

Fighting Flares in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia



Pentagon Announces \$2bn Ukraine Air Defense Package

The U.S. Department of Defense announced the latest in a series of aid packages for Ukraine on Friday, an additional \$2.1 billion in security assistance that it said included critical air defense and ammunition capabilities.

The package includes additional munitions for Patriot air defense systems, Raytheon HAWK air defense systems and missiles, 105mm and 203mm artillery rounds, AeroVironment Puma unmanned aerial systems, laser-guided rocket system munitions and support for training and maintenance, the Defense Department said in a statement.

Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative funds will be used to purchase the weapons, allowing President Joe Biden's administration to buy weapons from industry rather than pull them from U.S. stocks. Delivery of the weapons and systems depends on their availability and production timeline.

On Friday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Moscow will deploy some of its tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus next month, a move that the Belarusian opposition described as an attempt to blackmail the West.

Putin said during a meeting with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko that work on building facilities for the nuclear weapons will be completed by July 7-8, and they will be moved to the territory of Russia's neighbor and ally quickly after that.

The move comes as Ukraine has stepped up attacks in several sectors of the front line in what some observers see as the start of its long-expected counteroffensive.

Tactical nuclear weapons are intended to destroy enemy troops and weapons on the battlefield. They have a relatively short range and a much lower yield than nuclear warheads fitted to long-range strategic missiles that are capable of obliterating whole cities.

Putin announced the planned deployment of the short-range nuclear weapons in Belarus earlier this year in a move widely seen as a warning to the West as it stepped up military support for Ukraine. He has emphasized that Russia will retain control of them.

Belgorod region, which borders Voronezh region, has been heavily shelled this month, forcing thousands of people to flee the border towns.

Russia and Ukraine have traded blame for the bursting of the Soviet-era Kakhovka hydroelectric dam, which sent waters cascading across the war zone of southern Ukraine in the early hours of Tuesday.

It forced thousands to flee their homes as water surged into the Dnipro River, flooding dozens of villages and parts of the regional capital Kherson.

A total of 600 square kilometers of the Kherson region is underwater, regional governor Oleksandr Prokudin said on social media.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday denounced the attack on the dam as a "barbaric act that led to a large-scale environmental and humanitarian catastrophe."

Currently, nearly 42,000 people are reportedly at risk of being affected by the flooding in Russian and Ukrainian-controlled areas along the Dnipro River.

Ukraine also blamed Russia for the dam's destruction, describing it as the result of a "Russian act of terrorism."

Russian authorities in Kherson on Friday reported eight deaths from the flood and said the water could keep rising for more than a week

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Fighting has intensified between Ukrainian and Russian forces in the southern Zaporizhzhia region amid speculations that it is a possible prelude to the expected offensive by Kiev.

Russian officials on Friday cited "active combat" ongoing in the region between Orehovo and Tokmak

Ukraine has offered no confirmation, but its forces bolstered by Western weapons and training have been expected for months to launch a counteroffensive.

The conflict comes as the human and environmental costs rise after the destruction of the Kakhovka dam and devastating floods in another part of southern Ukraine.

The Ukrainian military said in a Facebook post that "the enemy is on the defensive" in Zaporizhzhia.

It said it had destroyed four missiles and 10 drones out of 20 that Russia had fired at "military installations and critical infrastructure".

The local governor of Russia said a drone crashed into a residential building in the city of Voronezh in the south of Russia and two people were injured.

Drone strikes have frequently hit Russian cities - including Moscow - in recent months. It is the first such incident in Voronezh, a city of about one million people.

Wildfire Smoke Disrupts Life in U.S., Canada



Pedestrians pass the One World Trade Center, center, amidst a smokey haze from wildfires in Canada, Wednesday, June 7, 2023, in New York.

MONTREAL (Dispatches) — Hundreds of wildfires continued to burn across Canada on Friday, as residents braced for what could be the worst wildfire season in recent memory, and one that is far from over. But the storm system that sent clouds of noxious smoke into the United States was moving on, and air quality in the United States was improving for most.

Canada is enduring its worst start to the wildfire season, with 2,392 fires so far this year and 4.4 million hectares (10.9 million acres) burned, according to the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre (CIFFC), roughly 15 times the annual average over the last decade.

Around 2,500 people were told to evacuate the community of Tumbler Ridge in northeastern British Columbia on Thursday. Officials also expanded evacuation orders for the Donnie Creek fire, the second-largest recorded in the province.

In the eastern province of Quebec, forestry minister Maite Blanchette Vezina said that as extra resources arrived, authorities would be better able to control the fires. Hundreds of firefighters from across the world have flown to Canada.

"This sprint phase is over - now we're in a marathon phase. So in the next days and weeks we will be working to contain those active fires to bring them under control and eventually extinguish them," she told a briefing.

"We also hope the weather will cooperate. Some precipitation is expected in some areas, but in the next few days the situation will remain critical."

