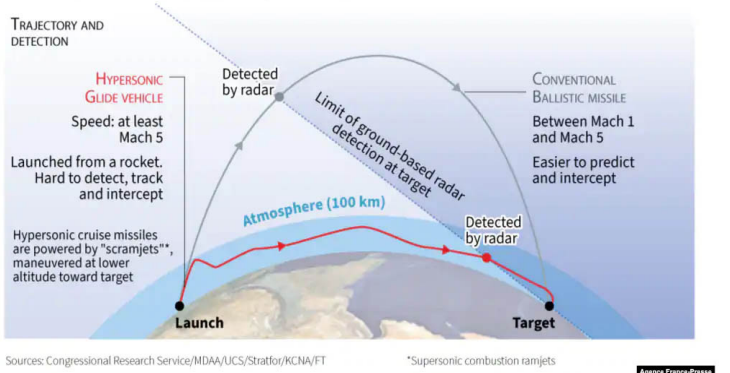


Ukraine Claims Downing Volley of Hypersonic Missiles

Hypersonic weapons

Considered the next generation of arms with conventional or nuclear warheads that are hard to detect and can travel more than five times the speed of sound



Graphic showing the trajectory and detection of hypersonic weapons.

KYIV (AFP) -- Ukraine claimed on Tuesday it had downed an entire barrage of Russian drones and missiles overnight -- including six hypersonic Kinzhal missiles -- hours ahead of a visit from China's special envoy.

The wave of strikes came just over a week after Kyiv announced it had shot down a Kinzhal nuclear-capable hypersonic missile for the first time, using U.S.-supplied Patriot systems.

The defense ministry said Ukrainian air defense systems had knocked out a total of 18 missiles, including types the Kremlin had touted as "ideal", as well as nine drones.

Three people were injured in Kyiv and some rocket fragments fell on the capi-

tal's zoo, but neither staff nor animals were hurt, Mayor Vitaliy Klitschko said.

Russia said all the targets assigned by its military had been hit.

China's special envoy, Li Hui, was expected to arrive in Kyiv for a two-day visit as part of a European tour to promote Beijing-led peace negotiations on the war in Ukraine.

A senior Ukrainian official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Ukrainian authorities planned to further discuss Kyiv's stance on the conflict and China's peace mission.

"Ending the war with a compromise at the expense of Ukraine will not work."

Li would become the highest-ranking Chinese diplomat to visit the war-torn

country since Moscow's invasion last year. His trip came three weeks after Zelensky spoke by telephone to Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

Beijing has said the aim of the tour is to "communicate with all parties on the political settlement of the Ukrainian crisis".

Li's visit follows hot on the heels of Zelensky's whirlwind tour of major European capitals to urge Ukraine's allies to increase military support.

His tour to shore up military assistance to help make his troops more battle-ready began in Italy, with weekend visits to France and Germany, followed by a stop in the UK.

But Zelensky has yet to succeed in his goal of enlisting Western fighter jets to seize command of the skies, although UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced on Monday preparations to open a flight school to train Ukrainian pilots.

France, too, has offered to train Ukrainian fighter pilots, although President Emmanuel Macron ruled out sending warplanes to Kyiv.

Nevertheless, Zelensky said late on Monday he was "returning home with new defense packages".

On the front line, fighting has picked up in the eastern Donetsk region, in particular for the battle-scarred city of Bakhmut.

In recent days, Ukraine has been posting its first gains around the city in weeks and the head of Russia's Wagner paramilitary group has blasted the performance of Moscow's regular troops around the city.

China Returns Warships to West Pacific for Drills



A helicopter takes off from China's Shandong aircraft carrier, over Pacific Ocean waters, south of Okinawa prefecture, Japan, in this handout photo taken April 15, 2023.

BEIJING (Reuters) -- Two Chinese warships have ventured into the Western Pacific for live-fire exercises, the military said on Tuesday, shortly after one of China's two aircraft carriers returned from a patrol, in its latest projection of force into more distant waters.

