

Ukraine Claims Gains in Some Parts of Bakhmut



Ukrainian service members fire a howitzer D30 at a front line near the city of Bakhmut, April 23, 2023.

KYIV (Reuters/AFP) -- Ukrainian counterattacks have ousted Russian forces from some positions in the besieged eastern city of Bakhmut, but the situation remains "difficult", a top Ukrainian general said in comments released Monday.

During the past few months the battle for Bakhmut has become the fulcrum of a conflict that has seen little shift in front lines since late last year, leaving both sides looking for a breakthrough.

"The situation is quite difficult," said Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, the commander of ground forces, in a statement on Telegram.

He added that new Russian units,

including paratroopers and fighters from the Wagner mercenary group, were being "constantly thrown into battle" despite taking heavy losses.

Russian forces have steadily made incremental gains in Bakhmut, but a Ukrainian military spokesman said on Sunday it was still possible to supply the defenders with food, ammunition and medicine.

Ukraine claimed on Monday its forces had repelled more than 36 enemy attacks on the part of the eastern frontline that stretches from Bakhmut to Maryinka, just west of Donetsk.

Kyiv is preparing to mount a widely expected counteroffensive to re-

take swathes of territory in the east and south.

Russian strikes killed one person and wounded three others in the Ukrainian region of Kherson, a regional official said Monday.

Moscow also launched a hail of missiles across Ukraine early on Monday, with Kyiv claiming it had shot down most of the projectiles.

Ukrainian air defense crews destroyed 15 out of 18 missiles launched by Russian forces in the early hours of Monday morning, the military said.

Kyiv's city officials wrote on the Telegram messaging app that all missiles directed at the capital were destroyed in what they said was the second attack on the city in three days.

Air defense systems were also called into action to shield the Kyiv region, which is a separate administrative entity from the city, from Russian missiles, officials said.

Russia has also launched missiles at other Ukrainian regions overnight, including on Dnipropetrovsk, Mykola Lukashuk, the head of the Dnipro region council, said. Air defence crews shot down seven missiles, but 25 people sought medical help.

The eastern Ukrainian city of Pavlohrad was struck twice overnight, and an industrial enterprise, 19 apartment buildings and 25 private buildings, among others, were damaged or destroyed, he added.

'Zero Leads' Days After Man Killed Five Neighbors in Texas



Mass shooting survivor Wilson Garcia, left wearing striped shirt, takes part in a vigil for his son, Daniel Enrique Laso, April 30, 2023, in Cleveland, Texas.

CLEVELAND, Texas (Reuters) -- Over 200 law enforcement officers in Texas searched on Sunday for a man accused of shooting to death five neighbors after being asked to stop firing a semiautomatic rifle in Cleveland, Texas.

Francisco Oropeza, 38, is accused of opening fire on neighbors after being asked to stop shooting an AR-15-style rifle late Friday because it was keeping a baby awake. The victims include an 8-year-old boy.

"Right now, we have zero leads," FBI Houston Special Agent in Charge James Smith told reporters.

San Jacinto County Sheriff Greg Capers said over 200 law enforcement personnel were going door-to-door looking for the suspect or

any tips on how to find him. Officials are offering an \$80,000 reward for information that will lead to the suspect's apprehension.

Oropeza's name had been spelled "Oropeza" in early communications from law enforcement but was changed "to better reflect his identity in law enforcement systems," the FBI said on Sunday. It gave no further detail.

Officials received a call from the home in Cleveland, about 45 miles (72 km) north of Houston, at 11:31 p.m. Friday.

Capers said on Saturday that the suspect stepped out of his house on Friday night and started shooting off rounds in his yard, which is when some of the victims stepped out to

ask him to stop.

"The man walked over to the fence, said 'Hey, we're trying to keep the baby asleep in here,'" Capers said.

Both parties then went back to their houses. Oropeza "topped off his magazine and walked down his driveway" onto the street then "into the people's house and started shooting," Capers said.

Capers had said most of the victims had been shot in the head, "almost execution-style." Police said all five were from Honduras.

Police had been called to the suspect's house on a couple of previous occasions over complaints about noise from gunfire in his yard, Capers said.

The victims were identified as Sonia Argentina Guzman, 25; Diana Velazquez Alvarado, 21; Julisa Molina Rivera, 31; Jose Jonathan Casarez, 18; and Daniel Enrique Laso, 8. They were all believed to be living in the house, but were not members of a single family, according to the FBI.

Mass shootings have become commonplace in the United States, with at least 176 so far in 2023, the most at this point in the year since at least 2016, according to the Gun Violence Archive.

The nonprofit group defines a mass shooting as any in which four or more people are wounded or killed, not including the shooter.

North Korea: U.S. Escalating Tensions to 'Brink of Nuclear War'

SEOUL (Reuters) -- North Korea criticized a recent U.S.-South Korea agreement to bolster the deployment of American strategic assets in the region for escalating tension to the "brink of a nuclear war," state media KCNA said on Monday.

