needed to intercept the three missiles that struck Chernigiv.

"Our neighbors were already there. We started shouting for everyone to fall to the floor. They did. There were two more explosions. Then we ran to the parking lot," the 33-year-old said.

The official death toll grew to 16 during the day, while emergency services said 61 people -- including three children -- had been wounded. "Search and rescue operations are ongoing," their statement added.

In August last year, seven people were killed in a Russian missile attack on a theatre hosting an exhibition on drones.

China Sends Fighter Jets to Shadow U.S. Navy Plane Over Taiwan Strait



Two Chinese Su-30 fighter jets taking off to patrol over the South China Sea.

BEIJING (Reuters) - China's military said on Wednesday it sent fighter jets to monitor and warn a U.S. Navy patrol aircraft that flew over the sensitive Taiwan Strait, a mission that took place just hours after a call between the Chinese and U.S. defense chiefs.

China says it has jurisdiction over the strait. Taiwan and the United States dispute that, claiming the Taiwan Strait is an international waterway.

The U.S. Navy's 7th Fleet said the P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol and reconnaissance plane, which is also used for anti-submarine missions, flew over the strait in international airspace.

China's military described the flight as "public hype", adding it had sent fighters to monitor and warn the U.S. plane and "deal with it in accordance with the law and regulations".

"Troops in the theatre are always on high alert and will resolutely defend national sovereignty and security as well as regional peace and stability," the Eastern Theatre Command of the People's Liberation Army said in a statement.

The last time the U.S. Navy announced a Poseidon had flown

through the strait, in December, China's military said it had also sent fighter jets to monitor and warn the aircraft.

The latest Poseidon mission came shortly after U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun, the first engagement the two have had in more than a year as the two countries seek to restore military ties.

Dong told Austin that the Taiwan issue is "core of China's core interests and China's core interests must absolutely not be harmed," according to a readout from his ministry. "The Chinese People's Liberation Army will never let any Taiwan independence separatist activities and external connivance and support go unchecked," it cited Dong as saying.

The United States is Taiwan's most important international backer and arms supplier despite the absence of formal diplomatic ties, and the issue is a constant irritant for Sino-U.S. relations.

U.S. military ships and aircraft transit the narrow Taiwan Strait about once a month.

China has never renounced the use of force to bring Taiwan under its control.

Russian Peacekeepers Start Withdrawing From Azerbaijan's Karabakh Region



Under the terms of a 2020 cease-fire between Azerbaijan and Armenia, 1,960 Russian soldiers as well as hundreds of units of armored personnel carriers and other military equipment were stationed in the region.

BAKU (Reuters) - Russian peacekeepers have begun withdrawing from Azerbaijan's Karabakh and other regions, ending a multi-year deployment.

Nearly 2,000 Russian peacekeeping troops deployed to the breakaway region of Karabakh in November 2020 under a Moscow-brokered deal that halted six weeks of fighting between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces.

Despite the deployment, Azerbaijan retook Karabakh the area in September last year in a move which triggered an exodus of 120,000 Armenians.

Azerbaijani news agency APA reported late on Tuesday that Russian peacekeepers had begun withdrawing and that the first personnel and equipment had disappeared from Azerbaijan's Kalbajar district a few days ago.

"The early withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers, temporarily stationed in the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan, in accordance with the trilateral Statement signed on November 10, 2020, has been decided by the leaders of both countries," it

cited him as saying. "The process has already begun, with the ministries of defense of Azerbaijan and Russia implementing appropriate measures for the execution of that decision."

On Wednesday, Azerbaijan reported that France is pressuring and threatening the country after Paris recalled its ambassador and accused the Caucasus country of damaging bilateral ties.

Azerbaijan has slammed France on multiple occasions over what it sees as the country's support for rival Armenia in a long-running stand-off between the neighbors.

"The Azerbaijani side has repeatedly stated to France that speaking in a language of threat and pressure will not bring any results, and once again declares that it will take all necessary measures to protect its national interests," Aykhan Hajizada, Azerbaijan's foreign ministry spokesperson, said in a statement.

French President Emmanuel Macron recalled ambassador Anne Boillon to Paris to discuss ties with Azerbaijan, the foreign ministry in Paris said Tuesday.

Caribbean Ambassador Calls for Global Action to Establish Slavery Tribunal



A UN flag waves outside the United Nations European headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland May 22, 2019.

LONDON (Reuters) - A high-level Caribbean ambassador said on Wednesday it was crucial to establish a new international special tribunal to seek reparations for transatlantic slavery and its legacies in today's society.

Reuters reported earlier this month that support was building among Africa and Caribbean nations for the creation of such a tribunal on atrocities dating to transatlantic slavery.

For over four centuries at least 12.5 million Africans were kidnapped, forcibly transported thousands of

kilometers by mainly European ships and merchants and sold into slavery.

David Comissiong, the Barbados ambassador to the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and a well-known reparations advocate, said a tribunal was needed as there was no international court properly equipped to deal with reparations claims of such magnitude and complexity.

