

China Simulates ‘Strikes on Targets in Taiwan’



A pilot is photographed operating an aircraft under the Eastern Theater Command of China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) during a combat readiness patrol and exercises around Taiwan, at an undisclosed location in this handout image released on April 8, 2023.

BEIJING (Al Jazeera) – China’s military has staged “simulated joint precision strikes on key targets in Taiwan” during a second day of drills launched near the island in the wake of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen’s brief visit to the United States.

The announcement on Sunday came as Taiwan’s defence ministry said it had detected multiple Chinese air force sorties and was monitoring Beijing’s missile forces.

China, which claims democratically governed Taiwan as its own territory, began the three days of military exercises around the island on Saturday, the day after Tsai Ing-wen returned from the U.S., where she held a meeting with the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Kevin McCarthy.

Chinese state television reported the

combat readiness patrols and drills around Taiwan were continuing.

“Under the unified command of the theater joint operations command center, multiple types of units carried out simulated joint precision strikes on key targets on Taiwan island and the surrounding sea areas, and continue to maintain an offensive posture around the island,” it said.

Taiwan’s defence ministry said that as of Sunday midday (04:00 GMT), it had spotted 58 Chinese aircraft, including Su-30 fighters and H-6 bombers, as well as nine warships around the self-ruled island.

The ministry said it was paying particular attention to the People’s Liberation Army’s Rocket Force, which is in charge of China’s land-based missile system.

It reiterated that Taiwan’s forces will “not escalate conflicts nor cause disputes” and would respond “appropriately” to China’s drills.

China has described the exercises, dubbed United Sharp Sword, as a “serious warning to Taiwan’s independence separatist forces”.

China had warned Taiwan and the U.S. against the Tsai-McCarthy meeting, which took place on the Taiwanese president’s return leg of a tour of the self-ruled island’s two remaining formal allies in Central America.

She arrived home on Friday.

China also staged extensive war games around Taiwan last year, including firing missiles into waters close to the island, after a visit to Taipei by then Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi.

U.S. channels of communication with China remain open, said a spokesperson for the American Institute in Taiwan, which serves as an embassy in the absence of formal diplomatic ties.

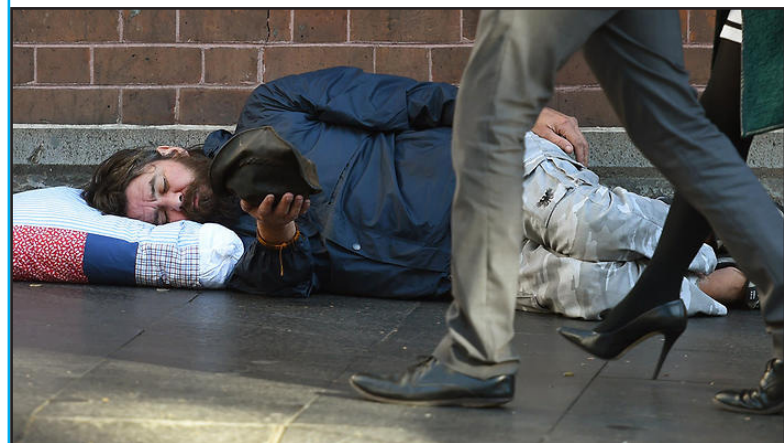
Washington severed diplomatic relations with Taipei in favor of Beijing in 1979 but still provides the island with weapons.

China, which has never renounced the use of force to bring the island under its control, says Taiwan is the most important and sensitive issue in its relations with the U.S., and the topic is a frequent source of tension.

Beijing considers Tsai a separatist and has rebuffed her repeated calls for talks.

China has over the past three years or so stepped up its military pressure against Taiwan, flying regular missions around Taiwan, though not in its territorial air space or over the island itself.

Homelessness Grips Growing Number of Australian, British Families



Housing may be a human right but right now, there are over 110,000 people without a permanent place to call home in Australia.

– A growing number of families in Queensland are being forced to sleep in their cars due to the rental crisis and rising cost of living.

Several councils have implemented new strategies to help including funding a sleeping bus and providing shower options, Sky News reported.

