

Blinken Faces Contempt of Congress Over Cable



The fiasco in Afghanistan was a grave blow to America's standing.

WASHINGTON (AP) — The chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee has threatened to hold Secretary of State Antony Blinken in contempt of Congress if the State Department does not turn over classified cables related to the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Rep. Michael McCaul, R-Texas, pledged in a letter Friday — obtained by The Associated Press — to escalate the ongoing battle with the State Department over a so-called dissent cable written by diplomats at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul shortly before the August 2021 withdrawal. The new deadline for the State Department to respond is Thursday.

The threat is the latest in an already

unprecedented effort by McCaul to force the release of sensitive documents to Congress, setting up what could become a constitutional showdown between House Republicans and the Biden administration on the ability of the legislative branch to conduct oversight.

The July 2021 communication in question reportedly warned Blinken about the potential fall of Kabul via a special “Dissent Channel,” which allows State Department officials to issue warnings or express contrarian views directly to senior agency officials.

House Republicans have argued over the last two years that access to these documents is key to fulfilling one of their campaign promises: holding the

Biden administration accountable for what went wrong as the Taliban swept to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 and the U.S. left scores of Americans and hundreds of Afghans who helped them over the years in grave danger. With the power of the gavel, McCaul has been able to elevate that criticism into aggressive congressional oversight and on a topic that has been met with bipartisan support in the past.

The State Department has pushed back, saying that providing the dissent cable to the committee would threaten the integrity of the classified reporting process and the people who wrote them.

The Dissent Channel was created in 1971, in part to address U.S. diplomats’ concerns over the Vietnam War, and the State Department has held communications closely. Nearly all such cables are classified to protect the integrity of the process and the identities of dissenting Foreign Service officers. They are not generally intended for public consumption, but some have been leaked to the press, often by their authors.

A contempt of Congress charge would require a full committee vote before going to the House floor. With Republicans’ slim majority in the chamber, it is possible the vote to hold Blinken in contempt could pass the chamber. The charge does not carry the force of prosecution, but it serves as a referral to the Department of Justice to consider charges.

Protests in Paris After Police Run Over Muslim Teens



French people take to the streets of Paris to protest against police violence and demand justice for three teenagers who were hit by a police car in the middle of April.

PARIS (Dispatches) -- Protesters in the French capital Paris have taken to the streets after three Muslim teens were run over by a police vehicle and seriously injured, in what their lawyer have characterized as an “assassination attempt.”

Among those taking part in the protest rally were family members and friends of the three victims, who were hospitalized after a police car rammed into their scooter last month as they were returning home from a mosque during the holy month of Ramadan.

The protesters carried signs and placards as they chanted slogans against increasing police brutality across the European country.

“My sister is in critical condition, still hospitalized. My brother has a kidney injury. My family is going through a hard time. We are participating in

this rally to tell the children that we support them and that this must not happen again,” said a relative of one of the teens taking part in the protest rally.

According to local press reports, the injured children were a 17-year-old girl, who was driving the scooter, her 13-year-old brother and another boy aged 14. The girl was hospitalized following the incident, her brother injured in the kidneys and the other boy was hurt on the knee.

The girl still remains in the hospital, suffering from serious injuries to her head.

While French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin admitted that the police officers had committed “actions that were not appropriate” and been suspended from duties pending the investigation, the attorney representing the families of the victims described

the police action against the Muslim teens as an “assassination attempt.”

“When you take chase and you prepare to run over a vehicle with three minors on it, it can effectively be considered an assassination attempt,” said the attorney, Arié Alimi. “What’s going through a police officer’s head when they’re driving their vehicle committing this act? Where is the training?”

Alimi has filed a formal legal complaint over “attempted murder by a person holding public authority, with a weapon by destination, on minors”.

He said witnesses to the police action had been “threatened with arrest [and] intimidated,” noting that he would also be looking to lodge a complaint of “measures of intimidation”, “threatening a witness” and “intimidation aiming to hinder the investigation.”

The lawyer also criticized Darmanin for his “late intervention” in the flagrant police brutality case and said that “procedural errors” had been in the works from the beginning following the incident.

“In addition to the serious events that took place, there was a desire for a cover-up, intimidation to prevent the investigation from taking place and the truth from coming out,” the attorney said.

“This must stop. The next time, there will be deaths. These are children. We can’t kill children,” Alimi added.

Among the participants in the anti-police-brutality protest in Paris on Sunday was Assa Traore, the sister of Adamad Traore -- another Muslim and African victim of police violence who was killed while in police custody in 2016.

Taiwan Eyes \$500 Million Arms Package From U.S.

TAIPEI (AFP) -- Taiwan is expecting a fast-tracked \$500 million weapons package from Washington this year to make up for delays in arms procurements, the island’s defense minister said on Monday.

The United States in September approved the Taiwan Policy Act -- which would see new legislation provide billions in military aid to Taipei.

But there have been reported delays in delivering weapons, and Taiwan’s Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng on Monday confirmed that Washington has been discussing a separate -- and fast-tracked -- weapons package with Taipei.