U.S. President Joe Biden and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol held a summit last week, during which Biden pledged to give Seoul more insight into its nuclear planning over any conflict with North Korea as anxiety grows over Pyongyang's weapons programs and the American nuclear umbrella.

Both leaders agreed to strengthen South Korea's defenses and regularly deploy U.S. strategic assets. As part of the efforts, a U.S. Navy nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarine will visit South Korea for the first time since the 1980s.

KCNA said the agreement stipulated the allies' willingness to take "the most hostile and aggressive action"

against North Korea, citing Choe Ju Hyon, whom it described as an international security analyst.

The stationing of American strategic assets has placed the situation of the Korean peninsula in a "quagmire of instability," and was intended to build "aggressive and exclusive military blocs" in the region, it said.

"It is just aimed to dodge the responsibility for the worst-ever nuclear-related crimes it has committed by systematically destroying and violating the nuclear non-proliferation system, and in particular, pushing the situation of the Korean Peninsula to the brink of a nuclear war," KCNA said.

"It is the hegemonic sinister aim pursued by the U.S. to turn the whole of South Korea into its biggest nuclear war outpost in the Far East and effectively use it for attaining its strategy for dominating the world."

Pyongyang has reacted angrily to the Yoon-Biden summit, saying it consolidated its conviction to perfect its "nuclear war deterrent."

Uzbek President Wins Referendum to Stay Until 2040



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TASHKENT (Nikkei Asia) -- In Uzbekistan's constitutional referendum on Sunday, voters overwhelmingly favored sweeping reforms that promise to strengthen individual rights but also allow the president to potentially stay in power until 2040.

The Central Election Commission on Monday said the constitutional amendments passed with 90.21% of the vote, based on preliminary results. Turnout was reported at 84.54%. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which was conducted a "limited observation mission," was due to share its initial findings on the poll later the same day.

The constitutional changes are the next stage in a reform drive for the Central Asian country of around 35 million people. The shift began after President Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016 following the death of his authoritarian predecessor, Islam Karimov. On Mirziyoyev's watch, economic reforms have been enacted, political prisoners have been set free and once-widespread forced labor in the cotton sector has come to an end.

The constitutional revamp will see around two-thirds of the existing document rewritten, with individual rights given prominence. Public consultations led to more than 60,000 proposals, with

around a quarter of the suggestions incorporated into the draft.

Rights to free health care, education, gender equality and decent conditions in the workplace will be enshrined. Property rights will be strengthened, including those for homeowners facing forced evictions. Criminal suspects will be granted the option of remaining silent, and prisoners are promised improved rights as well.

Mirziyoyev had been due to step down in 2026 after serving the allowed two five-year terms. But in the reformed constitution, the term limits will be extended to seven years and the 65-year-old's term count will be reset to zero. This will enable him able to run twice more and theoretically allow him to stay in power until 2040.

The referendum came almost a year after neighboring Kazakhstan held its own constitutional referendum in response to violent unrest that swept through the country in January 2022, leaving at least 230 dead.

The vote in Kazakhstan saw President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev make a break from the era of his predecessor, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who ruled the country with an iron fist for three decades before handing over the presidency in 2019. Last November, Tokayev was reelected for a single seven-year term.

Poll: U.S. News Media Doing More Harm Than Good



WASHINGTON (AP) — When it comes to the news media and the impact it's having on democracy and political polarization in the United States, Americans are likelier to say it's doing more harm than good.

Nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults say the news media is increasing political polarization in this country, and just under half say they have little to no trust in the media's ability to report the news fairly and accurately, according to a new survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights.

The poll, released before World Press Freedom Day on Wednesday, shows Americans have significant concerns about misinformation — and the role played by the media itself along with politicians and social media companies in spreading it — but that many are also concerned about growing threats to journalists' safety.

"The news riles people up," said 53-year-old Barbara Jordan, a Democrat from Hutchinson, Kansas. Jordan said she now does her own online research instead of going by what she sees on the TV news. "You're better off Googling something and learning about it. I trust the internet more than I do the TV."

That breakdown in trust may prompt many Americans to reject the mainstream news media, often in favor of social me-

dia and unreliable websites that spread misleading claims and that can become partisan echo chambers, leading to further polarization.

While a slim majority of Americans say they have some degree of confidence in the news media's ability to report the news fully and fairly, only 16% say they are very confident. Forty-five percent say they have little to no confidence at all.

The survey reveals the complicated relationship many Americans have with the media: A majority rate in-depth and investigative reporting as very helpful or extremely helpful for understanding the issues they care about, but they are more likely to say they regularly scan the headlines than read an in-depth investigative article. And while overall trust in the media is low, a majority of respondents say the media is doing at least somewhat well in covering issues they care about.

Four in 10 say the press is doing more to hurt American democracy, while only about 2 in 10 say the press is doing more to protect it. An additional 4 in 10 say neither applies.

Partisanable news outlets and social media platforms have driven the problem by conditioning many Americans to see one another as enemies, said Joe Salegna, a Republican who lives on Long Island, New York.

