



MOSCOW (Reuters) - About 50,000 people were left without power in the Russian city of Belgorod on Friday after Ukrainian missiles struck it overnight, the Ukrainian governor said. Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said about half of those affected should be reconnected by the end of Friday following the latest in a series of attacks that have caused repeated blackouts. Belgorod, which lies about 40 km (25 miles) from the border with Ukraine, has been a frequent target of Ukrainian drone and missile strikes in the four years since Russia invaded its neighbor. "Serious damage has occurred with energy infrastructure," Gladkov wrote on Telegram. "As a result, there have been disruptions to supplies of power, water and heating."

WASHINGTON (AP) - A public showdown between the Trump administration and Anthropic is hitting an impasse as military officials demand the artificial intelligence company bend its ethical policies by Friday or risk damaging its business. Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei drew a sharp red line 24 hours before the deadline, declaring his company "cannot in good conscience accede" to the Pentagon's final demand to allow unrestricted use of its technology. Anthropic, maker of the chatbot Claude, can afford to lose a defense contract. But the ultimatum this week from Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth posed broader risks at the peak of the company's meteoric rise from a little-known computer science research lab in San Francisco to one of the world's most valuable startups.

CHAPPAQUA (AFP) - Former U.S. president Bill Clinton will be grilled by a Congressional panel on his well-documented links to Jeffrey Epstein, as Democrats seek to shift focus onto Donald Trump's own ties to the convicted sex offender. Clinton features prominently throughout the latest Epstein files disclosures, with the former president insisting that he broke ties with him well before the disgraced billionaire's 2008 conviction for sex offenses.

TIRANA (Reuters) - Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama late on Thursday dismissed his deputy, Belinda Balluku, who faces accusations of manipulating public tenders, allegations that have sparked opposition protests. A special prosecution office targeting corruption and organized crime, known as SPAK, indicted Balluku in December on suspicion of interfering in the awarding of two construction contracts in 2021 worth more than 200 million euros. Parliament is expected to decide on March 5 whether to eliminate her immunity, which would allow SPAK to arrest her. Albania, which wants to join the European Union by 2030, faces pressure from the bloc to tackle corruption.

KUALA LUMPUR (Reuters) - Malaysia's top police official said on Friday authorities were investigating an alleged conspiracy to "topple the government and sabotage national stability." The alleged plot involved a local influential figure as well as an international media agency, Inspector-General of Police Mohd Khalid Ismail said in a statement. He did not name the person or the media agency. The investigation was being carried out under laws against undermining parliamentary democracy, an offense that carries a maximum jail term of 20 years upon conviction, he said.

Polls Undercut White House Claims of a Booming Economy



WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President Donald Trump says the U.S. economy is booming and that he has fixed inflation. But most Americans, including many in his Republican Party, do not see things that way, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll.

"This is the golden age of America," Trump said in his State of the Union address on Tuesday. "The roaring economy is roaring like never before."

The latest Reuters/Ipsos poll, completed on Monday, showed 68% of people disagree with a statement that "the U.S. economy is booming," a claim Trump has repeatedly made since returning to office in January 2025.

Republicans in the survey were sharply divided on how well the economy is doing, a warning sign for the party ahead of the November 3 midterm elections when Trump's party will defend majorities in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate. Some 56% of Republicans thought the economy was booming, while 43%

disagreed.

In Dickson, Tennessee, west of Nashville, Marcus Tripp wishes Trump would prioritize making the country more prosperous over his aggressive effort to deport unauthorized immigrants.

"The economy is what he needs to be focused on," said Tripp, 53, who works in manufacturing in a district represented by Republican U.S. Representative Matt Van Turner, whose special election last fall turned out to be more competitive than expected as Democrats rallied to support the challenger.

"Even as a two-income household, we are struggling," said Tripp, who leans Republican. "I am worried more about how much my rent and everything is going up than I am about whether the guy down the street has citizenship documents or not."

Americans interviewed in the Reuters/Ipsos poll cited the cost of living as the top issue that will determine how they will vote in November's

midterms. They also rejected assertions that price increases were no longer a problem, a claim made by Trump last month when he said "inflation has been defeated" and that Americans currently see "virtually no inflation."

Republicans and Democrats will begin to pick their candidates for November's elections in primaries that begin on Tuesday in Texas, North Carolina and Arkansas.

Only 16% of poll respondents agreed with a statement that "there is hardly any inflation in the U.S."

Eighty-two percent of respondents overall - and the same share of independents - disagreed, as did 72% of Republicans. Democrats, who have become more bearish on the economy since Trump returned to the White House, overwhelmingly rejected notions of an economic boom or vanquished inflation.

