

US-Russia standoff escalates

US mulling to send F-22s to Europe over Russia 'threat'; Russia boosts nuclear arsenal, warns against heavy weapons at its doorsteps

AGENCIES

President Vladimir Putin said that Russia must defend itself if threatened, as the US warned against a return to a "Cold War status" after Moscow announced plans to boost its nuclear arsenal.

The declaration from the Kremlin strongman came as Russia reacted with fury to reports the US is planning to bulk up its military deployments in eastern Europe, adding to already high tensions between Russia and the West over the Ukraine conflict.

The New York Times reported at the weekend that the Pentagon was poised to station heavy weapons for up to 5,000 American troops in several Eastern European and Baltic countries to deter Russian aggression.

This would be the first time since the end of the Cold War that the US has had heavy military equipment — including battle tanks — in newer Nato members that were under Moscow's influence in the Soviet era.

Meanwhile, US Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said F-22 fighter jets, the Pentagon's premier fighter, could be deployed to Europe as the standoff with Moscow rumbles on, The Wall Street Journal reported Monday.

Putin accused Nato — which has accused Russia of backing rebels in eastern Ukraine with weapons and its own troops, a claim Moscow denies — of "coming to our borders".

"If someone puts some of our territories under threat, that means we will have to direct our armed



Iskander tactical missile system



F-22 fighter jet



A Russian missile system fires during an exhibition on Tuesday; and Nato troops land off the coast of Ustka, northern Poland, during a military exercise yesterday.

forces and modern strike power at those territories, from where the threat emanates," he said at a meeting with his Finnish counterpart Sauli Niinisto.

"As soon as some threat comes from an adjoining

state, Russia must react appropriately and carry out its defence policy in such a way as to neutralise a threat against it," Putin added.

Relations between Moscow and West have plunged to their lowest point since the Cold War over conflict in

Ukraine, and on Tuesday Putin once again raised the spectre of the conflict by announcing plans to boost Russia's nuclear arsenal by the end of the year.

"This year, the size of our nuclear forces will increase by over 40 new intercontinental ballistic missiles that will be able to overcome any, even the most technologically advanced, missile defence systems," Putin said at the opening of an exhibition of military hardware outside Moscow.

The United States slammed the announcement as a retrograde move reminiscent of the Cold War.

"We've had enormous cooperation from the 1990s forward with respect to the destruction of nuclear weapons that were in former territories of the Soviet Union. And nobody wants to see us step backwards," said US Secretary of State John Kerry.

"Nobody should hear that kind of announcement from the leader of a powerful country and not be concerned about what the implications are," he said, adding that "nobody wants to — I think — go back to a kind of Cold War status."

Russia has an estimated 7,500 nuclear warheads, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, of which around 1,780 are deployed on missiles or at military bases.

The United States, in comparison, has some 7,300 warheads, of which 2,080 are deployed.

Nato has moved to reassure Russia's nervous Eastern European neighbours, launching US-led drills in the Baltic states and Poland earlier this month.

Russian Defence Ministry official General Yuri Yakubov has said that his country will retaliate if the

PHOTO: AFP

EU agrees to extend Russia sanctions

REUTERS, Brussels

European Union governments yesterday agreed to extend economic sanctions on Russia over its actions in Ukraine by six months until Jan. 31, diplomats said, maintaining unity in the West's tough stance towards Moscow.

The six-month extension was agreed by ambassadors from the 28 EU nations meeting in Brussels.

Ratification of the decision by EU foreign ministers meeting in Luxembourg on Monday is expected to be a formality.

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WHITE HOUSE RACE Donald Trump joins fray

AFP, New York

Property tycoon Donald Trump, one of America's most flamboyant and outspoken billionaires, threw his hat into the 2016 race Tuesday for the White House, promising to make America great again.

The 69-year-old long-shot candidate ridiculed the country's current crop of politicians as "stupid" and vowed to take on the growing might of China in a speech launching his run for the presidency.

"I am officially running for president of the United States and we are going to make our country great again," he said from a podium bedecked in US flags at Trump Tower on New York's Fifth Avenue.

Trump identifies as a Republican and has supported Republican candidates in the past. But in his speech he did not explicitly say if he was running for the party's nomination or as an independent.

He trails in polls behind rival Republican candidates. Last month, just five percent of voters said would vote for Trump at the Republican primary, according to the Quinnipiac University.

And in March, 51 percent of all voters said they would definitely not vote for him, another Quinnipiac poll found.

Palestinian split widens as unity govt quits

AFP, Ramallah

The Palestinian unity government resigned yesterday in a deepening rift with Gaza as the blockaded territory's de facto rulers Hamas held separate, indirect talks with Israel.

