

Violent Protest Hits U.S. Police Center, Dozens Detained



A stop sign sits on the outside of the forest as construction continues after a SWAT escort this morning at the construction site of a public safety training facility that activists have derided with the nickname "Cop City", in Atlanta, Georgia, U.S., February 6, 2023.

ATLANTA (Reuters) - Fires broke out at the construction site of an Atlanta police training center on Sunday after a demonstration at the property led to clashes between police and protesters and 35 people were arrested, police said.

The site of the planned Atlanta Public Safety Training Center, derisively called "Cop City" by opponents, has been the scene of escalating confrontation as demonstrators oppose both the increasing militarization of police and the development of the forest that its defenders call the "lungs of Atlanta."

The police and fire training center is being built on 85 acres (34.4 hectares) of a 400-acre property

in unincorporated DeKalb County that is owned by the city, according to the facility's website.

It is within the larger South River Forest, also known as the Weelaunee Forest.

Sunday's events began with a music festival that was part of a week of demonstrations against the construction. But police said events turned violent when "agitators" changed into black clothing, breached the site, and launched bricks, rocks, Molotov cocktails and fireworks at officers.

Heavy smoke could be seen for miles, WSB television reported. Images on social media showed flames and smoke coming from multiple spots on the property.

One image showed heavy equipment in flames.

Hundreds of people attended Sunday's events, and a group broke off from the concert to start a protest, WSB reported, citing witnesses.

The area was on lockdown, with a special weapons and tactics (SWAT) team reporting to the scene. The fire was later extinguished, WAGA television reported, citing reporters at the scene.

Opponents of the site say they want to save an important green space near the greater Atlanta metropolitan area of 6 million people.

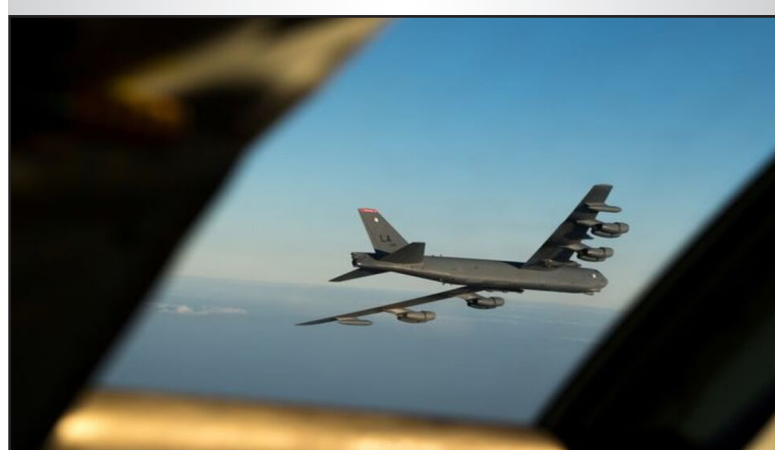
"We call on all people of good conscience to stand in solidarity with the movement to stop Cop City and defend the Weelaunee Forest," reads a statement on a website called Defend The Atlanta Forest.

The website promoted a series of events from March 4 to March 11 including live music and forest tours, describing it as the fifth such week of activities.

With more events planned in coming days, Atlanta police said they and other law-enforcement agencies had "multi-layered strategy that includes reaction and arrest."

The site was subject to a protest in January that briefly turned violent as demonstrators set a police car on fire and smashed windows of buildings. Demonstrators at that time gathered to protest against the killing by law enforcement of an activist during a raid to clear the construction site.

U.S. Deploys B-52 Bomber for Drill With South Korea



A B-52 Stratofortress long-range bomber returns to RAF Fairford, England, after flying a sortie over Norway, March 28, 2019.

SEOUL (Dispatches) -- The United States deployed a B-52 bomber for a joint drill with its ally South Korea on Monday, in a show of force against North Korea, South Korea's defense ministry said.

B-52 bombers are capable of carrying nuclear weapons.

The air drill came ahead of combined large-scale exercises including amphibious landings starting later this month.

North Korea has traditionally called for those joint exercises to be called off, branding them as a prelude to invasion.

