

G7 Pledges Swift Aid for Ukraine as Russia Gains Momentum



G7 Foreign Ministers meet on Capri island, Italy, April 18, 2024.

CAPRI, Italy (Dispatches) - Group of Seven (G7) major powers pledged on Friday to bolster Ukraine's air defenses to counter increasingly deadly Russian attacks.

Foreign ministers from the G7, comprising the United States, Italy, Canada, France, Germany, Japan and Britain, wrapped up three days of talks on the island of Capri that were dominated by wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

They acknowledged they had to do more to help Ukraine, which is struggling to hold off stronger Russian forces.

Alarmed by growing Russian momentum on the battlefield, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba came to Capri in person to tell G7 allies that they needed to send more aid, saying wars in his home country and the Middle East were linked.

The G7 said in a statement it would increase security assistance for Kyiv, specifically bolstering "Ukraine's air defense capabilities to save lives and protect critical infrastructure".

At the G7 foreign ministers' meeting, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg

also said that Ukraine had an "urgent, critical need for more air defense."

While NATO allies had made "encouraging" recent commitments on military support, he said: "We should have given them more earlier."

He was speaking to reporters ahead of a working session on Ukraine, also attended by Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba.

Ukraine has struggled on the battlefield for months, outgunned and outnumbered by Russian forces amid a shortage of Western military aid.

On Thursday, Russia said that the latest aid package by the west for Ukraine will fail to change the military situation in favor of Kyiv, as Washington gears up for a seminal weekend vote on a long-stalled major military aid package for the ex-Soviet republic.

At a press conference on Thursday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stressed that the \$61 billion package of U.S. funding for Ukraine would not change the dynamics on the battlefield.

"It won't in any way influence the de-

velopment of the situation on the front. All experts now assert that the situation on the front is very unfavorable for the Ukrainian side. Therefore it will not be able to change anything," he said.

His comments came as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has already warned that his country will lose its war with Russia if the U.S. Congress withholds the major aid package, saying that the months-long delay has cost Ukraine lives and territory.

CIA Director William Burns has said that Ukrainian defenses could completely collapse under a Russian onslaught as early as this year unless the U.S. approves a new aid package for Kyiv. His comments come after U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson announced that the chamber would vote on the long-delayed measure later this week.

Speaking at the Bush Center's 2024 Forum on Leadership on Thursday, Burns stressed the urgency of the U.S. approving a \$61 billion security aid package for Ukraine. The bill has been held up for months in Congress due to Republican opposition demanding more efforts to enhance security on the Mexican border.

Meanwhile on Friday, Ukraine shot down a Russian strategic bomber 300 km (185 miles) from its border after the warplane took part in an airstrike that killed at least eight people, including two children, in the central Dnipropetrovsk region, Kyiv said.

Missiles rained down on the city of Dnipro and the surrounding region in the early hours, damaging residential buildings, the main train station and wounding at least 28 civilians, regional officials said.

Russia has stepped up its long-range aerial assaults on Ukraine's energy system and other targets in recent weeks, ratcheting up the pressure on Kyiv far behind the front lines where Russian forces have been slowly advancing in the east.

China Slams Biden Over 'Xenophobic' and 'Cheating' Claims



BEIJING (Dispatches) - China has slammed the United States of hypocrisy in response to accusations by American President Joe Biden that Beijing is "xenophobic" and "cheating" on trade.

In a speech on Wednesday to union members, Biden called for a hike in steel tariffs on China, accusing the country of cheating during an election campaign in the northeastern state of Pennsylvania.

"I would like to ask him: are you talking about China or the U.S. itself?" Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lin Jian responded on Thursday when asked about the comments.

"They're not competing, they're cheating. They're cheating and we've seen the damage here in America," the 81-year-old Biden said to cheers at the headquarters of the United Steelworkers union in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

"They're xenophobic..they've got

real problems," he added.

Biden also claimed that Chinese steel companies are heavily subsidized by the government and hence "don't need to worry about making a profit."

Biden said he had called for the U.S. trade representative to triple the tariff rates for Chinese steel and aluminum if Beijing was confirmed to be using anti-competitive practices.

Earlier this week the United States announced a probe into China's trade practices in the shipbuilding, maritime, and logistics sectors alleging that Beijing used "unfair, non-market policies and practices" to dominate these sectors.

China has "firmly opposed" the probe, calling the move a "mistake on top of a mistake."

