



G7 Pledges More Arms for Ukraine; NATO Membership Elusive



G7 members stand with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky as they address a media conference during NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, Wednesday, July 12, 2023.

VILNIUS, Lithuania (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky welcomed fresh pledges of weapons and ammunition and longer-term security commitments from the West on Wednesday even as he expressed disappointment over the lack of a clear path for his country to join NATO at its annual summit.

A joint declaration issued by the G7 lays the groundwork for each nation to negotiate agreements to help Ukraine bolster its military over the long term. Zelensky described the initiative as a bridge toward eventual

NATO membership and a deterrent against Russia.

"Our support will last long into the future," Biden said. "We're going to help Ukraine build a strong, capable defense."

The Ukrainian and American presidents also met separately along with their advisers, and Biden pledged that "the United States is doing everything we can to get you what you need." He acknowledged that Zelensky is sometimes "frustrated" by the pace of military assistance.

It was a marked shift in tone from Zelensky's complaints a day earlier that it was "unprecedented and absurd" to avoid

setting a timeline for Ukraine to join NATO.

'We're Not Amazon'

British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace warned Wednesday of bubbling frustration over Zelensky's demands, adding that "people want to see gratitude" for Western military support. Wallace also said he's heard "grumbles" from some U.S. lawmakers that "we're not Amazon."

"I mean, that's true," Wallace said, according to multiple British media outlets. He recalled telling the Ukrainians the same thing when he visited the country last year and was presented with a list of weapon requests. "I'm not Amazon."

U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan made a similar public remark in Lithuania, asserting that "the American people do deserve a degree of gratitude from the U.S. government for their willingness to step up and aid Ukraine and from the rest of the world as well."

Ukrainian officials, including President Vladimir Zelensky, have been critical of the U.S. and its allies for not providing enough support or for providing it too slowly.

China Warns NATO Against Expanding Into Asia-Pacific



In This photo, U.S. military aircraft and warships are seen in formation during a transit of the South China Sea by the Nimitz Carrier Strike Force, July 6, 2020.

BEIJING (Dispatches) - Beijing lashed back at NATO's accusation that China challenges the bloc's interests and security, and opposed any attempt by the military alliance to expand its footprint into the Asia-Pacific region.

China's Mission to the European Union issued a statement on Tuesday in response to NATO's joint communique, which accused Beijing of pursuing "coercive policies" that "challenge" Western interests.

"The China-related content of the communique disregards basic facts, wantonly distorts China's position and policies, and deliberately discredits China. We firmly oppose and reject this," the Chinese diplomats said.

The statement went on to pledge that Beijing would "safeguard its sovereignty" and oppose "NATO's eastward expansion into the Asia-Pacific." It added that "any actions that damage China's legitimate rights and interests will be met with a resolute response."

Leaders of the Western military alliance met on Tuesday in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, to discuss additional aid to Ukraine, among other matters. They also accused Beijing of posing "cyber, space, hybrid and other asymmetric threats," and of engaging in "the malicious use of emerging and disruptive technologies."

The Chinese EU mission argued that NATO had failed to reflect on its own responsibilities, and instead "blindly blames other countries, keeps meddling in extraterritorial affairs and creates confrontation." It added that the bloc's "ambitions for expansion and hegemony are obvious," and warned that its status as a "nuclear alliance" would only "further aggravate regional tensions."

The statement comes after Chinese officials warned against the opening of a NATO liaison office in Japan, which would mark the bloc's first facility in Asia. Though Tokyo indicated it was considering the idea, France has reportedly shot down the project, insisting NATO should remain confined to the North Atlantic.

The relations between the U.S. and China have deteriorated significantly in recent years, with countries clashing over Taiwan, global trade, and human rights.

Beijing's remarks on NATO's expansion echo previous criticisms from Moscow, which has repeatedly decried the alliance's gradual expansion eastward in recent decades, and stressed that it considers Western military sites close to its borders a threat to national security. NATO has rejected these claims, insisting that the supply of heavy weapons to Ukraine does not make the alliance a party to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

North Korea Fires Long-Range Ballistic Missile



People at a railway station in Seoul, South Korea watch a television screen showing footage of a North Korean missile launch.

