

China Ends Three Days of Drills With Warning to Taiwan



Customers dine near a giant screen broadcasting news footage of aircraft taking part in a combat readiness patrol and "Joint Sword" exercises around Taiwan, at a restaurant in Beijing, April 10, 2023.

TAIPEI (Dispatches) -- China ended three days of military drills around Taiwan on Monday saying they had tested integrated military capabilities under actual combat conditions, having practised precision strikes and blockading the island that Beijing views as its own. Beijing announced the drills on Saturday, after Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen returned to Taipei following a meeting in Los Angeles with U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Kevin McCarthy. China has never renounced the use of force to bring the island under Beijing's control. Taiwan's government strongly disputes China's claims and has denounced the drills. The Chinese military said it had

"successfully completed" the exercises and "comprehensively tested" the capabilities of multiple units under actual combat conditions. Chinese state television said earlier on Monday that aircraft, including nuclear-capable H-6 bombers armed with live missiles, and warships staged drills to "form a multi-directional island-encompassing blockade situation". The Eastern Theatre Command said the Shandong aircraft carrier had also taken part in combat patrols, and it showed fighters taking off from its deck. Taiwan's defense ministry published a map on Monday of the previous 24 hours of Chinese air force activities, showing four carrier-based

Chinese J-15 fighters operating over the Pacific Ocean to Taiwan's east. The ministry said that as of mid-morning on Monday it had spotted 59 military aircraft and 11 ships around Taiwan, and that the Shandong carrier group was conducting drills in the Western Pacific. The Shandong conducted air operations in waters close to Japan's Okinawa islands on Sunday, Japan's defense ministry said on Monday. Jet fighters and helicopters took off and landed on the carrier 120 times over Friday to Sunday, with the carrier, three other warships and a support vessel coming within 230 kilometers (143 miles) of Japan's Miyako island, the defense ministry said. The southern Japanese island of Okinawa hosts a major U.S. air force base, and last August when China staged war games to protest the visit of then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taipei, Chinese missiles landed within Japan's exclusive economic zone. The Kremlin backed China's three-day drills around Taiwan, saying Beijing had a "sovereign right" to respond to what Moscow called "provocative acts." "We have witnessed multiple acts that were provocative in their character towards the Chinese People's Republic," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. "China has the sovereign right to respond to these provocative acts, including with military maneuvers, in strict accordance with international law."

Philippines: No 'Offensive Action' on Bases Open to U.S.



Philippine Gen. Francis Coronel, right, shakes hands with U.S. Army soldiers after a live-fire exercise during a March 31, 2023 joint exercise between the Philippines and the U.S. at Fort Magsaysay in the Philippines.

MANILA (Dispatches) -- Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr assured China on Monday that military bases accessible to the United States would not be used in any offensive action, stressing the arrangement with Washington was designed to boost his country's defenses. China's foreign ministry last week said the United States strengthening military deployment in the Philippines would only lead to more tension in the region, after Manila allowed Washington access to more of its bases. "China's reaction was not surprising," Marcos told reporters. "The Philippines will not allow the bases to be used in any offensive action," he said. The Philippines identified last week four more of its bases the United States will get access to, almost doubling the number included in its Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The locations of the bases are significant, with three facing north towards Taiwan and one near the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, where China has built artificial islands equipped with runways and missile systems. EDCA underlines the Philippines' strategic importance to the former colonial ruler the United States, coming at a time of growing tensions in the

South China Sea and self-ruled Taiwan. Signed in 2014, it allows U.S. access to Philippine bases for joint training, pre-positioning of equipment and building of facilities such as runways, fuel storage and military housing, but it is not a permanent presence. The pact stalled under former president Rodrigo Duterte, who favored closer ties with China. But Marcos, who succeeded Duterte in June, has adopted a more U.S.-friendly foreign policy and sought to accelerate the implementation of the EDCA. China warned last week the expanded military deal could endanger regional peace, and accused Washington of a "zero-sum mentality". The four additional bases include sites near the hotly disputed South China Sea and another not far from Taiwan. "If no one is attacking us, they need not worry because we will not fight them," Marcos said. "What we are doing is we are strengthening our territorial defense, the defense of the Republic." Marcos' remarks also come ahead of the largest ever joint military exercises between the Philippines and the United States, which will feature for the first time live fire exercises at sea.

News in Brief

BALTIMORE (AP) -- The mayor of Baltimore called for a summer curfew after two teenagers were shot while police were attempting to break up a large crowd of minors. A 14-year-old and a 16-year-old were shot and wounded as police attempted to break up fights among a crowd of more than 200 teenagers gathered at the city's Inner Harbor area around 9 p.m. Sunday, WBAL-TV reported. Two suspects were arrested, police said, including one with a loaded gun who matched a description of the shooter and another who was found with a loaded gun in a police garage, WBAL reported. Following the shooting, Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott announced his intention to implement a 9 p.m. curfew for anyone 14 years and younger and 10 p.m. for those younger than 17 during the forthcoming summer months, WJZ-TV reported. "I want everyone to hear me and hear me clearly," Scott said. "We are going back to the old days. We will be enforcing a youth curfew as we move into the latter spring and summer months."

