

Russia Reports Fierce Fighting as African Peace Mission Leaves Empty-Handed



Ukrainian troops ride a tank, as Russia's attack on Ukraine continues, near the front line city of Bakhmut.

MOSCOW (Reuters) – Russia reported fierce fighting on Sunday on three sections of the front line in Ukraine, a day after hosting an African peace mission that failed to spark enthusiasm from either Moscow or Kyiv.

A Russian-installed official said Ukraine had recaptured Piatykhatty, a village in the southern Zaporizhzhia region, and were entrenching themselves there while coming under fire from Russian artillery.

“The enemy’s ‘wave-like’ offensives yielded results, despite enormous losses,” the official, Vladimir Rogov, said on the Telegram messaging app.

Russia’s defence ministry made no mention of Piatykhatty in its daily

update, in which it said its forces had repelled Ukrainian attacks in three sections of the 1,000 km (600 mile) front line. A separate statement from Russia’s Vostok group of forces said Ukraine had failed to take the settlement.

Reuters could not independently verify the battlefield reports.

There was no comment from Ukraine, which last week said it had recaptured another nearby settlement, Lobkove, and a string of villages further east, in Donetsk region, at the start of its long-awaited counteroffensive.

Ukrainian officials have imposed an information blackout to help operational security, but say that Russia has suffered much greater losses than Ukraine has

during its new assault.

A regional official said Ukrainian forces had destroyed a major Russian ammunition dump in occupied Kherson region, part of a weeks-long effort by Kyiv to wreak havoc with Russian supply lines.

British defence intelligence said heavy fighting in recent days had been focused on Zaporizhzhia, western Donetsk and around Bakhmut, which Russian fighters captured last month after the longest battle of the war.

At talks in St Petersburg on Saturday, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa presented Putin with a 10-point peace initiative from seven African countries and told him the time had come for Russia and Ukraine to start negotiations to end the war.

Putin responded by repeating accusations denied by Ukraine and the West and saying it was Kyiv, not Moscow, that was refusing to talk. He thanked Ramaphosa for his “noble mission”.

Russian news agencies quoted Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov as saying Putin had shown interest in the plan but it would be “difficult to realize”.

In Kyiv the previous day, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy had told the African delegation - the first since the start of the war to hold separate face-to-face talks with both leaders on their peace initiative - that allowing negotiations now would just “freeze the war” and the suffering of the Ukrainian people.

Politico: U.S. Lawmakers Oppose Pentagon Military Spending Plans

WASHINGTON (RT) – The Pentagon’s ambitious plan to increase missile production could end up having its wings clipped due to Republican opposition, Politico has reported.

GOP representatives on the House Appropriations Committee are understood to have demanded significant cuts to the program.

Citing a draft committee report, the media outlet claimed that members were insisting on spending reductions of over \$2.5 billion in the area of missile procurement.

They argued that the Pentagon had failed to prove that buying projectiles at a higher volume would necessarily result in lower prices, Politico reported. The panel decided to redirect the funds to other areas, such as military training, maintenance, and research and development.

“The committee is particularly concerned [that] the Department [of Defense] cannot provide realistic cost estimates and has proceeded with these multi-year procurement requests without a firm understanding of each program’s unit cost and production capacity,” the representatives allegedly wrote in their report.

The original plan for multi-year purchases of munitions was part of President Joe Biden’s push to ramp up military spending as the coun-



Members of U.S. 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command stands next to a Patriot surface-to-air missile battery 230km east of the capital Vilnius, Lithuania, on July 20, 2017.

try continues to provide billions of dollars worth of military supplies to Ukraine. Another major factor, the article said, was growing fears of a future conflict with China.

The cuts proposed by Republican committee members have reportedly come under fire from their Democratic counterparts. Politico predicted that a fight between the two parties would likely ensue in the House and Senate when the report is published next week.

Meanwhile, Bloomberg claimed last week that the latest aid package

pledged by Washington to Ukraine could face lengthy delays in its implementation, as the weapons would first have to be contracted and produced.

