

# Russia Declares Battlefield Gains as Ukraine Urges Faster Military Aid



**Bohdan, "Fritz", the deputy of commander of the unit in 79th Air Assault Brigade, fires a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) towards Russian positions on a frontline near the town of Marinka, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, Donetsk region, Ukraine, February 14, 2023.**

KYIV (Dispatches) - Russia said on Wednesday it had broken through two fortified Ukrainian defense lines on the eastern front, as Kyiv described conditions there as difficult and Western allies announced more military aid, including increased supplies of artillery rounds.

The ministry did not specify in which part of the Luhansk region the offensive took place.

The ministry added that its "Southern group", backed by artillery, was waging an offensive in the direction of Donetsk.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office said Ukrainian forces had repelled some Russian attacks in Luhansk but added: "The situation in the region remains difficult."

Luhansk regional governor Serhiy Haidai said Russia was pouring heavy equipment and mobilized troops into Luhansk.

"The attacks are coming from different directions in waves," Haidai said.

But he added: "Those who spread the information that allegedly our defense forces have pulled back beyond the line of the administrative border (of Luhansk) - this does not correspond to reality."

Russia has intensified attacks across a swathe of southern and eastern Ukraine in recent weeks, and a major new offensive has been widely anticipated.

Moscow's main effort has been focused on the town of Bakhmut in Donetsk province adjacent to Luhansk.

## U.S. Military Support for Ukraine Fanning Flames of Conflict

The Russia Ukraine war is approaching its first anniversary, a war in which thousands of people have been killed and many more displaced. Now after nearly one year the war has turned into a bigger conflict, an encounter between the West and Russia.

Many countries, including the U.S.,

Germany, France, and the UK, have been fanning the flames of the conflict by sending military aid worth billions of dollars to Ukraine.

In the U.S. there has been much debate among politicians on whether to support Kyiv in the war with Russia. Most American politicians and lawmakers are in favor of U.S. support for Ukraine while others, such as Republican Congressman Matt Gaetz, have taken a different stance.

Congressman Gaetz has introduced a bill which calls for an immediate end to U.S. military and financial support for Ukraine. The resolution also urges the warring sides to negotiate a ceasefire.

Gaetz has also taken a jab at President Joe Biden. In a statement on his resolution Gaetz said President Joe Biden must have forgotten his prediction for March 2022, suggesting that arming Ukraine with military equipment would escalate the conflict to world war three.

He added: "America is in a state of managed decline, and it will exacerbate if we continue to hemorrhage, taxpayer dollars toward a foreign war. We must suspend all foreign aid for the war in Ukraine and demand that all combatants in this conflict reach a peace agreement immediately".

This resolution has so far received ten co sponsors including representatives from Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky and Illinois.

The bill introduced by Gaetz shows that the U.S. has already authorized over \$110 billion to spend on the war in less than a year.

The resolution comes after a series of escalations of US military aid, including M1 Abrams tanks, at a time when Ukraine is seeking fighter jets from the U.S. and its allies.

# NATO Chief Eyes Bigger Defense Budgets, Hard Spending Target



**NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg speaks during a news conference following the Meeting of defense ministers at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Wednesday, Feb. 15, 2023.**

BRUSSELS (AP) — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on Wednesday urged the 30 member countries to commit to spending at least 2% of their gross domestic product on defense by a set date.

NATO allies agreed in 2014, to halt the spending cuts they had made after the Cold War and move toward spending 2% of GDP on their defense budgets by 2024. That pledge expires next year, and NATO is

working on a new target.

NATO allies in Europe and Canada increased defense spending for the eighth consecutive year in 2022, adding around \$350 billion to their budgets. According to NATO's most recent estimates, 10 countries are close to or above the 2% guideline. Thirteen spend around 1.5% or less.

Several member countries insist that the figure was only ever a guideline, and not a hard target.

The United States spends more on

its defense budget than all the other allies combined, putting 3.47% of GDP into its military coffers, according to NATO estimates for last year. Some members have suggested that NATO should move toward a 2.5% guideline. Others say that's unrealistic.

Many countries insist that it's the quality of the equipment and the amount of contributions that allies make to NATO operations that is most important. GDP percentages are also a slippery metric. When economies tanked during the COVID-19 pandemic, defense budgets looked bigger.

Germany's defense minister said he was in favor of raising NATO's military spending target, as allies gathered in Brussels on Wednesday for talks on whether defense expenditures of 2% of GDP are sufficient with a war raging in Ukraine.

At their Wales summit in 2014, NATO leaders agreed to move towards spending at least 2% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defence within a decade.

NATO's decision was a reaction to what it perceived as a severely deteriorated security situation in Europe months after Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea.

