

U.S., Ukraine Urge End to Soaring Tensions With Russia

WASHINGTON (AFP) - U.S. Vice President Joe Biden and Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko in a phonecall urged a speedy resolution to the conflict with pro-Russian separatists amid a spike in tensions with Moscow, the White House said.

Biden and Poroshenko "expressed concern over the recent surge in fighting in eastern Ukraine, where ceasefire violations by combined Russian-separatist forces are at their highest levels since 2015, often using heavy weapons", the White House statement read.

Kiev and the West accuse Russia of supporting the separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine and deploying troops across the border -- claims Moscow denies.

Biden and Poroshenko "reiterated the need for a political and diplomatic resolution of the conflict through full implementation of the Minsk agreements by all parties," the statement added.

The Minsk accord, signed in February 2015 with French and German mediation and in the presence of President Vladimir Putin, calls for a ceasefire along with a range of political, economic and social measures to end the conflict.

Biden told Poroshenko that U.S. officials "had sent a message to Russia that the world is watching and underscored the need to deescalate the situation."

He also urged Ukraine to show restraint.

Poroshenko on Thursday said he could not rule out a "full-scale" Russian invasion as violence raged in the east, amid accusations that Russia is building up its military force in the region.

The Pentagon on Friday said that the extra Russian troops along the border were associated with a regular military exercise.

Poroshenko's claim came after Russian President Vladimir Putin lashed out last week at Kiev over an incident on the frontier between Crimea, which Moscow annexed in March 2014, and Ukraine, accusing it of "practicing terror".

Two Russian officers were killed in the incident, in which Ukraine denied any involvement.

Putin on Friday visited Crimea to boost security measures there. It was his fifth visit to the Black Sea peninsula since annexing it from Ukraine.

Separately, Biden and Poroshenko discussed conditions set by the International Monetary Fund for disbursing the next tranche of much-needed financial assistance, the White House said.

They also "agreed on the importance of recent Ukrainian efforts to continue critical anti-corruption reforms", the statement said.

Venezuela Condemns 'Bold Threats' From Paraguay

CARACAS (AFP) - Venezuela's Foreign Minister Delcy Rodriguez on Saturday condemned what she called "bold threats" from her Paraguayan counterpart after he announced a "total freezing of relations."

Paraguayan Foreign Minister Eladio Loizaga announced on Friday that he would not return to Caracas indefinitely over what he called "rants" by Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

"Venezuela will not allow itself to be threatened or succumb to

the fear from those who choose to serve the empire rather than the people," Rodriguez tweeted in response. "(Loizaga's) bold threats... insult our heritage of independence and freedom."

Earlier this month, Maduro said Venezuela was being "persecuted" by "a corrupt Paraguayan oligarch and drug trafficker," referring to Paraguayan President Horacio Cartes.

Venezuela — in political and economic crisis, facing severe shortages of basic goods — has

come under fire from its Latin American neighbors for allegedly failing to comply with the region's Democratic Charter, a binding document.

Earlier this week, Brazil accused Maduro of imposing an "authoritarian" regime on his country.

A group of 15 countries from the Organization of American States on Thursday called on Venezuela to act "without delay" to clear the way for an election over whether to recall Maduro from office as a way out of its mounting crisis.

Refugees in Greek Camps Targeted by Mafia Gangs



Refugees and migrants wait to be registered at the refugee camp near the village of Moria, on the Greek island of Lesbos.

LONDON (The Guardian) - Fresh evidence is emerging that refugees stranded in camps across Greece are falling victim to rising levels of vice peddled by mafia gangs who see the entrapped migrants as perfect prey for prostitution, drug trafficking and human smuggling.

Details of the alarming conditions present in many of the facilities comes as the Greek government — facing criticism after the Observer's exposé of sexual abuse in camps last week — announced urgent measures to deal with the crisis. A further four refugee cen-

ters, it said, would be set up in a bid to improve severe overcrowding, a major source of tensions in the camps.

Aid workers say an estimated 58,000 migrants and asylum seekers in Greece are increasingly being targeted by Greek and Albanian mafias. Tales of criminals infiltrating camps to recruit vulnerable women and men are legion.

With an estimated 55 centers nationwide — including "hotspots" on the Aegean islands within view of Turkey — Greece has effectively become a huge holding pen for refugees since EU and Balkan countries closed their borders to shut them out earlier this year.

In private, many Greek officials express alarm that numbers are growing amid worrying signs that the five-month-old deal signed between Ankara and the EU to keep the flows in check is on the verge of collapse.

Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte threatens to leave UN

MANILA (BBC) - Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has threatened to "separate" from the UN after it criticized his war on drugs as a crime under international law.

Mr Duterte said he might ask China and African nations to form another body. He also accused the UN of failing on terrorism, hunger and ending conflicts.

Mr Duterte, elected in May, has sanctioned the killing of traffickers to try to wipe out the drugs trade.

The UN has repeatedly condemned the drive as a violation of human rights.

Some 900 suspected drug traffickers have been killed

since Mr Duterte was elected on 9 May.

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At Least 10 Dead in Twin Blasts in Somalia Town: Official

MOGADISHU (AFP) - At least 10 people were killed Sunday in two explosions in a town in central Somalia, police said.

The Shabaab militant group claimed responsibility for the blasts in the town of Galkayo, some 700 kilometers (440 miles) northeast of Mogadishu.