Those affected by the housing crisis are predominantly families and young people, where homeless parents are facing the risk of losing custody of their children.

St Vincent de Paul in Queensland has resorted to paying car registration fees to help families stay together.

Meanwhile, the number of homeless families being housed in hotels and B&Bs over the legal limit by

English councils has doubled within a year, figures revealed.

The latest figures released by the government show 1,210 families were in hotels and B&Bs for longer than the six-week legal limit between July 1 to September 30 in 2022, up from 570 in 2021 for the same period. These are the highest figures since 2017, The Guardian reported.

A total of 11,490 homeless households spent time in hotels and B&Bs in the same period in 2022, the highest number since 2003.

The problem is particularly acute in London. According to data from London Councils, there was an 180% increase in families being housed in hotels and B&Bs for more than six weeks from 2021 to 2022.

Families living in B&Bs and hotels

often have no access to cooking and clothes washing facilities and have to pay for laundrettes, storage services and takeaway food.

Piotr Rembikowski, 46 has been living with his wife, Madga, 44, and two sons aged 15 and 20 in a Travelodge in Enfield since August last year. They are one of 200 families currently being housed in commercial hotels by Enfield council.

Rembikowski is a wheelchair user and has a reconstructed bowel after suffering from colitis. He was made homeless after his privately rented property, which the family lived in for 16 years, burned down last year after a fire spread from a nearby construction site.

Rembikowski said he was unable to find another property on the private rental market due to his family’s income and the fact he is on disability benefits.

“I called many agencies but nobody wants to rent to a crippled person in a wheelchair,” he said.

He was told by letting agents he would need to have a household income of £54,000 to rent a three-bedroom home. He reported the family was homeless to Enfield council, and they were housed in the Travelodge.

Rembikowski has turned down food from the food bank because there is nowhere to store or cook the food. Due to his reconstructed bowel, Piotr usually has a strict diet but due to a lack of cooking facilities, he has had to rely on dry or takeaway foods.

Canadian Minister Condemns Hate Crime at Mosque

OTTAWA (Dispatches) – Canadian trade minister Mary Ng has denounced a hate-motivated Islamophobic attack at a mosque in Markham, Ontario when an individual desecrated a copy of the Holy Qur’an and attempted to ram worshipers with a vehicle.

“Deeply disturbed to hear of the violent hate crimes and racist behavior at the Islamic Society of Markham. To Muslims in Markham and Canada, I stand with you,” Ng tweeted in a post on Twitter.

“During Ramadan, mosques are places of community and peace – and everyone should feel safe in their place of worship. This violence and Islamophobia has no place in our communities or in Canada,” she added on Twitter.

According to a statement issued by the Islamic Society of Markham (ISM), which is one of the oldest and largest Muslim institutions in Markham, on Thursday an individual arrived at the ISM with his car, and upon entering the mosque he tore a copy of the Holy Qur’an, ranted

racial and Islamophobic slurs, and while leaving the place of worship, attempted to run over the worshipers with his vehicle.

Thousands of congregants attend the ISM, and the center is much busier because of the sacred month of Ramadan, the ISM said.

The attack comes during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which is considered the holiest month in the Islamic calendar

Canada is one of the top emerging centers of Islamophobia and hate crimes around the world, as it saw a rapid increase in the 21st century.

Canadians with Middle Eastern backgrounds have also been specifically targeted and victimized by Islamophobia in the context of the September 11 attacks.

Islamophobia has manifested itself in the vandalism of mosques and physical assaults on Muslims, including violence against Muslim women wearing hijab.

U.S. Opens Probe Into Leak of Secret Documents Related to Ukraine War



Ukrainian troops ride a self-propelled howitzer near the front line city of Bakhmut, Ukraine April 7, 2023.

WASHINGTON (AFP/Reuters) – The U.S. Department of Justice says it has begun an investigation into a trove of leaked U.S. documents, many related to Ukraine, that have spread to the Internet.

The breach appears to include assessments and secret intelligence reports that touch not only on Ukraine and Russia but also highly sensitive analyses of U.S. allies.

“We have been in communication with the Department of Defense related to this matter and have begun an investigation,” a Justice Department spokesperson told AFP.