SEOUL (AFP) - North Korea has fired a long-range ballistic missile, the South Korean military said Wednesday, days after Pyongyang threatened to down U.S. spy planes that violated its airspace.

Relations between the two Koreas are at one of their lowest points ever, with diplomacy stalled and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un calling for increased weapons development, including tactical nukes.

South Korea's military said it had detected the launch of a long-range ballistic missile from the Pyongyang area around 10:00 am (0100 GMT).

"The ballistic missile was fired on a lofted trajectory and flew 1,000 km (620 miles) before splashing down in the East Sea," the Joint Chiefs of Staff said, referring to the body of water also known as the Sea of Japan.

Pyongyang last fired one of its most powerful intercontinental ballistic missiles in April -- the purportedly solid-fuelled Hwasong-18 -- and in February launched a Hwasong-15, which flew a similar 989 kilometers.

The flight time of around 70 minutes is also similar to some of North Korea's previous ICBM launches, experts said.

"Given what we have at this point, it's about 90 percent certain that it was an ICBM launch," Choi Gil, a professor of military studies at Sangji University, told AFP.

He added that it could also have been North Korea trying to re-test its satellite launch technology to prepare for another attempt to put a reconnaissance satellite into orbit, after a May launch failed.

A spokesperson for the North Korean Ministry of National Defense

said the United States had "intensified espionage activities beyond the wartime level", citing "provocative" spy plane flights over eight straight days this month.

"There is no guarantee that such shocking accident as downing of the U.S. Air Force strategic reconnaissance plane will not happen in the East Sea of Korea," the spokesperson added.

Kim's powerful sister Kim Yo Jong said that a U.S. spy aircraft had violated the country's eastern airspace twice on Monday morning, according to a separate statement.

Kim Yo Jong said North Korea would not respond directly to U.S. reconnaissance activities outside of the country's exclusive economic zone, but warned it would take "decisive action" if its maritime military demarcation line was crossed.

The United States said in April that one of its nuclear-armed ballistic submarines would visit a South Korean port for the first time in decades, without specifying an exact date.

The missile launch came ahead of the second day of a NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, who are taking part in the summit, are scheduled to meet up with one another as well as other NATO leaders on the sidelines of the event on Wednesday.

jets were scrambled to ward off an American warplane that was detected inside the North's 200-nautical-mile economic zone.

Canada's Indigenous Women Forcibly Sterilized

TORONTO (AP) — Decades after many other rich countries stopped forcibly sterilizing Indigenous women, activists, doctors, politicians and at least five class-action lawsuits say the practice has not ended in Canada.

A Senate report last year concluded "this horrific practice is not confined to the past, but clearly is continuing today." In May, a doctor was penalized for forcibly sterilizing an Indigenous woman in 2019.

Indigenous leaders say the country has yet to fully reckon with its troubled colonial past — or put a stop to a decades-long practice that is considered a type of genocide.

There are no solid estimates on how many women are still being sterilized against their will or without their knowledge, but Indigenous experts say they regularly hear complaints about it. Sen. Yvonne Boyer, whose office is collecting the limited data available, says at least 12,000 women have been affected since the 1970s.

Thousands of Indigenous Canadian women over the past

seven decades were coercively sterilized, in line with eugenics legislation that deemed them inferior. In the U.S., forced sterilizations of Native American women mostly ended in the 1970s after new regulations were adopted requiring informed consent.

The Geneva Conventions describe forced sterilization as a type of genocide and crime against humanity and the Canadian government has condemned reports of forced sterilization elsewhere, including among Uyghur women in China.

Indigenous people comprise about 5% of Canada's nearly 40 million people, with the biggest populations residing in the north: Nunavut, Yukon and the Northwest Territories.

The more than 600 Indigenous communities, known as First Nations, face significant health challenges compared to other Canadians. Suicide rates among Indigenous youth are six times higher than their counterparts and the life expectancy of First Nations people is about 14 years less than other Canadians.

UN Rights Council Condemns Holy Qur'an Desecration



Anti-Qur'an protests in Sweden have stirred anger in Turkey and other parts of the Muslim world.