Smoke rises from a wildfire in

Tumbler Ridge, British Columbia, Canada, in this screen grab taken from a video, June 8, 2023. BC Wildlife Service/Handout via REUTERS

Earlier, fire fighters contained blazes that had threatened hydro-electric facilities in the Lac-Saint-Jean area, about 300 km (190 miles) north of Quebec City, public broadcaster Radio-Canada said.

Federal authorities said this week they were concerned by the threat that blazes could pose to critical infrastructure.

Temperatures in parts of British Columbia soared to more than 30 degrees Celsius (86 Fahrenheit) this week, nearly 10 degrees above the seasonal average. While rain is expected over the weekend there is a risk of lightning strikes.

Although wildfires are common in Canada, it is unusual for blazes to be burning simultaneously in the east and west, stretching resources and fuelling concerns about the worsening consequences of climate change.

In the western province of Alberta, more than 3,500 people remain under evacuation orders and heat warnings were in effect over much of the central area.

Wildfire smoke continued to plague millions of people across eastern Canada and the northeastern United States.

Poor air quality is expected to persist in cities including Ottawa, Toronto, New York and Washington until Sunday when the wind direction shifts.

Nearly a third of the fires burning across Canada are in Quebec, more than any other province. Rain is expected in Quebec and neighboring Ontario on Monday.

China Warns Europe Against Official Ties With Taiwan

BEIJING/PRAGUE (Reuters) - China urged Europe on Friday not to have any official exchanges with Taiwan or support "independence forces" ahead of a planned trip to the continent next week by Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu.

Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky confirmed Wu was due to visit Prague next week, saying on Friday state officials were not expected to shift from their existing policy towards Taiwan.

Taiwan has no formal diplomatic ties with any European country except the Vatican. Beijing regularly denounces any form of contact between Taiwanese and foreign officials, viewing it as encouraging global recognition of Taiwan's separate status from China.

On Wu's Europe trip, which Taiwan's government has not officially confirmed, he is expected to speak at a think-tank event in Prague immediately after Czech President Petr Pavel, Reuters reported on Thursday.

Asked about the visit on Friday, Czech Minister Lipavsky said he had "been informed" about Wu coming to Prague.

"Of course, the Czech government has a fairly clear policy on how we maintain relations with Taiwan, so I don't expect us to veer from this in any way," he said, adding he would be travelling during the visit.

The Czech Republic has no diplomatic ties with Taiwan but has built up economic and cultural relations.

Beijing views Taiwan as being part of "one China" and demands other countries recognise its sovereignty claims, which Taiwan's democratically-elected government rejects.



Chinese Foreign Ministry Wang

Speaking at a regular news briefing in Beijing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said Taiwan didn't have a foreign minister, only a "head of the region's local foreign affairs department".

The "one China" principle is a prerequisite and the political basis for China to develop "friendly" relations with all countries in the world, Wang said.

"We urge the European side to understand the essence of the Taiwan issue, to abide by the solemn commitments made to China on the 'one China' principle, not to support Taiwan independence forces, and not to conduct official exchanges with Taiwan under any name," he said.

"We also want to tell the Taiwan Democratic Progressive Party authorities that any separat-

ist acts and attempts to gain self-respect from foreigners are doomed to end in failure," Wang added, referring to Wu's ruling party.

Wu is also due to visit Brussels, the European Union's capital, sources told Reuters.

Wu made a low-key trip to Brussels in 2021, part of a visit to the continent that also took in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

In January, then-Czech President-elect Pavel and Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen spoke by telephone shortly after his election, in a diplomatic coup for Taiwan that infuriated China.

Czech lower house speaker Marketa Pekarova Adamova told Taiwan lawmakers in March that her country and Taiwan were bound together by freedom and democracy and pledged to always stand with the island's people.

Climate: El Nino Pattern Returns, Extreme Conditions Feared

PARIS (AFP) - Scientists have warned that El Nino could bring extreme weather and temperature records. The warming effects of El Nino had last occurred from 2018 to 2019.

The U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced on Thursday that the expected, so-called El Nino phenomenon has arrived.

"Depending on its strength, El Nino can cause a range of impacts, such as increasing the risk of heavy rainfall and droughts in certain locations around the world," the NOAA quoted as saying Michelle L'Heureux, climate scientist at the Climate Prediction Center.

"Climate change can exacerbate or mitigate certain impacts related to El Nino. For example, El Nino could lead to new records for temperatures, particularly in areas that already experience above-average temperatures during El Nino often."

El Nino often brings increased rainfall to southern South America, central Asia and the Horn of Africa, raising hopes that it may bring an end to droughts there. However, the climate pattern is also associated with an increased risk of droughts in other areas such as Australia, Indonesia and parts of southern Asia.

Earlier this week, Australia warned that El Nino would deliver warmer,

drier days to the country that is already vulnerable to wildfires.

Japan has partly blamed the climate pattern for its warmest spring on record.

In the United States, El Nino has a relatively weaker effect in the summer, but gets stronger starting from late fall through spring, according to the NOAA.

While El Nino has a suppressive effect on hurricane activity in the Atlantic, it usually boosts typhoon activity in the central and eastern Pacific.