"I think it's tearing this country apart," Salegna, 50, told the AP. "Since the 2016 election I think it's gotten a lot worse."

News in Brief

OTTAWA (Reuters) -- Canada reached agreement for a new wage deal with a union representing 120,000 federal workers, the union said on Monday, bringing an end to the country's largest public sector strike that had crippled services from tax returns to immigration. While the 120,000 Treasury Board employees were set to return to work, more than 35,000 revenue agency workers striking since April 19 were expected to continue into Monday, the union, which represents both groups, said in a statement. "Strike action continues across the country for 35,000 members at Canada Revenue Agency," the union said, adding that talks would resume with a new mandate for a fair contract. Their key outstanding concerns include fair wages, the right to work remotely, and the role of seniority in layoffs. The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) union, which had been in collective bargaining for a new contract since 2021, ramped up pressure on the government last month by calling for the rare wide-ranging strike.

SAN FRANCISCO (AFP) -- U.S. financial authorities have taken possession of California's troubled First Republic Bank, which will be acquired by JPMorgan Chase, government regulators announced Monday in the latest banking failure. First Republic had failed to come up with a workable rescue plan and last week disclosed that it had lost more than \$100 billion in deposits in the first quarter, causing its shares to plummet. The federal government stepped in with the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation said (FDIC), an agency in charge of guaranteeing bank deposits, and the U.S. Treasury approaching six banks last week to gauge their interest in buying First Republic assets, a source told AFP last week on condition of anonymity. With its assets standing at \$233 billion at the end of March, First Republic would be the second largest bank to fail in U.S. history -- excluding investment banks, like Lehman Brothers -- after Washington Mutual's bankruptcy in 2008.

LOS ANGELES (AFP) -- Hollywood faced a cliffhanger moment Monday as talks to avert a potentially catastrophic strike by thousands of TV and movie writers remained unresolved just hours before a crunch deadline. Major studios and networks including Disney and Netflix are locked in talks with the powerful Writers Guild of America (WGA), which has threatened to order a walkout just after midnight Tuesday unless a new deal is agreed. The last time talks failed, in 2007, Hollywood writers laid down their pens and keyboards for 100 days, costing the Los Angeles entertainment industry around \$2 billion. This time, the two sides are clashing as writers demand higher pay and a greater share of profits from the boom in streaming, while studios say they must cut costs due to economic pressures.

BRASILIA (AFP) -- Brazilian authorities were investigating the death of an Indigenous man who they say was shot by miners illegally encroaching on territory belonging to the Yanomami people. The incident, which occurred Saturday in the northern state of Roraima, also left two people injured, according to the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples (MPI). According to the G1 news outlet, the person who died was a 36-year-old man who had been shot in the head. Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in February launched a police and military operation to force out thousands of miners illegally occupying protected reserves belonging to the Indigenous Yanomami people in the Amazon rainforest along the border with Venezuela, where gold prospectors are accused of sparking a humanitarian crisis. Yanomami leaders say some 20,000 clandestine miners have invaded their territory, killing Indigenous people, sexually abusing women and adolescents, and contaminating rivers with the mercury they use to separate gold from sediment. Last week, the government decreed six new Indigenous reserves, including a vast Amazon territory, after a freeze in such expansion under leftist Lula's far-right predecessor Jair Bolsonaro.

ASUNCION (AFP) -- Paraguayans elected a president from the rightwing Colorado Party, in power for nearly eight decades, rejecting a center-left challenger who had rallied against institutional corruption. Economist and former finance minister Santiago Pena, 44, won the election with more than 42 percent of votes cast, results showed with 90 percent of ballots counted. Sixty-year-old challenger Efraim Alegre of the Concertacion center-left coalition garnered 27.5 percent despite having had a narrow lead in opinion polls ahead of Sunday's vote. The Colorado Party has governed almost continually since 1947 -- through a dictatorship and since the return of democracy in 1989, but has been tainted by corruption claims.

BANGKOK (Reuters) -- Thailand's leading prime ministerial candidate, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, gave birth on Monday to a baby boy two weeks before elections in which she hopes to return to power the populist movement her father and aunt led before army coups ousted them. Paetongtarn, 36, announced the birth on her official Facebook and Instagram accounts with a photo of the newborn. Paetongtarn, who goes by the nickname Ung Ing, has been first or second in polls for voters' favorite prime ministerial candidate throughout the campaign for the May 14 election, trading places with Pita Limjaroenrat of the progressive opposition Move Forward Party. Recent polls showing opposition parties with big leads could spell trouble for incumbent Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, who first came to power in a 2014 coup that ousted an elected government that had been led by Paetongtarn's aunt, Yingluck Shinawatra. Paetongtarn's father and Yingluck's brother, former telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra was himself toppled in a 2006 military coup. Both Thaksin and Yingluck live in self-imposed exile to avoid prison convictions their allies say were designed to prevent their political comebacks.