



TASS: Moscow Warns of End to Russia-U.S. Relations If Assets Seized



Russian soldiers patrol a street in Volnovakha in the Donetsk region.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) – Any possible seizure of Russian assets by the United States will completely destroy Moscow's bilateral relations with Washington, TASS quoted the head of the North American Department at the Russian foreign ministry as saying on Saturday.

Russia's relations with the West have deteriorated sharply since Moscow sent tens of thousands of troops into Ukraine on February 24, calling it a "special military operation."

The West responded with unprecedented economic, financial and diplomatic sanctions, including freezing around half of Russia's gold and foreign exchange reserves that stood near \$640 billion before February 24.

Top Western officials, including European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, have suggested seizing the frozen reserves to help fund the future reconstruction of Ukraine.

"We warn the Americans of the detrimental consequences of such actions that will permanently damage bilateral relations, which is neither in their nor in our interests," Alexander Darchiev told TASS in an interview.

Darchiev also said that the U.S. influence on Ukraine had increased to the degree that "Americans are increasingly becoming more and more a direct party in the conflict."

Two U.S. senators seeking to pass such legislation visited Ukraine's capital last month to discuss the bill with the country's President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Since President Vladimir Putin of Russia declared the campaign in Ukraine, the United States has been providing Kiev with military aid, including at least 16 HIMARS systems.

Russia said on Tuesday its forces had destroyed six HIMARS systems in Ukraine since the start of the war. Defense Minis-

ter Sergei Shoigu ordered Russian generals last month to prioritize destroying the long-range missiles and artillery weapons. The ministry said at the time that the U.S.-made weapons were being used to strike residential areas of the Russian-held Donbass and to intentionally set fire to wheat fields and grain storage silos.

'Russia in Full Control of Pisky in Donetsk'

As for the developments on the ground in Ukraine, Russia says its armed forces have taken full control of a town on the outskirts of Donetsk, bringing Moscow one step closer to its declared objective of "liberating" the breakaway eastern regions in Ukraine.

The town, known as Pisky, is now under the control of the Russian forces. Fighting is still under way in the surrounding areas, Interfax cited the Russian Defense Ministry as saying on Saturday.

Russia began the conflict in Ukraine on February 24 to demilitarize and "de-Nazify" the country, and to "liberate" the Donbass, which is composed of the two breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.

The Russian military says it has fully captured Luhansk and has concentrated its efforts to seize the other region.

Russian forces recently destroyed a U.S.-supplied HIMARS rocket system near Ukraine's Kramatorsk and a depot with ammunition for the system, Interfax reported.

HIMARS is a long-range, mobile rocket system capable of hitting targets with precision. Its manufacturer, Lockheed Martin, says the systems have a "recognized and proven range" of up to 300 kilometers.

"You have got to talk to the employers," and then we end up with a situation where it goes round and round in circles," said Mick Whelan, general secretary of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen.

More public- and private-sector unions are planning strikes as Britain faces its worst cost-of-living crisis in decades. Postal workers, lawyers, British Telecom staff, dock workers and garbage collectors have all announced walkouts for later this month.

UK inflation has hit a 40-year high of 9.4%, and the Bank of England says it could rise to 13% amid a recession later this year. The average UK household fuel bill has risen more than 50% so far in 2022 as the war in Ukraine squeezes global oil and natural gas supplies. Another increase is due in October, when the average bill is forecast to hit 3,500 pounds (\$4,300) a year.

China Sending Fighter Jets to Thailand for Joint Exercises



The Chinese air force is sending fighter jets and bombers to Thailand for a joint exercise with the Thai military on Sunday.

BANGKOK (AP/ Al Jazeera) — The Chinese air force is sending fighter jets and bombers to Thailand for a joint exercise with the Thai military on Sunday.

The training will include air support, strikes on ground targets and small- and large-scale troop deployment, the Chinese Defense Ministry said in a statement posted on its website.

China's expanding military activities in the Asia-Pacific region have alarmed the United States and its allies and form part of a growing strategic and economic competition that has inflamed tensions between the world's two largest economies.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited Thailand in June as part of an effort to strengthen what he called America's "unparalleled network of alliances and partnerships" in the region.

The Falcon Strike exercise will be held at the Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base in northern Thailand near the border with Laos. Thai fighter jets and airborne early warning aircraft from both countries will also take part.

The training comes as the U.S. holds combat drills in Indonesia with Indonesia, Australia, Japan and Singapore in the largest iteration of the Super Garuda Shield exercises since they began in 2009.

