

Russia Blasts West's 'Obnoxious' Remarks About Navalny



Ministers attend the annual Munich Security Conference, in Munich, Germany February 16, 2024.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- The Kremlin said Monday the investigation into the death of Alexei Navalny was ongoing as it slammed "vulgar statements" over the Kremlin's responsibility for his death.

"It's ongoing, all the necessary actions are being carried out," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters when asked about the investigation, adding that Moscow considered a series of "blatantly vulgar statements" about Navalny's death to be "absolutely unacceptable".

Peskov said the West's reaction to the death was unacceptable but that the obnoxious statements from the United States and Europe would not harm President Vladimir Putin.

"We consider it absolutely unacceptable to make such, well, frankly obnoxious statements," he said. "These statements, of course, cannot cause any damage to our head of our state."

Peskov said the investigation into Navalny's death was ongoing and is being conducted in accordance with Russian law.

Asked how Putin reacted to news of the death, Peskov said: "I have nothing to add."

Russian investigators have yet to determine the official cause of Navalny's death, his spokeswoman said on Monday, after prison authorities said he suddenly dropped dead following a walk in the "Polar Wolf" penal colony.

The West and Navalny's supporters have dismissed the Russian prison service's statement on Friday that the 47-year-old had lost consciousness and died. Western leaders have cast Putin as a killer and said he is responsible for Navalny's death.

Putin has made no public comment but Russian officials scolded Western leaders for rushing to conclusions about the death, which has further deepened a schism in relations between Moscow and the West caused by the Ukraine war.

Germany will propose new sanctions against Moscow over the death, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said Monday.

The ministers were already due to discuss the bloc's 13th package of sanctions against Russia since the Ukraine war broke out on Feb. 24, 2022. Hungary is the only EU state yet to approve the proposed restrictions against nearly 200 firms and people.

"(EU) member states will propose sanctions for sure against those responsible," said the chairman of Monday ministerial talks, foreign policy chief Josep Borrell. "The great responsible is Putin himself."

Navalny's mother, Lyudmila, was told on Saturday at the prison colony that he had perished from "sudden death syndrome", according to Navalny's team.

Navalny's spokeswoman, Kira Yarmysh, said his 69-year-old mother and lawyers were informed that the official verification of the cause of death had been extended.

Peskov has said the reaction of Western leaders to Navalny's death was "absolutely rabid".

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the reaction of the West and its media demonstrated "their hypocrisy, cynicism and unscrupulousness".

"In any situation, the script is always: 'blame Russia,'" Zakharova said.

UN: UK Plans to Send Asylum Seekers to Rwanda 'Undercut' Rights



Recent legislative moves by the UK Government seek to facilitate the prompt removal of asylum-seekers to Rwanda.

GENEVA (AFP) -- Britain's legislation on its controversial plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda for processing undercuts basic rights principles, the UN human rights chief said Monday.

Volker Turk said the legislative moves by British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's government to facilitate removals to Rwanda ran contrary to the basic principles of the rule of law and risk delivering a serious blow to human rights.

"The combined effects of this bill, action to shield government from standard legal scrutiny, directly undercut basic human rights principles," Turk said in a statement.

The British government introduced the so-called Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill late last year, shortly after the Supreme Court ruled that deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda is illegal under international law.

If passed after ongoing scrutiny in both houses of parliament, the legislation would compel British judges to treat Rwanda as a safe third country.

It would also give government ministers powers to disregard sections of international and British human rights legislation.

Turk called for the bill to be reconsidered.

"I urge the UK government to take all necessary steps to ensure full compliance with the UK's international legal obligations, and to uphold the country's proud history of effective, independent judicial scrutiny," he said. "Such a stance is today more vital than ever."

Hungary Moves to Deepen Ties With China After Snubbing U.S.

BRUSSELS (Guardian) -- China has offered to deepen security cooperation with Hungary, underscoring Budapest's warming ties with Beijing just as Hungarian officials snubbed a visiting delegation from Washington.

Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, met China's minister of public security, Wang Xiaohong, on Friday.

In comments published by China's official Xinhua news agency over the weekend, Wang said he was hoping to "deepen cooperation in areas including counter-terrorism, combating transnational crimes, security and law enforcement capacity building under the belt and road initiative".

The aim, according to the Chinese minister, would be "to make law enforcement and security cooperation a new highlight of bilateral relations".

Hungary is a member of the EU and NATO, making China's offer highly unusual.

"The negotiating parties drew attention to the importance of security and stability," the spokesperson said.

The prospect of greater security cooperation between Budapest and Beijing comes at a time when Hungary's relationship with its EU and NATO allies is at a low point.

While Hungary's standing in western capitals has been deteriorating for years, Budapest's decision to renege on a promise not to be the last to ratify Sweden's NATO application has further deepened the rift.

