

Moscow Criticizes Macron's Statements on Ukraine



French President Emmanuel Macron (right) welcomes Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at the Elysee palace in Paris.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko has criticized French President Emmanuel Macron's remarks about the potential deployment of French troops to Ukraine as unacceptable, especially amid the tense military-political situation in Europe.

"The Russian Foreign Ministry has repeatedly commented on the French president's recent statements about the possible dispatch of military personnel from alliance member countries to the combat zone. I repeat that these ideas were immediately disavowed at NATO headquarters in Brussels, and in Washington, and in most other capitals of the bloc," Russia's RIA Novosti news agency quoted Grushko as saying.

"These statements indicate a readiness to follow the path of escalation in conditions when the West itself is suffering a strategic defeat on the ground. Such bragging, no matter what foreign or domestic political goals they

pursue, are unacceptable for responsible politicians, especially in the context of the already tense military-political situation in Europe," Grushko said.

Grushko also highlighted that NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has repeatedly stated that the alliance is not at war with Russia and is not a party to the conflict surrounding Ukraine.

In February, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the European Union's plan for a new coalition to supply Ukraine with long-range missiles and discussed, without consensus, the potential deployment of troops, saying that all options are being considered.

Earlier on Wednesday, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and his French counterpart Sebastien Lecornu discussed Ukraine peace negotiations and the recent terrorist attack in Moscow in a telephone conversation.

In the conversation, Lecornu expressed his condolences to Shoigu for the terrorist attack

at the Crocus City Hall concert venue in late March, which left a total of 144 people dead, according to a statement from the Russian Defense Ministry.

The French defense minister also tried to convince Shoigu that Ukraine and Western countries were not involved in the attack.

On Friday, the Russian Investigative Committee said that evidence shows a potential link between the deadly terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall near Moscow and the ongoing special military operation in Ukraine.

In a statement issued on its Telegram channel, the committee noted that from the attackers' mobile phones, which the terrorists attempted to destroy, data was retrieved related to the preparation of the attack.

"The data may indicate a connection between the terrorist act committed and the special military operation," the statement read.

In the battlefield, Ukrainian officials claimed Friday they used a barrage of drones to destroy at least six military aircraft and badly damage eight others at an airfield in Russia's Rostov region. Russian defense officials, however, claimed they intercepted 44 Ukrainian drones and that only a power substation was damaged in the attack.

The assault appeared to be one of Kyiv's biggest air attacks in the war, coming as its forces stepped up their assaults on Russian soil. Russia has also escalated attacks on civilian infrastructure, including Ukraine's power plants, in recent weeks, signaling a new and potentially dangerous phase in the conflict as both sides struggle to achieve significant advances on the ground.

The overnight attack targeted a military airfield near Morozovsk in Russia and was conducted by Ukraine's Security Service in cooperation with the army, Ukrainian intelligence officials told the AP.

U.S. Installs Secret Military Bases in Guyana Essequibo, Maduro Says

CARACA (Dispatches) - The United States has installed secret bases in Guyana Essequibo, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro said in a live broadcast on Venezolana de Television.

"We have confirmation that secret bases of the United States Southern Command and the CIA have been installed in the Guyana Essequibo region to prepare attacks on the population of southern and eastern Venezuela," Maduro said at the promulgation of the Organic Law for the Defense of Guyana Essequibo, which recognizes the region as part of Venezuela, TASS reported.

The Venezuelan president said that Guyana was under control of the U.S. Southern Command, the Central Intelligence Agency and ExxonMobil rather than its president Irfaan Ali. "We should always be ready to protect peace and Venezuela's territorial integrity," Maduro added.

On Wednesday, Venezuela hailed a majority vote by a session of the United Nations Human Rights Council that rejects imposing unilateral sanctions, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Yvan Gil said.

A resolution on the effects of im-



posing unilateral coercive measures on the exercise of human rights was adopted with 32 votes in favor, 14 against and one abstention.

"Today at the UN Human Rights Council, 32 countries voted against the imposition of unilateral coercive measures, recognizing their negative impact on populations," Gil said on social media platform X.

The "message" was clear, he said. "The international community rejects the interventionist and criminal policy of the United States, and it is time to

promote multipolarity."

Applying unilateral sanctions "runs counter to international law and the principle of sovereign equality between nations," the minister said.

