

Refinery Strikes Worsen as France Moves to Call Back Essential Workers



Striking French oil workers have voted to continue their industrial action, which has led to shortages at fuel stations across the country.

PARIS (Dispatches) - France has said that it would requisition essential workers to staff Exxon's French oil depot, and threatened to do the same for Total's French refineries if talks failed to progress. But workers at Total's Donges refinery decided to strike on Wednesday, French union CGT said.

French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne said that the government would start the callback process for Exxon-Mobil's staff at its oil depots in the country after talks between the oil company and two unions, CGT and FO, stalled. The CFDT union, however, managed on Monday to reach an agreement with Exxon.

"Today some unions, despite the deal, wants to continue the strike action and blockades, we cannot accept that," Borne said, according to Argus media.

Those comments followed weekend comments by the country's energy minister Agnes Pannier-Runacher that

the government was "doing its utmost to restore the situation to normal as soon as possible."

The CGT and FO unions declared strikes weeks ago at Total's 246,900 bpd Gonfreville and 109,300 bpd Feyzin refineries, along with the Carling petrochemicals plant. The FO Now, ExxonMobil's 219,000 bpd Donges refinery is being added to the list. The FO union had workers striking at Exxon's 235,000 bpd Fos-Sur-Mer refinery, as well as its 270,000 bpd Port Jerome refinery, but FO called off its strike action on Monday, Argus said.

The additional striking action comes just as France prepares to order some essential workers back to the workplace.

More than half of the country's refinery capacity has been offline as many of the country's gas stations suffer widespread gasoline and diesel outages. On Monday, the CGT trade union rejected an offer from TotalEnergies, which had offered to bring forward

negotiations if the union called off the strike.

Maintenance on Eight French Nuclear Reactors Delayed by Strike

France's FNME trade union said on Wednesday that some workers at EDF's nuclear plants resumed their strike over salaries, delaying maintenance work on eight reactors as the union sent a message of support to striking refinery workers.

Three of the Cruas nuclear plant's reactors are affected by the strike, while two reactors at the Cattenom and Tricastin plants and one Bugey reactor have had their maintenance delayed by the strike, FNME said.

The strike is not reducing power supply at active reactors, FNME added.

EDF did not respond immediately to a request for comment.

French nuclear availability is currently at 51% of total capacity with 26 reactors offline for maintenance.

The strikes by workers at nuclear power plants have been ongoing for several weeks, though action has sometimes been suspended.

EDF has been facing organizational challenges over maintenance plans for a few years now and any days of strikes will add to its problems, Emeric de Vigan, vice president of power at data and analytics firm Kpler, said.

"If there is a delay on a site, it's likely to create a delay on another. This does not help the market to trust EDF's super-optimistic future availability forecasts," he added.

FNME representative Vignie Neumayer told Reuters the union sent a message of support to striking workers at refineries and petrol depots owned by oil giants TotalEnergies and Exxon Mobil.

Russia Arrests Eight Suspects Over Crimea Bridge Blast



Road traffic resumed on the Crimea bridge, after it was severely disrupted following the blast.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) said in a statement on Wednesday that it had arrested five Russians, three Ukrainians, and one Armenian for a huge blast that recently targeted a bridge connecting the Russian mainland to the Crimean Peninsula, Interfax reported.

The FSB accused Ukraine's military intelligence service and its director, Kyrylo Budanov, of organizing the attack, with a Kiev agent having coordinated the transit of the explosives.

According to the FSB's investigation, the attack was carried out by a Georgian-registered cargo truck that had been loaded with explosive devices.

The explosives were hidden in 22 plastic film rolls, the service said, adding that they left the Ukrainian port of Odesa in August and transited through Bulgaria, Georgia, and Armenia before entering Russia.

Twelve people were also identified as accomplices, TASS news agency reported.

Ukraine's Interior Ministry spokesman Andriy Yusov has dismissed the accusation as "nonsense," saying Kiev would definitely not comment on statements by the FSB, which he said was a "fake structure" serving the Russian government.

On Saturday, a truck bomb went off on the Kerch Strait Bridge, which hosts road and rail links between the Russian Federation and Crimea.

The bomb set fire to seven oil tankers that were being carried by rail to Crimea, sparking a massive blaze and killing three people. Dramatic social media footage showed a huge plume of smoke billowing out of the site of the incident, while parts of the bridge were seen plunging into the sea.