Since Russia launched its military campaign against the neighboring country last February, the U.S. has been by far the most generous donor of weapons to Ukraine.

Moscow has consistently condemned Western arms shipments to Kyiv, insisting that they only serve to prolong the conflict and risk escalation.

New Sudan Ceasefire Goes Into Effect After Deadly Airstrikes on Civilians

KHARTOUM (AFP) – Sudan’s warring generals agreed a new 72-hour ceasefire from Sunday, mediators said, after fighting intensified with deadly airstrikes in Khartoum and an exodus of wounded from Darfur over the border into Chad.

Airstrikes killed 17 civilians, including five children, in the capital Saturday, a citizens’ group said, as medics in Chad reported hundreds of wounded from Darfur seeking treatment.

Multiple truces have been agreed and broken during the two-month war, including after the United States slapped sanctions on both generals after a previous attempt collapsed at the end of May.

A 24-hour ceasefire from June 10 to June 11 provided Khartoum residents with a brief respite from the air strikes and artillery exchanges that have ravaged whole neighborhoods of the capital but the fighting resumed within 10 minutes of the ceasefire ending.

“The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and United States of America announce the agreement of representatives of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on a ceasefire throughout Sudan for a period of 72 hours,” a Saudi foreign ministry statement said late Saturday.

The ceasefire took effect at 6 am (0400 GMT), the mediators said.

“The two sides agreed that during the ceasefire period they

would refrain from movements and attacks, the use of warplanes or drones, artillery bombardment, reinforcement of positions, resupply of forces, or refrain from attempting to achieve military gains,” the mediators said.

“They also agreed to allow freedom of movement and the delivery of humanitarian aid throughout Sudan.”

The SAF, commanded by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, has since April 15 been battling the paramilitary RSF, headed by his former deputy Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, after the two fell out in a power struggle.

On Thursday, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths described the conditions in Darfur as particularly dire. Medics also warned about the increasing number of wounded people who are fleeing the Darfur region.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), at least 149,000 people have fled from Darfur into Chad. They are among the roughly 2.2 million people uprooted nationwide by the fighting, which has forced more than 528,000 to seek refuge in neighboring countries, said IOM.

A record 25 million people – more than half the population – are in need of aid and protection, including 13 million children, according to the United Nations, which said it has received only a fraction of the necessary funding.

The situation is expected to worsen with the approaching rainy season threatening to make parts of the country inaccessible and raising the risks of malaria, cholera, and waterborne diseases.

U.S. Secretary of State in China for High-Stakes Visit



United States Secretary of State Blinken met with his Chinese Counterpart Qin Gang in Beijing at the start of the highest-level trip by a US official to China in nearly five years.

BEIJING (Al Jazeera) – United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his Chinese Counterpart Qin Gang in Beijing at the start of the highest-level trip by a U.S. official to China in nearly five years as the two powers aim to stabilize ties.

Blinken’s two-day trip on Sunday comes amid frosty bilateral ties and follows the discovery of a suspected spy balloon above the U.S. in February that prompted him to delay a trip that had been planned for the same month.

With the world’s two largest economies at odds on an array of issues from trade to technology and regional security, both China and the U.S. have voiced guarded hopes of improving communication, although they have played down expectations of a significant breakthrough.

U.S. President Joe Biden played down the balloon episode as Blinken was heading to China, saying, “I don’t think the leadership knew where it was and knew what was in it and knew what was going on.”

“I think it was more embarrassing than it was intentional,” Biden told reporters on Saturday.

Biden said he hoped to again meet Chinese President Xi Jinping after a lengthy meeting in November on the sidelines of a Group of 20 (G20) summit in Bali, where the two agreed on Blinken’s visit.

“I’m hoping that, over the next several months, I’ll be meeting with Xi again and talking about legitimate differences we have but also how there’s areas we can get along,” Biden said.