The destroyer Dalian and guided-missile frigate Huangshan sailed to an unidentified area of the West Pacific "not long ago" and conducted attack and defense drills, the Southern Theatre Command of the People's Liberation Army said in a statement.

"The joint training in unfamiliar and complex waters is of great significance in exploring the boundaries of new equipment effectiveness, testing the practical application of new warfare method," the command said, citing a training officer.

The exercises in more distant seas in the West Pacific came soon after a carrier group led by the Shandong, one of China's two operational aircraft carriers, returned to its home port this month after sailing around

Taiwan and into the Western Pacific.

China is modernizing its military and its formidable missile forces and navy fleet, with new vessels such as cutting-edge cruisers, are posing a concern for the U.S. and its allies.

"China's aircraft carrier is not a homebody and cannot just stay at home," Song Zhongping, a military commentator with Hong Kong's Phoenix TV, told Reuters, referring to the Shandong.

"There will be more and more of these distant sea travels in future. Also China has quite a lot of warships."

In March, China's first domestically produced amphibious assault ship, the Hainan, along with a destroyer, a frigate, and a supply ship completed their first distant sea training after a 30-day trip into the South China Sea and the Western Pacific, the Southern Theatre Command said.

Despite China's military expansion, it could be more than a decade before it can mount a credible carrier threat far from its shores, defense analysts say.

Swiss Islamic Scholar Vows to Fight 'Lies' in Court



Tariq Ramadan arriving at the Geneva courthouse on Monday to face rape charges.

GENEVA (AFP) -- The Swiss Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan went on trial in Geneva charged with "rape and sexual coercion", allegations which the former Oxford University professor denied.

The Swiss intellectual, a charismatic yet controversial figure in European Islam, could face two to 10 years in prison if convicted.

Sometimes smiling and sometimes tetchy, Ramadan did not hide his emotions during the first day of his trial at the Geneva Criminal Court.

The Swiss complainant, who wishes to be known under the assumed name of "Brigitte", was in her 40s at the time of the alleged attack on October 28, 2008.

In court, a screen was placed between Ramadan and Brigitte at her request, so that they could not see each other.

Ramadan said he had not told Brigitte that he was in Geneva and insisted that she had invited him for a coffee, and then invited herself to his hotel room, having sent him a string of messages.

Asked by a judge why he accepted the invitation, he replied: "I got these messages from someone who says they've met me before; I don't remember. She has a nice way with words, she's smart. Like any man, one can be intrigued."

woman who is extremely insistent on seeing me," he continued.

Suffering from depression and multiple sclerosis, Ramadan said he wanted to "fight" against what he called the "lies and manipulation" in the case. He insisted he had "never sexually assaulted anyone".

His children were in court to see him give evidence.

Ramadan's defense revealed that it intends to call the controversial French comedian Dieudonne to give evidence on Tuesday.

The trial is expected to last three days. The verdict will be delivered on May 24, and Ramadan will be able to appeal if convicted.

Controversial among secularists who see him as a supporter of political Islam, Ramadan obtained his doctorate from the University of Geneva, with his thesis focused on his grandfather, who founded Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood movement.

He was a professor of contemporary Islamic studies at Britain's prestigious Oxford University until November 2017, and held visiting roles at universities in Qatar and Morocco.

He was forced to take a leave of absence when rape allegations surfaced in France at the height of the "Me Too" movement, over suspected attacks in France between 2009 and 2016. Brigitte filed a complaint with the Geneva courts in April 2018.

Nigel Farage: Brexit Has Failed



Nigel Farage, the former leader of the Brexit Party, is pictured at an event in central London on March 20, 2023.

LONDON (Dispatches) -- Britain's departure from the European Union has not been a failure, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's spokesperson said on Tuesday, rebuffing criticism from prominent eurosceptic politicians about how Brexit had been implemented.

Nigel Farage, the British politician who helped force a Brexit referendum in 2016 and successfully campaigned to leave the European Union, said on Monday "Brexit has failed".

