

Kyiv: Eastern Front 'Deteriorated' as Russian Armored Raid Ramps Up



A Ukrainian soldier rides an M113 armored personnel carrier on a road in the Donetsk region.

KYIV (AFP) — Ukraine's commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrsky said Saturday the situation on the eastern front had worsened significantly and Russia claimed the capture of a village near the occupied industrial town of Avdiivka.

"The situation on the eastern front has deteriorated significantly in recent days," said Syrsky, who took over as commander-in-chief in February after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky fired his popular predecessor, Valery Zaluzhny.

Russia's defense ministry announced its troops had "liberated" the village of Pervomaiske in the Donetsk region, about 11 km (7 miles) west of the largely destroyed town of Avdiivka, captured by Russia in the middle of February.

Syrsky spoke of "a significant intensification of the enemy's offen-

sive after the presidential elections in Russia" last month.

The commander-in-chief added decisions were being taken "to strengthen the most problematic defense areas with electronic warfare and air defense".

In the southern Zaporizhzhia region, Russia accused Ukraine on Saturday of killing 10 by shelling the occupied town of Tokmak.

The town fell to Russia at the start of the invasion.

Ukrainian authorities in Zaporizhzhia said Russia had struck the region more than 400 times over the last day, including from planes.

Ukraine has also said the situation around the eastern frontline city of Chasiv Yar is "difficult and tense" with the area under "constant fire".

Chasiv Yar lies 20 kilometers (12 miles) west of the town of Bakhmut,

which was flattened by months of artillery fire before it was captured by Moscow last May.

Russia is now securing fresh territorial gains and trying to press onwards against Ukrainian units hobbled by delays in the supply of vital Western military aid.

"The enemy is actively attacking our positions in the Lyman and Bakhmut sectors ... In the Pokrovsk sector, they are trying to break through our defense using dozens of tanks and armored personnel carriers," Syrsky said.

"The issue of achieving technical superiority over the enemy in high-tech weapons has again arisen. Only this will enable us to defeat a larger enemy," Syrsky said.

"The second serious problem is to improve the quality of training of military personnel, especially infantry units, so that they can make the most of all the capabilities of military equipment and Western weapons," Syrsky added.

European allies of Ukraine are engaged in a training push for its forces.

France's defense minister Sebastien Lecornu on Friday said future Ukrainian fighter pilots likely to fly American F-16 aircraft were receiving their initial training in the south of France.

Other countries including the Netherlands, Denmark and Romania are seeking to help Ukraine train pilots.

Some Ukrainians, after receiving initial training in Britain, are now undergoing "advanced training" in an undisclosed location to learn how to fly fighter jets, according to a military source.

'95,000 Fled Capital in A Month'

Haiti Decrees Long-Awaited Transition Council

PORT-AU-PRINCE (Reuters/AFP) — Haiti's government formalized the creation of a nine-member transitional presidential council, a long-delayed move intended as the first step in restoring security to the gang-ravaged Caribbean country.

The decree, however, leaves many questions unanswered.

It does not name the new council members or establish a time frame for installing the council and replacing Prime Minister Ariel Henry, who pledged one month ago to step down once his successor was in place.

Indicating the unelected Henry will initially retain oversight of proceedings, the decree allows the current prime minister to make the "necessary arrangements" ahead of the new appointments. Those chosen must then "participate, in agreement with the prime minister, in the formation of an inclusive ministers' cabinet."

It calls on the council to help speed the deployment of international troops Henry requested in 2022 to aid police in their battles with armed and increasingly powerful gangs.

The development comes as the United Nations said Friday about 95,000 people have fled rampant gang violence in the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince since early March.

Insecurity is "pushing more and more



Haiti has formalized a planned council aimed at restoring security in the gang-ravaged country.

people to leave the capital to find refuge in provinces, taking the risks of passing through gang-controlled routes," according to the UN's International Organization for Migration.

The agency is collecting data at high-traffic bus stations in the capital, and notes that its figures may not be complete as some people may not have passed through checkpoints or simply may not have been counted.