"There were two car bomb blasts which targeted the local government headquarters. More than 10 people have been killed," said police officer Mohamed Abdiqani.

Local resident Hassan Abdulkadir said he counted a dozen bodies, some burned beyond recognition.

"It was horrible. The first blast was caused by a truck loaded with explosives, and the second was a minibus," he said.

Shabaab said it carried out the attack, in a message distributed via the Telegram messaging service, claiming "at least 30 people, including military personnel and apostates were killed."

The Shabaab carries out regular attacks against government, military and civilian targets using suicide car bombers and gunmen.

In March, Shabaab militants attacked a hotel in Galkayo killing at six people including a senior local government official.

An Al-Qaeda aligned group, the Shabaab is fighting to overthrow the internationally-backed government in the capital Mogadishu and it is expected to try and violently disrupt elections due to be held in September and October.

The Shabaab was forced out of the capital by African Union soldiers five years ago but continues to launch regular attacks including, in recent months, on restaurants, hotels and military bases.

The terrorists have also staged repeated attacks in neighboring Kenya and a recent security analysis warned the group was expanding its horizons with cells active in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda as well as Somalia.

Nigeria Oil Rebels Announce Conditional Ceasefire



The Niger Delta Avengers claim to seek a fairer share of Nigeria's oil wealth for residents of the region as well as self-determination and political autonomy.

LONDON (Daily Mail) - A Nigerian rebel group has announced a conditional ceasefire and agreed to hold talks with the government following months of attacks on key oil and gas facilities that have hampered the economy.

In a message posted on the Niger Delta Avengers' (NDA) website late on Saturday, the group said it would "observe a cessation of hostilities," so long as the country's ruling party stops what it called harassment of innocent civilians.

It said it would support efforts to negotiate with "the federal government of Nigeria, representatives from the home countries of all multinational oil corporations and neutral international mediators."

There have been unconfirmed reports for several weeks of talks underway with Abuja, and the government of President Muhammadu Buhari has invited rebels to discussions several times.

But the NDA never publicly acknowledged that it was engaged in negotiations, or that it would support efforts by community figures from the area.

The NDA said it would honor its ceasefire pledge "unless the ruling

political APC (All Progressives Congress party) continues ... to arrest, intimidate, invade and harass innocent citizens and invade especially Ijaw communities."

Otherwise it warned: "We promise to fight more for the Niger Delta, if this opportunity fails."

The Ijaw ethnic people of Delta, Rivers and Bayelsa states have long dominated oil rebel groups operating in the area, although experts say militants from other communities have also set up new branches.

When he took office last year President Buhari announced he wanted to progressively wind down a scheme which had offered amnesty to former members of armed groups in the Delta, notably the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).

The scheme was inherited from the previous government of Buhari's predecessor Goodluck Jonathan.

Since 2009 large sums of money have been paid in allowances to some 30,000 former fighters, while training programs were offered to those who pledged to lay down their arms.



NEW JERSEY (Dispatches) - Two commuter buses collided in New Jersey's largest city Friday morning, pushing one of the vehicles onto its side, killing one of the drivers and critically injuring seven other people, authorities said.

The person killed in the Newark crash was the driver of a New Jersey Transit bus that had no passengers when it slammed into the side of another NJ Transit bus that was carrying about 20 passengers around 6 a.m. Mayor Ras Baraka said 19 people were injured, including seven critically.

ALABAMA (Reuters) - Five people were killed in rural Citronelle, Alabama, and a suspect was arrested across the border in Mississippi, police said on Saturday.

The Mobile County Sheriff's Office said on Twitter that a suspect was taken into custody in Greene County, Mississippi, but did not immediately identify the person. Greene County is about 10 miles (16 km) west of where the bodies were discovered.

The suspect walked into the Greene County Sheriff's Office and confessed to the killings, Alabama Media Group reported on its website AL.com, citing a sheriff's official.

Alabama Media Group also said that one of the five people killed was believed to be a pregnant woman and that the bodies were discovered in a home.

The victims were all adults, according to reports, with multiple weapons including a gun used in the murders. An infant was found unharmed in the home.

ANKARA (Reuters) - U.S. Justice and State Department officials will fly to Ankara to discuss government accusations against Fethullah Gulen, the exiled cleric Turkey accuses of masterminding a failed military coup, according to a Justice Department official.

President Tayyip Erdogan has demanded the United States extradite Gulen, who lives in Pennsylvania, over the July putsch in which more than 200 people, including civilians, were killed. Turkish officials have suggested refusal to repatriate Gulen for trial would seriously strain ties between the two NATO allies.

Gulen, described by Erdogan as a terrorist, denies any involvement in the coup attempt, which has led to large-scale purges of the military, civil service, judiciary and academia.

BERLIN (Reuters) - Germany has tightened border controls with southern neighbor Switzerland to choke off a flow of illegal immigrants, Swiss Finance Minister Ueli Maurer said, calling it evidence that Germany has withdrawn its welcome mat for migrants.

Germany's interior ministry confirmed border staffing had been reinforced.

More than a million people fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere arrived in Germany last year. The mood towards them has soured after a spate of attacks on civilians last month, including three carried out by migrants.

Switzerland itself has cracked down on migrants -- many of them African -- trying to enter from southern neighbor Italy after crossing the Mediterranean. Humanitarian groups are scrutinizing if the stance violates human rights conventions, which Swiss officials insist they will safeguard.