

U.S. Still in Dark Over Mystery Flying Objects



A U.S. Navy sailor conducts a search during recovery efforts of a high-altitude Chinese balloon shot down off the coast of South Carolina.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- The White House responded to growing and at times fevered speculation over the shooting down of unidentified aerial objects by saying the targets could be anything from commercial craft to espionage devices.

After mounting pressure on President Joe Biden's administration to explain the unprecedented situation that has seen an alleged Chinese spy balloon and three mystery objects shot down in North America in just over a week, officials appeared sure of only one thing: It's not aliens.

"I just wanted to make sure we address this from the White House," Biden's press secretary, Karine Jean-

Pierre said at the top of the first full-blown briefing since the latest shoot-down of an unidentified object Sunday. "There have been questions and concerns about this but there is no -- again, no -- indication of aliens or extraterrestrial activity."

What actually is going on, however, remains unclear.

According to the U.S. government, the first of the four objects -- a sophisticated, high-altitude balloon shot down on February 4 off the coast of South Carolina -- was part of an ongoing, global "fleet" of Chinese espionage balloons.

China denied this, calling the huge balloon an errant weather research

craft, and lashed out at Washington on Monday. Beijing said more than 10 U.S. balloons entered Chinese airspace "without any approval" over the last year.

As for another high-altitude balloon spotted in Latin America, China says that was a civilian flight test device.

The United States says the large Chinese balloon down on February 4 was obviously a spy craft and that the debris is currently being plucked from the Atlantic Ocean for analysis.

Crews have recovered important sensor and electronics parts from the balloon, as well as large parts of the structure, the U.S. military said Monday.

The other three unidentified objects -- shot down Friday over Alaska, Saturday over the Yukon in Canada, and Sunday over Lake Huron on the U.S.-Canadian border -- were much smaller, less sophisticated, and were flying lower than the Chinese balloon from earlier this month.

U.S. officials know little about them -- not even to whom they belonged.

"Countries, companies, research and academic organizations operate objects at these altitudes for purposes that are not nefarious at all, including scientific research," Kirby said.

Whether they were spying also remains unknown.

"Even if we have no indications that any of these three objects were surveilling, we couldn't rule that out," he said.

Shooting at Michigan University Campus Leaves Deaths, Injuries



A stretcher is unloaded from an ambulance outside the Michigan State University Union following shootings on campus, Feb. 13, 2023, in East Lansing, Mich.

EAST LANSING, Mich. (Reuters) -- A gunman opened fire on Monday night on the main campus of Michigan State University, killing three people and injuring five, before an hours-long manhunt for the suspect ended with his death, apparently from a self-inflicted gunshot, police said.

The 43-year-old gunman had no known affiliation to the university, and his motive remained a mystery, police said at an early morning news briefing more than five hours after the violence began on the sprawling East Lansing campus, about 90 miles northwest of Detroit.

Details about the sequence events remained sketchy, but Chris Rozman, interim deputy chief of the

university police, said shots were fired in two locations - an academic building called Berkey Hall and the Michigan State University (MSU) Union building.

Rozman said investigators had no information about the motive, adding that the university was not aware of any threats made to the campus before Monday's bloodshed.

Rozman said three victims were killed and five were taken to a hospital in the nearby city of Lansing, the state capital, all of them listed in critical condition. Two of the dead were at Berkey Hall and the other at the MSU Union.

Officials declined to provide any details about the victims, some of whose identities and relationship to

the university were still being determined, Rozman said.

The name and other information about the suspect were not immediately released, and police said they remained baffled by what precipitated the shooting.

"We have no idea why he came to campus to do this tonight," Rozman told reporters.

The gunman was confirmed dead, from an apparently self-inflicted gunshot roughly four hours after the bloodshed had started, Rozman said.

MSU officials said Monday night that all classes and school activities would be canceled for 48 hours at the university's flagship East Lansing campus, a public academic center with some 50,000 students, mostly undergraduates.

The violence came roughly 14 months after a deadly mass shooting on Nov. 30, 2021, at Oxford High School in Oakland County, Michigan, about 80 miles east of East Lansing, in which a 15-year-old student opened fire with a semi-automatic pistol.

Four classmates were killed and six students and a teacher were wounded in that attack, the deadliest U.S. school shooting that year.

Authorities said the teenage suspect in the 2021 shooting, who has pleaded not guilty to murder charges, used a gun his parents bought him as a Christmas present despite signs that he was emotionally disturbed. Both parents were charged with involuntary manslaughter in the case.

Indian Officers Raid BBC Offices for 'Spewing Venom'



Police officers stand outside a building having BBC offices, where income tax officials are conducting a search, in New Delhi, India, Feb. 14, 2023.

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) -- Indian tax officers searched the BBC's bureaus in New Delhi and Mumbai on Tuesday, the British broadcaster said, weeks after the government came down hard against a BBC documentary critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's role in the 2002 Gujarat riots.

The documentary had focused on the Hindu nationalist politician's leadership as chief minister of the western state during the deadly communal riots, in which at least 1,000 people were killed, most of them Muslims, though activists put the toll at over twice that number.