The two leaders are likely to attend the next G20 summit, in September in New Delhi, and Xi has been invited to travel to San Fran-

cisco in November when the U.S. hosts leaders from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping.

Blinken is expected to meet top Chinese officials and attend a banquet at the state guesthouse in the Diaoyutai gardens.

A phone call between Blinken and his Chinese counterpart Qin underlined the heightened tension between the two sides.

“Beijing is looking for assurances from the U.S. that it won’t meddle into its domestic affairs, that it won’t cross the red lines of its core interests, particularly Taiwan,” said Al-Jazeera’s Katrine Yu reporting from the Chinese capital.

But expectations of any breakthrough from the visit are very low, Yu added.

Ties between Beijing and Washington have deteriorated across the board, raising the specter that the two might one day clash militarily over the self-ruled island of Taiwan, which China claims as its own.

They are also at odds over issues ranging from trade, U.S. efforts to hold back China’s semiconductor industry and human rights.

Biden’s National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, also travelled to Tokyo for separate three-way meetings involving Japan, South Korea and the Philippines.

In recent months, the U.S. has reached deals on troop deployments in Southern Japan and the Northern Philippines, both strategically close to Taiwan.

Blinken before departure also met in Washington with his counterpart from ally Singapore, a U.S. ally, who voiced hope the U.S. would stay as a power but also find ways to coexist with a rising China.

Survivors: Greek Coastguard ‘Watched’ as Boat Sank

ATHENS (Middle East Eye) – Survivors of a shipwreck carrying “hundreds” of people continue to blame the Greek coastguard for causing the rusty trawler to capsize, as scores remain missing.

Greek officials said authorities recovered at least 75 dead bodies after a rusty trawler sank off Greece’s Peloponnese peninsula in the deepest part of the Mediterranean on Wednesday night. Since then, no other bodies have been found.

Around 104 survivors - all men and primarily Syrian, Egyptian and Pakistani - were rescued after the incident, though as many as 500 more people are missing and feared dead.

Survivors said at least 100 children were onboard the vessel before it sank. But as rescue efforts end, those on board are blaming the Greek coastguard for failing to save them sooner.

Five survivors who spoke to the Times said the Greek coastguard did not send help for at least three hours after the boat capsized.

Ayad from Syria said that Greek authorities “just watched... [and] could have saved so many more people”.

Survivors, who also spoke to La Repubblica and the Guardian, blamed the coastguard for causing the boat to capsize after it threw a rope on the overcrowded boat to tow it back to shore.

They said that the rope broke, so the coastguard tied another one onto the vessel, which then began moving for-

ward before turning abruptly left and right.

Moroccan-Italian activist Nawal Soufi said passengers who spoke to her said they “were asking to be saved by any authority.”

These reports contradict claims by Greek officials, who claimed passengers requested no help from the coastguard.

The United Nations has called for an urgent investigation into the incident.

Earlier on Sunday, Pakistani authorities arrested 10 alleged human traffickers as local media estimate dozens of its nationals had been onboard.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif ordered a crackdown on agents working with smugglers and called for them to be “severely punished”.

Pakistani media reported that at least 298 Pakistanis had died, 135 of whom were from the Pakistani side of Kashmir.

Survivors speaking to the coastguard said smugglers forced Pakistanis below deck, according to leaked testimonies given to the Guardian. People from other nationalities were allowed on the top deck where they had a greater chance of surviving a capsize, according to the report.

Survivors said crew members mistreated Pakistani nationals when they tried to search for freshwater or tried to escape. The testimonies also claimed that women and children had been “locked up” below deck.

News in Brief

MANILA (AP) – A ferry carrying 120 passengers and crew members has caught fire at sea in the Philippines, and a coastguard vessel has been deployed to rescue those on board and extinguish the flames, according to officials. The M/V Esperanza Star caught fire at dawn on Sunday while travelling from Siquijor province to Bohol province in the central Philippines, the coastguard said. It did not immediately say how many people had been rescued from the ferry or if there were casualties. Photos and video released by the coastguard show flames and black smoke billowing from two decks at one end of the ferry as coastguard personnel on board another vessel used water cannon trying to put out the fire. A fishing boat and another vessel could be seen nearby. None of the 65 passengers and 55 crew members could be seen on board the burning ferry based on the photographs and video released by the coastguard.