They have in the past drawn sharp reactions from Pyongyang including missile tests and nuclear threats, and North Korea's foreign ministry on Sunday demanded an immediate halt to U.S. - South Korea combined military drills, saying they were raising tensions.

With denuclearization talks stalled, North Korea conducted a record number of missile launches last year. As South Korea has lifted anti-COVID measures, the allies are returning to large-scale drills.

On Sunday, North Korea called on the United Nations to demand an immediate halt to joint military drills by the United States and South Korea.

In a statement on state media, Vice Foreign Minister Kim Son Gyong said the drills and the rhetoric from the allies have pushed tensions to an "extremely dangerous level".

He said the UN and the international community "will have to strongly urge the U.S. and South Korea to immediately halt their provocative remarks and joint military exercises".

The statement comes after officials from Seoul and Washington announced on Friday more than 10 days of large-scale military exercises, including amphibious landings, from March 13 to 23.

Pyongyang sees the drills as a rehearsal for invasion.

On Saturday, it blamed Washington for what it called the collapse of international arms control systems and said its nuclear weapons were "the surest way" to ensure the balance of power in the region.

Seoul and Washington also conducted a combined air drill with a U.S. long-range bomber and South Korean fighter aircraft on Friday, the latest in their series of joint training in recent weeks.

The "irresponsible acts" of the allies will only take the regional situation "to a very critical and uncontrollable phase," Kim warned.

It is regrettable that the UN has been consistently silent on the exercises, which have a "clear aggressive nature," he added.

Last month Kim issued a statement, saying UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has been "extremely unfair, unbalanced" on North Korea's missile tests.

Russian Troops Continue to Besiege Bakhmut



Ukrainian soldiers are firing artillery rounds toward a Russian infantry position near Bakhmut.

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian military leaders are determined to hold onto Bakhmut, Kyiv officials said Monday, even as Russian forces continued to encircle the devastated eastern Ukrainian city that they have sought to capture for six months at the cost of thousands of lives.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's office said he chaired a meeting with military officials during which the country's top brass advocated strengthening Ukrainian positions there.

Intense Russian shelling targeted the Donetsk region city and nearby villages as Moscow deployed more resources there in an apparent bid to finish off Bakhmut's resistance, according to local officials.

"Civilians are fleeing the region to escape Russian shelling continuing round the clock as additional Russian troops and weapons are being deployed there," Donetsk Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko said.

Some analysts questioned the wisdom of the Ukrainian defenders holding out much longer, with others suggesting a tactical withdrawal may already be underway.

Ukrainian officials have previously raised the possibility of a tactical retreat.

The Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank, noted that urban warfare favors the defender but considered that the smartest option now for Kyiv may be to withdraw to positions that are easier to defend.

In recent days, Ukrainian units destroyed two key bridges just outside Bakhmut, including one linking it to the nearby hilltop town of Chasiv Yar along the last remaining Ukrainian resupply route, according to UK military intelligence officials and other Western analysts. Demolishing the bridges could be part of efforts to slow down the Russian offensive if Ukrainian forces start pulling back from the city.

"Ukrainian forces are unlikely to withdraw from Bakhmut all at once and may pursue a gradual fighting withdrawal to exhaust Russian forces through continued urban warfare," the ISW said in an assessment published late Sunday.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the millionaire owner of the Wagner Group military company that spearheaded the Bakhmut offensive, has been at loggerheads with the Russian Defense Ministry and repeatedly accused it of failing to provide his forces with ammunition. On Sunday, he again criticized top military brass for moving slowly to deliver the promised ammunition, questioning whether the delay was caused "by red tape or treason."

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu traveled to Mariupol and toured some of the city's rebuilt infrastructure, the Defense Ministry reported Monday.

Shoigu was shown a newly built hospital, a rescue center of the Emergency Ministry and residential buildings, the ministry said.

South Korea to Compensate Victims of Japan Atrocities



The proposal faced immediate backlash from some victims.

SEOUL, South Korea (Dispatches) — South Korea took a step toward improving ties with its traditional rival Japan on Monday, announcing a plan to compensate Koreans who performed forced labor during Tokyo's colonial rule that doesn't require Japanese companies to contribute to the reparations.

