

U.S. Expands Training Ukraine Forces in Germany



U.S. soldiers stand in front of a parked howitzer M109 Paladin during the 'Dynamic Front 22' annual artillery exercise in Europe, in Grafenwoehr, southern Germany, on July 20, 2022.

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) — The U.S. military's new, expanded combat training of Ukrainian forces began in Germany, with a goal of getting a battalion of about 500 troops back on the battlefield to fight the Russians in the next five to eight weeks, said Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Milley, who planned to visit the Grafenwoehr training area on Monday to get a first-hand look at the program, said the troops being trained left Ukraine a few days ago. In Germany is a full set of weapons and equipment for them to use.

Until now the Pentagon had declined to say exactly when the training would

start.

Milley said the complex training — combined with an array of new weapons, artillery, tanks and other vehicles heading to Ukraine — will be key to helping the country's forces take back territory that has been captured by Russia in the nearly 11-month-old war.

The new instruction comes as Ukrainian forces face fierce fighting in the eastern Donetsk province, where the Russian military has claimed it has control of the small salt-mining town of Soledar. Ukraine asserts that its troops are still fighting, but if Moscow's troops take control of Soledar it would allow them to inch closer to the bigger city of Bakhmut, where fighting

has raged for months.

Russia, Belarus Launch Air Drills

Belarus said Monday that joint air force drills with Russia began on its territory. The drills will last until February 1, the ministry said earlier.

All military airfields in Belarus will be involved in the drills, Minsk has said.

The ministry added that the exercises will involve training in aerial reconnaissance, joint patrolling of the state border, tactical air assault landing, the delivery of goods and evacuation of wounded.

Officials have described the drills as defensive.

Russia has produced the first nuclear warheads for the Poseidon super torpedoes to be deployed on the Belgorod nuclear submarine, TASS reported on Monday, citing an unidentified defense source.

"The first Poseidon ammunition loads have been manufactured, and the Belgorod submarine will receive them in the near future," TASS quoted the source as saying.

President Vladimir Putin first announced what would become known as Poseidon in 2018, saying it was a fundamentally new type of strategic nuclear weapon with its own nuclear power source.

In the 2018 speech, Putin said the range of the torpedo would be unlimited and that it could operate at extreme depths at a speed many times that of any submarine or other torpedoes.

Japan, India Begin First Joint Fighter Jet Drill



Japan Air Self-Defense Force Maj. Gen. Takahisa Ishimura (R) and Col. Rohit Kapil of the Indian Air Force shake hands at the ASDF's Hyakuri Air Base in Omitama, Ibaraki Prefecture, eastern Japan, on Jan. 10, 2023, ahead their first joint jet fighter air exercise.

TOKYO (Dispatches) — Japan and India began their first joint fighter jet exercise on Monday near Tokyo as the countries upgrade defense and security ties with an eye on China's growing military might.

The 11-day joint exercise will involve eight Japanese fighter jets, with India sending four fighters, two transport aircraft and an aerial refueling tanker, Japan's defense ministry said.

Around 150 Indian Air Force personnel are taking part in the exercise at the Hyakuri Air Base in Ibaraki prefecture, northeast of Tokyo.

The drill was agreed by the two countries during talks between Japanese and Indian defense and foreign ministers in 2019, but was delayed by the pandemic.

Japan and India — along with Australia and the United States — are part of the "Quad" alliance, a grouping of regional powers that seek to counter China's military and economic influence.

Tokyo has held a string of joint military exercises in recent months, as well as been overhauling its defense and security strategy and explicitly flexing its muscles against China.

In December, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's government committed to doubling defense spending to two percent of GDP by 2027, and dubbed China the "greatest strategic challenge ever" to Japan's security.

Last week, Japan inked a new defense deal with Britain and agreed to expand its

mutual defense treaty with Washington to attacks in space.

The Chinese embassy in India said the border situation with India was "overall stable" and both sides "have maintained smooth and constructive communications on boundary-related issues".