NEW YORK (AFP) - The UN Human Rights Council voted Wednesday to condemn the recent desecration of the Holy Qur'an.

Pakistan and other Organization of Islamic Cooperation countries brought forward a debate and resolution after an Iraqi refugee desecrated pages from the Holy Qur'an outside Stockholm's main mosque last month. The incident triggered a diplomatic backlash across the Muslim world.

The United Nations' top rights body backed the OIC resolution on countering religious hatred by 28 votes in favor, with 12 against and seven abstentions.

Britain, the United States, European Union countries including France and Germany, plus Costa Rica and Montenegro, voted against the resolution.

And there was little sense of triumph from Pakistan's ambassador Khalil Hashmi, speaking for the OIC.

Hashmi insisted the resolution was not looking to curtail free speech, but had been aimed at striking a prudent balance.

"Regrettably, some states have chosen to abdicate their responsibility to prevent and counter the scourge of religious hatred," he said.

"A message has been sent to billions of people of faith across the world that their commitment to prevent religious hatred is merely a lip service.

"The opposition of a few in the room has emanated from their unwillingness to condemn the public desecration of the Holy Qur'an.

"They lack political, legal and moral courage."

The wording of the resolution condemns all manifestations of religious hatred, including "public and premeditated acts of desecration of the Holy Qur'an", and underscores the need to hold those responsible to account.

It urges states to adopt laws to "address, prevent and prosecute acts and advocacy of religious hatred that constitute incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence".

It also wants the UN rights chief Volker Turk to identify gaps in countries' laws in light of the resolution.

LONDON (AP) — Concerns are growing that Russia will not extend a United Nations-brokered deal that allows grain to flow from Ukraine to parts of the world struggling with hunger, with ships no longer heading to the war-torn country's Black Sea ports and food exports dwindling. Turkey and the UN negotiated the breakthrough accord last summer to ease a global food crisis, along with a separate agreement with Russia to facilitate shipments of its food and fertilizer. Moscow insists it's still facing hurdles, though data shows it has been exporting record amounts of wheat.

BEIJING (Reuters) - A private Chinese company launched on Wednesday the world's first methane-liquid oxygen rocket, beating U.S. rivals in sending what could become the next generation of launch vehicles into space. The Zhuque-2 carrier rocket blasted off at 9 a.m. (0100 GMT) from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwest China and completed its flight according to plan, state media reported. It was the second attempt by Beijing-based LandSpace, one of the earliest firms in China's commercial launch sector, to launch the Zhuque-2. A first attempt in December failed.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. President Joe Biden's public approval rating held steady at 40% in early July, close to the lowest levels of his presidency, as economic worries continued to trouble Americans, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll this week. The three-day online poll, which asked Americans, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Joe Biden is handling his job as president?" and ended on Monday, showed a marginal decrease from his 41% approval rating a month earlier, within the survey's three percentage point margin of error. The largest number of respondents -- 21% -- cited the economy as their top concern, following by 15% who cited crime or corruption. The White House in recent weeks has kicked off a series of events aimed to lift Americans' dour mood about the economy, touting what it calls the Democratic president's "Bidenomics" agenda.

NEW YORK (AFP) - Black women throughout the Americas -- and in particular the United States -- face health care mistreatment due to "systemic racism," leading to high death rates during childbirth, the United Nations warned Wednesday. Maternal mortality among women of African origin is "alarmingly high," both in absolute terms and when compared to non-Black and non-Indigenous women in the region, according to a damning new report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reviewing nine countries in the Americas. The study drew on data from Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Panama, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, the United States and Uruguay.

NEW DELHI (Reuters) - India's capital New Delhi on Wednesday began evacuating hundreds of residents over the risk of flooding as record rainfall has swelled water levels in a river that runs through the city, its chief minister said. The Yamuna River has already risen above the "danger mark" and submerged a few adjoining areas in the capital of 20 million people, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said, adding that the water levels had surged to a 45-year high. On Wednesday, people living in makeshift houses next to the river put their belongings on bikes and tractors and moved to some of the 2,500 relief camps set up in the city.