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) – Tens of thousands of anti-government protesters have staged marches in Belgrade and other Serbian cities against President Aleksandar Vucic, pledging to “radicalize” weeks of peaceful gatherings that have already shaken his populist rule. The demonstrators in Belgrade blocked the main highway that leads through the capital and chanted slogans for Vucic to resign, something that he has repeatedly rejected over the past seven weeks of protests. The protest initially erupted in response to two back-to-back mass shootings in early May that left 18 people dead and 20 others wounded, many of them pupils from a Belgrade elementary school. The protesters have been demanding the resignations of top Serbian security officials and the revoking of broadcasting licenses for pro-government media and tabloids that regularly air violent content and host crime figures and war criminals.

PHILADELPHIA (AFP/Daily Mail) – United States President Joe Biden made his 2024 reelection pitch to union members in Philadelphia in his first political rally since launching his campaign in April, aiming to shore up a key part of his political coalition and bolster support among white working-class voters. The event was hosted by the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), which includes 60 unions representing more than 12.5 million workers. It endorsed Biden and his running mate Vice President Kamala Harris this week – the earliest it has ever made an endorsement in a U.S. presidential election. “I told you when I ran for president, I’d have your back, and I have,” Biden told the approximately 2,000 union members in attendance. “But you’ve had my back as well.” A new poll for DailyMail.com lays bare the challenge facing Biden as he runs for reelection. Almost half of Democrats believe he is too old for the job, and 52 of all voters believe they are worse off since he became president. Republicans have used both as attack lines in their campaigns to unseat Biden. The president has always been gaffe-prone, but now any botched comment is seized on as evidence that the 80-year-old is no longer fit for office.

PARIS (Reuters) – Twelve police have been wounded in clashes with demonstrators in France’s Savoie department where a protest against a high-speed rail project in the Alps turned violent, authorities said. Some 2,000 protesters, including a roughly 300-strong dark-clad hardcore, were in the Maurienne Valley objecting to a tunnel for the link between Lyon and the Italian city of Turin. They threw rocks at riot police, who responded with tear gas, and one demonstrator was wounded, local prefect Francois Ravier told a news conference. “The day is not over, we remain prudent and mobilized,” he said. Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin tweeted the police injury toll. Border checks turned up 400 objects, like knives and hammers, while 96 individuals known by security services were sent back to Italy, the officials said.

LUCKNOW (AP) – At least 96 people died in two of India’s most populous states over the last several days, officials said Sunday, with swaths of the country reeling from a sweltering heat wave. The deaths happened in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh and eastern Bihar where authorities warned residents over 60 and others suffering various maladies to stay indoors during the daytime. All the fatalities in Uttar Pradesh, totaling 54, were reported in Ballia district, some 300 kilometers southeast of Lucknow, the state capital. Authorities found out most of those who passed away were over 60 years old and had preexisting health conditions, which may have been exacerbated by the intense heat. S. K. Yadav, a medical officer in Ballia, said in the past three days, some 300 patients were admitted to the district hospital for various ailments aggravated by heat. Due to the gravity of the situation, authorities canceled leave applications of medical personnel in Ballia and provided additional hospital beds in the emergency ward to accommodate the influx of patients.

BAMAKO (Al Jazeera) – Malians voted on Sunday in a referendum on changing the constitution that the military rulers and regional powers have said will pave the way to elections and a return to civilian rule. The military government, which seized power in coups in 2020 and 2021, promised to hold the plebiscite as part of a transition to democracy under pressure from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Voting began at 08:00 GMT and results are expected within 72 hours. Presidential elections are scheduled for February 2024. Voter turnout is expected to be low in the country of 21 million due to armed conflict.