Haiti is grappling with a wave of violence

by powerful gangs that intensified in late February as they sought to oust Henry.

Delays in his stepping down mean violence, food shortages and a lack of medicine are still blighting the impoverished Caribbean nation.

A majority (58 percent) of those leaving Port-au-Prince have headed towards Haiti's southern region, which already hosts more than 116,000 displaced people, most of whom have fled the capital region in recent months, the IOM said.

U.S. House Passes Controversial Surveillance Bill to Renew Spy Program



Recent revelations that the FBI used the surveillance power to hunt for information about Black Lives Matter protesters, congressional campaign donors and U.S. lawmakers have raised further doubts about the program's integrity.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) — The Republican-controlled U.S. House of Representatives voted to reauthorize a controversial surveillance program on Friday, in a major step toward keeping a key element of the United States' espionage operation in place.

The House passed a bill reauthorizing Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act in a 273-147 vote. The FISA bill now moves to the Senate, which is expected to give it bipartisan approval. Without congressional action, the program will expire on April 19.

Approval came after the duration of the bill was changed to two years from a previous version of five years, as some Republicans had sought.

FISA has attracted criticism from both Republican and Democratic lawmakers, who say it violates Americans' constitutional right to privacy. The bill was blocked three times in the past five months by House Republicans bucking their party.

The White House, intelligence chiefs and top lawmakers on the House Intelligence Committee have warned of potentially "catastrophic effects of not reauthorizing the program," which was first created in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

The reauthorization was thwarted earlier this week when House Republicans refused to support the bill House Speaker Mike Johnson had put forward, which fell short of the changes they wanted.

"We will go blind on April 19" without the program, Representative Mike Turner, the Republican chair of

the House Intelligence Committee, told reporters on Wednesday.

Although the right to privacy is enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, the data of foreign nationals gathered by the program often includes communications with Americans, and can be mined by domestic law enforcement bodies such as the FBI without a warrant.

That has alarmed both headline Republicans and far-left Democrats. Recent revelations that the FBI used this power to hunt for information about Black Lives Matter protesters, congressional campaign donors and U.S. lawmakers have raised further doubts about the program's integrity.

Section 702 allows U.S. intelligence agencies to conduct warrantless electronic surveillance of foreigners outside the U.S.

Its sole purpose is to monitor email traffic and other communications of foreign citizens, but American messages may inadvertently be intercepted if they are in communication with the individuals under surveillance.

The program's failure to be reauthorized has been cautioned against by the White House, intelligence chiefs, and top lawmakers on the House Intelligence Committee due to the potential for catastrophic consequences.

In December, a senior White House official stressed the importance of Congress renewing the program, citing the ongoing conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, as well as the high tensions with China and the persistent threat of cyber-attacks, making it a dangerous time for any kind of "unilateral" disarmament.

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Russian Military Trainers Arrive in Niger as Relations Deteriorate With U.S.

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) — Russian military trainers have arrived in Niger to reinforce the country's air defenses as the west African nation pulls away from close cooperation with the United States in counterterrorism efforts, turning instead to Russia for security.

State television in Niger broadcast footage of Russian military trainers arriving in the country aboard a plane equipped with military supplies. Two Russian trainers were filmed in front of the plane at night wearing military uniforms, caps and face coverings.

"We are here to train the Nigerian army to use the military equipment that is here," one of the Russian trainers said in the broadcast, speaking in French. "We are here to develop military cooperation between Russia and Niger."

Niger's ruling military council, known as the CNSP, has yet to order American troops out, U.S. officials have said. But the arrival of Russian forces makes it complicated for the U.S. forces, along with diplomatic and civilian personnel, to remain in the country. It also throws into doubt the future of joint Niger-U.S. counterterrorism operations.

Until recently, Washington considered Niger a key partner and ally in a region swayed by coups in recent years, investing millions of dollars in an air base in a desert area that served as the heart of American operations in Africa's sub-Saharan region known as the Sahel.

