

NATO Vows to Stick With Ukraine 'as Long as It Takes'



NATO and Ukraine "are already working and taking decisions together, as equals"

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - NATO's foreign ministers Wednesday agreed to step up work with Ukraine on a wide range of security issues, in a bid to show solidarity amid distractions from the war between Israel and Hamas.

In a statement, NATO allies vowed to "remain steadfast in their commitment to further step up political and practical support to Ukraine" and said they "will continue their support for as long as it takes," after a meeting with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in Brussels.

"We are increasing our interoperability with NATO," Kuleba said, ahead of the first foreign ministerial-level NATO-Ukraine Council meeting. "We are pretty much becoming a de facto NATO army, in terms of our technical capacity, management approaches and principles of running an army."

According to the NATO statement, the alliance and Ukraine "are already working and taking decisions together, as equals, on a broad range of issues, including interoperability, energy security, innovation, cyber defence, and resilience. We will further develop these work strands."

NATO countries will also work to "help rebuild the Ukrainian security and defence sector and to support Ukraine's deterrence and defence in the long term." On Tuesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmi-

try Peskov said that NATO was originally created as "an instrument of confrontation," and the bloc is actively seeking to contain Russia.

"NATO views Russia as an adversary. NATO is an alliance that was created as an instrument of confrontation," Peskov said.

Peskov noted that NATO was originally established to contain Russia despite any statements that attempt to prove the opposite.

He said that the military bloc hasn't abandoned its plans up to this day, and is sacrificing the Ukrainian people in its fight against Russia, adding that Moscow fully understands the current situation and is planning any further action accordingly.

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg also has urged members of the security alliance to continue backing Ukraine in its battle against Russia amid opposition in the United States to a military aid package and resistance in Europe for a longer-term support plan for Kyiv.

On Wednesday, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Washington and its allies remained steadfast in their backing for Ukraine against Russia, despite doubts over future assistance and stalemate on the ground.

"Some are questioning whether the United States and other NATO allies in truth continue to stand with Ukraine as we enter the second winter," Blinken

said. "But the answer here today at NATO is clear and it's unwavering. We must and we will continue to support Ukraine."

We covered a lot of ground during the Foreign Ministers Meeting - from our expectations at the Washington Summit next year, to ways we can deepen our partnership with Ukraine, to how we can help support the Euro-Atlantic future of the Western Balkans.

Opposition from hardline Republicans in the U.S. Congress has stalled a new \$60-billion package of support and thrown into question the future of Washington's assistance.

The U.S. has provided more than \$40bn in security aid to Ukraine since the war in February 2022 and pledged to back Kyiv for as long as necessary.

But some \$61bn in proposed U.S. aid to Ukraine is being held up by the U.S. Congress, while another \$50bn package from the European Union is struggling to pass because of opposition from Hungary.

The Kremlin said on Wednesday, any decision by Finland to allow a "concentration" of troops on its border with Russia would be viewed by Moscow as a threat, after Poland offered to send military advisers to help Helsinki police the frontier.

The head of the Polish National Security Bureau, Jacek Siewiera, said in a post on social media X late on Tuesday that Poland would send military advisers to its NATO ally Finland, in response to "an official request for allied support in the face of a hybrid attack on the Finnish border".

"A team of military advisers will provide on-site knowledge on border security, also in operational terms," he said.

Finland said it was unaware of the Polish offer. It has closed its entire 1,340 km (833 mile) border with Russia for two weeks in a bid to halt an unusually large flow of asylum seekers that Helsinki says amounts to a "hybrid attack" orchestrated by Moscow, a charge the Kremlin denies.

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U.S. Military Aircraft Crashes in Sea Off Japan Killing At Least One



The hybrid Osprey aircraft has a troubled history, with multiple fatal crashes over the past years.

TOKYO (Reuters) - A U.S. military aircraft carrying six people crashed into the sea in western Japan on Wednesday, killing at least one crew member with the condition of at least two hauled from waters unclear.

Japan's coast guard said it found what appeared to be wreckage from the tilt-rotor V-22 Osprey and one person who was later confirmed to have died some 3 km (2 miles) from Yakushima island.

Fishing boats in the area found three people in the surrounding waters, a representative of a local fisheries cooperative said, adding their condition was unknown.