BEIJING (Reuters) -- China firmly opposes a visit by India's home minister to Arunachal Pradesh and views his activities in the area as violating Beijing's territorial sovereignty, a foreign ministry spokesperson told a news briefing on Monday. China has renamed some places in what India regards as its eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as part of its territory. "Zangnan is China's territory," spokesperson Wang Wenbin said in response to a question on the visit by Indian Home Minister Amit Shah. "The Indian official's visit to Zangnan violates China's territorial sovereignty, and is not conducive to the peace and tranquility of the border situation." China and India have had several skirmishes over the disputed border and clashes in mountainous regions in recent years have seriously strained ties.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia plans to overhaul its air defense forces after gaining new experience in the war in Ukraine and will also bolster its air defenses to counter Finland's accession to the NATO military alliance, a commander in Russia's aerospace forces said. In an interview published on Monday with the Red Star newspaper, Lieutenant General Andrei Demin, deputy commander-in-chief of aerospace forces, said air defense forces had faced a number of challenges in the face of Ukrainian strikes. Russia, he said, had added more than 50 mobile radar stations and A-50 early warning and control aircraft patrolled 24 hours a day while missile and anti-aircraft installations in regions next to Ukraine had been bolstered. In Ukrainian regions under Russian control, air defense units had been set up to defend key installations, Demin said, while Russia had ramped up production of the RLK-MC anti-drone system.

Ukraine: Russia Focusing on Two Cities in Donetsk Region



Ukrainian service members fire a howitzer M119 at a front line, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, near the city of Bakhmut, March 10, 2023.

KYIV (Reuters) -- Russian forces are pressing attacks in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, focusing on two cities and pounding Ukrainian positions with airstrikes and artillery barrages, Kyiv said on Monday. The commander of Ukraine's ground forces said the Russians were destroying buildings and positions in besieged Bakhmut in what he called "scorched earth" tactics. Russia's assault on Bakhmut, a small city in Donetsk at the edge of a chunk of Russian-controlled territory, has for months been the focus of the biggest battle of the war, now in its second year. Ukraine's Armed Forces General Staff said on Sunday fighting

was heaviest along the western approaches to Bakhmut. The Russians were also targeting the city of Avdiivka, it said. On Monday, ground forces commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi said the defense of Bakhmut continued. "The situation is difficult but controllable," he said in comments quoted by Ukraine's Media Military Centre. Moscow is sending in special forces and airborne assault units to help their attack as members of Russia's private mercenary Wagner group are now exhausted, Syrskyi said. Wagner mercenaries have spearheaded the Russian assault on Bakhmut which has left it largely in ruins.

Ukraine's general staff said Russian forces had made unsuccessful advances on areas west of Bakhmut and at least 10 towns and villages had come under Russian shelling. The Russians had also made no headway in attacks on Avdiivka, it said. Donetsk is one of four provinces in eastern and southern Ukraine that Russia declared annexed last year and is seeking to fully occupy in what appears to be a shift in its war aims after failing to overrun the country soon after the war began in February 2022. Western analysts say both sides have been losing large numbers of troops in the battle for Bakhmut, a regional transport and logistics hub prior to the war. Control of Bakhmut could allow Russia to directly target Ukrainian defensive lines in Chasiv Yar in the east and open the way for its forces to advance on two bigger cities in the Donetsk region - Kramatorsk and Sloviansk. While Ukraine has said it wants to inflict as many casualties as possible on the Russian forces as it prepares its own counteroffensive, President Volodymyr Zelensky last week acknowledged that if troops risked being encircled they could be pulled back. Ukrainian military analyst Oleh Zhdanov said Russian forces controlled the center of Bakhmut, with much of their assault now focusing on the railway station.

Sikh Row: India Says UK Trade Talks Not Suspended



A pro-Khalistan supporter attempts to pull down Indian flag at the High Commission of India in London (left).

NEW DELHI (Reuters) -- Trade talks between India and Britain have not been suspended and will continue this year, three officials said on Monday, responding to a British newspaper report that said India had "disengaged" from the talks after London failed to condemn Sikh separatists. An official in India's foreign ministry said progress in the trade talks and New Delhi's concerns around Sikh separatist activities in Britain should not be inter-linked. A diplomatic official in the British High Commission in New Delhi said trade talks will continue in a scheduled manner and security officials in London were addressing India's concerns about Sikh separatist activities in Britain. "Both the UK and India are committed to delivering an ambitious and mutually beneficial FTA and concluded the latest round of trade talks last month," a spokesperson for Britain's Department for Business and Trade said. New Delhi has been upset about protests and vandalism by Sikh separatists outside its mission in London and elsewhere in the United States and Canada. Last month, protesters with banners supporting the so-called independent Sikh state of "Khalistan" staged a demonstration outside the Indian High Com-

