

Moscow: U.S. to Draw More Division Lines at Summit for Democracy



Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov

MOSCOW (TASS) - Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov has described the forthcoming Summit for Democracy, due in December, as the United States' attempt to draw more division lines. He stressed Russia's negative attitude to this event.

"Our attitude to this event is unequivocally negative. It is nothing but an attempt to draw more division lines. In the early 1990s, we worked very hard for reducing and eliminating these division lines, but the United States now prefers to create more divides and to rate countries that are good, in its opinion, and bad, in its opinion as well," Peskov told the media on Wednesday.

The U.S. stance, he said, is disconnected from reality.

"It is utterly dissonant with the general sentiment in the world. Ever more countries prefer to decide on their own what kind of life they should live, with-

out caring a bit what somebody else might say. Yet the United States continues such attempts at lecturing others," Peskov said.

The Kremlin official stressed that Washington was trying to impose on other countries its own idea of democracy and to privatize this term.

"They wish to privatize the very word 'democracy.' In their opinion democracy is only what corresponds to Washington's understanding of democracy. Obviously, this cannot be so and must not be so. And in fact, it is not," he concluded.

Washington is going to hold a Summit for Democracy for the leaders of countries, human rights activists and businessmen in a video conference mode on December 9-10. A total of 110 countries and territories have been invited to attend.

Earlier, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that the United

States-arranged Summit for Democracy was aimed at "dividing people and countries into democratic and not democratic." In his opinion, by inviting countries to such an event the United States tries to make everybody think this is a massive movement. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova described the Summit for Democracy as a "chimera, expected to show that the collective West has some constructive, unifying agenda."

China Opposes U.S. Inviting Taiwan to Democracy Summit

And also, on Wednesday, China's Foreign Ministry Zhao Lijian expressed strong opposition to the U.S. for inviting Taiwan to the "Summit for Democracy" which will be held next month virtually.

Speaking at a daily press briefing, Lijian also urged the U.S. to stop colluding with Taiwan "independence" separatists, CGTN reported.

China reacted after the Joe Biden administration officially released the list of participants to its upcoming "summit for democracy", which includes the island of Taiwan.

The invitation comes days after President Xi Jinping and his U.S. counterpart held a video summit where the Chinese leader warned Biden that encouraging Taiwanese independence would be "playing with fire".

There are 110 participants on the U.S. state department's invitation list for the virtual event on December 9 and 10 including India but not China and Russia.

Red Cross Warns Serious Problems With Rohingya Muslims



Rohingya refugees sit on wooden benches of a navy vessel on their way to the Bhasan Char island in Noakhali district, Bangladesh, December 29, 2020.

YANGON (Reuters) - A senior Red Cross official warned that "serious problems" remain with a remote island off southern Bangladesh housing Rohingya refugees, as officials prepared to ship thousands more people there this week.

Since last December, Bangladesh has moved about 19,000 Rohingya refugees, members of a persecuted mostly Muslim minority from

Myanmar, to the island of Bhasan Char from mainland border camps.

Rights groups have likened it to an island jail and said some relocations were involuntary.

Alexander Matheou, Asia-Pacific director for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, said restrictions on free movement and a shortage of job opportunities and healthcare

would "deter people from choosing to go in large numbers" to the island, several hours' from the mainland.

Matheou, who visited said the site was "well-designed and organized in terms of housing" and had access to clean water, but the health services were "too basic to cope with a large population" and there was no established system of referrals to the mainland.

He said the main issue among refugees he spoke to was that they could not move back and forth to the mainland to see their families.

"While that's difficult, that is really, really upsetting people," he said. "So those issues could all act as a deterrent for people to voluntarily coming... I think that those will sort of undermine the success of the project unless they're addressed."

He said authorities, who plan to move another 81,000 refugees to the island, were exploring allowing people to travel to the mainland for limited periods.

Bangladesh officials did not respond to requests for comment by Reuters.

UNICEF: World's Highest Child Soldier Numbers in West, Central Africa

LONDON (Al-Jazeera) - West and Central Africa is the region with the highest number of child soldiers in the world, as well as the most underage victims of sexual violence, according to a new report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Since 2016, the region has been hit by growing conflict in which more than 21,000 children have been recruited by government forces and armed groups, the report said.

In addition, more than 2,200 children have been verified as victims of sexual violence during the past five years, it added. Meanwhile, some 3,500 children have been abducted, making it the region with the second-highest abductions in the world, while there have been at least 1,500 attacks on schools and hospitals.

Overall, the UN's children agency said more than 57 million children in the region are in need of humanitarian assistance, a number that has doubled since last year as a result of conflict



More than 2,200 children in West, Central Africa have been victims of sexual violence since 2016, the UNICEF report said.

and the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Whether children in West and Central Africa are the direct targets or collateral victims, they are caught up in conflict and face violence and insecurity," said Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF's regional director for West and Central Africa.

"The grave violations of their rights perpetrated by parties to the conflicts are unacceptable. They have an adverse impact on their capacity to learn, work, build meaningful relationships and contribute to the development of their communities and countries," Poirier added.

Poll: 77% of Americans Say Inflation Affecting Them, 57% Blame Biden



U.S. President Biden

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - More than three-quarters of Americans (77 percent) say inflation is affecting their lives as the holiday season begins, according to a new Yahoo News/YouGov poll — and a clear majority (57 percent) blame President Biden.

