

China Says U.S. Flying Balloons Over Its Territory



A U.S. Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft takes off for a nighttime mission at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, August 22, 2017.

BEIJING (AFP) -- China accused the United States on Monday of flying balloons over its territory, hitting back against Washington's claims that Beijing has been sending alleged surveillance aircraft.

Relations between the United States and China have further soured after Washington shot down an alleged Chinese espionage device in early February, which Beijing has insisted was for civilian purposes.

A number of other such devices have since been shot down over the U.S. and Canada, though Beijing has only admitted that the first was one of its own.

Over the weekend, Chinese state-affiliated media reported that an uniden-

tified flying object had been spotted off the country's east coast -- and that the military was preparing to shoot it down.

Beijing on Monday declined to comment on that report, only referring journalists to the defense ministry, which did not respond to requests for comment from AFP.

But it did accuse the United States of sending more than 10 balloons into its airspace since January 2022.

"It's not uncommon as well for the U.S. to illegally enter the airspace of other countries," foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said during a briefing.

"Since last year alone, U.S. balloons

have illegally flown above China more than 10 times without any approval from Chinese authorities."

Asked how China responded to those alleged incursions, Wang said Beijing's "handling (of these incidents) was responsible and professional".

"If you want to know more about U.S. high-altitude balloons illegally entering China's airspace, I suggest you refer to the U.S. side," he added.

Americans have been watching the skies as a growing number of aerial incursions are reported -- of which Beijing on Monday denied knowledge.

On Sunday the Pentagon said that it does not yet know what the other three objects -- one shot down Friday over Alaska, one Saturday over Canada's Yukon territory, and the most recent one Sunday over Lake Huron -- are.

But it said the object downed Sunday had been tracked for nearly a day and did not resemble the alleged Chinese surveillance balloon that was destroyed off the Atlantic coast on February 4 after traversing the country.

President Joe Biden ordered an F-16 fighter to shoot down the latest object "out of abundance of caution", a senior administration official said.

The object was described by the official as an octagonal structure with strings hanging off it.

Drifting at about 20,000 feet (6,000 meters) over Michigan, it could have posed a hazard to civil aviation, the official said.

NATO to Ask Members to Ramp Up Ammunition Stockpiles



Ammunition for a howitzer is seen during training at a German army base on a NATO media day, in which up to 7,500 soldiers from 9 nations take part, in Munster, Germany, May 10, 2022.

BRUSSELS/PARIS (Reuters) -- NATO is expected to ask its members to raise its ammunition stockpiles which have been badly depleted by the war in Ukraine, as allies try to put arms supplies to Kyiv and their own militaries on a sustainable footing after a year in crisis mode.

Even before the Ukraine war began on Feb. 24 last year, many NATO countries fell short of meeting the alliance's stockpiling targets, as officials considered wars of attrition with large-scale artillery battles a thing of the past.

But the pace of deliveries to Ukraine, where Kyiv's troops are firing up to 10,000 artillery shells daily, has drained Western inventories and exposed

holes in the efficiency, speed and manpower of supply chains.

"If Europe were to fight Russia, some countries would run out of ammunition in days," a European diplomat told Reuters.

NATO has just completed an extraordinary survey of the remaining munitions stocks, a NATO official told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

"Those NATO (munitions targets) that we set, and each ally has a specific target, those were not being met for the most part (before the Ukraine war)," the official said.

Now the stockpiles are running even lower due to the conflict in Ukraine, making it likely that NATO will raise

the target levels for their members' ammunition reserves, the source said.

"I would be absolutely gobsmacked if the targets...were not increased," said the NATO official.

Just how many rounds are left in Western military inventories is highly classified. The same goes for the NATO stockpiling targets, which are specific to each member state and one of the alliance's best kept secrets.

Generally speaking, NATO tasks each ally with providing certain capabilities that the alliance can draw upon in case of a conflict.

