

Kremlin Vows Justice for 'Murder' of Russian Soldiers



Soldiers of the DNR (Donetsk People's Republic) run with a stretcher carrying an injured separatist in a contested area of Mariupol.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- The Kremlin said Monday it would bring to justice people responsible for the "murder" of Russian soldiers in Ukraine after footage surfaced online and spurred mutual war crime allegations from Kyiv and Moscow.

The footage which appeared on social media last week showed the bodies of Russian servicemen killed after surrendering to Kyiv's troops, Moscow

has said.

Ukraine has denied that its forces had killed prisoners of war, saying the soldiers were shot following a false surrender.

"Without a doubt, Russia will itself search for those who committed this crime. They must be found and punished," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Russia "will do everything within

the framework of international mechanisms to draw attention to this crime," he added.

The defense ministry said last week that the videos showed the "deliberate and methodical murder" of more than 10 servicemen.

The UN said last week it had been made aware of the videos and was looking into them. A report it released earlier last week said there were credible allegations of abuses committed by both sides.

One video shows soldiers apparently surrendering to several military personnel in camouflage and wearing yellow armbands.

The soldiers who are giving themselves up lie down on the ground in the debris-filled backyard of a house. The video abruptly cuts as shots are heard.

Another video filmed from above shows the bodies of around a dozen people surrounded by apparent blood stains.

Russia's Human Rights Council said the alleged executions took place in Makiivka, a village in the eastern Luhansk region of Ukraine, which the Ukrainian army said it had recaptured last week.

Tokayev Re-Elected as Kazakhstan's President



Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev walks out of a voting booth before casting his ballot at a polling station during presidential elections in Astana, Kazakhstan, November 20, 2022.

ALMATY, Kazakhstan (Dispatches) -- Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was re-elected as leader of Central Asia's largest country in a landslide, months after deadly unrest, according to preliminary results released on Monday.

The 69-year-old, who came to power in 2019, received 81.31 percent of the vote, said the oil-rich nation's electoral commission. Final results were due to be announced within a week, after the tally of votes from abroad.

None of Tokayev's five opponents scored double digits in the vote, while 5.8 percent of voters cast their ballot against all candidates.

The electoral commission gave an estimated turnout of just over 69 percent among the 12 million

eligible voters.

"The people have clearly expressed their confidence in me and we have to justify it," Tokayev said as the results emerged.

Rich in natural resources and located at the crossroads of important trade routes, Kazakhstan sank into chaos during protests over high living costs in January, which left 238 dead.

While Kazakhstan has since stabilized, tensions persist, as shown by the arrest last week of seven opposition supporters accused of an attempted coup.

Hoping to turn over a new leaf after a turbulent year, Tokayev had said he was seeking a "new mandate of trust from the people" in this election.

After voting early on Sunday in the capital Astana, he said "the

main thing is that there is no monopoly of power".

Tokayev came to power in 2019 after winning 70 percent of the vote after he obtained the backing of former ruler Nursultan Nazarbayev.

For the following two-and-a-half years, he played a role of loyal protégé.

Tokayev distanced himself from his former mentor Nazarbayev, purged his clan from positions of authority and promised a "new and just Kazakhstan".

He announced reforms, a constitutional referendum and introduced single presidential terms of seven years.

Nazarbayev, who led Kazakhstan for three decades, was the first to congratulate Tokayev on his re-election. It was, he said, "unquestionable proof of the people's unshakeable faith in (his) reforms".

Nazarbayev praised his attitude "at critical times" for the country, a reference to the events earlier this year.

Tokayev also stood up to Russian President Vladimir Putin, as the Ukraine war shocked former Soviet republics.

In response, Tokayev strengthened his country's ties not only with China, but also with Europe.

Putin on Monday congratulated Tokayev, saying "You have received a convincing mandate of trust from fellow citizens, which opens up new opportunities for the implementation of the course of national development that you are advancing".

China Reintroduces Online Classes as COVID Cases Rise

BEIJING (Reuters) -- Students in schools across several Beijing districts buckled down for online classes on Monday after officials called for residents in some of its hardest-hit areas to stay home, as COVID cases in China's capital and nationally ticked higher.

China is fighting numerous COVID-19 flare ups, from Zhengzhou in central Henan province to Chongqing in the southwest and for Sunday reported 26,824 new local cases, nearing April's peaks. It also recorded two deaths in Beijing, up from one on Saturday, which was China's first since late May.

Guangzhou, a southern city of nearly 19 million people that is battling the largest of China's recent outbreaks, ordered a five-day lockdown for its Baiyun district, its most populous. It also suspended dine-in services and shut night clubs and theatres in Tianhe, home to the city's main business district.

Asian share markets and oil prices slipped on Monday as investors fretted about the economic fallout from the intensifying COVID situation in China, with the risk aversion benefiting bonds and the dollar.