An aide to president Mahmud Abbas said prime minister Rami Hamdallah "handed his resignation to Abbas and Abbas ordered him to form a new government."

Discussions to form a new government would include consultations with the various Palestinian factions, including Hamas, aide Nimr Hamad said.

The government of technocrats was formed last year to replace rival administrations in Gaza and the West Bank.

"The government will continue to function until we have a new one," a Palestine Liberation Organisation official said before the official resignation.

"I think what's coming now is the formation of a government with politicians, not a government of technocrats."

Officials said the move had been under discussion for several months because of the cabinet's inability to operate in the Hamas-dominated Gaza Strip.

But Hamas rejected any unilateral dissolution of the unity government and said it had not been consulted.

Senior Hamas official Ziad al-Zaza, however, struck a more conciliatory note, calling on Abbas "to form a unity government with all national and Islamic factions to face Israeli occupation."

The move comes at a critical time, with Hamas sources saying it is holding separate, indirect talks with Israel on ways to firm up an informal ceasefire agreement that took hold last August, ending a 50-day war in Gaza.

World is running out of water: Nasa

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The world's largest underground aquifers — a source of fresh water for hundreds of millions of people — are being depleted at alarming rates, according to new Nasa satellite data that provides the most detailed picture yet of vital water reserves hidden under the Earth's surface.

Twenty-one of the world's 37 largest aquifers — in

locations from India and China to the United States and France — have passed their sustainability tipping points, meaning more water was removed than replaced during the decade-long study period, researchers announced Tuesday.

Thirteen aquifers declined at rates that put them into the most troubled category. The researchers said this indicated a long-term problem that's likely to worsen as reliance on aquifers grows.

Scientists had long suspected that humans were taxing the world's underground water supply, but the Nasa data was the first detailed assessment to demonstrate that major aquifers were indeed struggling to keep pace with demands from agricul-

ture, growing populations, and industries such as mining.

"The situation is quite critical," said Jay Famiglietti, senior water scientist at Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California and principal investigator of the University of California Irvine-led studies.

Underground aquifers supply 35 percent of the water used by humans worldwide. Demand is even greater in times of drought.

The aquifers under the most stress are in poor, densely populated regions, such as northwest India, Pakistan and North Africa, where alternatives are limited and water shortages could quickly lead to instability.

But the Nasa satellites could not measure the total capacity of the aquifers. The size of these tucked-away water supplies remains something of a

mystery. Still, the satellite data indicated that some aquifers may be much smaller than previously believed, and most estimates of aquifer reserves have "uncertainty ranges across orders of magnitude," according to the research.

Aquifers can take thousands of years to fill up and only slowly recharge with water from snowmelt and



NEWS IN brief

Local gin kills 70 in Nigeria

AFP, Lagos

About 70 people have died in Nigeria's oil-rich south after consuming home-brewed gin "ogogoro" that was found to contain large amounts of methanol, senior health officials said yesterday. The deaths, which first came to light earlier this month, have led to Rivers imposing a total, state-wide ban on the manufacture, sale

S Korea MERS cases a wakeup call: WHO

AFP, Geneva

The MERS outbreak in South Korea is a "wake-up call," the World Health Organization warned yesterday, saying that a lack of knowledge and substandard controls in hospitals had contributed to the spread of the disease. The WHO urged all countries to be more vigilant as South Korea reported its 20th death from the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome virus, and criticism grew of its

Turkey ex-leader Demirel dies

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey's former president and prime minister Suleyman Demirel, a political giant for over half a century who survived two military coups and a ban on holding office, died yesterday. He was 90. He died of heart failure resulting from a severe respiratory tract infection, the state Anatolia news agency said, quoting the private Ankara hospital where

US Senate votes to ban interrogation tortures

AFP, Washington

The US Senate voted Tuesday to ban torture during interrogations, a measure aimed at ending brutal techniques that were used on terror suspects following the 9/11 attacks of 2001. The measure passed overwhelmingly, 78 votes to 21, with all members of the Democratic caucus and 32

Indian Kashmir shuts down over killings

AFP, Srinagar

Shops and schools shut down in parts of Indian Kashmir yesterday to protest against a string of apparently targeted killings that has triggered fear in the restive region. Hundreds of police and paramilitary troops in riot gear patrolled Kashmir's mostly deserted main city of Srinagar after separatist groups called a strike over the killings which they have



A wounded child looks on after receiving treatment at a make-shift medical centre in Douma on the northeastern outskirts of the Syrian capital Damascus, yesterday. At least 33 people, including five children, were killed in the Damascus region as the army bombarded rebel-held Douma and the rebels fired rockets into the capital, a monitoring group said yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Don't close the door to migrants: Pope

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis yesterday said that those who "close the door" to refugees seeking a safe haven in Europe should ask God's forgiveness, as tensions rose in the EU over the migrant crisis.