This could, for example, mean a certain ally may have to have one armored division - some 10,000 to 30,000 troops - fully equipped and ready with ammunition, capable of fighting at a certain level of intensity for a certain amount of time.

Factoring all these conditions in, the country will have to provide a certain amount of ammunition, tanks, howitzers and what else may be needed to fulfill NATO's requirements.

Germany alone was 20 billion euros (\$21 billion) short of reaching the NATO target before the invasion, according to a defense source.

The NATO official said the biggest shortfall are battle-decisive munitions ranging from 155 mm shells used in howitzers, to HIMARS missiles, and ammunition for air defense systems like IRIS-T, Patriot and Gepard, all in heavy use by Ukrainian troops.

Russia Claims Gains in Eastern Ukraine

KYIV (Reuters) -- Russia said on Monday its troops had pushed forward a few kilometers along the frontlines in Ukraine, while Kyiv said its forces had repelled Russian attacks in several areas.

As the first anniversary of the war neared, much of the fighting was taking place around the eastern city of Bakhmut, still in Ukrainian hands amid a months-long battle.

The Ukrainian military on Monday reported heavy Russian shelling all along the frontline and said 16 settlements had been bombarded near Bakhmut.

Russia's Defense Ministry said Russian troops had managed to advance 2 km (1.2 miles) to the west in four days. However, it did not say which part of the long frontline, encompassing several Ukrainian regions in the south and east, had moved.

"The Russian servicemen broke the enemy's resistance and advanced several kilometers deeper into its echeloned defense," it said.

Ukraine's military said that over the past day, its forces had repelled a number of attacks near Bakhmut, which sits in the Donetsk region, as well as assaults in the Kharkiv, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia regions.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, founder of Russia's Wagner Group, said on Sunday the mercenary force had taken the village of Krasna Hora, on the northern edge of Bakhmut. Wagner has for months spearheaded the assault on Bakhmut, making small but steady gains.

Bakhmut is a major objective for Russian President Vladimir

Putin and months of Russian shelling have left much of it in ruins.

The Donetsk region is partially occupied by Russia and Moscow wants to occupy it fully. However, neither side has made a decisive gain for weeks.

The commander-in-chief of Ukraine's Armed Forces, General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi, said on Saturday Ukrainian troops held their defense along the frontline in Donetsk and in some areas have managed to regain previously lost positions.

With Ukraine desperate for more weapons and munitions to turn the tide of the war, defense ministers from several NATO countries allied to Kyiv were due to meet in Brussels on Tuesday to discuss possible further military aid.

Russia is widely thought to be planning a major new offensive and Ukraine says it needs fighter jets and long-range missiles to counter this and to recapture lost territory.

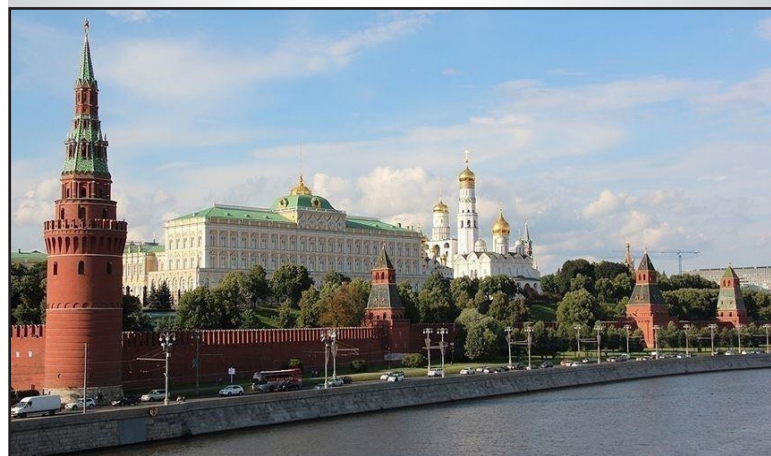
Russia invaded last Feb. 24 saying its neighbor posed a security threat. Kyiv and the West say the action was nothing more than a land grab.