The latest wave is testing China's resolve to stick to adjustments it has made to its zero-COVID policy, which calls for cities to be more targeted in their clampdown measures and steer away from catch-all lockdowns and testing that have strangled the economy and frustrated residents.

Several Chinese cities began cutting routine community COVID-19 testing last week, including the northern city of Shijiazhuang, which became the subject of fervent speculation that it could be a test bed for policy relaxation. This sparked worry among some local residents.

But late on Sunday, Shijiazhuang announced it would conduct mass testing in six of its eight districts over the next five days after new daily local cases hit 641. It also encouraged residents to shop online and ordered some schools to suspend in-person teaching.

The capital Beijing reported 962 new infections, up from 621 a day earlier. Its sprawling Chaoyang district, home to 3.5 million people, urged residents to stay home, with school going online. Some schools in Haidian, Dongcheng and Xicheng also halted in-person teaching.

China's recent efforts to make its COVID-19 curbs more targeted even as China faces its first winter battling the highly transmissible Omicron variant.

Many analysts expect such a shift to begin only in March or April, however, with the government arguing that President Xi Jinping's signature zero-COVID policy saves lives.

Experts warn that full reopening requires a massive vaccination booster effort and a change in messaging in a country where the disease remains widely feared.

UK Says Has No Plan for Swiss-Style Ties With EU



Newly appointed British Health Secretary Steve Barclay walks outside Number 10 Downing Street, in London, October 25, 2022.

LONDON (Reuters) -- The British government said it has no plans to move to a Swiss-style relationship with the European Union after some of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's euro-skeptic lawmakers warned him against pursuing a closer alignment with the trading bloc.

The Sunday Times reported that Sunak's government would look to pursue frictionless trade with the EU, which Britain left in January 2020. The newspaper said a potential deal could be modeled on Switzerland's EU relationship but that this would not involve a return to freedom of movement.

Switzerland has access to the EU's single market, but in return has to accept conditions, including freedom of movement and payments into the bloc's budget - a model previously rejected by British ministers during negotiations with Brussels.

"I don't recognize this story at all," health minister Steve Barclay told Sky News. "I don't support that. I want to maximize the opportunities that Brexit offers."

A UK foreign ministry spokesperson said: "These reports are categorically untrue".

Simon Clarke, a former minister, was

among those to criticize any suggestion that Britain could pursue a Swiss-style deal. He said on Twitter he hoped and believed that a Swiss-style deal "isn't something under consideration".

David Frost, former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's chief Brexit negotiator, said if the claims were correct, he hoped "the government thinks better of these plans, fast".

Nigel Farage, one of the most high-profile faces of the campaign to leave the EU, said on Twitter: "This level of betrayal will never be forgiven."

Britain's governing Conservatives have lurched from crisis to crisis since the vote to leave the European Union in 2016, which led to years of difficult negotiations with Brussels over an exit deal.

During those talks, the British government said the Swiss-style model of EU relations was unsuitable for Britain because the UK would have had to align with EU laws without any say over them and agree to freedom of movement for EU workers.

Britain is currently locked in talks with the EU over the Northern Ireland protocol, a part of the Brexit deal that mandated checks on some goods moving to Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom due to the province's open land border with EU member Ireland.

Election Deadlock Leaves Malaysia in Quandary



Pakatan Harapan chief Anwar Ibrahim (left) has the slight edge, with 82 MPs compared with former premier Muhyiddin Yassin's 79.

KUALA LUMPUR (Reuters) -- Malaysia's political parties were given until Tuesday to submit prime ministerial candidates, as the royal palace extended a deadline for opposition rivals Muhyiddin Yassin and Anwar Ibrahim to find more support after an election delivered a hung parliament.

The inconclusive result prolongs political instability in the Southeast Asian nation, which has had three prime ministers in as many years, and risks delays to policy decisions needed to galvanize an economic recovery.

Investors reacted negatively to the outcome of Saturday's vote as the ringgit currency weakened and the Kuala Lumpur stock market slid over 1 percent in early trade on Monday.

Having initially asked political coalitions to submit the names of candidates for prime minister by 2 p.m. on Monday, the palace extended the deadline by a day.

King Al-Sultan Abdullah plays a largely ceremonial role but has the power to appoint as prime minister a lawmaker he believes will command a majority.

Anwar's multi-ethnic coalition won the most number of seats in the Saturday election with 82.

Muhyiddin's conservative Malay Muslim alliance took 73 seats, but then secured support from two smaller

political blocs on Sunday, giving it control of 101 - still short of the 112 needed for a majority.

Muhyiddin's bloc includes an Islamic party that has called for sharia law and that secured the largest number of seats of any single party.