A steady drip of dozens of leaked documents and slides have made their way onto Twitter, Telegram, Discord and other social media and chat sites in recent days, and new documents continue to surface.

The Pentagon said Friday it was “actively reviewing the matter” and that it had formally referred the apparent breach to the Justice Department.

U.S. officials told the Washington Post that some documents appeared to be manipulated but many were consistent with CIA World Intelligence Review reports that are shared at high levels within the White House, Pentagon and State Department.

Defense analysts say any breach of internal classified U.S. documents would be both damaging and potentially embarrassing.

In addition, the leak would prove valuable to Moscow by showing how deep U.S. intelligence has penetrated parts of the Russian military apparatus, U.S. media said.

Other documents include apparent information about internal debate within the governments of U.S. allies.

Among the documents, for example, were discussions about South

Korea’s debate on whether to provide the United States artillery shells for use in Ukraine, The New York Times said.

A South Korean presidential official said on Sunday Seoul is aware of news reports about the leak of several classified U.S. military documents and it plans to discuss “issues raised” as a result of the leak with the United States.

Meanwhile, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has ruled out negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, claiming that Moscow has not demonstrated its readiness for “constructive” talks.

He made the remarks during a press briefing in Germany on Friday, demanding that Russia first show its willingness to engage in “constructive negotiations” with the goal of a “just and lasting peace.”

Blinken also claimed that although the idea of a ceasefire may be “tempting,” it will not contribute to a “just and lasting peace” if it means “ratification” of Moscow’s control over the former Ukrainian territories that voted in a referendum to join the Russian federation following the start of its “special military operation” in neighboring Ukraine aimed at protecting the country’s Russian-speaking population as well as blocking further eastward advance of the U.S.-led NATO military alliance.

Moscow launched its military operation in Ukraine back in February 2022 in face of Kiev’s surging attacks on the pro-Russia Donbass republics and NATO’s failure to satisfy Russia’s persisting demands for security guarantees amid growing calls for Ukraine’s NATO membership, which would eventually place hostile Western military forces and weaponry on Russian border.

Armed Groups Kill Dozens in Nigeria’s Benue State

ABUJA (Al Jazeera) – At least 74 people were killed in two separate attacks by gunmen this week in Benue state, north central Nigeria, local officials and police have said.

Violence has increased in the region in recent years as population growth leads to an expansion of the area dedicated to farming, leaving less land available for open grazing by nomads’ cattle herds.

Benue state police spokesperson Catherine Anene said 28 bodies were recovered at a camp for internally displaced people in Mgban local government area between Friday evening and Saturday morning.

It was not immediately clear what triggered the attack but witnesses said gunmen arrived and started shooting, killing several people.

The attack followed a separate incident in the same state in the remote Umogidi village of Otukpo local government area, when suspected herdsmen killed villagers at a funeral, Bako Eje, the chairman for Otukpo, told the Reuters news agency.

Paul Hembra, a security adviser to the Benue state governor, said 46 bodies were recovered after the attack.

President Muhammadu Buhari in a statement on Saturday condemned “the recent bout of killings in Benue State in which tens of people were killed in Umogidi community” and directed security forces to increase

surveillance in affected areas.

Many attacks in remote parts of Nigeria go unreported as thinly stretched security forces often respond late to distress calls by communities.

Benue is one of Nigeria’s Middle Belt states, where the majority Muslim north meets the predominantly Christian south.

Competition over land use is particularly intractable in the Middle Belt, where fault lines between farmers and herders often overlap with ethnic and religious divisions.

Benue has been one of the states hit hardest by years of disputes between nomadic herders and pastoral farmers who blame herdsmen for destroying farmland with their cattle grazing.

Those conflicts have often spiraled into broader criminality and tit-for-tat revenge attacks between informal armed groups established to protect rival communities.

A spokesman for the national herders association this week urged officials not to blame herders for every attack before carrying out proper investigations.

Separately on Saturday, gunmen abducted at least 80 people in Zamfara state, a hot spot for kidnappings for ransom by armed gangs targeting remote villages.

