

Ukraine, Russia Accuse Each Other of Planning to Attack Europe's Biggest Nuclear Plant



A Russian serviceman guards an Area of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Station in territory under Russian military control southern Ukraine, on May1, 2022.

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine and Russia accused each other Wednesday of planning to attack one of the world's largest nuclear power plants, but neither side provided evidence to support their claims of an imminent threat to the facility in southeastern Ukraine.

The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant has been a focus of concern since Moscow's forces took control of it and its staff in the early stages of the war. Russia and Ukraine have regularly traded blame over shelling near the plant that caused power outages. Over the last year, the UN's atomic watch-

dog repeatedly expressed alarm over the possibility of a radiation catastrophe like the one at Chernobyl after a reactor exploded in 1986.

The six reactors at Zaporizhzhia are shut down, but the plant still needs power and qualified staff to run crucial cooling systems and other safety features.

Ukraine has alleged more recently that Moscow might try to cause a deliberate leak in an attempt to derail Kyiv's ongoing counteroffensive in the surrounding Zaporizhzhia region.

The International Atomic Energy Agency has officials stationed at the

Russian-held plant, which is still run by its Ukrainian staff. IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi said his agency's most recent inspection of the plant found no activity related to explosives, "but we remain extremely alert."

"As you know, there is a lot of combat. I have been there a few weeks ago, and there is contact there very close to the plant, so we cannot relax," Grossi said during a visit to Japan.

In Russia, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov raised the specter of a potentially "catastrophic" provocation by the Ukrainian army at the nuclear plant, which is Europe's largest.

"The situation is quite tense. There is a great threat of sabotage by the Kyiv regime, which can be catastrophic in its consequences," Peskov said in response to a reporter's question about the plant. He also claimed that the Kremlin was pursuing "all measures" to counter the alleged Ukrainian threat.

Grossi said he was aware of both Kyiv's and Moscow's claims and reiterated that "nuclear power plants should never, under any circumstances, be attacked."

"A nuclear power plant should not be used as a military base," he said.

China, EU at Odds Over Top Diplomat's Visit, Cancellation at Last Minute



European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell speaks during a media conference.

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — China has abruptly canceled a visit to Beijing by the European Union's top diplomat, the EU said Wednesday, amid ongoing disagreements between the two powers over trade, human rights and the Ukraine war.

Josep Borrell, the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, was due to arrive in China on July 10 for talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang and other officials, according to an announcement by the EU ambassador to Beijing on Sunday. The European and Chinese diplomats were set to discuss topics including trade, human rights and China's stance on the war in Ukraine, according to Ambassador Jorge Toledo.

But China has canceled Borrell's visit, the EU announced.

"China attaches high importance to Sino-European relations and has maintained exchanges with Europe at all levels and in various aspects," ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbing said at a routine briefing in Beijing on Wednesday. "We welcome Representative Borrell to visit China as soon as possible at the convenience of both sides, and we

are ready to carry on exchanges with the European side."

Borrell was initially scheduled to visit Beijing in April but had to postpone after testing positive for Covid-19, the EU said.

While it remains unclear what has caused the latest cancellation, it comes on the heels of a summit by EU member states last week during which the bloc endorsed a strategy to try to procure critical materials from sources other than China, while insisting it did not want to entirely "decouple" from the world's second-largest economy.

China and the EU appeared to find more common ground during a high-level climate dialogue in Beijing on Monday between China's climate envoy Xie Zhenhua and the EU's top climate official, Frans Timmermans. It was the first in-person bilateral meeting on climate change and the environment between the two sides since the start of the pandemic.

Beijing and Brussels are supposed to hold two more summits, focused on economic and digital cooperation, in September, Toledo said. The last two recurring meetings on these topics failed to produce joint statements.

News in Brief

TOKYO (BBC) - A controversial plan by Japan to release treated waste water from the Fukushima nuclear plant has sparked anxiety and anger at home and abroad. Since the 2011 tsunami which severely damaged the plant, more than a million tonnes of treated waste water has accumulated there. Japan now wants to start discharging it into the Pacific Ocean. The UN nuclear watchdog the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has published a report endorsing Japan's plan. But since it was announced two years ago, the plan has been deeply controversial in Japan with local communities expressing concerns about contamination.