Venezuela has denounced the United States for imposing on the South American country more than 900 unilateral sanctions, saying these measures affect the fundamental rights of its people.

In a speech to the UNHRC in late February, Gil said the sanctions have cost Venezuela more than \$232 billion in losses.

India's Top Court Puts Order Banning Islamic Schools on Hold



A calligraphy instructor teaches students from different schools the art of calligraphy during a workshop at an information and exhibition centre outside Jamia Masjid, Kashmir's main mosque in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir, 17 July 2017.

NEW DELHI (Reuters) - India's top court put on hold a lower court's order that effectively banned Islamic schools in the country's most populous state, lawyers involved in the case said on Friday, giving a breather to thousands of students and teachers in the system.

The directive comes days before the country begins voting in a national election where Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are seeking a third term.

The top court was responding to a challenge to the March 22 order

of the Allahabad High Court which scrapped a 2004 law governing the schools, called madrasas, in Uttar Pradesh state, where one-fifth of the 240 million population is Muslim.

Saying the law violated constitutional secularism, the High Court had also directed that pupils at these institutions be moved to conventional schools.

"We are of the view that the issues raised in the petitions merit closer reflection," the Supreme Court said on Friday, news portal LHC Law reported.

The matter will now be heard in July, and "everything will remain stayed" until then, lawyers said.

India's federal election system will conclude in June.

Iftikhar Ahmed Javed, head of the board of madrasa education in Uttar Pradesh state, welcomed the court's order, terming it a "big win".

"We were really worried regarding the future of about 16 lakh (1.6 million) students and now this order has come as a big relief for all of us," he said.

Descendants of Caribbean Slaves Break Silence Around France's Shameful Past



Dieudonne Boutrin is the president of the Nantes-based Coque Nomade-Fraternité.

NANTES (Reuters) - Descendants of the Caribbean people enslaved by France have come forward to raise awareness about the country's blotted history of slave trade.

France was responsible for 11% of the transatlantic slave trade. From 15th to the 19th century, at least 12.5 million men, women, and children were kidnapped and forcibly transported by European ships and sold into slavery.

Boutrin is the president of the Nantes-based Coque Nomade-Fraternité, an association that wants to "break the silence" around slavery through education.

Statistics show 27% of those enslaved by France were children.

About 13% died during the grueling "middle passage" voyage across the Atlantic.

Boutrin's association is raising funds to finish a 2018 project to build a replica of an 18th century ship that transported captive Africans enslaved by the French. "People will be able to understand the conditions the captives lived in," Boutrin said.

Through the association, Boutrin joined Guillon de Prince, to give guided tours that explore Nantes' links to slavery. De Prince has always known his ancestors were involved in slavery as ship-owners. That made him look deeper into the tainted past of France and work with Boutrin.

Dieudonne Boutrin is a descendant of people enslaved in the Caribbean. Pierre Guillon de Prince's ancestors, from Nantes, were ship-owners trans-

porting those enslaved. Although contrasting, their families' histories are linked.

They met in 2021 in Nantes, which was France's largest port for transatlantic slavery, and have since been working together to raise awareness about the past and its legacy in today's society.

Originally from the Caribbean island of Martinique, 59-year-old Boutrin moved to Nantes in the 1980s. It was only then that he fully learned about the true extent of slavery.

From the 15th to the 19th century, at least 12.5 million Africans were kidnapped and forcibly transported by mostly European ships and sold into slavery. Researchers estimate at least 2 million people died in the gruelling "Middle Passage" voyage across the Atlantic. France trafficked an estimated 1.3 million people to the Americas, including the Caribbean.

"The more I got into the story, the more anger there was," Boutrin said. "(So) I decided to put all my energy into paying tribute to these men and women."

In 2001, France officially recognized transatlantic slavery as a crime against humanity but, according to the French Foundation for the Remembrance of Slavery, racism persists.

Several cases of police using excessive force against Black people in recent years have highlighted accusations of systemic racism in the French police by human rights groups.

UN: Myanmar's Worst Violence Since Military Takeover Intensifying Crisis

UNITED NATIONS (AP) - Myanmar's escalating conflict and worst violence since the military takeover in 2021 are having a devastating impact on human rights, fundamental freedoms and basic needs of millions of people - as well as "alarming spillover effects" in the region, UN officials said Thursday.