The statement came from a spokesperson for the embassy after the US State Department of Defense said China "continues to amass forces and build military infrastructure along the LAC (line of actual control)".

"The current China-India border situation is overall stable. The two sides have maintained smooth and constructive communication on boundary-related issues through diplomatic and military channels, and promoted the border situation to switch from the phase of emergency response to normalized management and control," the statement from envoy Wang Xiaojian said.

The Pentagon's allegations, against China in border issue were "without any factual basis", it said, calling the U.S. "a third country pointing fingers".

"The Chinese side is firmly opposed to such acts that a third country points fingers at the bilateral issue between the other two countries out of geopolitical consideration. The boundary question is a matter between China and India. The two sides have the will and capability of resolving the question through dialogue and consultation. We hope the U.S. could do more things that contribute to regional peace and stability," it said.

Nepal Scours River Gorge After Plane Crash



Rescue teams work to retrieve bodies at the crash site of an aircraft carrying 72 people in Pokhara in western Nepal, Jan. 15, 2023.

KATHMANDU (Reuters) — Searchers on Monday found both the cockpit voice recorder and flight data recorder from a passenger flight that crashed on Sunday, killing at least 68 people in Nepal's deadliest plane crash in 30 years, officials said.

The data on the recorders may help investigators determine what caused the ATR 72 aircraft, carrying 72 people, to crash in clear weather just before landing in the tourist city of Pokhara.

Both recorders were in good shape and would be sent for analysis based on the recommendation of the manufacturer, Teknath Si-

taula, an official at the Kathmandu airport, told Reuters on Monday.

Rescuers were battling cloudy weather and poor visibility as they scoured the river gorge for passengers who are unaccounted for, more than 24 hours after the crash. Sixty-eight bodies have been recovered.

Reuters footage from the crash site showed rescuers looking at the charred remains of the plane near a gorge in the mountains.

The plane, on a scheduled flight from Kathmandu to Pokhara, gateway to the scenic Annapurna mountain range, was carrying 57 Nepalis, five Indians, four Russians, two South Koreans, and one person

each from Argentina, Ireland, Australia and France.

Pokhara police official Ajay K.C. said the search-and-rescue operation, which stopped because of darkness on Sunday, had resumed.

"We will take out the five bodies from the gorge and search for the remaining four that are still missing," he told Reuters. "It is cloudy now... causing a problem in the search."

The other 63 bodies had been sent to a hospital, he said. A spokesperson for Pokhara airport also said that the weather was hampering rescue efforts, but that clouds were expected to clear later in the day.

Nearly 350 people have died since 2000 in plane or helicopter crashes in Nepal — home to eight of the world's 14 highest mountains, including Everest — where sudden weather changes can make for hazardous conditions.

Experts say air accidents are usually caused by a combination of factors, and investigations can take months or longer.

India's aviation regulator said it would take all measures to ensure safe aviation in the country's airspace.

Nepal declared a day of national mourning on Monday and set up a panel to investigate the disaster and suggest measures to avoid such incidents in future.

Covid-19 Spreading Across America Again



A billboard promotes Covid-19 vaccinations in Times Square in New York.

WASHINGTON (Guardian) — In the fourth year of the pandemic, Covid-19 is once again spreading across America and being driven by the recent holidays, fewer precautions and the continuing evolution of Omicron subvariants of the virus.

New sub-variants are causing concern for their increased transmissibility and ability to evade some antibodies, but the same tools continue to curtail the spread of Covid, especially bivalent boosters, masks, ventilation, antivirals and other precautions, experts said.

Yet booster uptake has been "pitiful", said Neil Sehgal, an assistant professor of health policy and management at the University of Maryland School of Public Health. Antiviral uptake has been low, and few mandates on masking, vaccination and testing have resumed in the face of the winter surge, which is once again putting pressure on health systems.