WASHINGTON (AFP) - The Secret Service has identified a substance found at the White House as cocaine, according to various media reports and police and fire radio communications. The White House was briefly evacuated Sunday evening while President Joe Biden was at Camp David in Maryland after the Secret Service discovered a suspicious powder in a common area of the West Wing. A preliminary test showed the substance to be cocaine, two law enforcement officials said. The powder was found in a small bag, NBC News reported.

CAIRO (Reuters) - In Sudan's capital, precious books in a major library have been burned and the national museum has been cut off for weeks by fighting. In Darfur, another museum is at risk from seasonal rains after projectiles punctured the roof. The conflict that has been raging between rival military factions in Sudan since mid-April has taken a toll on the country's rich cultural heritage, which includes the ancient Kingdom of Kush that controlled trade between southern Africa and Egypt at the time of the pharaohs. According to a report published last week by Heritage For Peace, a cultural heritage NGO in touch with local researchers and archaeologists, at least 28 cultural and archaeological sites around the country have been targeted or suffered collateral damage.

SEOUL (Al-Jazeera) - South Korea has said its analysis of the wreckage from a North Korean spy satellite that crashed into the sea suggests the equipment had no meaningful military use. Pyongyang launched what it said was its first military satellite on May 31, but the rocket crashed soon after takeoff, plunging into the sea off South Korea's west coast. South Korea's military began a salvage operation almost immediately, retrieving debris from the rocket as well as the satellite itself in a complex operation involving aircraft, the navy and deep sea divers.

LONDON (Reuters) - Monday, July 3, was the hottest day ever recorded globally, according to data from the US National Centers for Environmental Prediction. The average global temperature reached 17.01 degrees Celsius (62.62 Fahrenheit), surpassing the August 2016 record of 16.92C (62.46F) as heatwaves sizzled around the world. Even Antarctica, currently in its winter, registered anomalously high temperatures. Ukraine's Vernadsky Research Base in the white continent's Argentine Islands recently broke its July temperature record with 8.7C (47.6F).

Britain's Afghan Probe Investigating UK Special Forces



The inquiry is looking at alleged unlawful killings by British troops in Afghanistan.

LONDON (AFP) - Britain's defense minister on Wednesday said reports of unlawful killings in Afghanistan being examined by an independent inquiry relate to UK special forces.

The inquiry which opened in March was "now reaching the stage of substantive hearings, and I can confirm that the reports relate to the conduct of UK Special Forces", Ben Wallace told parliament in a written statement.

The inquiry is looking at a number of detention operations between 2010 and 2013 and how allegations of wrongdoing were investigat-

ed by military police, in particular whether there were any cover-ups.

On Sunday, the Guardian daily reported that one of the elite soldiers from the UK's elite Special Air Services (SAS) is believed to have "personally killed" 35 Afghans on a single six-month tour of duty as part of an alleged policy to terminate "all fighting-age males" in homes raided, "regardless of the threat they posed".

It is being led by senior judge Charles Haddon-Cave, who has said it is important wrongdoing be "referred to the relevant authorities for investigation" while "those who

have done nothing wrong should rightly have the cloud of suspicion lifted from them".

Haddon-Cave said on Wednesday that he had recently visited the office of the prosecutor at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, although he did not elaborate.

Other countries' special forces have also faced allegations of unlawful killings in Afghanistan.

In Australia, a 2020 military investigation found special forces personnel "unlawfully killed" 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners, revealing allegations of summary executions, body count competitions and torture by Australian forces.

The British inquiry followed legal challenges to the government by families of eight people including three young boys who were allegedly murdered by UK special forces in two separate incidents during night raids in 2011 and 2012.

"We live in hope that those responsible will one day be held to account," a member of the Noorzai family, one of the two families involved, said at the time.

"Over 10 years ago I lost two of my brothers, my young brother-in-law and a childhood friend, all boys with a life ahead of them," he added.

The independent statutory inquiry was commissioned by Wallace under the 2005 Inquiries Act.