Another Osprey landed safely at the island's airport on Wednesday afternoon around the time of the crash, a spokesperson for the local government said.

U.S. forces in the region were still gathering information, a spokesperson said.

The United States has about 54,000 U.S. troops in Japan, many in the strategically important southern island chain, amid growing Chinese military assertiveness in the South China Sea.

The crash happened just before 3 p.m. (0600 GMT) with witnesses saying the aircraft's left engine appeared to be on fire as it approached an airport for an emergency landing, despite clear weather and light wind, media reported.

The coast guard corrected the number of people on board the plane to six from an initially announced eight.

Yakushima is in Japan's Kagoshima prefecture, some 1,040 km (650 miles) southwest of the capital Tokyo and known for its World Heritage-accredited wildlife and forests.

Japan, which also operates Osprey aircraft, said on Wednesday it had no plans to ground the aircraft but had asked the U.S. military to investigate the crash.

Developed jointly by Boeing and Bell Helicopter, the Osprey can fly both like a helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft and is operated by the U.S. Marines, U.S. Navy and the Japan Self-Defense Forces.

The deployment of the Osprey in Japan has been controversial, with critics saying it is prone to accidents. The U.S. military and Japan say it is safe.

Myanmar, China Conduct Naval Drills Together as Fighting Surges in Border Area



Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun, spokesperson of the ruling military council, was quoted in state media Wednesday as saying that Myanmar and China remain strategic partners and have close and friendly communications.

BANGKOK (AP) — Myanmar and China are conducting naval drills together as the military government in the Southeast Asian nation loses ground in its north-east border region to a coalition of militias that also has strong ties to Beijing.

State-run Myanmar Alinn newspaper said Wednesday that three Chinese vessels were anchored in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, and that officials from both nations met Tuesday to discuss the maritime security exercises.

The Chinese vessels - the destroyer Zibo, frigate Jing Zhou and supply ship Qian Dao Hu - carry about 700 sailors and arrived at the Myanmar port Monday. The report didn't give more details on the drills.

Myanmar's military seized power from an elected government in 2021 and since has been in armed conflict with pro-democracy forces and ethnic militias.

The visit of the Chinese vessels comes during an upsurge in violence on Myanmar's border with China by the Three Brotherhood Alliance, a group of militias that launched a coordinated offensive against the ruling military on Oct. 27.

China is Myanmar's biggest trading partner and maintains good relations with the ruling generals. The groups in the alliance also have good relations with China and have vowed to protect foreign investments such as Chinese-backed projects in territory they control.

The alliance has claimed widespread victories including four border crossings in the northern part of Shan state, and the military government acknowledged soon after fighting began that it had lost three towns.

The alliance's offensive has energized the nationwide armed struggle to overthrow the military regime that was installed after the army seized power, and fighting has spread to many parts of the country.

On Wednesday, the resistance forces in the northwestern Chin state seized a small town in Matupi township bordering India, according to Salai Danny, a spokesperson of the Chinland Defense Force-Zotung militia group.

Beijing has called for a cease-fire and has said the warring parties should try and resolve their differences through dialogue. It has not, however, used its influence with the militia groups to pressure them to put an end to the fighting.

Before the offensive, China had been growingly discontented with the military government's inattention to large-scale criminality in Myanmar near the border, including drug trafficking and cyberscam centers.

As the Three Brotherhood Alliance has gained ground, thousands of Chinese nationals involved in such operations have been repatriated into police custody in China.

Supporters of Myanmar's ruling generals have held several demonstrations in major cities accusing China of aiding the militia alliance.

News in Brief

LONDON (Reuters) - A majority of Britons support rejoining the European Union's single market even though that would mean the restoration of the free movement of workers from the bloc, according to a poll published on Wednesday. Curbing immigration was a key reason Britons voted to leave the European Union in 2016. Polls in recent months have shown that a majority of people now think Brexit was not a mistake, and Wednesday's poll comes less than a week after data showed that annual net migration to the United Kingdom hit a record high last year - more than double the figure recorded in the year before the Brexit vote.