Many Americans are unaware of the policies and proposals Trump has put forward to limit increases in the cost of living, the Reuters/Ipsos poll found. Some 44% of respondents had never heard of the White House plan unveiled last month to restrict large investors, such as investment firms, from buying single-family homes. Forty-eight percent had never heard of Trump's proposal to cap credit card interest rates at 10%.

Americans were considerably more aware of Trump's pre-eminent economic policy push of raising tariffs on imported goods, with 78% saying they had heard at least a little about tariff hikes. Some 54% of respondents - including 69% of Democrats and 42% of Republicans - said they expected tariffs to raise the cost of living.

Embarrassing Defeat for UK's Starmer as Greens Seize Labour Stronghold



LONDON (Reuters) - UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer's Labour suffered an embarrassing election defeat to the left-wing Green Party on Friday in an area of Manchester it had dominated for almost a century, a result that underscored the breakdown of Britain's two-party politics.

The loss of one of Labour's safest seats, in the biggest electoral test in almost a year, piles further pressure on Starmer to prove that he should keep his job following weeks of political turmoil and calls for him to resign.

The Green Party's Hannah Spencer won the contest for the vacant parliamentary seat of Gorton and Denton, with Nigel Farage's populist Reform UK party coming second, and Labour pushed into third place.

The result was "clearly disappointing", said Labour Party chair Anna Turley.

John Curtice, Britain's most respected pollster, called the result a "seismic moment", which means the "future of British politics looks more uncertain than at any stage" since the end of World War Two.

Starmer had staked his personal authority on Labour winning the seat by blocking one of his rivals, the popular Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham, from standing, and by visiting the constituency this week, when British leaders normally avoid campaigning in local areas if they risk losing.

The defeat comes after Starmer faced the most dangerous moment of his premiership this month when some of his lawmakers said he should resign over his decision to appoint Labour veteran Peter Mandelson as ambassador to Washington, despite his links to the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Labour won just over half the vote in Gorton and Denton at the last general election in 2024. But Starmer's unpopularity, sluggish economic growth and a series of scandals

and policy U-turns contributed to a deep fall in the party's support.

The Green Party won 40.7% of the vote on Friday in an election triggered when a member of parliament resigned for health reasons. Nigel Farage's Reform Party came second with 28.7% of the vote and Labour finished third with 25.4%.

While so-called by-elections are often lost by the governing party, the scale of Labour's defeat by the left-leaning Greens piles pressure on Starmer, who has brushed off calls to resign and has pledged to fight on.

Starmer was unlikely to face an immediate threat to his position if he lost, Labour lawmakers said before the vote.

But he could be challenged after May elections, they added, when Labour is expected to fare badly in local and regional polls, including for the parliaments in Wales and Scotland.

Gorton and Denton - which includes the area where the Gallagher brothers who formed Oasis grew up - was once part of Labour's old coalition of industrial areas across England that was considered so impregnable that it was called the Red Wall.

But the election contest was an example of how the British electorate has become more volatile, with declining loyalty and growing support for insurgent parties on the right and left of politics.

It was the first time the Green Party, which supports leaving NATO and legalizing recreational drugs, had won a one-off election for a seat in parliament or one in the North of England. That takes the party's total number of seats in the House of Commons to five out of 650. Nationally, five parties, including the Greens, Reform and the Liberal Democrats, are polling double-digit percentages, threatening the Labour-Conservative duopoly of the last century.

Cuba Slams U.S. for 'Impunity' on Speedboat Attack Suspects

SANTA CLARA (Reuters) - Cuba criticized the U.S. government for allowing anti-Cuban groups to operate with impunity on Thursday, as Cuban exiles wounded in an apparent attack aboard a Florida-registered speedboat convalesced at a provincial Cuban hospital.

The government in Havana said heavily armed Cuban nationals tried to infiltrate the country by speedboat on Wednesday, leading to gunfire at sea in which Cuban forces killed four Cuban nationals and wounded six others, who were in Cuban custody.

According to a U.S. official in Washington, at least two of those aboard the speedboat were U.S. citizens, one of the dead and one of the injured, who was receiving medical care in Cuba. Others may have been legal U.S. residents, the official said.

While Cuba laid blame at the U.S. for allowing anti-Castro groups to operate freely, it also said it had been in communication with U.S. officials since the outset of Wednesday's incident, saying the Americans in turn showed a willingness to cooperate on clarifying

what happened.

The boat's owner alleged that the vessel was stolen by an employee, the U.S. official said.

The deadly confrontation took place at a tense moment in the frequently antagonistic U.S.-Cuban relationship. U.S. President Donald Trump has further tightened economic sanctions on Cuba since the U.S. captured Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, a key Cuban ally, on January 3.

