



Russian Troops Advance in Ukraine's Kharkiv Region



Rescuers at a house after a Russian missile attack in Kharkiv.

UKRAINE (AFP) -- Russia pounded over 30 villages and towns in Ukraine's northeastern Kharkiv region after launching a ground offensive in the border region, forcing almost 6,000 to evacuate, the governor said on Monday.

Ukraine's General Staff acknowledged on Monday that Russia "currently is achieving tactical success" after driving a wedge into Kyiv's defenses.

Russia's defense ministry said on Monday that troops had "improved the tactical position and dealt a blow to (Ukrainian) manpower" around border villages including Lyptsi and the town of Vovchansk.

"They are shelling the villages, firing on everything they can," Sergiy Kryvchenko, deputy head of the

military administration in the village of Lyptsi, told AFP.

"The KABs (guided aerial bombs) are flying. The artillery is flying. Drones. Everything," he said.

On Friday, Russia began an offensive across its border into the Kharkiv region and later claimed to have taken several villages in the region near the border.

The situation in the Kharkiv region is "complex and dynamically changing", with Russian troops mounting assaults in various areas, Ukraine's General Staff said.

Kharkiv regional governor Oleg Syneubov wrote on social media that over the last day, "more than 30" towns and villages "were struck by enemy artillery and mortar attacks", wounding at least nine people.

Some areas were also bombed by Russian aircraft, Syneubov added.

A total of 5,762 people have been evacuated from their homes since the start of the offensive, the governor said.

Over the course of Sunday, Russia "carried out 22 assaults" in five border areas, 14 of which were still ongoing, the General Staff said.

The General Staff said fighting was ongoing for the border town of Vovchansk, where Russia was deploying "significant forces", numbering up to five battalions.

Vovchansk, which previously had a population of 2,500 but now has only 200-300 residents, suffered "massive shelling" on Sunday that hit houses and wounded seven, said Syneubov.

A 69-year-old man was also wounded in the town of Izyum by detonating ammunition and a woman was injured in a village near the town of Kupiansk.

The city of Kharkiv itself had not been struck over the last 24 hours, however, he said.

Syneubov said on national television that "the grey zone and the front line are expanding" because Russia is "trying to deliberately stretch it, attacking in small groups in new directions".

The DeepState Telegram channel, which is close to the Ukrainian army, wrote that Russia had taken pockets of territory measuring around 100 square kilometers (39 square miles).

Modi's BJP Skips Kashmir as India Votes in Final Election Phase



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during a rally at a stadium in Kashmir on March 7, as his bodyguard looks on.

SRINAGAR, India (AFP) -- India's six-week election resumed Monday including in Kashmir, where voters are expected to show their discontent with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cancellation of their disputed territory's semi-autonomy and the security crackdown that followed.

Modi remains popular across much of India and his Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is widely expected to win the poll when it concludes early next month.

But his government's decision in 2019 to bring Kashmir under its direct rule -- and the subsequent clampdown -- have been deeply resented among the region's residents, who will be voting for the first time since the move.

Kashmir has been divided between India and Pakistan since their independence in 1947. Both claim it in full and have fought two wars over control of the Himalayan region.

Rebel groups opposed to Indian rule have waged an insurgency since 1989 on the side of the frontier controlled by New Delhi, demanding either independence or a merger with Pakistan.

India accuses Pakistan of backing the insurgents, a charge that Islamabad denies.

The conflict has killed tens of thousands of soldiers, rebels and civilians

in the decades since, including a spate of firefights between suspected rebels and security forces in the past month.

Modi's government says its cancelling of Kashmir's special status has brought "peace and development", and it has consistently claimed the move was supported by Kashmiris.

But his party has not fielded any candidates in the Kashmir valley for the first time since 1996, and experts say the BJP would have been roundly defeated if it had.

The BJP has appealed to voters to instead support smaller and newly created parties that have publicly aligned with Modi's policies.

But voters are expected to back one of two established Kashmiri political parties calling for the Modi government's changes to be reversed.

India's election is conducted in seven phases over six weeks to ease the immense logistical burden of staging the democratic exercise in the world's most populous country.

More than 968 million people are eligible to vote in India's election, with the final round of polling on June 1 and results expected three days later.

Turnout so far has declined significantly from the last national poll in 2019, according to election commission figures.

PM: Sweden Open to Hosting Nuclear Weapons in Wartime



Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson says he is open to allowing nuclear weapons on Swedish soil in wartime.

STOCKHOLM (AFP) -- Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said Monday he was open to allowing nuclear weapons on Swedish soil in wartime, as critics call for the new NATO member to ban their deployment.

Sweden's parliament is set to vote on a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the United States in June which will give the U.S. access to military bases in Sweden and allow the storage of military equipment and weapons in the Scandinavian country.

Sweden abandoned two centuries of military non-alignment to join NATO in

March this year.