Budapest's isolation was demonstrated over the weekend at the Munich security conference, from which senior Hungarian officials were absent.

The continued strain was on full display over the weekend, as Hungarian officials refused to meet visitors from Washington.

"Allies have been awaiting Hungary's action on Sweden's accession to NATO for 21 months," the U.S. ambassador in Budapest, David Pressman, wrote on social media.

"Regrettably, a range of senior Hungarian government officials and Fidesz parliamentary representatives declined to meet with the most senior U.S. bipartisan congressional delegation to visit Hungary in years," he added.

In his weekend speech, Orbán made his preferences clear. "We cannot interfere in other countries' elections, but we would very much like to see President Donald Trump return to the White House and make peace here in the eastern half of Europe."

China Calls on U.S. to Stop 'Harassment' of Chinese Students



Beijing has repeatedly said that Chinese nationals have been subject to aggressive interrogations and deportations at U.S. airports.

BEIJING (AFP) -- China's public security minister called on the U.S. homeland security secretary to stop alleged "harassment" of Chinese students entering the United States in a meeting between the two in Vienna, Beijing's state media reported Monday.

Beijing has repeatedly alleged that Chinese nationals with valid travel documents have been subject to aggressive interrogations and deportations at U.S. airports.

Last month, its embassy in Washington said Chinese travelers should avoid the capital's Dulles airport.

In a readout of talks Sunday between Wang Xiaohong and Alejandro Mayorkas, Beijing said Washington must "stop harassing and checking Chinese students for no apparent reason", state news agency Xinhua said.

In his meeting with Mayorkas, Wang urged the United States to "ensure that Chinese citizens enjoy fair entry treatment and full dignity," according to Xinhua.

Wang also pressed Mayorkas to "rectify" the U.S. decision to place China on a list of major countries transiting or producing narcotics.

U.S. officials have long charged that China is complicit in the trade of fentanyl, which is many times more powerful than heroin and is responsible for more than 70,000 overdose deaths a year in the United States.

Last month in Beijing, U.S. and Chinese officials agreed to cooperate to curb the production of ingredients to make fentanyl, known as precursor chemicals.

A U.S. readout of Sunday's talks said Wang and Mayorkas had held "candid and constructive discussion on the steps needed to combat the spread of precursor chemicals".

"The two sides also made commitments with respect to continued law enforcement cooperation, technical bilateral exchanges between scientists and other experts, scheduling of precursor chemicals, and furthering multilateral cooperation," it said.

Washington and Beijing also discussed expanding cooperation "in the fight to protect children from online child sexual exploitation and abuse", the readout added.

Relations between China and the United States have warmed over the past year as Washington has pursued dialogue with Beijing.

But the Chinese government still resents U.S. measures, including a ban on exports of advanced semiconductors and sanctions on Chinese firms and individuals.

In talks in Munich last week, Foreign Minister Wang Yi told Secretary of State Antony Blinken the U.S. must "lift illegal unilateral sanctions".

Wang also called on the U.S. to "stop unwarranted harassment and interrogation of Chinese citizens".

Czech Farmers Join European Protests, Eiffel Tower Closes



Farmers drive tractors during a protest against European Union agricultural policies, grievances shared by farmers across Europe, in Prague, Czech Republic, February 19, 2024.

PRAGUE (Reuters/AFP) -- Hundreds of Czech farmers drove their tractors into downtown Prague on Monday, disrupting traffic outside the Agriculture Ministry, as they joined protests against high energy costs, stifling bureaucracy and the European Union's Green Deal.

Farmers across Europe have taken to the streets this year, including in Poland, France, Germany, Spain and Italy, to fight low prices and high costs, cheap imports and EU climate change constraints.

Czech farmers are planning to join protests this week, although major agricultural associations distanced themselves from Monday's action, in which tractors blocked one lane of a major road through Prague, slowing but not completely snarling traffic.

Several hundred whistling and jeering protesters outside the Agriculture Ministry yelled "Shame" and "Resign" in comments directed at the minister, who has not met organizers of the tractor protest.

The Agrarian Chamber (AK) has called its own protests to join other European farmers at border crossings on Thursday, and has distanced itself from Monday's tractor protest.

Its main complaint is EU farm policy, market distortions and low purchase prices coming from surpluses amid cheap imports from outside the bloc.

associated with the EU's climate change fight laid out in the Green Deal, which sets out agricultural regulations for the bloc's 27 members for decades.

"Farmers are desperate in this hopeless situation and do not know what they should expect in the near future, let alone the distant one," AK president Jan Dolezal said last week. "They need stability in the business environment."

In Paris, the Eiffel Tower, one of the world's top tourist attractions, was closed Monday after staff went on strike, unions told AFP.

The strike, which was called to protest over the way the monument is managed financially, could be extended, they said.