A day after European interior ministers failed to agree on how to stem the flow of boat migrants across the Mediterranean or house the thousands of new arrivals, Francis demanded greater respect for "our brothers and sisters who seek refuge far from their own lands".

"I encourage those who bring them aid and hope that the international community will act in a united and efficient fashion to prevent the causes of forced migration," he said.

"And I invite everyone to ask God's pardon for those people and institutions who close the door to those who are seeking a family, who are seeking to be protected," he said.

France yesterday unveiled plans to add 10,500 additional housing spots for migrants as pressure grew within EU for sharing responsibility over migrant crisis.

Meanwhile Hungary yesterday ordered the closure of the EU country's border with Serbia and the construction of a fence along its length to keep out migrants. More than 100,000 migrants have arrived in Europe this year, 60,000 through Italy alone, according to the EU.

China 'bans Muslims from fasting during Ramadan'

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China has, once again, banned Ramadan in parts of the far western Xinjiang district for Muslim party members, civil servants, students and teachers.

Muslims throughout the district — which is known to have a minority population of Uighurs — have been told not to fast during the Holy Month.

The Uighur leader, Dilxat Raxit, sees the move as China's attempt to control their Islamic faith and warned that the restrictions would force the Uighur people to resist the rule of the Chinese government even more.

He added: "The faith of the Uighurs has been highly politicised and the increase in controls could cause sharp resistance."

In recent years, Chinese authorities have blamed separatist Uighurs for a string of terrorist attacks on civilian crowds and government institutions, but the group has consistently denied involvement.

Activists have long accused Beijing of exaggerating the threat as an excuse to impose restrictions.

Mr Raxit told Radio Free Asia: "They [the Chinese government] are extracting guarantees from parents, promising that their children won't fast on Ramadan."

According to the government's website, halal restaurants near the Kazakh border are being encouraged by food safety officials to stay open during daylight hours in Ramadan.

Shops and restaurants owned by Muslims have also been ordered to continue selling cigarettes and alcohol over the

'Australia paid traffickers' Indonesian police produce evidence to back claim

AFP, Sydney

Indonesian police insist Australian authorities paid the crew of a people-smuggling boat US\$31,000 to turn back, displaying thousands of US dollars as proof, reports said yesterday.

West Timor police also claim that the 65 asylum-seekers and six Indonesian crew were placed onto two wooden boats for the return trip, with one running out of fuel and the other crashing on a reef before making land.

"We have given you the evidence," General Endang Sunjaya told the Sydney Morning Herald, which ran a front page image of him displaying a photograph of

US\$100 notes. "It's now up to you and other organisations to demand an answer from the Australian government."

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott is facing intense pressure over the alleged payments, which he has refused to confirm or deny, saying he does not comment on operational matters.

Reports said that the people-smuggling boat at the centre of the allegations left West Java for New Zealand in early May carrying 65 mostly Sri Lankan asylum-seekers.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation said according to the Indonesian police's initial findings, the boat was intercepted twice by Australian authorities.

The first time they were warned not to cross into Australian waters but were allowed to continue on their way.

The second time they were detained, with the Indonesian captain Yohanis Humiang allegedly taken onboard an Australian Customs ship and told his boat was not in good enough condition to reach New Zealand.

According to the police findings, a deal was then struck under which the asylum-seeker boat would return to Indonesia, with the captain paid US\$6,000 and the five crew US\$5,000 each, the ABC said.

After being anchored at Australia's Ashmore Reef for two days, the 65 asylum-seekers were allegedly placed in two other wooden boats, along with three Indonesian crew in each, life-jackets, food, a map and directions to Indonesia's Rote Island, the ABC said.

But approaching the island, about eight hours away, one boat ran out of fuel — so all 71 people ended up on the other vessel, which later ran aground near the island off West Timor.

MIGRANT CRISIS



DEADLY FLOODS IN GEORGIA Escaped tiger kills man

AFP, Tbilisi

A tiger that killed a man in the central square of Georgia's capital Tbilisi yesterday was shot dead, officials said, four days after hundreds of animals escaped from the city's zoo after deadly floods.

The interior ministry had initially said the animal was a lion and deployed special forces to hunt down the beast.

But spokeswoman Nino Giorgobiani later told AFP, "It was one tiger. It has been liquidated."

Eyewitnesses told Georgian television they saw a person getting mauled by a white tiger.

Georgian media said the tiger had been hiding in a warehouse and escaped the citywide hunt for the escaped creatures.

Lions, bears and a hippo were seen roaming the flood-ravaged streets after floods hit Tbilisi on Sunday, killing at least 17 people and causing massive damage to the city's