It also follows China's sending warships, missiles and aircraft into the waters and air around Taiwan in a threatening response to a visit by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to the island, which China claims as its territory.

Meanwhile, the United States plans to keep stirring tensions by conducting new "air and maritime transits" in the Taiwan Strait in a step the White House says will reflect its response to China's military drills in the strait amid rising tensions over the self-ruled island.

China conducted its largest-ever military drill around Taiwan, which Beijing considers its territory, during a trip by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi earlier this month.

Kurt Campbell, the White House coordinator for Asia-Pacific issues and adviser to U.S. President Joe Biden, said despite tensions, U.S. forces "will continue to fly, sail

and operate where international law allows, consistent with our longstanding commitment to freedom of navigation."

"That includes conducting standard air and maritime transits through the Taiwan Strait in the next few weeks," he told reporters.

Campbell did not confirm what kind of deployment would be made to support the maneuvers, saying he had no "comments about either the nature of our crossings or the timings across the Taiwan Strait."

He said Washington is set to announce an "ambitious roadmap" for deeper economic ties with Taiwan in the wake of tensions with China over the island.

China considers Taiwan to be a breakaway province that should be reunited with the motherland under the internationally-recognized "one-China" policy.

Under the policy, nearly all countries recognize Beijing's sovereignty over the island, including the United States, which has no formal diplomatic ties with the territory.

However, in violation of its own stated policy and in an attempt to irritate Beijing, Washington continues to court the secessionist government in Taipei, supporting its anti-China stance and supplying it with massive caches of armaments.

China warned Taiwan against harboring any aspirations of secession from the mainland, including by teaming up with "external forces."

China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin made the remarks at a press briefing in Beijing, addressing Chinese Taipei's President Tsai Ing-wen and her Democratic Progressive Party.

"We warn the DPP authorities in Taiwan that colluding with external forces to seek secession and make provocations will only speed up its own perish and push Taiwan into an abyss of catastrophes," he added.

The spokesman also said, "It's the common will of all Chinese people to realize complete reunification of the motherland, and this is the unstoppable general trend of history." "We are ready to create broad space for peaceful reunification, but we'd never leave any room for separatist activities in any form seeking to secede Taiwan from China."

Driver Walkout Halts Trains as UK Summer Strike Wave Spreads

LONDON (AP) – Thousands of UK train drivers walked off the job Saturday in a strike over jobs, pay and conditions, scuppering services across much of the country. The action was the latest in a spreading series of strikes by British workers seeking substantial raises to offset soaring prices for food and fuel.

The 24-hour strike by members of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen halted trains on major routes, including the main lines between London and Scotland and commuter services around the capital.

Weekend workers, soccer fans heading for games and families seeking seaside solace from a heat wave were among those forced to change their plans.

This has been a summer of travel disruption in Britain. Thousands of railway cleaners, signallers, maintenance workers staged a series of one-day strikes in June and July. More strikes are scheduled

next week on nationwide trains and on London's bus and subway network.

The disputes center on pay, working conditions and job security as Britain's railways struggle to adapt to travel and commuting habits changed — perhaps forever — by the coronavirus pandemic.

There were almost 1 billion train journeys in the UK in the year to March, compared to 1.7 billion in the 12 months before the pandemic, and rail companies are looking to cut costs and staffing after two years in which emergency government funding kept them afloat.

Unions accuse Britain's Conservative government of preventing train companies — which are privately owned but heavily regulated — from making a better offer.

"We find ourselves in a position where we are saying 'That won't be enough,' they say 'It's down to the government,' we talk to the government and they say

Montenegro Town Reels After Mass Shooting

CETINJE (AFP) – Residents in Montenegro's Cetinje were filled with disbelief Saturday as they tried to make sense of an unexpected mass shooting that saw their quiet town's streets shattered by a gruesome killing spree.

Friday's shooting saw a man murder 10 residents in broad daylight before a passerby killed him, according to the state prosecutor.

The shooting erupted after an alleged argument involving the gunman turned violent.

The gunman then went on a door-to-door rampage during which he massacred a mother and two small children in a home he owned, according to residents.

Six people were also wounded, including three that were in a critical condition as of late Friday.

"In all, he broke into six houses," one resident in Cetinje told AFP, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Authorities have yet to release a motive for the crime by the 34-year-old assailant that his neighbors described as a "peaceful" family man who worked at a nearby national park and had been the member of a local hunting club.