# Report: 8,468 Perished Trying to Reach Europe Since 2019

CAIRO (AP) — More than 8,400 Europe-bound migrants perished at sea while attempting to cross the Mediterranean over the past four years, a charity said.

Save the Children said in a report that about a half million people crossed or attempted to cross the Mediterranean to Europe since 2019. Of those, 8,468 people died or went missing in the Mediterranean, the charity added.

Analyzing data from the UN refugee agency, the charity said deaths at European borders were partly blamed on "the increasing trend of European governments forcibly, illegally and often violently stopping refugees from entering their territory and even abducting and expelling those who have arrived."

The 40-page report cited a 2021 warning by the UN refugee agency that "asylum was under attack at Europe's borders" and that pushbacks were being "carried out in a violent and apparently systematic way."

The report mentioned pushbacks of migrants trying to

reach Spain from Morocco; Greece from Turkey; and Italy from Libya and Tunisia.

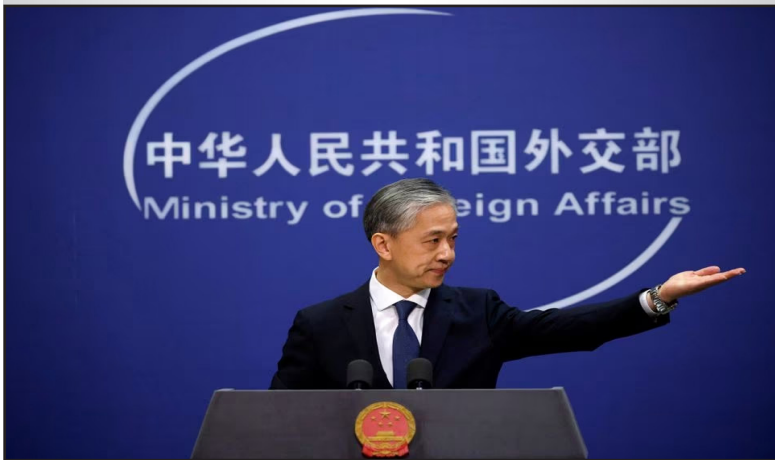
Pushbacks are unlawful under international and European Union law, as they violate the right to seek asylum and the legal principle that prohibits the return of anyone to a place where they would risk persecution, torture or deadly threat.

In its report titled "Safe for Some," the charity accused European countries of having "double standards" in dealing with Middle Eastern and African migrants and those who fled Ukraine over the past year.

Save the Children said over 8 million migrants — 40% of them children — from Ukraine were allowed into Europe since Russia's invasion of the country last February.

Tens of thousands have attempted to cross the Mediterranean to Europe from North African countries that have become hubs for migrants fleeing poverty and wars in Africa and the Middle East, seeking better lives in Europe.

# China Says U.S. Balloons Flew Over Its Regions, Warns of Countermeasures



**Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin attends a news conference in Beijing, China December 14, 2020.**

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China said on Wednesday that U.S. high altitude balloons flew over its Xinjiang and Tibet regions, and that it will take measures against U.S. entities that undermine China's sovereignty as a diplomatic dispute festered.

Washington and Beijing are locked in a tussle over flying objects after the U.S. military this month shot down what it called a Chinese spy balloon over the coast of South Carolina. Beijing says its balloon was a civilian research vessel mistakenly blown off course, and that Washington overreacted.

This week, China countered that U.S. balloons had flown over its airspace without permission more than 10 times on round-the-world flights since May 2022.

"Without the approval of relevant Chinese authorities, it has illegally flown at least 10 times over China's territorial airspace, including over Xinjiang, Tibet and other provinces," Wang told a regular daily briefing on Wednesday.

"The U.S. has abused force, overreacted, escalated the situation, and used this as a pretext to illegally sanction Chinese companies and institutions," Wang said.

"China is firmly opposed to this and will take countermeasures against relevant U.S. entities that undermine China's sovereignty and security in accordance with the law,"

Wang said, without specifying the measures.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who postponed a planned trip to Beijing over the balloon, is considering meeting China's top diplomat Wang Yi in Munich this week, sources have said.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has strongly criticized President Joe Biden for his delay in handling a suspected Chinese spy balloon that intruded into U.S. airspace.

Pompeo criticized Biden during an exclusive interview with The Hill on Monday, saying the current administration had "made an enormous mistake" that had caused "global shame."

But he added, "The whole world saw a slow-moving balloon transiting Montana, Kansas, South Carolina — and the United States of America did nothing."

A U.S. military fighter jet brought down the "spy" balloon off the coast of South Carolina last Saturday, after it traversed the United States for several days. The U.S. military had earlier said it had mobilized fighter jets but advised Biden against shooting the balloon out of the sky for fear debris could pose a safety threat to people on the ground.