Fernando de Cossio, a senior foreign ministry official, told reporters in Havana on Thursday that Cuba has in the past alerted the United States to an "increase in violent and terrorist plans and actions against Cuba" by groups and individuals in U.S. territory, but that the U.S. has failed to act.

Cuba said the six survivors were receiving medical attention. At least some of them appeared to be in custody at the Arnaldo Milian Castro Provincial Clinical Surgical Hospital in Santa Clara, about 250 km (150 miles) east of Havana.

Santa Clara is the capital of the province

where the incident was reported to have taken place, about one nautical mile off a northern cays.

The civilian hospital was under heavy guard. Security personnel who stopped Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel issued a defiant statement on X earlier on Thursday. "Cuba will defend itself with determination and firmness against any terrorist and mercenary aggression that seeks to affect its sovereignty and national stability," Diaz-Canel said.

Cuba said two of the detainees - Amijail Sanchez Gonzalez and Leordan Cruz Gomez - were previously wanted and appeared on a 2025 list of suspects that Cuba deemed as terrorists.

Sanchez was accused of involvement in a plot against a municipal court and a Communist Party organization in Havana, and Cruz was suspected of arms trafficking in a purported attack on a military unit in Matanzas. Both are aged 47 and Cuba-born U.S. residents, according to a report filed with Cuba's official gazette.

China Conducts Patrol in South China Sea, Accuses Philippines of 'Disrupting' Peace



BEIJING (Dispatches) - China's military said on Friday it conducted a routine patrol in the South China Sea, and accused the Philippines of "disrupting" peace and stability by organizing joint patrols with countries outside the region.

The military's Northern Theatre Command will "resolutely safeguard China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, and firmly uphold regional peace and stability," spokesperson Zhai Shichen said in a statement.

The navies of the Philippines, the U.S. and Japan trained alongside each other in the South China Sea this week to ramp up cooperation among the military allies, the Philippines' armed forces said on Friday.

Since 2023, the Philippines has worked with a number of countries to assert its rights and maritime entitlements in the South China Sea. China claims most of the resource-rich waterway, rejecting a 2016 arbitral award that has voided its historical claims to the area.

In a statement, the Philippine military said the joint activity "underscores the sustained commitment of partner forces to enhance interoperability, reinforce maritime security, and improve Maritime Domain Awareness in the region."

The Philippines deployed its Antonio Luna frigate, helicopters and fighter jets to the joint drills. Japan deployed a P-3 Orion aircraft while the U.S. sent guided-missile destroyer USS Dewey and a Poseidon plane.

Exercises included replenishment at sea, joint air patrols, fly-bys and communications check exercises.

North Korea's Kim Promises More Nuclear Weapons as Congress Closes With Military Parade



SEOUL (Reuters) - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said he would focus on expanding his country's nuclear arsenal and that prospects for improving relations with the U.S. rested entirely on Washington's attitude, state media KCNA reported on Thursday.

North Korea's week-long Ninth Congress of the ruling Workers' Party wrapped up with a military parade in the capital Pyongyang on Wednesday, KCNA reported.

The Asian nations "international status has risen extraordinarily" as it laid out major policy goals for the next five years, Kim said, Reuters reported.

"It is our party's firm will to further expand and strengthen our national nuclear power, and thoroughly exercise our status as a nuclear state," Kim said, according to KCNA. "We will focus on projects to increase the number of nuclear weapons and expand nuclear operational means."

North Korea has assembled around 50 warheads, possesses enough fissile material to produce up to 40 more and is accelerating the production of further fissile material, think tank Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimated last year.

Kim also laid out North Korea's plans to develop stronger intercontinental ballistic missiles including ones that can be launched from underwater, attack systems using artificial intelligence, unmanned drones, and weapons that can hit enemy satellites, KCNA said.

State media photos of the military parade showed formations of soldiers marching through a brightly-lit Kim Il Sung square under a podium where Kim and his daughter stood with senior officials.

Some troops in the parade wore camouflage and special warfare gear, and jets conducted a fly-by.

There was no military hardware visible in photos nor reference by KCNA to strategic weapons such as those that were shown off in a military parade in October.

The presence of Kim's daughter, known as Ju Ae, will fuel further speculation over whether she is being groomed as his successor.

Kim left the door open for discussions with the United States, while also noting that North Korea maintains "the toughest stand" as its U.S. policy.

"If the U.S. withdraws its policy of confrontation with North Korea by respecting our country's current status ... there is no reason why we cannot get along well with the U.S.," Kim said, according to KCNA.

Kim has so far not accepted overtures by U.S. President Donald Trump, whom he met with three times during Trump's first term.

Members of North Korea's military march during a military parade involving 14,000 troops in Pyongyang.