The plan reflects conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol's push to mend frayed ties with Japan and solidify security cooperation among Seoul, Tokyo and Washington in order to build a united front against China and North Korea. President Joe Biden quickly hailed it as "a groundbreaking new chapter" of cooperation between two of the United States' closest allies.

The South Korean plan, which relies on the money raised in South Korea, drew immediate, domestic backlash from former forced laborers and their supporters. They've demanded direct compensation from the Japanese companies and a fresh apology from the Japanese government.

Ties between Seoul and Tokyo have long been complicated by grievances related to Japan's brutal rule of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945, when hundreds of thousands of Koreans were mobilized as forced laborers for Japanese companies, or sex slaves at Tokyo's military-run brothels during World War II.

Many forced laborers are already dead and survivors are in their 90s. Among the 15 victims involved in 2018 South Korean court rulings that ordered two Japanese companies — Nippon Steel and

Mitsubishi Heavy Industries — to compensate them, only three are still alive and they are all in their 90s.

South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin told a televised news conference the victims would be compensated through a local state-run foundation that would be funded by civilian donations. He said South Korea hopes that Japanese companies would also make voluntary contributions to the foundation.

South Korean officials didn't elaborate on which companies would finance the foundation. But in January, Shim Kyusun, chairperson of the Foundation for Victims of Forced Mobilization by Imperial Japan, which would be handling the reparations, said the funds would come from South Korean companies that benefited from a 1965 Seoul-Tokyo treaty that normalized their relations.

The 1965 accord was accompanied by hundreds of millions of dollars in economic aid and loans from Tokyo to Seoul that were used in development projects carried out by major South Korean companies, including POSCO, now a global steel giant. POSCO said Monday that it will actively consider a contribution to the foundation if it receives an official request.

Japan insists all wartime compensation issues were settled under the 1965 treaty, and retaliated for the South Korean court-ordered compensation from the Japanese companies by slapping export controls on chemicals vital to South Korea's semiconductor industry in 2019.

Record Autumn Heatwave Lashes Parts of Australia's East

SYDNEY (Reuters) — Parts of Australia's east including Sydney recorded their hottest day in more than two years on Monday with temperatures hitting more than 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit), raising the risk of bushfires.

Firefighters are working to contain nearly 40 bushfires across New South Wales, the home state of one-third of Australians, with crews on the ground supported by aircraft.

One fire near Mudgee, more than 250 km (155 miles) northwest of Sydney, is at emergency warning level. Emergency crews urged residents there to seek shelter as it was too late to leave.

Total fire bans are now in place for multiple regions across most of New South Wales (NSW), while 35 public schools, mostly in inland regions, have been closed due to the severe heat.

"If a fire does start, it's going to be burning under those difficult conditions ... (it's) harder for our firefighters to get around them, and fire can spread very quickly, particularly in grassland," Angela Burford, operational officer at the

New South Wales Rural Fire Service, told the Australian Broadcasting Corp.

Dry thunderstorms are also possible across eastern NSW, leading to conditions that could see lightning ignite new fires, the Bureau of Meteorology said. The hot and dry conditions are likely to persist until Wednesday.

Penrith, a suburb in western Sydney, recorded 40.1 degrees Celsius on Monday afternoon - the hottest day since Jan. 26, 2021 - while some inland towns reached nearly 41 degrees.

Australia's east coast has been dominated by the La Nina weather phenomenon - typically associated with increased rainfall - over the last two years, which brought record rains and widespread flooding. In 2022, Sydney recorded its highest annual rainfall since records began in 1858.

But the weather bureau last week said its climate models suggest La Nina was "likely near its end" and neutral conditions, which is neither La Nina or its opposite El Nino, were likely to prevail through the southern hemisphere autumn.