Assistant Secretary-General for political affairs Khaled Khiri told the UN Security Council that "the civilian toll keeps rising" amid reports of indiscriminate bombing by Myanmar's armed forces and artillery shelling by various parties.

The nationwide armed conflict in Myanmar began after the army ousted the government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021 and suppressed widespread nonviolent protests that sought a return to democratic rule.

Thousands of young people fled to jungles and mountains in remote border areas as a result of the military's suppression and made common cause with ethnic guerrilla forces battle-hardened by decades of combat with the army in pursuit of autonomy.

Despite its great advantage in armaments and manpower, the military has been unable to quell the resistance movement. Over the past five months, the army has been routed in northern Shan state, is conceding

swaths of territory in Rakhine state in the west, and is under growing attack elsewhere.

Myanmar's main resistance group said Thursday its armed wing launched drone attacks on the airport and a military headquarters in the capital, Naypyitaw, but the ruling military said it destroyed the drones as they attacked. It wasn't possible to independently verify most details of the incident, but the military's acknowledgement that it had taken place in one of the country's most heavily guarded locations will be seen by many as the latest indication that it is losing the initiative.

Members of the Rohingya minority have long been persecuted in Buddhist-majority Myanmar. About 740,000 fled from Myanmar to refugee camps in Bangladesh when the military in August 2017 launched a brutal counterinsurgency campaign in response to attacks in Rakhine by a guerrilla group claiming to represent the Rohingya.

Khiri urged all parties in Rakhine to support the Rohingya, who are caught in the middle of the conflict and continue to experience "significant restrictions" on their freedom of movement as well as denial of citizenship and disproportionate vulnerability to abduction or forced recruitment.



QUITO (Reuters) - Ecuador's government has declared Mexico's ambassador to the country unwelcome, citing "unfortunate" comments from the Mexican president about Ecuador's elections last year. Ambassador Raquel Serur Smeke should leave the country "soon," Ecuador's foreign ministry told Reuters, after describing her as "persona non grata" in a statement. Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador commented on the assassination last year of Ecuadorean presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, comparing it with recent violence during Mexico's current election season, with several local candidates having been gunned down.

LOS ANGELES (AP) - Thieves stole as much \$30 million in an Easter Sunday burglary at a Los Angeles money storage facility in one of the largest cash heists in city history, police said. The burglary occurred Sunday night at an unnamed facility in the Sylmar area of the San Fernando Valley where cash from businesses across the region is handled and stored, LA Police Department Commander Elaine Morales told the Los Angeles Times. The burglars were able to breach the building as well as the safe where the money was stored, Morales said. The operators of the business, whom police did not identify, did not discover the massive theft until they opened the vault on Monday.

HOUSTON (Xinhua) - Bird flu has spread among herds in at least six U.S. states as of Thursday, with at least two confirmed human infections, raising worries over its risks to humans and a hike in egg prices. Infections have been reported in seven dairy herds in Texas, two in Kansas, and one each in New Mexico, Ohio, Michigan and Idaho since last month, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The agency is currently testing more, warning that transmission of the virus among cows across the states cannot be ruled out. The initial cases in Texas and Kansas appear to have been introduced by wild birds, and the strain of the virus in subsequent cases in New Mexico, Michigan and Idaho was very similar, said the USDA.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. military officials met their Chinese counterparts earlier this week for a series of meetings in Hawaii focused on how the two countries can operate safely, U.S. officials said on Friday. U.S. President Joe Biden sought to manage tensions over the South China Sea in a call with Chinese President Xi Jinping on Tuesday. The two leaders had agreed to resume direct military talks when they met in November. In a statement, the U.S. military said officials from both countries "reviewed safety-related events over the last few years, and discussed sustaining maritime and aviation operational safety and professionalism."

LIMA (Reuters) - Peru's Congress has voted twice against formally debating the launch of a process to impeach under-fire President Dina Boluarte, who is facing a probe into her possession of expensive jewelry, including luxury Rolex watches. Boluarte - a former vice-president who was rapidly sworn in as head of state by Congress in 2022 after her predecessor was impeached - is facing a probe for alleged illicit enrichment by improperly acquiring the high-end Rolex watches. Congress backed the government's new slate of ministers in a vote of confidence in the latest cabinet. Nearly a third of ministers resigned earlier this week, following a weekend raid at Boluarte's residence.