"He was a peaceful and discreet man," said the 55-year-old neighbor of the gunman, who asked to remain anonymous. "He was a father of four children. Nobody expected this of him."

"I didn't know him very well, but he was never a problem... I am shocked that he could have done this," added the neighbour.

In the massacre's wake, Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic announced three days of official mourning, saying the incident was unprecedented in Montenegro's recent history.

"I invite all the citizens of Montenegro to be



Friday's shooting saw a man murder 10 people in broad daylight in Montenegro's Cetinje, before a passerby killed him.

with the families of the innocent victims," he wrote in a post on Telegram late Friday.

Mladen Zadrima, the chief editor of Cetinje's local radio station, said residents were struggling to come to terms with the scale of the tragedy in the close-knit community of just 14,000 people.

"The day after has not brought any relief. On the contrary, disbelief has been replaced by sadness," said Zadrima.

Cetinje is famed as the home of the former royal capital and produced a string of renowned painters but for decades had fallen into economic malaise following the closure of an appliances factory that had once been the lifeblood of the community.

The picturesque town surrounded by mountains briefly gained notoriety for also being the home to members of the infamous jewel heist

gang known as the Pink Panthers, whose members are mainly from hailed the former Yugoslav republics.

The incident comes as Montenegro is in the full throes of its highly anticipated tourism high season following two years of the coronavirus pandemic.

With an unemployment rate of some 18 percent and an average monthly salary of under 520 euros (\$533), Montenegro counts on tourism and the appeal of some 300 km (180 miles) of azure coastline along with its stunning mountains to boost its revenues.

Organized crime and corruption have remained two major issues plaguing the country which authorities have pledged to tackle under pressure from the European Union.

Mass shootings, however, have been rare in the Adriatic nation.

Review: Mississippi Leads World in Mass Incarceration

MISSISSIPPI (Tate Reeves) – Mississippi is now the world's leader in putting people behind bars, more inmates per capita than any state or nation, according to the World Population Review.

"Is there a political price to be paid for foolishly sticking with a failed system that's made us the world capital of mass incarceration?" asked Cliff Johnson, director of the MacArthur Justice Center at the University of Mississippi School of Law. "What's it going to take for Mississippians to realize that the mass incarceration we have carried out for decades has made us less safe, rather than safer?"

Across the U.S., the number of those in prison in the U.S. is 16% lower today than before the pandemic, according to the Vera Institute of Justice, but Mississippi's rate is skyrocketing, rising more than 1,500 in less than six months. That population now exceeds 18,000 — the highest rate since April 2020.

"We have perfected throwing people away for long periods of time," Johnson said, "and yet after decades and decades of this approach, Mississippians are more fearful about violent crime than any time I remember."

In September 2013, Mississippi had as many as 22,490 inmates behind bars. In the years since, reforms and an aggressive Parole Board, headed by a veteran law enforcement officer, reduced the number of inmates to the lowest level in two decades.

On Feb. 7, that population fell to 16,499, according to MDOC.

But with Gov. Tate Reeves' new board chairman, a former Chevron executive he put in charge in January, that trend has reversed itself.

On Aug. 1, the prison population hit a high of 18,080.

If this current trend continues, Mississippi would top 19,000 inmates before the end of the year and would surpass 22,000 inmates before the end of 2023.

That additional prison population would cost taxpayers more than \$100 million a year, based on the \$53.72 per-day cost computed by the state's legislative watchdog.

"We're stuck in this futile cycle of throwing more money at prisons," Johnson said. "Even with the Department of Justice breathing down our necks, we can't handle the people we have."

When Gov. Phil Bryant, a Republican, signed House Bill 585 into law in 2014, the measure drew widespread praise from conservatives and liberals alike because it promised to reduce the prison population, save millions — \$266 million, to be exact — and reinvest some of the money into programs for offenders.

Instead, all of those savings went back into the state's coffers, helping to pay for huge phased-in corporate tax cuts enacted in 2016, because the state was struggling to meet revenue estimates.