Beijing and Washington have clashed in recent years on flash point issues ranging from technology, trade, and human rights to Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Indians Vote in World's Largest Election as Modi Seeks a Third Term



A woman casts her ballot at a polling station as voting starts in the first phase of India's general election, in Madartoli village of Hojai district of Assam state on April 19, 2024.

NEW DELHI (AP) — Millions of Indians began voting Friday in a six-week election as Prime Minister Narendra Modi is seeking a rare third term as the country's leader.

People began queuing up at polling stations hours before they were allowed in at 7 a.m. in the first 21 states to hold votes, from the Himalayan mountains to the tropical Andaman Islands. Nearly 970 million voters — more than 10% of the world's population — will elect 543 members to the lower house of Parliament for five years during the staggered elections that run until June 1. The votes will be counted on June 4.

This election is seen as one of the most consequential in India's history and will test the limits of Modi's political dominance.

If Modi wins, he'll be only the second Indian leader to retain power for a third term, after Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister.

Most polls predict a win for Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, who are up against a broad opposition alliance led by the Indian National Congress and powerful regional parties.

Voters in hot and humid Chennai, the state's capital, began briskly filling the city's nearly 4,000 polling booths. A number of them said they were voting for a change in federal government given rising prices, unemployment and religious

polarization stoked by the BJP.

P. Chidambaram, an opposition Congress party leader and the country's former finance minister, said that the people of Tamil Nadu would not vote for the BJP as "it is imposing one language, one culture, one system and one kind of food."

In Rajasthan, people returning from polling stations covered their heads against dusty winds.

"If the new government is able to solve unemployment, then it will be good. People are migrating from this region to earn a living," said Atinder Singh, 26.

The opposition — and critics — warn that Modi has turned increasingly illiberal. They accuse Modi of using tax authorities and the police to harass the opposition, and they fear a third term could undermine India's democracy. His Hindu nationalist politics, they argue, has bred intolerance and threatens the country's secular roots.

The BJP hopes for a landslide win powered by its popular welfare programs, which it says have improved access to clean toilets, health care and cooking gas, as well as providing free grain to the poor. Moves like the construction of a controversial temple to Ram on the site of a demolished mosque, and the scrapping of the disputed Muslim-majority region of Kashmir's former autonomy, may resonate with supporters who hail him as the champion of the Hindu majority.

News in Brief

TOKYO (Xinhua) - Japan on Friday started the fifth round of release of nuclear-contaminated wastewater from the crippled Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant into the Pacific Ocean. Despite opposition among local fishermen, residents as well as backlash from the international community, Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), the plant's operator, started discharging the radioactive wastewater in the morning, the first round in fiscal 2024. Similar to the previous four rounds, about 7,800 tons of the wastewater, which still contains tritium, a radioactive substance, will be discharged until May 7.

PARIS (AFP) - Kenya's defense chief and nine other top brass have died in a military helicopter crash in a remote area of the country, President William Ruto said. Today at 2:20 pm, our nation suffered a tragic air accident... I am deeply saddened to announce the passing of General Francis Omondi Ogolla, the Chief of the Kenya Defence Forces (CDF)," Ruto told reporters. The president, who had convened an urgent meeting of the National Security Council after news of the accident emerged, said nine other "gallant military personnel" on board were also killed while two survived.

SEOUL (Reuters) - South Korea's government announced on Friday it is willing to adjust plans to raise medical school admissions in a bid to end a walkout by junior doctors and in the wake of the ruling party's crushing election defeat, media reports said. The country's health-care system is under pressure due to a prolonged stalemate between the government and doctors over plans to boost medical school admissions by 2,000 from 3,000 starting in 2025. On Thursday, some medical school deans suggested scaling back the increase by up to half and allowing universities flexibility to determine their quotas, as a potential way to reach a compromise.

BRASILIA (Reuters) - Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva officially has recognized two more Indigenous territories, but said he decided not to sign off on four others because they still need to be cleared by people currently occupying them. The recognition grants the territories legal protection as reservations to be defended against invasions by illegal loggers, gold miners and cattle ranchers. Lula, who pledged to legalize as many reservations as possible, signed in Brasilia the recognition of the Aldeia Velha and Cacique Fontoura lands, which are located in the states of Bahia and Mato Grosso, respectively. The leftist leader has so far recognized 10 Indigenous territories since he took office in January 2023 for his third non-consecutive term. Lula said at an event that he had received from his Justice Minister last week a list of six Indigenous territories ready

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) - Dengue cases have created an "emergency situation" in the Americas, although cases in hotspots Argentina and Brazil appear to have stabilized, the head of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) said. PAHO, a United Nations agency, has confirmed more than 5.2 million cases of dengue across the Americas this year, an over 48 percent jump from the 3.5 million cases the group reported late last month. More than 1,800 people have died from the mosquito-borne viral illness, up from over 1,000 deaths reported last month in the year through March. Dengue symptoms include fever, headache, vomiting, skin rashes, as well as muscle and joint pain. In some cases, it can cause a more severe hemorrhagic fever, resulting in bleeding that can lead to death.