One of two sources in the BBC's New Delhi office told Reuters that tax officials were speaking with the accounts officer and no one was allowed to leave.

While the search was underway, television news crews set up outside the office near Connaught Place, in central Delhi, to report developments.

The main opposition Congress party condemned the tax department's actions. "The IT raid at BBC's offices reflects desperation and shows that the Modi government is scared of criticism," lawmaker and Congress General Secretary K.C. Venugopal wrote on Twitter.

"We condemn these intimidation tactics in the harshest terms. This undemocratic and dictatorial attitude cannot go on any longer."

The BBC should not "spew venom" while operating in India, a ruling-party

spokesman said. "The BBC indulges in anti-India propaganda," Gaurav Bhatia told reporters. "India is a country which gives an opportunity to every organization... as long as you don't spew venom."

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) said Indian institutions work independently and the tax department was "within law in looking into tax compliance."

"India is a vibrant democracy where no one is above the law," Gopal Krishna Agarwal, a BJP spokesman, said.

Last month, police in Delhi detained students as they gathered to watch the documentary that the government has dismissed as propaganda. India's foreign ministry in January said the documentary was meant to push a "discredited narrative", was biased, lacked objectivity and showed a "continuing colonial mindset". The BBC has stood by its reporting for the documentary.

Modi ruled Gujarat for more than a decade before becoming prime minister in 2014. Accusations he did not do enough to stop the rioting have dogged his career. Modi has always denied any wrongdoing. In 2013, a panel appointed by the Supreme Court said there was insufficient evidence to prosecute him.

A fire at a train carrying Hindu pilgrims in Gujarat in February 2002 set off one of independent India's worst outbreaks of communal violence.

Russia Bombs Ukrainian Positions as NATO Sends More Arms



Black smoke rises over the ruins of Bakhmut.

KYIV (Reuters) -- Russian forces bombarded Ukrainian positions along the frontlines in eastern Donetsk region on Tuesday in what appeared to be early salvos of a new offensive as NATO allies met in Brussels to plan stepped-up supplies to the Kyiv government.

The Donetsk region city of Bakhmut, a major target for Russian President Vladimir Putin's troops, was in a precarious position.

Regional governor Pavlo Kyrylenko told Ukraine's national broadcaster that Russian artillery was hitting targets all along the frontlines in Donetsk, which along with Luhansk region makes up the Donbas, Ukraine's industrial heartland and a main objective for the Russians.

With the first anniversary of the war approaching, the Kremlin has intensified operations across a broad area of southern and eastern Ukraine and a major new offensive has been widely anticipated.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on Monday that the bombardments and ground attacks indicated the offensive was already underway.

Ukraine's military said on Tuesday its forces had repelled attacks in five settlements in Luhansk and six in Donetsk, including in Bakhmut, over the past 24 hours.

They had also beaten back an attack

on a town in Kharkiv region, which borders Russia in northeast Ukraine.

The capture of Bakhmut would give Russia a new foothold in Donetsk and a rare victory after months of setbacks.

Ukrainian officials said the Russians had suffered big losses around Vuhledar, a town about 150 km southwest of Bakhmut, including tanks and armored vehicles as well as personnel.

With Ukraine desperate for more weapons, defense ministers from several NATO allies will meet at the organization's headquarters in Brussels on Tuesday to discuss more military aid.

On the eve of the meeting, Ukraine's top general and the most senior U.S. Army commander in Europe discussed military aid and training in a telephone conversation. Ukraine says it needs fighter jets and long-range missiles.

Stoltenberg said he expected the issue of aircraft to be discussed but that Ukraine needed support on the ground now.

A NATO source said it would increase the stockpiling of ammunition as Ukraine was burning through shells much faster than Western countries could produce.

Training of Ukrainian forces on the Leopard 2 and other modern battle tanks that are to boost their defenses is underway in several European countries, including Poland, Britain and Germany.



LONDON (Reuters) -- The United Kingdom recorded the highest number of working days lost to labor disputes in 2022 for more than 30 years, official data showed on Tuesday, as a cost-of-living crisis led employees to walk out in demand of higher pay. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) said nearly 2.5 million working days were lost to industrial action last year, the highest since 1989 when 4.1 million days were lost. With inflation at its highest in four decades, workers across a range of sectors from train drivers to teachers and healthcare workers have held strikes over the last few months. The ONS data showed 843,000 days were lost to strike action in December alone, with border force staff, around 100,000 nurses and thousands of ambulance workers among those who staged walkouts either in the run up to or during the Christmas period. While some smaller disputes have been resolved, the most high-profile show little sign of abating. Up to half a million teachers, civil servants, and train drivers walked out earlier this month in the largest coordinated strike action for a decade and many trade unions have further days of strike action scheduled.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia rejected on Tuesday an accusation by Moldova's president that Moscow is plotting to destabilize the former Soviet republic. Moldova's president, Maia Sandu, complained on Monday that Russia was planning to use foreign saboteurs to bring down her tiny country's leadership, stop it joining the European Union and use it in the war against Ukraine. "Such claims are completely unfounded and unsubstantiated," Russia's foreign ministry said in a statement. Russia blamed Ukraine for stirring tension between Russia and Moldova, saying Kyiv was trying to draw Moldova "into a tough confrontation with Russia". Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said last week his country had uncovered a Russian intelligence plan "for the destruction of Moldova". Days later, Moldova's government resigned.