The tower's operator, SETE, said on its website that "visits of the monument will be disrupted on Monday".

The stoppage is the second strike at the Eiffel Tower within two months for the same reason.

Unions have criticized operator SETE for its business model that they say is based on an inflated estimate of future visitor numbers, while under-estimating construction costs.

The Eiffel Tower -- Paris's most famous landmark -- attracts nearly seven million visitors a year, around three-quarters of them foreigners, according to its website.

During the Covid pandemic numbers dropped sharply due to closures and travel restrictions, but recovered to 5.9 million in 2022.

News in Brief

YANGON (AFP) -- Two people were killed in a crush outside a passport office in Myanmar on Monday, a rescue worker said, as thousands rush to leave the country to escape a junta military service law. Two women aged 52 and 39 died early Monday after hundreds of people surged to get in line at the passport office in second city Mandalay, a rescue worker who arrived at the scene told AFP. "There was a ditch near the crowd. They fell into the ditch and died from a lack of oxygen," the rescue officer said, requesting anonymity for security reasons. Another woman was slightly injured, the officer said, adding that all three had been selling tokens assigning numbers in the queue. Three years after seizing power in a coup, the military is struggling to crush widespread armed opposition to its rule.

CIUDAD VICTORIA, Mexico (AFP) -- Mexican troops on patrol killed 12 gunmen in a clash in Tamaulipas, according to the government of the northeastern state, which has been rocked by violence linked to organized crime. The shootout occurred when soldiers were patrolling Miguel Aleman municipality on the border with the United States, the office of Tamaulipas's spokesperson for security said on social media. It said members of the Secretariat of National Defense (Sedena) "were attacked by armed civilians who were hiding in the bush" at around 2 pm (2000 GMT). The clash left "12 assailants dead", and soldiers seized 12 guns and an array of ammunition, it added. State government sources confirmed to AFP that the 12 attackers, alleged members of a drug cartel, were killed in the incident, during which the military also used drones and a helicopter.

BUENOS AIRES (AFP) -- Argentina's new far-right libertarian President Javier Milei has blamed the South American country's traditional political "caste" for the poverty that a study revealed now plagues nearly 60 percent of the nation. "The true heritage of the caste model: 6 out of 10 Argentines are poor. The (economic) destruction of the last hundred years has no parallel in the history of the West," Milei said on social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter. He was reacting to figures released by the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina's Social Debt Observatory, which said 57.4 percent of Argentines lived below the poverty line in January. January was the first full month in office for Milei, elected in November to dislodge the long-dominant Peronist political movement known for a generous welfare program and heavy subsidies. The poverty figure represented more than 26 million people and was a significant jump from the 49 percent measured in December, when self-styled "anarcho-capitalist" Milei's government devalued the peso, lifted price controls and increased tariffs.

HONG KONG (AFP) -- Fourteen people went on trial Monday in Hong Kong for allegedly planning to carry out a bomb attack to murder police officers during protests in 2019, with prosecutors invoking the city's anti-terrorism act. The defendants, allegedly members of a radical protest group called "Dragon Slayers", were arrested after police accused them of planning to carry out a bomb attack during a rally marking International Human Rights Day. Thousands of people have been rounded up and charged over their involvement in months of huge and at times violent protests that kicked off in 2019 calling for greater autonomy from Beijing's rule. On Monday, prosecutor Edward Lau accused the 14 defendants of plotting to place two bombs along the rally's marching route on December 10 that year to kill police officers. The prosecution said "Dragon Slayers" planned to ransack shops to attract authorities. Then-18-year-old member David Su was to push officers closer to the bombs, they said.

BANGKOK (Reuters) -- A day after his high-profile release from detention, Thailand's former premier Thaksin Shinawatra met with prosecutors on Monday to discuss allegations he insulted the powerful monarchy, during which he appeared "truly ill", a senior official said. The influential billionaire, who has loomed large over Thai politics for two decades, reached the meeting in a wheelchair, wearing a neck brace, according to images in local media. Thaksin, 74, was released on parole on Sunday after six months in hospital detention, his first day of freedom in his homeland 15 years after fleeing in the wake of his overthrow in a military coup. It is unclear what health issues he has been suffering from, with full details yet to be disclosed by doctors or his family. He was paroled, with conditions, on account of his age, health and time served. Thaksin's eight-year sentence for abuse of power and conflicts of interest was commuted by the king to one year soon after he went into detention.

SYDNEY (Reuters) -- At least 26 people were killed in tribal fighting in the northern highlands of Papua New Guinea, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) said on Monday, citing local police. The men were killed in an ambush in Enga Province, according to the Australian state broadcaster. A report by local newspaper the Post-Courier said the violence took place on Sunday and was connected to a battle between two tribes. Police initially reported that at least 53 people had died, before revising their number down to 26, the ABC said.