Asked if Sunak agreed with Farage, that Brexit had failed because politicians had mismanaged the exit from the EU, Sunak's spokesman said:

"No. The prime minister has talked about the benefits of Brexit on a number of occasions."

William Cash, a well known eurosceptic in the governing Conservative Party, accused the government on Monday of making "trivial" and "obsolete" changes by announcing plans to remove around 600 of the almost 4,000 EU laws by the end of this year.

Almost seven years after Britain voted to leave the EU, opinion polls show a majority of the public regret leaving the bloc. Britain's economy is expected to grow more slowly than other major economies this year, although economists say Brexit is not

the sole cause of the problems.

The government, led by Brexit-supporting Sunak, says Britain is prospering with new-found freedoms, while the opposition Labor Party does not plan to apply to rejoin the bloc if it wins the next general election due next year.

Farage has criticized how the Conservative government has handled its implementation.

"What Brexit has proved, I'm afraid, is that our politicians are about as useless as the commissioners in Brussels were. We have mismanaged this totally and if you look at simple things, simple things such as takeovers, such as corporation tax, we are driving business away from our country."

"Arguably, now we're back in control, we're regulating our own businesses even more than they were as EU members. Brexit has failed," Farage told the BBC, adding that takeover regulation and corporation tax were driving businesses away. "We've mismanaged this totally."

Asked if the prime minister had sympathy with the concerns of businesses who said they were struggling to deal with government bureaucracy, Sunak's spokesman said the prime minister wanted to "ensure that the UK remains a business-friendly country to invest in".

Death Toll From Cyclone in Rakhine Rises

YANGON (AFP) -- The death toll in cyclone-hit Myanmar rose to 60 on Tuesday, according to local leaders and junta-backed media, as villagers tried to piece together ruined homes and waited for aid and support.

Packing winds of up to 195 kilometers (120 miles) per hour, Mocha made landfall on Sunday, downing power pylons and smashing wooden fishing boats to splinters.

In Rakhine state, at least 41 people died in the villages of Bu Ma and nearby Khaung Doke Kar, inhabited by the persecuted Rohingya Muslim minority, local leaders told AFP reporters at the scene.

Thirteen people were killed when a monastery collapsed in a village in Rathedaung township north of Rakhine's capital Sittwe, and a woman died when a building collapsed in a neighboring village, according to Myanmar state broadcaster MRTV.

"There will be more deaths, as more than a hundred people are missing," said Karlo, the head of Bu Ma village near Sittwe.

Other residents watched by the seashore searching for family members swept away by a storm surge that accompanied the cyclone, AFP correspondents said.

State media had reported five deaths on Monday, without offering details.

over a decade, churning up villages, uprooting trees and knocking out communications across much of Rakhine state.

China said it was "willing to provide emergency disaster relief assistance", according to a statement on the Facebook page of its embassy in Myanmar.

The United Nations refugee office said it was investigating reports that Rohingya living in displacement camps had been killed in the storm.

Widely viewed as interlopers in Myanmar, the Rohingya are denied citizenship and healthcare, and require permission to travel outside of their villages in western Rakhine state.

Many others live in camps after being displaced by decades of ethnic conflict in the state.

In neighboring Bangladesh, officials told AFP that no one had died in the cyclone, which passed close to sprawling refugee camps that house almost one million Rohingya who fled a Myanmar military crackdown in 2017.

Cyclones -- the equivalent of hurricanes in the North Atlantic or typhoons in the Northwest Pacific -- are a regular and deadly menace on the coast of the northern Indian Ocean where tens of millions of people live.

Non-profit ClimateAnalytics said rising temperatures may have contributed to Cyclone Mocha's intensity.