"Hospitals are at maximum capacity," said Brendan Williams, president and CEO of the New Hampshire Health Care Association, of his region's current rates. "I'm not sure what the trajectory of this thing's going to be, but I am worried."

In the past week, Covid deaths rose by 44%, from 2,705 in the week ending 4 January to 3,907 in the week ending January 11.

This is one of the greatest surges of Covid cases in the entire pandemic, according to wastewater analyses of the virus. It's much lower than the peak in January 2022, but similar to the summer 2022 surge, which was the second biggest.

And it's not done yet. "Certainly it does not appear that we are peaking yet," Sehgal said.

Despite the high rates of Covid spread, hospitalizations have not yet reached previous peaks seen earlier in the pandemic, probably due to immunity from vaccinations and prior cases, said Stuart Ray, a professor of medicine and infectious diseases at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

But that protection should not be taken for granted, he said, particularly because immunity wanes.

Even if the U.S. reaches the point where surges do not cause a corresponding increase in hospitalizations and death, they will still increase the number of people sickened and disabled by long Covid, experts said.

Peruvians Defy Emergency State to Mobilize for New Protests

LIMA (Dispatches) — Lima and other Peruvian regions were under a renewed state of emergency even as opponents of President Dina Boluarte began mobilizing toward the capital ahead of a major demonstration Monday, the latest in weeks of deadly unrest.

At least 42 people have died, according to Peru's human rights ombudsman, in five weeks of clashes at burning roadblocks and other flashpoints to demand fresh elections and Boluarte's resignation.

She took over on December 7 as the South American country's first woman president following the impeachment and arrest of leftist Pedro Castillo in what his supporter characterize as an orchestrated coup.

On Sunday some 3,000 protesters in Andahuaylas in southeastern Peru began boarding trucks and buses bound for the demonstration in Lima, RPP radio reported.

The government extended by 30 days a state of emergency from midnight Saturday for Lima, Cusco, Callao and Puno, authorizing the military to back up police actions.

The state of emergency also suspended constitutional rights such as freedom of movement and assembly, according to a decree published in the official gazette.

In protest epicenter Puno, the government declared a new night-time curfew for 10 days, from 8:00 pm to 4:00 am.

Dozens of demonstrators had arrived in Lima's Miraflores district late Saturday as part of a mobilization for what they

called a "takeover of the city."

Almost 100 stretches of road remained blockaded Sunday in 10 of Peru's 25 regions — a record, according to a senior land transport official.

The ouster of Castillo, a former rural school teacher and union leader, sparked immediate nationwide protests, mainly among the rural poor, that petered out over the holiday period but resumed on January 4.

In the run-up to Monday's demonstrations, attitudes among both protesters and government officials appeared to harden.

"We ask that Dina Boluarte resign as president and that Congress be shut down. We don't want any more deaths," Jasmin Reinoso, a 25-year-old nurse from Ayacucho, told AFP.

Earlier in the day, some 500 Peruvians, including several dozen police officers, attended a mass in Lima's central cathedral for fallen protesters, as well as for a policeman burnt alive in the southern city of Juliaca.

Many of the mourners wore white T-shirts to symbolize peace and bore photographs of the dead.

An Ipsos poll published Sunday said Boluarte had a 71 percent disapproval rating.

More than 100 Peruvian, Argentine and Chilean intellectuals, meanwhile, urged Boluarte in an open letter Saturday to "stop the massacre of citizens who exercise their legitimate right" to protest.

News in Brief

MOSCOW (Reuters) — Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said during a government meeting shown on state television on Monday that the country's budget revenues from oil and gas were up 28% or 2.5 trillion roubles (\$36.71 billion) in 2022. Novak also said that Gazprom had increased gas supplies to China via the Power of Siberia pipeline to 15.5 billion cubic meters in 2022, and that oil production was up 2% to 535 million tonnes, with oil exports up 7%. Meanwhile, Gazprom said it will ship 35.4 million cubic meters of gas to Europe via Ukraine on Monday, a volume in line with recent days.