The bridge, constructed on the orders of Russian President Vladimir Putin, had been inaugurated in 2018, four years after Crimea voted in a referendum to become part of Russia.

Putin has called the blast "a terrorist act" carried out by Ukrainian secret services aimed at destroying critical Russian civilian infrastructure.

On Monday, Russia's military struck Kiev and other Ukrainian cities, with Putin warning of a "harsh" response in case of any further attacks such as the one on the Crimean Bridge.

Kiev's police officials say the blasts caused at least five deaths and 12 injuries there, but there were no details about the casualties in other cities, including Lviv, Zhytomyr, Khmelnytsky, Dnipro, and Ternopil.

Ukraine has not claimed responsibility for the bridge bombing. But Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak has said the bombing is "the beginning." Ukraine says the bridge served as a key transport link for carrying military equipment to Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine, especially in the south.

Russian invaded Ukraine in February.

West Rushes Weapons to Ukraine as War Rages On

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - Ukraine's allies announced delivery of new air defenses and re-committed to providing it robust, enduring military assistance at a meeting at NATO headquarters on Wednesday.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, sitting next to his Ukrainian counterpart, opened the gathering of more than 50 countries by condemning Russian President Vladimir Putin's deadly missile attacks against Ukraine.

Germany announced that the first of four IRIS-T air defense systems had reached Ukraine. German Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht called it a "very important support for Ukraine in the fight against missile attacks."

A senior U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Germany's IRIS-T system was

another sign of the commitment to provide air defenses to Ukraine, pre-dating Putin's latest missile strikes on the country.

The gathering in Brussels is the first big NATO meeting and the alliance has classified as a clear escalation of the war that started on Feb 24.

Attacks on the Nord Stream pipelines running under the Baltic Sea have contributed to heightening the tensions, although it remains unclear who was behind the explosions.

NATO warned Moscow on Tuesday that it would meet attacks on allies' critical infrastructure with a "united and determined response."

Stoltenberg pledged to boost the protection of critical infrastructure, saying NATO had already doubled its presence in the Baltic and North Seas to more than 30 ships supported by aircraft and undersea activities.

Speaking ahead of the two-day meeting of the alliance's defense ministers, Stoltenberg said that while the alliance had not seen any changes in Russia's nuclear posture, it was vigilant and would proceed with its annual nuclear preparedness exercise next week.

He was referring to the "Steadfast Noon" exercise, in which NATO air forces practice the use of U.S. nuclear bombs based in Europe with training flights, without live weapons.

Cancelling the drills because of the war in Ukraine would send a "very wrong signal," Stoltenberg said.

At Least 25 People Killed in South Sudan Communal Land Violence



A member of the SSNPS (South Sudan National Police Service) police gestures as they gather ahead of patrolling the streets of Juba, South Sudan on April 9, 2020.

UBA (Reuters) - At least 25 people have been killed in South Sudan, officials said, after youths from two neighboring communities in the country's north clashed over a disputed borderline separating their areas.

Violence is endemic in parts of South Sudan where clashes triggered by localized disputes over grazing areas, water, cultivation grounds and other resources often turn deadly.

The country's volatile politics

often helps exacerbate some of the localized disputes, fanning the violence.

In the latest unrest, armed youths from the Twic community in War-rap state on the border with Sudan on Monday attacked residents of neighboring Abyei town also on the border.

"That gun raid resulted into ... 15 people who died from Twic side," Ariech Mayar Ariech, a lawmaker representing Warrap State in the national parliament told Reuters.

An additional 12 people were killed among the Abyei residents including two women and a child, Deng Ajak, a local administration official said.

Both sides disagree over where the borderline separating the two communities lies, with each claiming the other is encroaching on their land, both officials said.

"The situation is worrisome ... It is very tense. There is too much hatred between these two sisterly communities," Ariech said, warning that the violence may escalate if the dispute is not resolved.

The episode is the latest deadly clash between the two communities over the same land. In February armed youth from Twic launched attacks on Abyei residents and several people were killed, others displaced and houses burnt.

South Sudan erupted into civil war shortly after declaring independence from Sudan in 2011, which pitted President Salva Kiir and his Dinka ethnic allies against his Vice-President Riek Machar and his Nuer tribe.