News in Brief

LONDON (Reuters) -- Former British prime minister Boris Johnson has nominated his father Stanley for a knighthood in the list of honors he can grant as an outgoing leader, the Times newspaper reported on Monday, drawing accusations of cronyism. The Times said Johnson had put forward as many as 100 names for awards. His predecessors Theresa May and David Cameron nominated roughly 60 each. The newspaper did not specify what service Stanley Johnson's nomination was in acknowledgement of. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has the power to block any honors nominations. His science minister, Michelle Donelan, said there were "bigger fish to fry", when asked if she would have a problem with a knighthood for Johnson's father. "Obviously it's the ex-prime minister's prerogative to be able to make those types of appointments, but we'll see if this story is true or not," she told LBC Radio. Opposition Labour's health policy chief Wes Streeting told the BBC: "I think (his resignation honors list) speaks to a pattern of Boris Johnson's behavior around cronyism." As prime minister, Johnson in 2020 elevated his brother Jo Johnson to the House of Lords, the upper chamber of parliament, where he has a seat for life.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- Four American citizens were shot at and kidnapped by armed men after driving across the US border into northeastern Mexico, the FBI said Sunday. The Americans crossed into Matamoros, in Tamaulipas state, on Friday, driving a white minivan with North Carolina license plates, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation said in a statement released by the US embassy in Mexico. "Shortly after crossing into Mexico, unidentified gunmen fired upon the passengers in the (minivan). All four Americans were placed in a vehicle and taken from the scene by armed men," the FBI said. Matamoros, located across the U.S. border from Brownsville, Texas, has been beset by violence linked to drug trafficking and other organized crime.

ATHENS (AFP) -- Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has asked the country's Supreme Court to give "top priority" to the criminal cases triggered by last week's fatal train disaster, his office said Monday. "The Greek people want an immediate and thorough clarification of the criminal incidents related to this tragic accident," Mitsotakis wrote in a letter to the court's prosecutor about the collision, which killed at least 57 people and stoked public anger. The letter specified that the court investigation into the tragedy was separate from the one already launched by government-appointed experts. On Sunday, Mitsotakis, who is expected to seek re-election in April, asked for forgiveness from the families of those killed in Greece's worst rail disaster as thousands of furious protesters rallied in Athens and clashed with police. The crash occurred last Tuesday when a freight train collided head-on with a passenger train carrying over 350 passengers, many of them young students.

ISLAMABAD (AFP) -- Pakistan TV stations have been banned from broadcasting speeches by former prime minister Imran Khan, the state media watchdog said, the latest hurdle facing the politician as he campaigns for early elections. Khan was routed from office in a no-confidence motion last year and has been pressuring the fragile coalition which replaced him with daily speeches, regular rallies and allegations of corruption. Meanwhile the 70-year-old former cricketing superstar has been tangled in a slew of elaborate legal cases, a frequent fixture in Pakistan's mudslinging politics. Late Sunday, as police attempted to arrest Khan in connection with a corruption case, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) banned his live speeches and reruns with immediate effect.

TAIPEI (Dispatches) -- The head of a small Taiwanese political party will next month become the first contender for 2024's presidential election to visit the United States, to brief officials on his policies should he win office, though that may be a long shot. Taiwanese presidential candidates traditionally go to the United States before elections given Washington's oversized role in backing Taiwan internationally in challenge to China which views it "sacred" Chinese territory. The Taiwan People's Party (TPP), only founded in 2019, said on Monday its Chairman Ko Wen-je would make a 21-day trip to the United States beginning on April 8 in his capacity as the party's presidential nominee, though he has yet to formally declare his candidacy. Ko, who served two terms as Taipei mayor until stepping down last year because of term limits, will meet State Department officials - the party declined to say who - and speak at universities included Harvard.

NOUAKCHOTT (AFP) -- Four takfiri prisoners escaped Sunday night after an exchange of fire at the central prison in Mauritania's capital Nouakchott, in which two national guards were killed, the Interior Ministry said. "The National Guard has tightened its control over the prison and immediately started tracking down the fugitives in order to arrest them as soon as possible," the ministry said in a statement published by the official news agency early Monday. Meanwhile, between 12 and 14 people were killed last week in northern Burkina Faso, a region that has been battered by takfiri insurgents, local inhabitants said Monday. "A group of terrorists" on Thursday attacked the village of Aorema, near the town of Ouahigouya, they told AFP. The attack was confirmed by a security source, who did not give a toll.