News in Brief

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- The FBI investigation into alleged collusion between Russia and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign was based on flimsy evidence and seriously flawed, an independent U.S. prosecutor said in a report published Monday. Special Counsel John Durham was appointed in 2019 by then-president Trump's attorney general Bill Barr to address allegations -- made most prominently by Trump himself -- that the Russia investigation was a political "witch hunt." Durham's more than 300-page report follows a four-year investigation that continued under Barr's successor, Attorney General Merrick Garland, an appointee of Democratic President Joe Biden. The long-awaited report was highly critical of the origins of "Crossfire Hurricane," the FBI's probe into allegations of collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign. "Neither U.S. law enforcement nor the Intelligence Community appear to have possessed any actual evidence of collusion in their holdings at the commencement of the Crossfire Hurricane investigation," the report said.

TOKYO (AFP) -- Japan and China used a new military hotline for the first time on Tuesday, their defense ministries said, following years of negotiations to set up the communication channel. Japanese Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada held a 20-minute call with his Chinese counterpart Li Shangfu, Tokyo's ministry said in a statement. Beijing confirmed the call, saying the air and maritime hotline would "contribute to further maintaining regional peace and stability". The hotline, launched on March 31, had been mooted by both sides for over a decade as a way to avert unexpected clashes in the East China Sea. A territorial dispute over islets in the area known as the Senkaku by Tokyo and the Diaoyu by Beijing has long fuelled tensions between the countries.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- President Joe Biden continues to hold an edge over potential Republican challengers Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis as the 2024 U.S. presidential election draws closer, according to the latest Reuters/Ipsos poll. But there are potential hazards ahead for Biden should the situation at the U.S. southern border worsen, the poll shows. Among registered voters, Biden led Trump, his predecessor as president, by six percentage points in a hypothetical match-up, 44% to 38%, holding an advantage that has opened up in recent few months. In a mid-March Reuters/Ipsos poll, Biden led Trump by five points after trailing him by three points in February. The latest poll collected responses nationwide from 4,410 U.S. adults. For registered voters, it had a credibility interval, a measure of precision, of two percentage points.

DRESDEN, Germany (AFP) -- A German court on Tuesday sentenced five gang members to up to six years in prison for snatching priceless 18th-century jewels from a Dresden museum in what has been dubbed the biggest art heist in modern history. The thieves made off with a haul worth more than 113 million euros (\$123 million) from the Green Vault museum in 2019. Some, but not all, of the loot was recovered in exchange for four of the defendants confessing in court. The convicted men are members of the "Remmo clan", an extended family mostly based in Berlin known for a web of ties to organized crime in Germany. The court in Dresden handed down three sentences ranging from just under to just over six years for armed robbery, aggravated arson and grievous bodily harm for the November 25, 2019, heist. Two of the men, who were minors at the time of the crime, received juvenile sentences of five years and four years and four months respectively. A sixth defendant was acquitted because he produced a credible alibi -- an emergency surgery at a Berlin hospital.

NAIROBI (AFP) -- The world must halve single-use plastics and slash throwaway consumption to stem the tide of environmental pollution, according to a UN report on Tuesday that warns the next few years are critical. Concern is growing about the impacts of microplastics -- produced when plastic products break down in the environment -- which have been found from the deepest oceans trenches to top of Mount Everest. In humans, they have been detected in blood, breast milk and placentas. The report by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) comes two weeks before negotiators from nearly 200 countries meet in Paris for a new round of negotiations aimed at reaching a legal agreement next year to end plastic pollution. It lays out a three-pronged plan based on reuse, recycling and diversifying the materials used -- to help slash plastic pollution 80 percent by 2040 overall and cut single-use plastic production by half. The report cited research estimating plastic could emit 19 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions by 2040.

WELLINGTON (Reuters) -- A fire at a hostel in New Zealand killed at least six people on Tuesday and officials said they believe the toll could rise with 11 people still missing. The blaze broke out on the top floor of Loafers Lodge in the Wellington neighborhood of Newtown just after midnight, police said, causing major structural damage that is hampering recovery efforts. "There is a significant amount of debris from the roof collapse but at this stage we have located six people," Bruce Stubbs, the incident commander from Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ) told a news conference. The cause of the fire is not known, but emergency services were treating the incident as suspicious.