The incumbent Barisan Nasional alliance, led by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) party - which had long been the dominant force in Malaysia - suffered its worst ever electoral performance, but could still end up playing a crucial role by throwing its support behind either of the leading candidates.

Media reported that Anwar's coalition was meeting with Barisan on Monday morning, though Muhyiddin had been a junior partner in the outgoing government and had been a senior UMNO leader until a few years ago.

The decline of the graft-tainted UMNO party, which had led every government since independence from British colonial rule in 1957 up until its first defeat in the 2018 election, has ushered in a new uncertain phase in Malaysia.

Massive corruption, mostly related to the looting of billions of dollars from sovereign fund 1Malaysia Development Bhd (IMDB), for which former prime minister Najib Razak was jailed earlier this year, seriously wounded UMNO's image.



BERLIN (Reuters) -- Germany has offered Warsaw the Patriot missile defense system to help it to secure its airspace after a stray missile crashed in Poland last week, Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht told a newspaper. The German government had already said it would offer its neighbor further help in air policing with German Eurofighters after the incident, which initially raised fears that the war in Ukraine could spill across the border. The missile that hit Poland last week, killing two people, appeared to have been fired by Ukraine's air defenses rather than a Russian strike, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg has said. Ground-based air defense systems such as Raytheon's Patriot are built to intercept incoming missiles. NATO has moved to strengthen air defenses in eastern Europe since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February. More than a dozen NATO allies led by Germany in October kicked off an initiative to jointly procure air defense systems for several layers of threats, including Patriot. Germany had 36 Patriot units when it was NATO's frontline state during the Cold War. German forces currently have 12 Patriot units, two of which are deployed to Slovakia.

MANILA (Dispatches) -- The United States has an "unwavering" commitment to the Philippines, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris told the country's president Monday during a visit. Harris is the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit Manila since President Ferdinand Marcos took power in June, signaling a growing rapport between the longtime allies after years of frosty relations under his Beijing-friendly predecessor Rodrigo Duterte. Marcos said he did not "see a future for the Philippines that does not include the United States." The United States has a long and complex relationship with the Philippines -- and the Marcos family. Marcos's dictator father ruled the former U.S. colony for two decades with the support of Washington, which saw him as a Cold War ally. Relations between the two countries soured under the foul-mouthed Duterte. In 2016, Duterte called Barack Obama a "son of a whore" over warnings he would be questioned by the then U.S. president over his drug war. Washington is now seeking to bolster its security alliance with Manila under the new president.

TOKYO (Reuters) -- Japan's internal affairs minister resigned in connection with a funding scandal, becoming the third cabinet member to leave in less than a month in a severe blow to Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's already shaky support. Kishida's approval ratings have sunk after the July assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe revealed deep and long-standing ties between ruling Liberal Democratic Party politicians and the Unification Church, a group that critics say is a cult. Internal affairs minister Minoru Terada tendered his resignation to Kishida after media reports the premier was preparing to sack him. Kishida on Monday appointed Takeaki Matsumoto, a former foreign minister, to succeed Terada. A poll conducted over the weekend, before Terada's resignation, found that only 30.5% of respondents approved of Kishida, down 2.6 points from a survey in October, Asahi TV said on Monday. Just over half, 51%, disapproved of how he had handled the resignation of two previous ministers, Economic Revitalization Minister Daishiro Yamagishi and Justice Minister Yasuhiro Hanashi.

BEIJING (AFP) -- China on Monday welcomed a deal struck at the landmark COP27 climate summit in Egypt, but warned there was still a "long way to go" for global cooperation in curbing rising temperatures. "The road map for doubling global adaptation funding is still unclear, which is not conducive to building mutual trust between the north and the south," Beijing's foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said, referring to funds for poorer countries already affected by climate change. "Global climate governance has a long way to go," she added, saying "developed countries have still not fulfilled their commitment to providing \$100 billion in climate funding to developing countries every year." China -- the world's biggest polluter -- at the summit rejected the idea that it should no longer be considered a developing country, though it is now the world's second-biggest economy.

BOGOTÁ (AFP) -- At least 18 people were killed in Colombia in clashes between holdouts from the rebel army FARC and another armed group linked to drug trafficking, the government said. The government ombudsman's office said the fighting occurred on Saturday in southwest Colombia, near the border with Ecuador. The clashes involved rebels who have rejected a 2016 peace agreement that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) signed with the government and a criminal band that calls itself Comandos de la Frontera, or Border Commandos. The latter is composed of other fighters that used to be with FARC and remnants of a right-wing paramilitary group active in trafficking cocaine to Ecuador and Brazil. The two groups have fought for control of smuggling routes in parts of the Putumayo border area for at least three years. Colombia has suffered more than half a century of armed conflict between the state and various groups of left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries and drug traffickers.