Burkina Faso Expels Three French Diplomats Over 'Subversive Activities'



A demonstration in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, against the French presence on 20 January 2023.

PARIS (AFP) - Burkina Faso has expelled three French diplomats for "subversive activities", a year after the junta ruling the African nation cut off ties with France, the landlocked country's former colonial ruler.

The three were declared "persona non grata" and told to leave the country within 48 hours, the foreign ministry said in a note that was sent to the French em-

bassy. According to the letter, which was addressed to the French embassy on April 16, two of the expelled French diplomats were listed as political advisers, without elaborating on what they were exactly accused of.

Citing an unnamed source, media reported that the diplomats were expelled because of meetings that they had with

civil society members.

The French foreign ministry denied the allegation, saying that it regretted the decision to expel its diplomats and staff from Burkina Faso.

"We reject the unfounded accusations made by the Burkina Faso authorities against our staff," it said in a statement.

"The decision of the Burkina Faso authorities is not based on any legitimate basis. We can only deplore it," added French foreign ministry spokesman Christophe Lemoine, who also slammed the allegation as "unfounded."

Since the coup, Ouagadougou has since expelled hundreds of French troops, pushed France to recall its ambassador, and suspended some French media amid growing anti-French sentiment.

Being one of the poorest countries in the world, Burkina Faso has been under the influence of terrorist groups linked to al-Qaeda and Daesh that have killed thousands of its citizens, creating one of the fastest-growing humanitarian crises in Africa.

Niger, which is bordered by Burkina Faso to the southwest, demanded a "negotiated framework" for the French troop planned pull-out from the West African country in September last year.

Venezuela Rejects U.S. Attempt to 'Control' Its Oil Industry

CARACAS (Reuters) — Venezuela has again rejected "the United States government's intention to monitor, protect, control and manipulate the Venezuelan oil industry."

At a press conference, Foreign Affairs Minister Yvan Gil read a statement confirming that "Venezuela will never recognize and accept" the "illegal policy of imposing coercive measures and licenses" against the South American nation by the United States.

The U.S. government released a new "license" on Wednesday, reinstating some of the sanctions against Venezuela that had been eased in October last year.

Venezuela "reminds the entire world that with or without licenses, with or without unilateral coercive measures, it is determined to be a free nation," Gil said.

Announced by U.S. officials on Wednesday, Venezuela's loss of a key U.S. license that allowed it to freely export and increase investment in its oil sector will hit the volume and quality of its crude and fuel sales while prompting a flurry of requests for individual U.S.

deal authorizations.

Last October the license eased oil sanctions that had been in place over the previous five years on OPEC-member Venezuela, once Latin America's top oil producer.

On Wednesday, U.S. officials gave companies 45 days to wind down pending transactions under a more restrictive license called 44A.

The period could allow departures by some oil supertankers chartered by PDVSA customers that have waited for months to load in Venezuela, but others might need individual U.S. authorizations to complete their purchases.

Venezuelan officials argue the sanctions had little effect at home, but would damage attempts to normalize bilateral relations and hit U.S. interests in the Venezuelan oil industry.

Washington said it would process specific authorization requests for doing business with Venezuela, a commitment Venezuelan officials said they expect the U.S. to honor.

Authorizations previously granted to oil firms including Chevron, Repsol and

Eni were not withdrawn, which secures Venezuela's oil flows to the United States and Europe.

On Thursday, Maha Energy said it had requested a special license from U.S. authorities earlier this year to operate PetroUrdeneta in western Venezuela.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury, however, cautioned that entering into new business arrangements or investments previously authorized "will not be considered wind-down activity," casting doubts on what type of transactions will be allowed.

Venezuela's prior, six-month license did not provide enough time for the country to secure long-term energy investments, but companies already in the country were negotiating expansions and projects linked to existing joint ventures with PDVSA.

Venezuela expects some of those expansions to be authorized in the 45-day window, including with Chevron and Repsol, and it will resort to individual license requests after that, Oil Minister Pedro Tellechea said on Wednesday.