The survey of 1,696 U.S. adults, which was conducted from Nov. 17 to 19, also found that more of them selected inflation as the "most important issue facing America" (17 percent) than any other issue, including COVID-19 (15 percent), which continues to kill more than 1,100 Americans each day, on average.

And just 18 percent say Biden is doing enough to address it.

These results explain in part why the president's overall approval rating has steadily declined to 43 percent in recent months while his disapproval rating has risen to 52 percent — and why, on the economy, Biden's approval rating is even lower (40 percent).

Since last October, overall prices have soared 6.2 percent amid supply-chain bottlenecks and sky-high demand for goods — the fastest yearly pace in more than three decades.

In a speech Tuesday, the president announced he was releasing

50 million barrels of oil from the nation's strategic petroleum reserve to help lower gas prices.

"We've made historic progress over the last 10 months," Biden said, pointing to the 5.6 million jobs added to the economy since he took office in January. But "disruptions related to the pandemic have caused challenges in our supply chain, which have sparked concern about shortages and contributed to higher prices."

He also vowed to continue "taking action."

"The fact is, we always get through those spikes. We're going to get through this one, and hopefully faster," Biden said. "But it doesn't mean we should just stand by idly and wait for prices to drop on their own."

The president has his work cut out for him. Like COVID, and unlike more favorable economic indicators such as quarterly GDP growth and monthly improvements in the unemployment rate, inflation is the kind of day-to-day problem that every American experiences firsthand. So are rising gas prices and shortages of goods and services, which another 4 percent and 7 percent of Americans, respectively, named as the biggest problems facing the country right now.

Ethiopia Says PM Abiy 'at Battlefield' to Lead Army



Abiy Ahmed has issued a rallying cry to Ethiopians in the year-long battle with TPLF rebels.

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Ethiopia's Nobel Peace Prize-winning prime minister has gone to the battlefield, his government announced Wednesday, after the leader said martyrdom might be necessary in the yearlong war with rival fighters approaching the capital.

State media showed no images of Abiy Ahmed, a 45-year-old former soldier, and his spokeswoman Bilen Seyoum dismissed a request for details on his location as "incredible." He arrived at the front Tuesday, according to a government spokesman.

Tens of thousands of people have died in the war between Ethiopian federal and allied troops and fighters from the country's Tigray region. The prospect of the ancient nation breaking apart has alarmed both Ethiopians and observers who fear what would happen to the often turbulent Horn of Africa at large. Countries including France, Germany and Turkey have told

their citizens to leave immediately.

Abiy was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize just two years ago for sweeping political reforms and for making peace with neighboring Eritrea. His trajectory from winning the Nobel to now potentially heading into battle has shocked many.

But a move to the front would follow the tradition of Ethiopian leaders including Emperor Haile Selassie and Emperor Yohannes IV, who was killed in battle in 1889, said Christopher Clapham, a retired professor associated with the University of Cambridge.

The Tigray forces, who had long dominated the national government before Abiy came to power, appear to have the momentum. They've approached the capital of Addis Ababa in recent weeks with the aim of strengthening their negotiating position or simply forcing the prime minister to step down.

News in Brief

BERLIN (Reuters) - German Social Democrat Olaf Scholz said on Wednesday he had reached a deal with the Free Democrats and Greens to form a new coalition government that will bring the curtain down on the Angela Merkel era. According to 177-page agreement struck after two months of talks, the three parties want to accelerate public investment in green technology and digitalisation while returning to strict debt limits from 2023 onwards.

PARIS (Reuters) - France will try to cement deeper ties in the Indo-Pacific region when its foreign minister arrives in Indonesia as it counters the loss of a strategic defense deal with Australia in September. Paris accused its allies of stabbing it in the back when Australia opted for nuclear-powered submarines to be built with U.S. and British technology instead of a multi-billion dollar French submarine program. Canberra pressed ahead with a trilateral alliance (AUKUS) excluding France, which it said was crucial to tackle the perceived Chinese threat in the region.

MOSCOW/KYIV (Reuters) - Russia staged military drills in the Black Sea, south of Ukraine, on Wednesday and said it needed to sharpen the combat-readiness of its conventional and nuclear forces because of heightened NATO activity near its borders. Ukraine, which with its ally the United States has alleged Russia may be preparing an invasion, staged exercises of its own near the border with Belarus. The increase of military activity on both sides follows weeks of rising tension that have raised the risk of war between the two neighbors, even though Russia denies aggressive intent and Western intelligence sources have told Reuters they do not see any invasion as imminent.

NEW YORK (AFP) -The United Nations Libya mediator Jan Kubis is stepping down, a UN spokesman said, less than a year after he took up the role and a month before planned elections in the country. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres accepted Kubis's resignation "with regret," spokesman Stephane Dujarric said. When asked when Kubis would leave, Dujarric said: "Mr Kubis has made it clear that he's not slamming the door today." "He, more than anyone, does not want to have the mission destabilised in any way, shape or form," he said.

ROME (AP) — Twenty towns in northern Italy's autonomous South Tyrol province went into a partial lockdown Wednesday to try to contain rising coronavirus infections and save the key winter tourism season in one of the least-vaccinated parts of Italy. The restrictions in the towns north of Bolzano include the closure of bars and restaurants after 6 p.m., a nighttime curfew from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. and a requirement to wear an FFP2 face mask on public transportation, according to the ordinance.

BOGUTA (AFP) - United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres has said that he celebrates the advances made to implement Colombia's 2016 peace deal with the demobilized FARC rebels, but added efforts must be redoubled to sustain economic opportunities for ex-combatants.