“The use of the \$500 million package is aimed at prioritizing supplying us with spot goods (available for immediate delivery) over any delay or late delivery in our arms procurement,” Chiu told lawmakers when questioned in parliament about the “military aid” package.

“It should be implemented this year,” he said, adding that the \$500 million package “is not counted into (previous) arms sales” and that Taiwan would be asking first for its “priorities”.

However, he did not elaborate on what type of equipment

would be prioritized in the \$500 million weapons package, saying only that the details would be thrashed out by both sides soon.

“For the delayed arms sales, they will make up by providing some of their spot goods or simulators or training equipment,” he said. “So when the arms are delivered in the future, we can start using them right away.”

The United States has for decades sold weapons to Taiwan.

But the decision in September goes a step further -- providing U.S. security assistance to the tune of \$4.5 billion over four years, a move that has infuriated Beijing.

There have been some roadblocks in deliveries. Taiwan’s defense ministry revealed last year it was looking for replacements after Russia’s war in Ukraine led to a shortage of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.

Last week, the ministry announced it was notified by Washington that the first of the 66 advanced new F-16V fighter jets it had previously ordered from the United States would come “out of the factory” in the third quarter next year.

Russia Steps Up Offensive Ahead of Victory Day



A view shows an apartment building damaged by remains of a suicide drone shot down during a Russian overnight strike in Kyiv, Ukraine May 8, 2023.

KYIV (Reuters) -- Russia carried out drone, missile and air strikes on Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities through the night, escalating attacks in the run-up to its cherished Victory Day holiday that celebrates the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Ukraine said its air defenses destroyed all 35 drones Russia had launched. Kyiv’s mayor said at least five people were wounded in the capital amid damage to a fuel depot, cars, buildings and infrastructure. A food warehouse was set ablaze by a missile in the Black Sea city of Odesa, where officials reported three people wounded.

It was one of the biggest volleys of missiles and drones yet in a renewed Russian air campaign unleashed 10 days ago after a lull since early March.

Kyiv said Moscow was also making a final push to try to capture the ruined eastern city of Bakhmut, to deliver President Vladimir Putin what would be his only prize for a costly Russian winter offensive, in time for the holiday.

The military said 16 rockets had hit the Kharkiv, Kherson, Mykolaiv and Odesa regions in the last 24 hours, in addition to 61 strikes and 52 rocket salvos on Ukrainian positions and populated areas.

Moscow is preparing for Tuesday’s Victory Day parade, the most important day in

the calendar for Russia under Putin, who uses the 1945 Soviet triumph over Nazi Germany to justify his “special military operation” in Ukraine.

Ukraine, which as part of the then-Soviet Union endured higher per capita casualties than Russia in battling the Nazis, and as ground zero of the Holocaust, proclaimed May 8 to be Victory Day, rather than May 9 - a clear bid to separate its observance of the day from that of Russia.

Russia has cancelled or curtailed some of the huge military parades that normally accompany Victory Day.

“The Russians still hope to capture the city by May 9. Our task is to prevent this,” Ukrainian ground forces commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi said after visiting the front line near Bakhmut, Russia’s main target.

Ukraine, which drove Russian forces back from the ramparts of the capital and recovered substantial territory last year, has kept its troops on the defensive for the past six months, but is preparing a massive counteroffensive in coming weeks.

In Kyiv, three people were injured in blasts in the Solomyanskyi district and two when drone wreckage fell in the Sviatoshyn district, both west of the capital’s center, Mayor Vitali Klitschko said on Telegram.

Sudan Fighting Rages; No Progress in Ceasefire Talks



Smoke billows during fighting in the Sudanese capital Khartoum, on May 3, 2023.

KHARTOUM (AFP) -- Airstrikes again shook Sudan’s capital Monday while the latest truce talks in Jeddah have yielded no progress, with a Saudi diplomat saying both sides consider themselves “capable of winning the battle”.

Sudan was thrown into deadly chaos when fighting broke out on April 15 between the forces of army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his deputy turned rival Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, who heads the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

The battles have since killed hundreds, wounded thousands and left millions barricaded inside their homes amid dire shortages of water, food and basic supplies.

The feuding generals have sent representatives to Saudi Arabia for talks on establishing a humanitarian truce in an effort also backed by the United States, but to no avail so far.

By Monday, the talks had yielded “no major progress”, a Saudi diplomat told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

“A permanent ceasefire isn’t on the table... Every side believes it is capable of winning the battle,” the diplomat added.

In Khartoum, a city of five million, terrified residents reported more combat, now in its fourth week, as they hid out in their homes amid power

outages and sweltering heat.

A southern Khartoum resident told AFP the family could hear “the sound of airstrikes which appeared to come from near a market in central Khartoum”.

The fighting has sparked a mass exodus of foreigners and of Sudanese, in both air and sea evacuations and arduous overland journeys to Egypt, Chad, South Sudan and other neighboring countries.