mission in London and took down an Indian flag from the building's balcony to denounce recent police action against a pro-Khalistan Sikh preacher. The demand for Khalistan has witnessed a revival in sections of the Sikh population in India and overseas. India last month summoned the top British diplomat in New Delhi to convey its "strong protest" over the London incident. The foreign ministry had later said India was not interested in assurances but would like to see action. British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said acts of violence towards staff at the High Commission in London were unacceptable and British police were investigating. The Times newspaper reported on Monday that India has "disengaged" from the talks after accusing Britain of failing to condemn a Sikh separatist group. A second Indian foreign ministry source said that trade talks with Britain had not been suspended, and described the media report to be "baseless". In total, Britain and India have an around 29 billion pound (\$35.5 billion) trading relationship, and expanding it is a major part of Britain's Indo-Pacific foreign policy tilt, which aims to enhance ties with the region's fast-growing economies.

OCCUPIED AL-QUDS (Dispatches) -- Israel signed a 1.44 billion shekel (\$400 million) deal to sell Spike anti-tank missiles to Greece, the occupying regime's war ministry said on Monday, just days after reaching a similar-sized deal to provide air defenses to newly-inducted NATO member Finland. The Spike is a guided anti-tank missile used by many EU and NATO countries produced by the Zionist regime's military contractor Rafael. Last week the occupying regime and Rafael said they would provide the advanced air-defense system David's Sling to Finland, after it officially joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on April 4. Finland will receive the defense system designed to intercept ballistic and cruise missiles in a 316 million euro (\$345 million) deal. It still requires approval from the United States, which is involved in the system's development.

NEW DELHI (Reuters) -- The Dalai Lama, the Tibetans' 87-year-old spiritual leader, apologized on Monday after footage showed him asking a young boy to "suck my tongue" at a public event. "His Holiness wishes to apologize to the boy and his family, as well as his many friends across the world, for the hurt his words may have caused," said a statement on the exiled leader's Twitter account. The video, which has 1 million views on Twitter, also shows the Nobel peace laureate apparently giving the boy a peck on the lips in presence of an audience who are heard clapping and laughing, while a man captures the moment on a phone. The Dalai Lama, who fled to India in 1959 after a failed uprising against Chinese rule in Tibet, is regarded by Beijing as a dangerous separatist. He now lives in a compound next to a temple ringed by green hills and snow-capped mountains in the northern Indian town of Dharamshala.

OSLO (Guardian) -- A record number of super-rich Norwegians are abandoning Norway for low-tax countries after the center-left government increased wealth taxes to 1.1%. More than 30 Norwegian billionaires and multimillionaires left Norway in 2022, according to research by the newspaper Dagens Naeringsliv. This was more than the total number of super-rich people who left the country during the previous 13 years, it added. Even more super-rich individuals are expected to leave this year because of the increase in wealth tax in November, costing the government tens of millions last tax receipts. Many have moved to Switzerland, where taxes are much lower. They include billionaire fisher turned industrial tycoon Kjell Inge Rokke who moved to the Italian-speaking canton of Lugano, close to his favored hangout Lake Como and fashion capital Milan.

Petrol Bombs Thrown Ahead of Biden Visit to Northern Ireland

LONDONDERRY, Northern Ireland (Reuters) -- A number of masked people attacked police with petrol bombs and other objects at a parade opposing the Good Friday peace accord in Londonderry, police said on Monday, a day before U.S. President Joe Biden visits Belfast. A Reuters photographer showed four young people in the mainly Irish nationalist area of Creggan throwing petrol bombs at an armored police vehicles, which was covered in flames on one side. Police said nobody was injured and appealed for calm. "Our officers have come under attack in Creggan with petrol bombs and other objects thrown at their vehicle while in attendance at an un-notified Easter parade. No injuries have been reported at this time," police said in a statement. Monday marked the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement that largely ended three decades of sectarian bloodshed in Northern Ireland. There is still some sporadic violence by small groups opposed to peace. Signed in Belfast on April 10, 1998, the Good Friday agreement is considered one of the most significant peace deals of the late 20th Century, seeking to end three decades of sectar-

ian strife that killed more than 3,600 people. But peace has come under strain following Britain's exit from the European Union and other political crises have overshadowed this week's commemorations. Biden will fly into Northern Ireland on Tuesday to attend events marking the 25th anniversary of the deal, a reflection of the role the United States played in brokering the agreement. "This is an agreement born of partnership between the British and Irish governments and, as we will see from President Biden's visit this week, it continues to enjoy huge international support from our closest allies," British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said in statement on Monday. Angry about post-Brexit trade rules that treated the province of Northern Ireland differently to the rest of the United Kingdom, the Democratic Unionist Party, the largest pro-British party, has boycotted the power-sharing devolved government central to the peace deal for more than a year. Last month, Britain's MI5 intelligence agency increased the threat level in Northern Ireland from domestic terrorism to "severe" - meaning an attack was considered highly likely.