Pompeo said the delay delivered "an enormous geopolitical advantage" for China.

# Human Rights Watch Condemns UK, U.S. Actions on Chagos Islands



**FILE - Protesters hold banners outside the World Court in The Hague, Netherlands, on Sept. 3, 2018, where judges listen to arguments in a case on whether Britain illegally maintains sovereignty over the Chagos Islands.**

LONDON (AP) — Britain and the United States committed crimes against humanity when they forced the people of the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean to leave their homes five decades ago to make way for a U.S. Navy base, a rights group charged Wednesday, calling on the two governments to let the Chagossians return.

Human Rights Watch also said Britain and the U.S. should pay compensation to the Chagossians and apologize for their treatment of the islanders.

"The forced displacement of the Chagossians and ongoing abuses amount to crimes against humanity committed by a colonial power against an indigenous people," the rights group said. "UK colonial rule in the Chagos Archipelago, unlike in most of its other colonies in Africa, did not end in the 1960s, and it has

continued at extraordinary cost to the people of Chagos."

The Chagos Islands are the heart of the British Indian Ocean Territory, some 6,000 miles southeast of London and home to the U.S. Navy base at Diego Garcia. The base was built in the 1970s and provides what American authorities have described as "an all but indispensable platform" for security operations in the Middle East, South Asia and East Africa.

The government in 2016 refused to allow the Chagossians to return to their homeland, citing "feasibility, defense and security interests, and cost to the British taxpayer."

But it also acknowledged that the original removal of the islanders was wrong, granted them citizenship and set aside 40 million pounds (\$49 million) to improve the lives of Chagossians around the world.

# News in Brief

DUBAI (Reuters) -At least 73 migrants were reported missing and presumed dead following a shipwreck off the Libyan coast on Tuesday, the official Twitter account of International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Libya said on Wednesday. Seven survivors made it to shore from the boat, which was carrying around 80 people, who had reportedly departed from Qasr Alkayar, east of Tripoli, to head to Europe, the IOM added. So far, 11 bodies have been retrieved by the Libyan red Crescent and the local police, while the seven survivors are in hospital, the IOM said. Libya has become a major launching point for migrants seeking to reach Europe via a dangerous route across the desert and over the Mediterranean.

\*\*\*

MANILA (Reuters) - The Philippines and the United States will this year carry out their biggest joint military drills since 2015, Manila's army chief said on Wednesday, against a backdrop of growing tensions with China in the South China Sea. The annual 'Balikatan' exercises will be conducted in the second quarter and involve more than the previous year's 8,900 troops, army chief Romeo Brawner told reporters. "All of these exercises that we are doing are in response to all types of threats that we may be facing in the future, both man-made and natural," Brawner said. President Marcos on Tuesday summoned China's ambassador to express "serious concern" over the intensity and frequency of China's activities in the South China Sea, most of which China claims as its territory.

\*\*\*

BERLIN (AP) — A German labor union has called on workers at seven of the country's airports to go on strike Friday to press demands for inflation-busting pay increases. Verdi said Wednesday that the one-day walkout by civil aviation security and ground staff would affect the airports in Frankfurt, Munich, Stuttgart, Hamburg, Dortmund, Hannover and Bremen. Frankfurt is Germany's biggest airport and a major hub for intercontinental travel. The strike in Munich could affect arrivals at the annual Munich Security Conference that runs from Friday to Sunday. The union is demanding a pay rise of 10.5%, or at least 500 euros (\$536), to counter the effects of high inflation that their members have endured.

\*\*\*

NEW DELHI (Reuters) - In two months, India is projected to become the world's most populous country with over 1.4 billion people. But for at least a year, and possibly longer, the country won't know how many people it has because it hasn't been able to count them. India's once in a decade census, due in 2021 and delayed due to the pandemic, has now got bogged down by technical and logistical hurdles and there are no signs the mammoth exercise is likely to begin soon. Experts say the delay in updating data like employment, housing, literacy levels, migration patterns and infant mortality, which are captured by the census, affects social and economic planning and policy making in the huge Asian economy. Calling census data "indispensable", Rachna Sharma, a fellow at the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, said studies like the consumption expenditure survey and the periodic labor force survey are estimations based on information from the census.

\*\*\*

WELLINGTON (Al-Jazeera) - Four people have been confirmed dead and thousands displaced in New Zealand after Cyclone Gabrielle brought widespread flooding and landslides to the northern part of the country. Gabrielle, which reached New Zealand on Sunday before making its way down the east coast of the North Island, cut off entire towns, washed away farms, bridges and livestock, and inundated homes, stranding people on rooftops. It was weakening and moving away on Wednesday.