Calls have mounted in recent weeks, from the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Association among others, for the government to put in writing in the DCA agreement that Sweden will not allow nuclear weapons on its soil.

The government has repeatedly insisted there is no need to have a ban spelled out, citing "broad consensus on nuclear weapons" in Sweden as well as a parliamentary decision that bars nuclear weapons in Sweden in peacetime.

But Kristersson said on Monday that war-

time was a different story.

"In a war situation it's a completely different matter, (it) would depend entirely on what would happen," he told public broadcaster Swedish Radio.

"In the absolute worst-case scenario, the democratic countries in our part of the world must ultimately be able to defend themselves against countries that could threaten us with nuclear weapons."

He insisted that any such decision to place nuclear weapons in Sweden would be taken by Sweden, not the United States.

"Sweden decides over Swedish territory," he said.

But, he stressed, "the whole purpose of our NATO membership and our defence is to ensure that that situation does not arise."

If Ukraine had been a NATO member, "it would not have been attacked by Russia," he said.

Sweden's Social Democratic Party, which was in power when Sweden submitted its NATO membership application in May 2022, said at the time it would work to express "unilateral reservations against the deployment of nuclear weapons and permanent bases on Swedish territory".

Nordic neighbors Denmark and Norway, which are already NATO members, have both refused to allow foreign countries to establish permanent military bases or nuclear weapons on their soil in peacetime.

Two U.S. Citizens Arrested Amid Protests in Georgia



Police officers blocked demonstrators near the parliament building in Tbilisi, Georgia on May 13, 2024.

TBILISI (Reuters) -- Two U.S. citizens and one Russian were among 20 people detained at protests in Tbilisi while Georgian lawmakers were debating a "foreign agents" bill that has sparked a political crisis, the interior ministry said on Monday.

The protesters were among several thousand opponents of the bill who heeded a call from Georgia's opposition to stage an all-night protest outside parliament with the intention of preventing lawmakers from entering the building on Monday.

However, lawmakers were able to get into the parliament building where the judiciary committee -- boycotted by opposition parties -- formally approved the legislation in a one-minute session. The full assembly is expected to debate and approve the bill on its third and final reading as early as Tuesday.

The U.S. embassy and Russia's diplomatic representatives in Georgia did not immediately reply to emailed requests for comment on their detained citizens. Russia does not currently have an embassy in Georgia, due to the countries' dispute over two Moscow-backed breakaway regions.

The Georgian interior ministry wrote on Facebook that one of the U.S. na-

tionals was born in 1995 but offered no further details.

Georgian media, citing witnesses, reported that police had pushed protesters away from the service entrances of the parliament building early on Monday, leading to some scuffles.

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze has vowed to press ahead with the bill despite it having caused some of the largest protests seen in the South Caucasus nation since it won independence from Moscow in 1991.

The "foreign agents" bill requires organizations receiving more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register as agents of foreign influence or face fines. Georgia's ruling party says it is needed to enhance the transparency of NGO funding and protect the country from outside interference.

The dispute over the bill has come to be seen as key to whether Georgia, which has had traditionally warm relations with the West, continues its push for European Union and NATO membership, or instead pivots more towards Russia.

The EU, which granted Georgia candidate status in December, has repeatedly said the bill could jeopardize Tbilisi's further integration with the bloc.

Catalans to Form Regional Minority Gov't After Election Setback

BARCELONA (AFP) -- Catalan separatist leader Carles Puigdemont said Monday he would seek to form a pro-independence minority government in the Spanish region despite a weekend electoral setback.

Spain's governing Socialist Party won a regional election in Catalonia on Sunday, snatching away separatist parties' majority.

But Puigdemont insisted he was still in a position to rally pro-independence groups and form a regional government.

"We can assemble a coherent majority," added Puigdemont, who lives abroad in exile to escape trial for leading a botched independence bid in 2017.

"Not an absolute one, but a coherent one, bigger than the one the Socialist Party candidate can gather," added Puigdemont, leader of the centrist hardline separatist party JxCat.

"We are going to concentrate on that from now on."

new Catalan regional parliament.

The Socialists won 42 of the regional parliament's 135 seats on Sunday -- nine more than in the previous election in 2021, but short of an absolute majority.

Analysts say the Socialists could ally with the radical left Comuns Sumar, which won six seats, and moderate independence party ERC, which won 20.

JxCat, ERC and the smaller hard-left CUP secured 59 seats between them, compared with 74 last time.

Puigdemont insisted the independence parties had "potentially more options" for winning office.

He said he had been in touch with ERC to discuss creating "a pro-sovereignty government".

Puigdemont spoke in Argeles-sur-Mer, a few kilometers (miles) from the Spanish border.

Ahead of the vote, he had pledged to retire from politics if he lost.

Sunday's result offered a boost to Spain's Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez.

He had wanted to show that his pol-

icy of defusing tensions triggered by the 2017 crisis had worked, reducing pro-independence sentiment in the wealthy northeastern region of eight million people.