“It’s very dangerous everywhere,” said Rawaa Hamad, who escaped from Port Sudan on an evacuation flight to Qatar on Monday carrying 71 people.

In Sudan, she said, there is “no safety now, unfortunately”, with its people enduring “a lack of everything -- a lack of water, lack of fuel, lack of medicine, lack of even hospitals and doctors”.

The battles have killed more than 750 people and injured over 5,000, according to a count by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.

The United Nations has warned of a widening humanitarian crisis after fighting has already displaced 335,000 people and created 117,000 refugees.

More than 60,000 Sudanese have fled north into Egypt, 30,000 west to Chad, and over 27,000 to South Sudan, according to the UN.

News in Brief

PARIS (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron led the traditional ceremony on Paris’ Champs-Élysées Monday commemorating the day that marked the end of World War II in Europe in 1945. Flanked by Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne, Macron laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier under the Arc de Triomphe monument. A brass band played the Marseillaise. To limit disruptions amid ongoing opposition to Macron and his contested pension reforms, police banned gatherings around the area of the ceremony in the French capital, and in Lyon where the president will travel later in the day. Authorities were vigilant that a “casse-rolade” or the loud banging of pots and pans in protest will not distract from the memorial ceremonies.

BRUSSELS (Reuters) -- The European Union has proposed sanctions on Chinese companies accused of selling equipment that could be used in weapons to support Russia’s war machine, the Financial Times reported. Seven Chinese businesses have been listed in a new package of sanctions that will be discussed by EU member states this week, the report said, citing a copy of the sanctions list seen by the FT. According to the FT, the sanctions list includes two mainland Chinese companies, 3HC Semiconductors and King-Pai Technology, along with five from Hong Kong including Sinno Electronics, Sigma Technology, Asia Pacific Links, Tordan Industry and Alpha Trading Investments. On Monday, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said China urges the EU to avoid taking the “wrong path”, otherwise it will take firm action to safeguard its rights and interests. “China opposes actions that use China-Russia cooperation as a pretext to impose illegal sanctions or long-arm jurisdiction against China,” Wang said at a regular news conference.

NEW YORK (AP) — Former President Donald Trump rejected his last chance to testify at a civil trial where a longtime advice columnist has accused him of raping her in a luxury department store dressing room in 1996. Trump, a Republican candidate for president in 2024, was given until 5 p.m. Sunday by U.S. District Judge Lewis A. Kaplan to file a request to testify. Nothing was filed. It was not a surprise. Trump has not shown up once during the two-week Manhattan trial where writer E. Jean Carroll testified for several days, repeating claims she first made publicly in a 2019 memoir. She is seeking compensatory and punitive damages totaling millions of dollars. The jury has also watched lengthy excerpts from an October videotaped deposition in which Trump vehemently denied raping Carroll or ever really knowing her. Without Trump’s testimony, lawyers were scheduled to make closing arguments Monday, with deliberations likely to begin on Tuesday.

BEIJING (Reuters) -- China’s state media tabloid, the Global Times, criticized on Monday a letter of protest by South Korea’s embassy in Beijing, the latest public spat amid worsening ties between the Asian neighbors. South Korea’s recent diplomatic push towards Japan and the U.S. would “induce and aggravate the ... collapse of the situation in northeast Asia” the paper said, a day after Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s landmark visit to Seoul. The editorial comment followed a letter published by the embassy on its website on Friday that “expressed strong regret over a series of unreasonable slanderous articles” by the paper. In turn, the Global Times criticized the embassy’s “brutal interference in (its) independent reporting”. China’s foreign ministry distanced itself from the state-affiliated tabloid at a daily briefing on Monday. “The relevant media viewpoint does not represent the position of the Chinese government, but reflects current Chinese public opinion,” said its spokesperson, Wang Wenbin.

KOCHI, India (Reuters) -- Rescuers searched on Monday for survivors from an overcrowded tourist boat that capsized on a south Indian waterway with the death of at least 22 people, authorities said. Police said the exact number of people on board the boat that capsized on Sunday evening in an estuary near the town of Tanur, in Kerala state, had yet to be confirmed. Police said they were searching for the owner of the boat who had absconded. A man identified as Shafeeq, who was on board the converted fishing boat, told the Manorama News channel the vessel had listed badly soon after it set off. According to initial estimates there were about 40 people, most believed to be domestic tourists, on board including several children, said Tanur police official Jeevan George. Famous for its picturesque backwaters, Kerala is a major destination for domestic and international tourists.

WELLINGTON (Reuters) -- The New Zealand Defense Force will get an additional NZ\$748 million (\$472.14 million) over four years, as the government tries to stop the loss of military personnel and ensure the country’s military can operate alongside allies and partners. Andrew Little said in a statement that the government would invest a further NZ\$419 million in defense force salaries and NZ\$328 million to upgrade assets and infrastructure over four years. “With climate change and an increasingly contested geostrategic environment, including in our Pacific neighborhood, it is important that New Zealand has the personnel and equipment to play our part in supporting global peace and security,” Little said.