SYDNEY (AFP) -- Australian officials said Tuesday dozens of Chinese-made security cameras would be ripped out of politicians' offices, days after the country's defense minister announced his department would remove the devices from its buildings due to security concerns. At least 913 Chinese-made security cameras have been installed across more than 250 Australian government buildings, including the Department of Defense's facilities, according to figures released last week. Australian Defense Minister Richard Marles told national broadcaster ABC last week that all these cameras within his department's buildings would be removed, saying it was to "make sure that our facilities are completely secure". After Marles' statements last week about removing Chinese-made cameras, Beijing accused Australia of "misusing national might to discriminate against and suppress Chinese enterprises". Similar moves have been made in the United States and Britain, which have taken measures to stop government departments installing Chinese-made cameras at sensitive sites.

NAIROBI (AFP) -- Kenya will deploy troops in the country's drought-stricken north on Wednesday, the government announced, accusing bandits and cattle rustlers of killing scores of people. More than 100 civilians and 16 police officers have lost their lives at the hands of "marauding bandits and livestock rustling terrorists" in the Northern Rift Valley region over the past six months, the interior ministry said in a statement late Monday. The theft of livestock or quarrels over grazing and water sources are common between cattle herding communities in northern Kenya. Hundreds of people have been forced to flee their homes, the ministry said, declaring a national emergency and ordering citizens to surrender any illegal firearms within the next three days. Kenya, the most dynamic economy in East Africa, is in the grip of the worst drought in four decades after five failed rainy seasons wiped out livestock and crops.

COLOMBO (AFP) -- Sri Lanka will ban single-use plastics, the government said Tuesday, in a move that follows a series of wild elephant and deer deaths from plastic poisoning. Cabinet spokesman and media minister Bandula Gunawardana said the manufacture or sale of plastic cutlery, cocktail shakers and artificial flowers will be prohibited from June. The move was recommended by a panel appointed 18 months ago to study the impact of plastic waste on the environment and wildlife. Non-biodegradable plastic bags were banned in 2017 due to concerns over flash floods.

LIMA (AFP) -- Peruvian prosecutors said they are investigating whether security forces were to blame for the deaths of several protesters during anti-government demonstrations in December. Peru has been engulfed in the remotest, sometimes violent protests following the removal from office of leftist President Pedro Castillo on December 7. According to the country's ombudsman, at least eight people, including a minor, died in the city of Ayacucho, some 360 kilometers (350 miles) southeast of Lima, in clashes with security forces on December 15. The prosecutor's office said Monday the investigation, led by a special human rights unit in Ayacucho, is targeting police personnel, the army and those "responsible for allegedly committing the crimes of manslaughter and injuries," according to a statement. Protesters in Peru, which erupted a day after the president took office on December 7, have left 48 civilians and a police officer dead.

Cyclone Gabrielle Wreaks Havoc in New Zealand

WELLINGTON (Reuters) -- New Zealand declared a national state of emergency for only the third time in its history on Tuesday as Cyclone Gabrielle caused widespread flooding, landslides and huge ocean swells, forcing evacuations and stranding people on roof tops.

Cancelled flights stranded thousands of people, while hundreds of thousands remained without power.

"The severity and the breadth of the damage that we are seeing has not been experienced in a generation," Prime Minister Chris Hipkins told a news conference on Tuesday. Australia and Britain had pledged support, he added.

At 6 p.m. (0500 GMT) Gabrielle had moved southeast of Auckland, near the east coast of the country's North Island, and was expected to continue moving southeast, roughly parallel to the coast. Weather warnings remained in place for much of the east coast of the North Island and upper South Island.

Dozens of 225,000 people were left without electricity, while dozens of supermarkets closed, with Hipkins urging New Zealanders not to panic-buy supplies.

Architect Lars von Minder, 50, lives in Muriwai, a beach

town on the coast west of Auckland.

"I've seldom seen anything like it," he told Reuters by phone. "There are three or four areas where there are just these massive slips, some of them 300 meters (1,000 feet) across, that have come down, taking out houses and roads and everything."

Kieran McNulty, minister of emergency management, said that while New Zealand was now through the worst of the storm, more rain and high winds were expected.

The country was suffering from extensive flooding, landslides and damage to roads and infrastructure, he added.

Transmission companies around the country reported damage to substations and power networks.

Authorities have evacuated beach settlements and are urging still more people to leave homes as rivers continue to swell and huge surf inundates beachfront properties.

Roads are closed, mobile phone services down and some towns cut off. Residents in hard-hit areas are being asked to conserve water and food because of fears of shortages. Air New Zealand restarted some flights in and out of Auckland, though many routes remained disrupted.