NAIROBI (Dispatches) – As Kenya's election count has dragged into its fifth day, official election results show that opposition leader and former Prime Minister Raila Odinga is leading the presidential race against his main challenger Deputy President William Ruto. According to results provided by Kenya's election commission and displayed on a large screen at a national tallying center in the capital, Nairobi, on Saturday, Odinga had 54 percent and Ruto had 45 percent with just over 26 percent of votes counted. Since in Kenya voted to elect their fifth president since independence on Tuesday, amid harsh economic conditions. More than 22 million Kenyans had registered to vote in the seventh general elections, which also included parliamentary and local polls, since multiparty democracy was established in the country of 53 million in 1992. Official results will be announced within a week. The candidates need more than half of all votes, as well as more than 25 percent of the votes in over half of the country's 47 counties, to avoid a runoff. However, official vote tallying has been proceeding slowly, fueling public anxiety.

MADRID (Xinhua) – One person has died and another 40 were injured early Saturday morning after strong gusts of wind led to the collapse of several structures and parts of the stage at a music festival in the Spanish coastal town of Cullera. The festival was being held in Cullera Valencia when sudden strong winds hit the area at around 4:20 a.m., and videos showed dust and debris being blown through the air. The person who died has been described as a 28-year-old man, with at least three of those injured suffered fractures, while the others have cuts and bruises of varying degrees and were evacuated to hospital in Valencia by emergency services. The festival organizers have issued a statement saying the festival site has been evacuated and "temporarily suspended." The Civil Guard has opened an investigation to determine the causes of the young man's death.

CAIRO (AP) – Libyan authorities said Saturday they found at least 15 migrants dead in the desert on the borders with Sudan, the latest tragedy involving migrants seeking a better life in Europe via perilous journeys through the conflict-wrecked nation. The Department for Combating Irregular Migration in the southeastern city of Kufra said the migrants were on their way from Sudan to Libya when their vehicle broke down due to lack of fuel. The agency said nine other migrants survived while two remain missing in the desert. There were women and children among the migrants, but the agency did not elaborate on how many. It also did not reveal causes of the migrants' death, but said they did not have enough food and water.

HAVANA (AFP) – Colombia's government has given the green light to resume peace talks with the country's largest remaining rebel force, a key electoral promise that brought leftist President Gustavo Petro to power earlier this week. Colombian government officials on Friday met with members of the National Liberation Army (ELN) in Havana, where they have been based since 2018, with Bogota saying it officially recognizes the "legitimacy of dialogue... in the search for peace." "Both parties agree on the need to restart a dialogue process with facts that show Colombian society and the world that this will be real," High Commissioner for Peace Danilo Rueda said. Present at the meeting were officials from Norway and Cuba, the guarantors of the talks, as well as representatives of the UN secretary-general and the Colombian Episcopal Conference. Petro, a former guerilla who has vowed to pursue negotiations with the rebels, has said that he wants to strike new peace agreements with the ELN and other armed organizations, as well as end the government's "war on drugs," which he considers a failure.

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) – Hundreds of Mexican soldiers were sent to the border city of Juarez Friday after a prison face-off between members of two rival cartels caused a riot and shootouts that killed 11 people, most of them civilians, authorities said. Los Chapos, members of the infamous Sinaloa Cartel formerly led by Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, and local group Los Mexicles clashed in a prison, Deputy Security Minister Ricardo Mejia said. A riot then broke out, leaving two shot to death and four injured with bullet wounds, Mejia said, speaking alongside Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador at a regular news conference. Another 16 were injured in the fighting, he said. Officials did not say what caused the clash. Following the riot, the Mexicles rampaged in the city, authorities said, killing nine civilians. Among them were four employees of a radio station, including one announcer, Mejia said. Across town, convenience stores were shot at and set on fire. FEMSA, the parent company of the Oxxo chain, said in a statement that one of its employees and a woman who was applying for a job were killed in the violence.

TOKYO (Al Jazeera) – Japan's new industry minister, Yasuhiro Nishimura, has become the first member of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's cabinet to visit the controversial Yasukuni Shrine for war dead in Tokyo, local media reported. Nishimura, who was appointed to his ministerial post on Wednesday following a cabinet reshuffle, visited the shrine on Saturday, Kyodo News reported. Yasukuni is seen in China and South Korea as a symbol of Japanese former military aggression because it honors, among some 2.5 million war dead, 14 Japanese World War II leaders convicted as war criminals by an allied tribunal. "I resolved to make utmost efforts for the peace and development of Japan, also thinking of the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe," Nishimura told reporters, according to Kyodo News, and referencing the former Japanese premier killed last month. Abe was engulfed in controversy when he visited the shrine in December 2013, shortly after taking office. He refrained from visiting Yasukuni for the rest of his tenure as prime minister to avoid angering China and South Korea.