The climate pattern takes place every two to seven years on average. The word El Nino is Spanish for "Little Boy," and it refers to the warm phase of the El Nino-Southern Oscillation.

It starts largely because of unusually warm waters in the eastern Pacific, and is likely formed when the trade winds blowing east-to-west along the equatorial Pacific slow down or reverse as air pressure changes.

Before this period of El Nino began, the average global sea surface temperature in May was already about 0.1 Celsius (0.2 Fahrenheit) higher than any other on record.

The warming effects of El Nino last occurred from 2018 to 2019, and was followed by a cooling period, known as La Nina, from 2020 until its return.

News in Brief

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Russia's foreign ministry said on Friday that it had summoned the Japanese ambassador over Tokyo's decision to supply military equipment to Ukraine. Japan - which has backed Western sanctions against its long-time antagonist in East Asia in response to Moscow's war in Ukraine - last month promised Ukraine around 100 military-use vehicles having previously given protective equipment such as helmets and bullet-proof vests.

TOKYO (Reuters) - Sweden will allow NATO to base troops on its territory even before it formally joins the defense alliance, the prime minister and defense minister said on Friday. Sweden applied last year to join NATO as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Objections from Turkey and Hungary have delayed the bid and Sweden now hopes to join by a NATO summit in Lithuania next month. "The government has decided that the Swedish Armed Forces may undertake preparations with NATO and NATO countries to enable future joint operations," Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson and Defense Minister Pal Jonsson said.

WASHINGTON (CNN) - Former president Donald Trump has been indicted on seven counts in the special counsel's classified documents probe, a stunning development that marks the first time a former president has faced federal charges. Trump is facing a charge under the Espionage Act, his attorney Jim Trusty said on CNN Thursday, as well as charges of obstruction of justice, destruction or falsification of records, conspiracy and false statements. The special counsel has been investigating Trump's handling of classified documents that were brought to his Mar-a-Lago Florida resort after he left the White House in 2021, as well as possible obstruction of the investigation and government efforts to retrieve the material.

MANILA (Reuters) - Authorities in the Philippines on Friday began evacuating around 10,000 people living near the Mayon Volcano after volcanic earthquakes and hundreds of rockfall events were detected. Mount Mayon is situated in the eastern province of Albay, some 330 kilometers south of the Filipino capital of Manila. The Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) said that the volcano was "in a relatively high level of unrest" and that a "hazardous eruption is possible within weeks or even days." "Fair crater glow and incandescent rockfall shed from new fluid lava at the summit of Mayon Volcano were also observed last night," the institute said in a Friday advisory. Images shared on social media showed an orange glow coming from the volcano.

TOKYO (AP) — Japan's parliament on Friday approved a revision to an immigration and refugee law that will allow the forced repatriation of asylum seekers after they are denied refugee status twice, a change that rights activists say could lead to their persecution at home. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's governing coalition and other conservative parties passed the revision with their overwhelming majority despite strong opposition. Kishida's Liberal Democratic Party and supporters of the revision say it allows immigration authorities to quickly repatriate foreign citizens who do not qualify for refugee status but keep reapplying for asylum under the current system which allows multiple applications so they can stay in Japan longer.

Sudan's Government Declares UN Envoy 'Persona Non Grata'

CAIRO (AP) — The Sudanese government announced that the UN envoy to the country and key mediator in its brutal conflict is no longer welcome as the warring sides in the African nation agreed to a new, 24-hour cease-fire.

Sudan's Foreign Ministry issued a terse statement late Thursday, weeks after the military chief, Gen. Abdel Fattah Burhan, demanded in a letter that envoy Volker Perthes be removed from his post. The ministry said UN secretary-general António Guterres was notified that Perthes was declared "persona non grata."

Since mid-April, Sudan's military, headed by Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, or RSF, led by Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, have been locked in a violent conflict. The fighting has killed more than 860 civilians, according to Sudan's Doctors' Syndicate, which tracks civilian casualties, though the actual death toll is likely much higher.

On Friday, the military and the RSF agreed to another truce, to last 24 hours, starting 6 a.m. on Saturday. The cease-fire was announced by Saudi Arabia and the United States in a joint statement, carried by the

kingdom's Saudi Press Agency.

Washington and Riyadh have been mediating in Sudan's fighting — the latest truce is to be the eighth such cease-fire since the clashes first erupted two months ago. All past agreements have foundered.

Despite the breakdown, the two mediators said they remain in contact with both sides in hopes of reviving the peace talks.

Perthes has been a key mediator in Sudan since 2021, first during the country's failed attempts to transition to democracy and then as relations between the military and the RSF deteriorated. Perthes' native Germany condemned Sudan's announcement.

"The international community, including the German government, continues to stand fully behind Mr. Perthes and his efforts," said Andrea Sasse, spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry in Berlin.

She said Perthes will continue to do his job from Kenya, from where he is supporting efforts in Jeddah to get the warring parties back to the table.

Perthes, who was in Ethiopia on Thursday, did not immediately comment on Sudan's announcement. The German diplomat had received death threats and numerous calls to resign in recent months.