News in Brief

FRANKFURT (AP) – Police warned people in Hamburg, Germany, to close their windows early Sunday after a large fire that engulfed several warehouses sent black, chemical-laden smoke drifting over the city. German news agency DPA said the fire broke out around 4:30 am in the Rothenburgsort district, located in the eastern part of Germany’s second-largest city. The smoke drifted from there toward the city center, halting long-distance trains between Hamburg and Berlin and other cities. A public safety alert conveyed through a mobile phone app advised people in Hamburg to close windows, turn off ventilation and air conditioning, and to avoid the area. No injuries were reported. Public broadcaster NDR said the fire involved containers with hydrogen sulfide, a toxic and foul-smelling substance, forcing firefighters and police officers in the area to wear breathing apparatus.

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) — At least 44 people were killed by extremists in multiple attacks in northern Burkina Faso, the government said Saturday. The militants attacked Kourakou and Tondobi villages in Seno province, said Lt. Col. P.F. Rodolphe Sorgho, governor of the Sahel region in a statement. Sorgho called the attacks on Thursday and Friday “despicable and barbaric” and said the government was stabilizing the area. He called on people to remain calm. The West African nation has been overrun by violence linked to Al-Qaeda and the Daesh terrorist group that’s killed thousands and displaced 2 million people over six years. Fighting has frustrated and divided a once peaceful population, leading to two military coups last year with each junta leader vowing to stem the attacks. But the violence is intensifying and spreading as militants blockade villages, preventing hundreds of thousands of people from moving freely. In February, the Daesh terrorist group claimed responsibility for killing more than 70 soldiers, wounding dozens and taking five hostage, in an ambush on a military convoy in the north. A few weeks before that, militants killed at least 32 people, including soldiers and civilians, in multiple attacks across the country. The violence has created the worst humanitarian crisis in the country’s history, forcing one in five citizens — some 4.7 million people — to be in need of humanitarian assistance, according to the United Nations.

PARIS (Reuters) – As many as 10 people were thought to be under the rubble after an explosion that caused two residential buildings to collapse in the southern French city of Marseille on Sunday, Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said. The cause of the explosion was not yet known. The collapse caused a fire that complicated rescue efforts and that Darmanin said could take hours to put out. He said authorities estimated there were between four and 10 people under the rubble. Five people were taken to hospital with serious but not life threatening injuries and a sixth person was being treated for shock, he added. A third building has partially collapsed and people have been evacuated from some 30 buildings in the area. The buildings that collapsed on the Rue de Tivoli were not known to have any structural problems, Darmanin said.

PARIS (AFP) – French President Emmanuel Macron said in an interview published Sunday that Europe must not be a “follower” of either the U.S. or China on Taiwan, saying that the bloc risks entanglement in “crises that aren’t ours”. His comments risk riling Washington and high-light divisions in the European Union over how to approach China, as the U.S. steps up confrontation with its closest rival and Beijing draws closer to Russia in the wake of the Ukraine war. “The worst thing would be to think that we Europeans must be followers and adapt ourselves to the American rhythm and a Chinese overreaction,” Macron told media including French business daily Les Echos and Politico as he returned Friday from a three-day state visit to Beijing. Citing his prized ideal of EU “strategic autonomy”, the French leader said that “we must be clear where our views overlap with the U.S., but whether it’s about Ukraine, relations to China or sanctions, we have a European strategy.” “We don’t want to get into a bloc versus bloc logic,” he added, saying Europe “should not be caught up in a disordering of the world and crises that aren’t ours”.

NEW YORK (Anadolu) – The United Nations has voiced concern over the current tense situation in Sudan following a delay in the signing of a final agreement to resolve the country’s months-long political crisis. In a statement, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk called on Sudan’s rivals to work to overcome obstacles to civilian transition. The rights chief appealed to all parties “to set aside entrenched positions and personal interests, to focus on the common interests of the Sudanese people by redoubling efforts towards restoration of a civilian-led government.” “Much work has been done and many positive steps taken towards the signature of a final agreement – all efforts must now go to get the political transition back on the right path,” he added. Turk also urged “all sides to work together to overcome obstacles on security sector reform and avoid any further delays in the signing of the political agreement.” He also called on all Sudanese sides to de-escalate tensions and refrain from violence.