Comissiong was speaking at the third session of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent (PFPAD) in Geneva. The PFPAD initially suggested the establishment of

the tribunal last year.

He said the tribunal would require a "positive decision" by the UN General Assembly, the main policy-making organ of the organization.

"Let us resolve to put in the international advocacy work to successfully deliver the creation of this critical institution at the UN General Assembly," he added. "Let us all rally around the forum and make this happen."

At the session, representatives of other nations, such as Guyana and Venezuela, echoed Comissiong's call.

In a video message at the opening of the PFPAD session on Tuesday, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres reiterated that racism was based on centuries of enslavement and colonialism. He said reparations should be part of efforts to tackle it.

The idea of paying reparations or making other amends for transatlantic slavery has a long history and remains deeply disputed, but has been gaining momentum worldwide.

Even supporters of the tribunal recognize that establishing it will not be easy. Hurdles include obtaining the cooperation of nations that were involved in transatlantic slavery and the legal complexities of finding responsible parties and determining remedies.

Hundreds Evacuated After Indonesia's Ruang Volcano Erupts

JAKARTA (Reuters) - At least 800 people in Indonesia's North Sulawesi province have been evacuated after multiple eruptions of the area's Ruang volcano, which for days has spewed lava and ash clouds into the sky, the country's volcanology agency said on Wednesday.

The volcano, located on Ruang island about 100 km (62 miles) from the provincial capital Manado, has erupted more than three times since Tuesday.

Authorities have raised the alert level to the second highest level following the increased activity, Heruningtyas Desi Purnamasari, an official at Indonesia's Center for Volcanology and Geological Hazard Mitigation (PVMBG), told Reuters.

The eruption of Mt. Ruang were triggered by recent earthquakes on the island, with the mountain emitting dangerous and "explosive hot clouds" as high as 1.8 km (1.1 miles) into the sky, she said.

"We must clear the island because

we anticipate there could be more eruptions. No activity is allowed within four kilometers from the crater," she said.

Footage seen by Reuters showed flows of red lava streaming down the mountain, reflected in the waters below, and billowing clouds of grey ash above its crater.

Ruang island is home to about 838 residents, most of whom have now been evacuated to the nearest island Tagulandang, said Heruningtyas.

News in Brief

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - The University of Southern California, citing safety concerns and passions around the latest Middle East conflict, has canceled its valedictorian speech from a Muslim student who said she was being silenced by anti-Palestinian hatred for her views on human rights. USC Provost Andrew Guzman claimed in a statement that the decision to scrub the traditional valedictorian address at next month's graduation had "nothing to do with freedom of speech" and was simply aimed at protecting campus security. The valedictorian, biomedical engineering major Asna Tabassum, in her own statement challenged the university's rationale, questioning "whether USC's decision to revoke my invitation to speak is made solely on the basis of safety."

LONDON (Reuters) - Britain's upper house of parliament again has defeated Rishi Sunak's plans to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, proposing changes that will delay but not block a policy the prime minister hopes could help change his party's electoral fortunes. Sunak has invested huge political capital in the Rwanda scheme before an election later this year he is predicted to lose, saying it will help meet his pledge to stop thousands of people arriving in Britain without permission in small boats. The House of Lords, Britain's unelected upper house, for a third time sought to make changes to the new legislation after the House of Commons lower house of parliament rejected its second set of proposals on Monday.

ATHENS (AP) - Ships remained docked at Greek ports and train services were halted on Wednesday amid a strike by transport sector workers demanding higher pay to cope with rising living costs. With bus and taxi drivers also walking off the job, many roads in central Athens were clogged as commuters resorted to driving themselves to work. The workers joined a 24-hour strike by Greece's largest private sector union GSEE who say their wages still lag behind those of their European colleagues. Greece this month raised its monthly minimum gross wage by 6.4 percent to 830 euros, the fourth such increase in five years, as the country has been recovering from a decade-long financial crisis.

TBILISI (AFP) - Riot police in Georgia began clearing demonstrators from around the ex-Soviet state's parliament as lawmakers debated a bill on "foreign agents" that the opposition denounces as authoritarian. The bill would require organizations receiving more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register as being agents of foreign influence. It is likely to pass in a parliament controlled by the ruling Georgian Dream party and its allies. Opponents say the legislation will damage Georgia's bid to join the European Union. More than 5,000 protesters had massed by parliament for a second day to denounce the bill, approved by a parliamentary committee. Officers, some carrying shotguns, ordered protesters to disperse and deployed what appeared to be a crowd-control substance like pepper spray.

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) - Venezuela President Nicolas Maduro has ordered the closure of his government's embassy and two consulates in Ecuador in protest of Ecuador's detention of former Vice President Jorge Glas, the Venezuelan information ministry said in a statement. Ecuadorian police arrested Glas, twice convicted of corruption, on April 5, removing him from the Mexican embassy where he had been living since December. The arrest prompted Mexico, which had offered Glas political asylum, to suspend diplomatic relations with Ecuador.