Following the visit last month of a U.S. delegation led by the top U.S. envoy to Africa, Molly Phee, the junta announced on state television that flights from the U.S.-built air base were illegal and that it no longer recognized the American military presence in the country.

The junta criticized the U.S. for warning Niger against cooperating with Russia, saying it was trying to force the African nation to choose between partners.

A senior U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing talks, said Washington was looking at options for revising military cooperation with Niger. While the path forward would not be easy, there was still hope for finding a formula that addressed concerns and interests on both sides, the official said.

The Russian plane had arrived on Wednesday night, the report by Niger's state television said, and carried Russian military supplies to help Niger improve its air defenses. The broadcast said the arrival of Russian trainers followed a call between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Niger's military leaders in March.

Niger's military leaders are seeking to diversify their partnerships and achieve greater sovereignty, the broadcast said.

"The arrival of a Russian air defense system can be viewed as part of the junta's effort to reclaim sovereignty," said John Lechner, Africa analyst and author on the Wagner Group.

North Korea, Chinese Top Officials Hail 'New Chapter' of Ties

SEOUL (AFP) — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and China's top legislator hailed a "new chapter" of Beijing-Pyongyang relations on Saturday, in one of the most high-level meetings between the allies in years.

Beijing's third highest-ranking official Zhao Leji -- a member of the powerful Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo -- made a goodwill visit to North Korea this week as the two countries mark 75 years of diplomatic ties.

Zhao told Kim that China is willing to "promote bilateral practical and mutually beneficial cooperation to achieve new results, to continue to give strong mutual support and to safeguard the common interests of both sides".

Kim in turn told Zhao North Korea was keen to "deepen the traditional friendship and write a new chapter in Democratic People's Republic of Korea-China relations," according to Xinhua.

Some performers wore colorful

A photo published by Xinhua showed Zhao and Kim smiling and shaking hands.

Zhao is China's third highest-ranking official, behind President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang.

Zhao earlier emphasized the need to "open up a new chapter of China-DPRK friendship along with the times", in a speech at the opening ceremony on Friday, which he attended alongside North Korean counterpart Choe Ryong Hae, according to North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency.

North Korea's Choe said on Friday that the two countries' relationship "has greeted a new heyday under the wise leadership" of their leaders, KCNA said.

Choe and Zhao were seen sitting next to each other watching performances by what KCNA said were "prestigious art troupes" of the two nations at the East Pyongyang Grand Theater, AFP footage showed.

Some performers wore colorful

traditional Korean and Chinese garments, and what appeared to be the final moment of the event highlighted a massive image of the countries' flags, accompanied by the phrase "eternal friendship".

South Korean local media reports said this week that Zhao's trip could include planning for Kim's next potential state visit to Beijing.

Kim last met President Xi in 2019 before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, making the Pyongyang meeting between Zhao and Choe one of the most high-level meetings in years.

The Chinese delegation was seen off by senior North Korean officials as they boarded their plane departing Pyongyang on Saturday, Xinhua said.

Xinhua said Friday that Zhao and Choe discussed the "situation on the Korean peninsula", and Zhao expressed Beijing's willingness to "intensify legislative exchanges and cooperation".

News in Brief

SYDNEY (Reuters) — An attacker who fatally knifed six people in a Sydney mall was shot dead by police in the beachside suburb of Bondi on Saturday, police said, as hundreds fled the scene. The assailant was shot by a police officer after he attacked shoppers in the busy Westfield Bondi Junction shopping centre, police said in a statement. Five of the six victims killed were women, while eight people, including a nine-month-old baby, were taken to hospital with stab wounds, New South Wales Police Commissioner Karen Webb told a press conference. Police at this stage do not believe the attack was terrorism-related, Webb said. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said there was no indication yet of the man's motive. "This was a horrific act of violence, indiscriminately targeting innocent people going about an ordinary Saturday doing their shopping," he told a press conference. Emergency services were called to the mall, about three kilometers (1.9 miles) from Sydney's iconic Bondi Beach and popular with children and families, just before 4 p.m. (0600 GMT) after the stabbing reports, police said.