Witnesses: Tunisians Target African Refugees, Dozens Expelled



Refugees wait in the Tunisian port of Sfax after being stopped at sea by the Tunisian coast guard during an attempt to cross to Italy, April 26, 2023.

PARIS (AFP) - Racial tensions in the Tunisian coastal city of Sfax flared into violence targeting refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, dozens of whom were forcibly evicted from the city, witnesses said Wednesday.

Amid the disturbances late Tuesday, police detained some and deported them as far away as the Libyan border more than 300 kilometers (over 200 miles), according to a local rights group.

The latest unrest started after the funeral of a 41-year-old Tunisian man who was stabbed to death Monday in an altercation with refugees, which led to the arrests of three suspects from Cameroon.

"We are going to avenge his death!" young people chanted at the victim's funeral, according to video footage published online.

Sfax, the North African country's second-largest city, is a departure point for many refugees hoping to reach EU member Italy by sea, usually the island of Lampedusa about 130 kilometers (80 miles) away.

Hundreds of residents massed in the streets late Tuesday demanding the eviction of all illegal refugees, said an AFP correspondent. Some blockaded streets and set tyres ablaze.

Videos shared on social media showed police chasing dozens of refugees from their homes to the cheers of city residents, before loading them into police cars.

On the Facebook page of non-government group Sayeb Trottoir, the medic Lazarh Neji, working in the emergency room of a hospital, deplored "an inhumane... bloody night that makes you tremble".

He said the hospital had received between 30 and 40 injured refugees, including women and children, and said "some were thrown from terraces, others attacked with swords".

Other footage showed refugees lying on the ground, their hands on their heads, surrounded by residents armed with sticks who waited for police to arrive to hand them over.

Police took some refugees to the site of the Sfax International Fair, from where they were to be transferred elsewhere, said Romdane Ben Amor, head of the non-government group Forum for Economic and Social Rights.

He told AFP that some migrants were taken to an area near the Libyan border, without being able to give precise numbers.

Tunisia has seen a rise in racially motivated attacks following President Kais Saied's comments in February accusing "hordes" of illegal refugees of bringing violence and alleging a "criminal plot" to change the country's demographic make-up.

With a population of 12 million, Tunisia hosts an estimated 21,000 refugees from other parts of Africa, representing 0.2 percent of the population.

Gap Between Canada's Rich and Poor Widening at Record Pace

LONDON (Bloomberg) - Inflation, higher interest rates and declining real estate values are worsening wealth inequality in Canada, with younger households bearing the brunt of the financial pain.

The richest 20% of households gained 67.8% of net worth in the country in the first quarter, while the bottom groups accounted for 2.7%, Statistics Canada reported Tuesday in Ottawa.

That widening of 65.1 percentage points was 1.1 points higher than the same period a year earlier. It's the fastest increase in records dating back to 2010, although the wealth gap is still slightly narrower than in 2020.

The widening wealth gap is a challenge for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, whose government has pledged to reduce inequality only to see it expand by a rapid rise in house prices during the pandemic. It also highlights a consequence of the Bank of Canada's aggressive increases to interest rates to combat inflation, which are squeezing the country's indebted households.

The least wealthy were affected more by recent economic pressures, seeing their net worth drop by 13.8%, more than triple the rate of decrease for the wealthiest.

The gap in the share of disposable income between

households in the top and bottom 40% reached 44.7 percentage points, up 0.2 percentage points from a year ago.

The decline in net worth for all households was due almost entirely to real estate, with the average value falling by 8.6% to a year ago. The least wealthy group saw their mortgage debt rise at a much faster rate than the overall value of their property holdings.

Debt-to-income ratios for younger and core working-age groups were also at record highs, and well above pre-pandemic rates. The ratio for the youngest households reached 207.5%, up 13.4 percentage points from a year ago. For those aged 35 to 44 years, the ratio jumped 16.6 percentage points to 275.8%.

Younger households have recently increased their share of Canada's total population, accounting for 47.3% of all growth since the third quarter of 2021, due primarily to high levels of immigration.

"Persistently high interest rates and inflation are likely to continue to strain households' ability to make ends meet without going further into debt, especially vulnerable groups, such as those with the lowest income, the least wealth and those of younger age groups," the statistics agency said.