LONDON (Reuters) — British police said on Monday a 22-year-old man had been arrested on suspicion of attempted murder after a seven-year-old girl was left with life-threatening injuries when she and five others were hurt in a drive-by shooting in London on Saturday. A 12-year-old girl was also among those injured and was taken to hospital with a minor leg injury but later discharged. Police said four women, aged 21, 48, 54 and 41, were also taken to hospital after the shooting, with the 48-year-old having suffered potentially life-changing injuries. The shooting took place near a church in north London, not far from Euston station, where a funeral was taking place.

WASHINGTON (AP) — Newly empowered House Republicans demanded the White House turn over all information related to its searches that have uncovered classified documents at President Joe Biden's home and former office in the wake of more records found at his Delaware residence. "We have a lot of questions," said Rep. James Comer, chairman of the House Oversight and Accountability Committee. Comer, R-Ky., said he wants to see all documents and communications related to the searches by the Biden team, as well as visitor logs of the president's home in Wilmington, Delaware, from Jan. 20, 2021, to present. He said the aim is to determine who might have had access to classified material and how the records got there. The White House on Saturday said it had discovered five additional pages of classified documents at Biden's home on Thursday, the same day a special counsel was appointed to review the matter. In a letter Sunday to White House chief of staff Ron Klain, Comer criticized the searches by Biden representatives when the Justice Department was beginning to investigate and said Biden's "mismanagement of classified materials raises the issue of whether he has jeopardized our national security." Comer demanded that the White House provide all relevant information including visitor logs by the end of the month. Appearing on CNN's "State of the Union," Comer referred to Biden's home as a "crime scene" though he acknowledged that it was not clear whether laws were broken.

SURABAYA, Indonesia (AP) — An Indonesian court began trial Monday against five men on charges of negligence leading to the deaths of 135 people after police fired tear gas inside a soccer stadium, setting off a panicked run for the exits in which many were crushed. The deadly crowd surge Oct. 1 in East Java's Malang city was among the world's worst sporting disasters. Police officers fired tear gas when fans flooded the pitch after Arema FC was defeated in a home match for the first time in 23 years by rival Persebaya Surabaya. The match at Kanjuruhan stadium was attended only by Arema fans, as organizers had banned Persebaya supporters because of Indonesia's history of violent soccer rivalries. It was among the deadliest soccer-related tragedies since a 1964 crush in Peru killed over 300 people.

JAKARTA (Reuters) — Two people were killed when workers clashed at a nickel smelting facility operated by a unit of China's Jiangsu Delong Nickel Industry in Indonesia's Sulawesi island at the weekend, police said on Monday. An Indonesian and a Chinese worker died after a clash broke out following a protest staged by a labor group at PT Gunbuster Nickel Industry (GNI) smelter, according to the Central Sulawesi police spokesperson Didik Supranoto. Local media reported the protesters had demanded better safety conditions and pay. Several company vehicles were torched and about 100 rooms at workers' dormitories were damaged, Didik said, adding that 71 people had been detained. Violent protests have broken out sporadically in the mineral-rich region of Sulawesi, which has seen a recent investment boom in nickel that is used in electric vehicle batteries.

BLOOMINGTON, Indiana (AP) — A 56-year-old woman has been charged after an 18-year-old Indiana University student repeatedly was stabbed in the head on a public bus in an attack the school says was because the victim is Asian. The victim told investigators she was standing and waiting for the exit doors to open on a Bloomington Transit bus Wednesday afternoon when another passenger began striking her in the head, Bloomington police said in a release. Bus surveillance footage showed no interaction between the two women prior to the attack. A witness who also was riding the bus followed the woman's attacker and contacted police, who later arrested Billie R. Davis of Bloomington. Citing court records, WRTV-TV reports that Davis told police she stabbed the woman multiple times in the head with a folding knife, because it "would be one less person to blow up our country."