MADRID (Reuters) - Spain is "very close" to signing a deal on the post-Brexit status of the British territory of Gibraltar, Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares said after meeting his British counterpart David Cameron in Brussels. "Today we have made progress, because David Cameron has shown a willingness to reach an agreement," Albares told reporters after the meeting. "We are very, very close," he added in comments broadcast by Spanish state broadcaster TVE. Albares did not say when both parties could announce a full agreement but he said they were discussing specific details, such as a formula for how both sides would use the airport. The status of Gibraltar - an enclave at the southern tip of Spain that has been under British rule since the 18th century - and how to police the border with Spain have been points of contention since Britain voted in 2016 to leave the European Union.

LONDON (Reuters) - Black employees in Britain have seen the gap in their earnings compared with white employees change little in recent years, but the difference narrowed for Asian or Asian British employees, Britain's statistics office said on Wednesday. Black, African, Caribbean or Black British employees were paid 5.6% less than white employees in 2022, the Office for National Statistics, citing its most recent data. That was close to the average difference over the past 10 years. The gap for Asian or Asian British employees was 1.9%, the ONS said, or roughly half its 10-year average. The ONS said its figures were adjusted for a number of factors such as occupation, geography and qualifications.

TOKYO (Reuters) - Japan's space agency was hit with a cyberattack but the information the hackers accessed did not include anything important for rocket and satellite operations, a spokesperson said on Wednesday. "There was a possibility of unauthorized access by exploiting the vulnerability of network equipment," the spokesperson at Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said, declining to elaborate on details such as when the attack took place. The investigation is ongoing, the spokesperson said.

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — New Zealand's new prime minister plans to ban cell-phone use in schools and repeal tobacco controls in the ambitious agenda he released Wednesday for his first 100 days in office. Christopher Luxon outlined 49 actions he said his conservative government intended to take over the next three months. The first new law he planned to pass would narrow the central bank's mandate to focus purely on keeping inflation in check, he said. That would change the Reserve Bank's current dual focus on low inflation and high employment.

Australia Apologizes to Pharma Victims

SYDNEY (AFP) - Australia issued a national apology Wednesday to survivors of the thalidomide drug scandal, which Prime Minister Anthony Albanese called one of the "darkest chapters" in the country's medical history.

Thalidomide was a "wonder drug" prescribed in the 1950s and early 1960s to help pregnant women cope with morning sickness, but it was later discovered the chemical also caused severe birth defects in children.

The Thalidomide Trust estimates more than 10,000 babies worldwide were impacted by thalidomide before it was pulled from shelves in the 1960s.

"Every day between then and now, Australians affected by

thalidomide have been owed an apology," Albanese said in a speech to parliament as Australian thalidomide survivors watched on.

"Today, at long last, Australia will say sorry. "This apology takes in one of the darkest chapters in Australia's medical history."

The British government made a similar apology in 2010. Australian obstetrician William McBride was in 1961 one of the first doctors to raise the alarm, after noticing women taking the drug were more likely to have babies with stunted or missing limbs.

The Australian government has said some 150 thalidomide survivors are registered with a national support program.

Bangladesh Opposition Says to Continue Protests



Supporters of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) join in a rally at Naya Paltan area in Dhaka, Bangladesh, October 28, 2023.

DHAKA (Reuters) - Bangladesh's main opposition party said on Wednesday it would continue its protests ahead of a general election in January.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), whose top leadership is either jailed or in exile, has already said it will boycott the election if Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina does not

resign and allow a caretaker government to oversee the poll, to be held on Jan. 7.

At least four people, including a policeman, have been killed and hundreds injured in violent protests across the country in the past few weeks, police said.

"Our peaceful and democratic protest programs will continue in spite

of the government crackdown on BNP, until the fundamental voting rights of the people of Bangladesh are restored," Abdul Moyeen Khan, a former minister and member of the BNP's highest policy-making body, told Reuters.

Two people were injured in the capital, Dhaka, when a crude bomb exploded on Wednesday as a countrywide transport blockade called by the BNP was underway, police said.

Dozens of buses and vehicles have been set on fire over the past one month, authorities said.

"People have no civil rights, no guarantee of living in safety. In order to end this misrule and lawlessness, the ongoing movement must be accelerated and the victory of the people must be ensured," senior BNP official Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said.

BNP said four people have been killed and more than 5,330 people arrested since the election was announced on Nov. 15.

Police say they have arrested only those responsible for violence.

Human Rights Watch has accused the government of targeting opposition leaders and supporters.