QUETTA, Pakistan (Reuters) — Gunmen shot and killed nine men after abducting them from a bus in a troubled province in southwestern Pakistan bordering Afghanistan and Iran, officials said on Saturday. No one has claimed the responsibility for the Friday night attack in Balochistan province in Pakistan's southwest. Separatist ethnic Baloch militant groups in the mineral-rich region have been fighting for decades against the state, saying it denies them their share of regional resources. Several gunmen intercepted the Iran-bound bus in Noshki district, taking the nine men with them after determining they were from the eastern province of Punjab, said police officer Abdullah Mengal. "All of them were travelling to Taftan," he said. The victims were shot at close range, he said. Their bullet-ridden bodies were found from beneath a bridge after one and a half hour, said the district deputy commissioner, Habibullah Musakhail.

GENEVA (Anadolu) — The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has called for international action as 20,000 people are forced to flee their homes in Sudan each day. According to the latest Displacement Tracking Matrix report, young people under the age of 18 belong to 53% of the daily figure, the IOM said in a statement. Over the past year, the agency said that more than 8.6 million people have been forced to flee their homes over the past year as fighting spreads in the country, including many who were previously displaced multiple times. "Sudan is on a tragically fast track to becoming one of the world's biggest humanitarian crises in decades, and the conflict that has engulfed the country is creating pressure throughout the region. Millions of people are displaced, hungry and vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, but their plight is being ignored by too much of the world," IOM Director General Amy Pope said. "We implore international leaders to rise to the moment, help us bring humanitarian aid to Sudan and use their influence to help bring peace," Pope said.

BEIJING (Reuters) — Floods, droughts, an earthquake and freezing conditions in China caused direct economic losses of 23.76 billion yuan (\$3.28 billion) in the first quarter, the government said on Saturday. The emergency management ministry cited damage from several cold spells, a 7.1 magnitude earthquake in the northwestern region of Xinjiang, landslides in Yunnan province in the southwest and flooding on the Yellow River. The disasters killed 79 people while 110,000 needed emergency relocation and resettlement and 10.4 million people across 26 regions and provinces were affected in the period, the ministry said in a report. Other natural disasters included a drought in the southwest affecting 424,000 hectares (10,500 acres) of crops, sandstorms in the northwest and forest fires in the southwest and south. Last year natural disasters in China caused 345.45 billion yuan (\$47.7 billion) of direct economic losses, with 691 people dead or missing, the ministry reported in January.

BENI, DRC (Dispatches) — Suspected militants killed at least 10 civilians in an attack near the city of Beni in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, local authorities and a UN source said. The assailants fired guns at people working in fields in Mulekera commune outside Beni, Mulekera Mayor Ngongo Mayanga said on Saturday. Seven bodies have been collected so far, including those of three women, with a further five victims reported elsewhere, he said. "Certainly there are other bodies that we will find as the search continues," he said by phone, blaming the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebel group. A source in the UN peacekeeping mission in eastern Congo said 10 people were killed. The ADF originates from neighbouring Uganda. Now based in eastern Congo, it has pledged allegiance to Duesh and mounts frequent attacks, further destabilizing a region where many militant groups are active.

MOSCOW (Reuters) — The level of the Ural river in the Russian city of Orenburg has reached 11.83 meters, or around 39 feet, local authorities said on Saturday, after major rivers burst their banks due to a historic deluge of melting snow. Authorities in the city called on thousands of residents to evacuate immediately on Friday due to rapidly rising floodwaters. "The situation remains challenging. In some areas the flood peak is still ahead," Orenburg Governor Denis Pasler said on the Telegram messenger app. Water was also rising sharply in another Russian region, Kurgan. Floodwaters were approaching the settlement of Baraba, located near the regional center Kurgan, governor Vadim Shumkov said on his Telegram channel, calling on residents to evacuate. Shumkov said a deluge could reach Kurgan in the coming days. The level of the Tobol river, which flows through the city, may reach 9-11 meters, he added.