A peace agreement signed three years ago is largely holding but the transitional government has been

WHO Says New COVID-19 Wave Emerging in Europe

LONDON (Al-Jazeera) - A new wave of COVID-19 cases appears to be spreading in Europe, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) say.

WHO's regional data showed that only Europe recorded a rise in COVID-19 cases in the week that ended October 2, clocking an increase of 8 percent from the week before.

"Although we are not where we were one year ago, it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is still not over," the WHO's Europe director,

Hans Kluge, and the ECDC's director, Andrea Ammon, said in a joint statement on Wednesday.

"We are unfortunately seeing indicators rising again in Europe, suggesting that another wave of infections has begun," they said.

The WHO and ECDC noted that millions of people across Europe have yet to be vaccinated against COVID-19. They urged European countries to administer both flu and COVID-19 vaccines ahead of an expected surge in cases of seasonal influenza.

"The potential co-circulation of

COVID-19 and seasonal influenza will put vulnerable people at increased risk of severe illness and death, with the likelihood of increased pressure on both hospitals and healthcare workers, already exhausted from almost three years on the front lines of the pandemic," they said.

"There was no time to lose," they said, adding that vulnerable groups such as pregnant women, people over 60 and those with co-morbidities, should get vaccinated against both influenza and the coronavirus.

Last week a health official in

France said the country had entered an eighth wave of the virus.

France's COVID-19 figures published on October 3 showed that the seven-day average of daily new cases had reached 45,631, its highest level since August 2.

The ECDC and WHO Europe issued their warning after WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in September that COVID-19 cases had dropped dramatically in the week of September 4, hitting their lowest number since March 2020 when the pandemic began. He had said the "end is in sight".



PARIS (AP) - Former French prime minister Edouard Philippe will appear before the Court of Justice of the Republic on Oct 24, as part of the judicial investigation over the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro reported. Edouard Philippe has been summoned by three magistrates of the CJR on account of "endangering the lives of others" and "voluntary non-participation to fight a disaster," according to the report. According to the daily newspaper Le Monde, he will have to explain why he had held the first round of municipal elections on March 15, 2020 despite mounting COVID-19 infections.

BANJUL (Reuters) - The deaths of 69 children from acute kidney injury in Gambia is linked to four cough syrups made in India and imported into the West African country via a U.S.-based pharmaceutical company, the Gambian police said in a preliminary investigation report. World Health Organization (WHO) investigators had already found "unacceptable" levels of diethylene glycol and ethylene glycol, which can be toxic, in four products made by New Delhi-based Maiden Pharmaceuticals Ltd. The police report did not name Maiden directly but listed the company's same four products that were mentioned by the WHO: Promethazine Oral Solution, Kofexhall Baby Cough Syrup, Makoff Baby Cough Syrup and Magrip N Cold Syrup. Atlanta-based Atlantic Pharmaceuticals Company Ltd, which has permission to export medicines into Gambia, ordered a combined total of 50,000 bottles of those syrups, according to the police report.

LONODN (Reuters) - A court in military Myanmar on Wednesday sentenced deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi to three years in prison on charges of accepting a bribe, a source with knowledge of the matter said. The 77-year-old Nobel laureate, a figurehead of opposition to military rule, faces charges for at least 18 offences ranging from graft to election violations, carrying combined maximum terms of nearly 190 years. Suu Kyi has called the accusations against her absurd and denied any wrongdoing. She is being held in solitary confinement in the capital, Naypyitaw, and her trials have been conducted in closed courts.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - San Antonio police have arrested one of their own recently fired officers and charged him with two counts of aggravated assault by a public official for shooting an unarmed 17-year-old who was eating in a fast-food parking lot. Police body-camera video of the Oct. 2 shooting went viral on social media, showing then-officer James Brennand opening the driver's side door with his weapon drawn, demanding the driver exit the vehicle. The officer could then be seen opening fire as the teen drove away.

TOKYO (AP) - Japan's space agency said a rocket carrying eight satellites failed just after liftoff Wednesday and had to be aborted by a self-destruction command, in the country's first failed rocket launch in nearly 20 years. The Epsilon-6 rocket was not in the right position to orbit around the Earth and its flight had to be aborted less than seven minutes after takeoff from the Uchinoura Space Center in the southern Japanese prefecture of Kagoshima, Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency President Hiroshi Yamakawa told an online news conference.