Putin's forces failed in an early bid to capture the capital and the capital has since become a grinding war of attrition that has killed thousands of soldiers and civilians and left whole cities in ruins.

On Sunday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said power workers had repaired much of the damage to the energy grid caused by Russian missile and drone strikes on Friday.

But he warned the population it was too early to declare victory on the energy front.

Moscow: U.S. Grooming Takfiris for Attacks in Russia



Russia says the U.S. is recruiting militants from takfiri groups to "carry out terrorist attacks in Russia and the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries."

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia's foreign spy service said on Monday that it had received intelligence that the U.S. military was grooming takfiri militants to attack targets in Russia and the former Soviet Union.

Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, headed by an ally of President Vladimir Putin, said it had intelligence that 60 such militants from groups affiliated with Daesh and Al-Qaeda had been recruited and were undergoing training at an American base in Syria.

"They will be tasked with preparing and carrying out terrorist attacks against diplomats, civil servants, law enforcement officers and personnel of the armed forces," said the Foreign Intelligence Service,

known by the initials SVR.

"Special attention is paid to attracting immigrants from the Russian North Caucasus and Central Asia," the SVR said in a statement.

The SVR, once part of the mighty Soviet-era KGB, is headed by Sergei Naryshkin who met CIA Director William Burns last year in Ankara.

Russia's war with Ukraine pushed relations with the United States to the lowest level since the crises of the Cold War.

Putin casts the United States as an empire that has repeatedly refused to take into account Russian interests since the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union. President Joe Biden casts Putin as an autocrat who is a major threat to the United States.

New Zealand Declares State of Emergency Amid Storms



People fill up sandbags at a public collection point in preparation for the arrival of Cyclone Gabrielle in Auckland, New Zealand, Feb. 12, 2023.

WELLINGTON (AFP) -- Tens of thousands of homes in New Zealand were without power and hundreds of a tropical storm lashed the north of the country.

A state of emergency was declared in five regions on the North Island, covering almost one-third of New Zealand's entire population of 5.1 million.

Although the storm was downgraded from a cyclone before it made landfall, high winds and torrential rains have already toppled trees, damaged roads and downed power lines.

Wellington-based Prime Minister Chris Hipkins was among thousands stuck in the northern city of Auckland after the wild weather grounded flights.

"Things will get worse before they get better," Hipkins told New Zealanders in a press conference Monday, calling for them to "be prepared, stay inside if you can".

He said the government had considered declaring a national state of emergency for only the third time in the country's history -- but it was not yet necessary.

The government announced an aid package of 11.5 million New Zealand dollars (\$7.25 million) to help recovery efforts.

Police said one person was missing aboard a boat, which issued a distress call early Monday near Great Barrier Island, north of Auckland.

Winds of up to 140 kilometers (87

miles) per hour battered the Northland region, while Auckland's harbor bridge was rocked by gusts of 110 kph.

About 58,000 people were without power on Monday afternoon, according to Roger Ball, head of the national emergency management agency.

Emergency management minister Kieran McNulty said Monday would be a difficult day due to the "highly dangerous" combination of high winds and heavy rain.

McNulty added that it was "unsafe" to try and repair the network while the dangerous weather continued.

Auckland, New Zealand's largest city and home to 1.6 million people, is still recovering after flash floods in late January forced thousands from their homes and resulted in four deaths.

"Many people haven't been able to catch a break," Hipkins said.

"The need in the community is significant. The effects of the weather events have compounded that."

Auckland mayor Wayne Brown said the next 24 hours would be "challenging".

The weather has created chaos on New Zealand's travel network with scheduled flights, trains and buses grinding to a halt.

National carrier Air New Zealand said it had so far cancelled 509 flights, but normal services were expected to resume Tuesday.

The airline said the travel plans of some 10,000 international customers had been disrupted.