With the Socialists having increased their number of seats by nine, it is thought the party's local leader Salvador Illa should be able to put together a left-wing alliance with smaller parties to form a new regional government, albeit with a slim majority.

The Socialists could ally with the radical left Comuns Sumar, or Comuns Unite, which won six seats and the moderate independence party ERC, which won 20.

More than 5.7 million voters were eligible to choose lawmakers for the regional parliament based in Barcelona.

Separatists have held the regional government for more than a decade. But polling and the national election in July show that support for secession has shrunk since Puigdemont's "illegal" breakaway bid in 2017.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- Russian President Vladimir Putin moved to replace defense minister Sergei Shoigu in a major shake-up to Russia's military leadership more than two years into its Ukraine offensive. Putin proposed economist Andrey Belousov as Shoigu's replacement, according to a list of the ministerial nominations published by the Federation Council, Russia's upper house of parliament. Putin simultaneously published decrees naming Shoigu as the new secretary of the Security Council, replacing long-standing Putin ally Nikolai Patrushev. "Shoigu will continue to work in this sector (defense), which he knows well," state media quoted Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov as saying. The major reshuffle comes with Russian forces advancing on the battlefield for the first time in months. Shoigu was appointed Russian defense minister in 2012. Despite a string of military setbacks for Russia -- including the failure to capture the Ukrainian capital Kyiv and retreats from the northeastern Kharkiv and southern Kherson regions -- Putin had stood by Shoigu until now.

MUENSTER, Germany (Reuters) -- A German high court on Monday ruled that domestic security services could continue to treat the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) as a potentially extremist party, meaning they retain the right to subject it to surveillance. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), charged with protecting Germany's democratic order from extremist threats, has classified the AfD as potentially extreme since 2021. The party, which continues to top polls in several eastern states that hold elections later this year, has come under increased scrutiny over allegedly racist remarks by its members and allegations that it harbored spies and agents for Russia and China in its midst.

FORT NELSON, British Columbia (AP) -- An intense wildfire could hit a town in western Canada on Monday, based on forecasts of strong winds that have been fueling the out-of-control blaze which has already forced the evacuation of thousands, fire experts and officials warned. The British Columbia Wildfire Service said the blaze was burning just 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) northwest of Fort Nelson, which has already seen about 3,500 people evacuated from there after an order to leave was issued on Friday. In a video posted on social media late Sunday, fire behavior specialist Ben Boghean with the British Columbia Wildfire Service said the extreme fire behavior -- made worse by years of drought and a below-normal snowpack this past winter -- could end up threatening the crews that have been fighting the nearby Parker Lake wildfire. In 2023, Canada witnessed a record number of wildfires that also caused choking smoke in parts of the U.S. and forced more than 250,000 Canadians to evacuate their communities.

YEREVAN (AFP) -- Armenian police said on Monday they had detained dozens of people attempting to block streets in the capital Yerevan as part of protests against government plans to concede land to Azerbaijan. Armenia has agreed to hand over territory it has controlled since the 1990s and has started border delimitation efforts, in a bid to secure an elusive peace deal with Baku and avoid another bloody conflict. The interior ministry said that a total of 151 people had been detained so far on Monday but that protesters had failed to close off any streets in Yerevan. Armenia and Azerbaijan, two former Soviet republics in the south Caucasus, have been locked in a standoff over disputed territory. The two countries last month announced they had begun border demarcation work as part of normalization efforts between the arch foes. The Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers met over the weekend in Kazakhstan.

PADANG, Indonesia (AP) -- Rescuers recovered more bodies Monday after monsoon rains triggered flash floods on Indonesia's Sumatra Island, bringing down torrents of cold lava and mud, leaving 43 people dead and another 15 missing. The heavy rains, along with a landslide of mud and cold lava from Mount Marapi, caused a river to breach its banks. The deluge tore through mountainside villages along four districts in West Sumatra province just before midnight Saturday. The floods swept away people and submerged hundreds of houses and buildings, while forcing more than 3,100 people to flee to temporary government shelters in Agam and Tanah Datar districts, said National Disaster Management Agency spokesperson Abdul Muhari.

BELGRADE (AFP) -- Ukraine's foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba kicked off an official visit to Serbia on Monday, where he was set to meet with the Balkan country's leaders days after a high-profile visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Ukraine's First Lady Olena Zelenska was also in the capital Belgrade, where she signed a new education agreement with a university in Serbia, according to a post on X. Serbia remains a rare outlier in Europe for refusing to sanction the Kremlin following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Belgrade has long been close to Moscow, with its shared Orthodox heritage, mutual distrust of NATO, and military alliances during several wars strengthening their relations. The country has welcomed tens of thousands of Russians fleeing the war in recent years. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has also met multiple times with Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky, including a brief sit down during a summit in Albania in late February.