ALMATY, Kazakhstan (AFP) -- A student wielding an axe and a knife on Monday wounded three students at a middle school in the Central Asian country of Kazakhstan, authorities said. The alleged attacker, who was later detained, "came out of the toilet with a knife and an axe," said an official in Petropavlovsk, a city with a population of some 200,000 near the Russian border, according to the official news agency Kazinform. Kazinform said two of the injured students were hospitalized and the other was treated on the scene. The two boys and one girl were all conscious, it added. The regional prosecutor's office said proceedings had been opened into attempted murder and that the suspect had been undergoing psychiatric monitoring prior to the attack.

MANILA (AFP) -- A Chinese security vessel shone a "military-grade laser light" at a Philippine patrol boat in the disputed South China Sea, temporarily blinding crew members, the Philippine coastguard said Monday. The incident happened on February 6 nearly 20 kilometers (12 miles) from Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratly Islands, where Philippine marines are stationed, the Philippine Coast Guard said in a statement. China's foreign ministry said the coast guard conducted actions according to law. The incident occurred days after the United States and the Philippines agreed to resume joint patrols in the sea and struck a deal to give U.S. troops access to another four military bases in the Southeast Asian country. The deal earlier this month brings to nine the total number of Philippine bases accessible to U.S. forces.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia supplied India with around \$13 billion of arms during the past five years, and New Delhi has orders placed with Moscow for weapons and military equipment exceeding \$10 billion, Russian state news agencies reported late on Sunday. India is the world's biggest buyer of Russian arms, accounting for around 20% of Moscow's current order book, and New Delhi has not explicitly condemned Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has called for dialogue and diplomacy to solve the conflict, now in its 12th month. Scores of Western countries imposed sanctions on Russia, including on arms, in response to the offensive. India, China and some Southeast Asian countries have maintained their interest in buying Russian arms, according to Dmitry Shugayev, the head of Russia's Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, the agencies reported. Annual arms exports were about \$14-15 billion, and the order book has remained steady at around \$50 billion, Interfax reported.

BEIJING (Dispatches) -- China's top diplomat Wang Yi will visit France, Italy and Hungary this month, the Chinese foreign ministry said on Monday at a regular press briefing. Wang will also attend the 59th Munich Security Conference and deliver a speech at China session to communicate the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security advocated by President Xi Jinping and share China's stance on major global issues.

LISBON (Reuters) -- At least 4,815 children were sexually abused by members of the Portuguese Catholic Church - mostly priests - over the past 70 years, a commission investigating the issue said in its final report on Monday. Most of the perpetrators - 77% - were priests and most of the victims were men, the head of the commission, child psychiatrist Pedro Strecht said, adding that they were abused in Catholic schools, priests' homes, confessionals, among other locations. The Portuguese commission started its work in January last year after a report in France revealed around 3,000 priests and religious officials sexually abused over 200,000 children. The abuse allegations have come from people from various backgrounds, from every region of the country and also from Portuguese nationals living in other countries in Europe, Africa and the Americas. The commission, which says it is independent, was financed by the Catholic Church. Asked by Reuters in December 2021 if that could be a threat to the commission's independence, Strecht said he would be the first to walk out and denounce if the church intervened in the process.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Ramzan Kadyrov, leader of the Russian region of Chechnya, said in an interview aired on Monday that Russia would achieve its goals in Ukraine by the end of the year and it would be wrong to negotiate with President Volodymyr Zelensky. Kadyrov's forces have played a prominent role in the war in Ukraine since Russia invaded almost a year ago, and he has forged an informal alliance with the increasingly prominent Wagner militia chief Yevgeny Prigozhin and other nationalist hardliners who back the war. In an interview broadcast on state television's flagship Rossiya-1 channel, he said Russia had the forces to take the capital Kyiv - from which it was driven back in the early weeks of the war - and that it needed to capture Ukraine's second city Kharkiv and its main port, Odesa. "I believe that, by the end of the year, we will 100% complete the task set for us today," Kadyrov said. With neither side prepared for concessions, there has appeared to be little prospect of peace talks since the early months of the war.