

No 'clean slate' in US, Russia ties

Says Tillerson in an interview

AFP, Washington

Relations between the United States and Russia, at their lowest level since the Cold War, will not restart "with a clean slate," Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said on Sunday.

The former ExxonMobil CEO, who was decorated in 2013 by Russian President Vladimir Putin, had said previously that the relationship between the two nuclear powers had hit its lowest point since the Soviet collapse in 1991.

His Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov - whom Trump hosted at the White House on Wednesday - said the same.

Speaking on NBC on Sunday, Tillerson reiterated that relations had fallen to "an all-time low point since the end of the Cold War, with a very low level of trust."

"It is not healthy for the world," he said. "It's certainly not healthy for us, for the American people, our national security interest and otherwise, for this relationship to remain at this low level."

However, "whether we can improve it or not remains to be seen," he added.

Although Tillerson said he is "committed" to improving relations -- which have been especially tense since 2012 thanks to differences over Syria and, later, Russia's invasion of Ukraine -- he expressed deep skepticism about the prospects for doing so.

He ruled out relaunching relations with a "clean slate," similar to the attempt at a "reset" by former president Barack Obama and his secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, in 2009.



Palestinian scouts hold keys during a rally marking the 69th anniversary 'Nakba' yesterday, in the northern West Bank city of Nablus. Palestinians mark the anniversary on May 15, when they commemorate the Nakba, or "catastrophe" of the creation of Israel, which sparked the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.

PHOTO: AFP

Macron names Philippe as French PM

AFP, Paris

France's new President Emmanuel Macron named Edouard Philippe, a little-known centre-right mayor, as prime minister yesterday, in his first major decision since taking power on a promise to lead a French "renaissance".

Philippe, a 46-year-old MP and mayor of the northern port of Le Havre, comes from the moderate wing of the rightwing Republicans party and is seen as a pragmatist.

His appointment was seen as a strategic move by 39-year-old Macron, a former minister in the outgoing Socialist government who is trying to woo modernisers of all stripes to his new centrist party, La République en Marche (Republic on the Move, REM).

France's youngest ever president has already attracted dozens of Socialist MPs to his side, triggering a major realignment in French politics that has left the traditional parties floundering.



Like Macron, Philippe is a product of France's elite ENA college for senior public servants and worked for a while in the private sector.

Relatively unknown outside his Le Havre fiefdom, he has already crossed the floor once in his career, defecting from the Socialists to the Republicans as a young politician.

One of Macron's aides welcomed his appointment as "a good move", telling AFP it would help him "break the right".

Taking office Sunday, the former investment banker who trounced far-right leader Marine Le Pen in the May 7 presidential run-off, said he aimed to restore France's shattered self-confidence.

Putin points finger at US

Rejects Russia's involvement; Europol says new chaos avoided as number of victims appears not to have gone up

AGENCIES

Russia had nothing to do with a massive global cyberattack, President Vladimir Putin said yesterday, criticising the US intelligence community for creating the original software.

Hundreds of thousands of computers in more than 150 countries have been hit by the ransomware attack, which has been described as the largest-ever of its kind.

It began Friday and struck banks, hospitals and government agencies among a variety of other targets, exploiting known vulnerabilities in older Microsoft computer operating systems.

"As for the source of these threats, Microsoft's leadership stated this directly, they said the source of the virus was the special services of the United States," Putin said.

He was referring to a weekend blog post by Microsoft president Brad Smith stating that the US National Security Agency had developed the

code being used in the attack.

It was leaked as part of a document dump, according to researchers.

"A genie let out of a bottle of this kind, especially created by secret services, can then cause damage to its authors and creators," Putin said on the sidelines of an international summit in Beijing.

WORLDWIDE CYBERATTACK

ASIA COMPANIES, GOVTS REPORT MINOR DISRUPTIONS

PROFESSIONALS WARN WORSE IMPACT MAY YET BE FELT

"This completely doesn't concern Russia."

The US has accused Russia in the past of mounting several cyberattacks.

The cross-border police agency Europol said yesterday the situation was now "stable", defusing concerns that attacks that struck computers in British hospital wards, European car

factories and Russian banks would spread further at the start of the working week.

"The number of victims appears not to have gone up and so far the situation seems stable in Europe, which is a success," senior spokesman for Europol, Jan Op Gen Oorth, told AFP.

"It seems that a lot of internet security guys over the weekend did their homework and ran the security software updates," he said.

Meanwhile, Asian governments and businesses reported some disruptions from the WannaCry ransomware worm yesterday but cybersecurity experts warned of a wider impact as more employees turned on their computers and checked e-mails, reported Reuters.

"Most of the attacks are arriving via e-mail, so there are many 'landmines' waiting in people's in-boxes," said Michael Gazeley, managing director of Network Box, a Hong Kong-based cybersecurity company.

Xi decries protectionism

West expresses unease over Chinese motives in Silk Road summit; Beijing to host next meet in 2019

AGENCIES

President Xi Jinping criticised protectionism yesterday at a summit positioning China as a champion of globalisation, and secured a free trade commitment from almost 30 other world leaders at the meeting wound up.

Xi addressed the leaders on the second day of the forum on his new Silk Road plan, a huge infrastructure project intended to revive ancient land and sea trade routes from Asia to Europe and Africa.

"It is our hope through the Belt and Road development, we will unleash new economic forces for global growth, build new platforms for global development, and rebalance economic globalisation so mankind will move closer to a community of common destiny," Xi said at the close of the event.

Xi said China would host the second Belt and Road Forum in 2019.

The inclusive tone of China's Belt and Road push stands in stark contrast to US President Donald Trump's "America First" policy, which included the scrapping of the

Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) deal, a regional trade pact involving Pacific Rim countries but excluding China.

Xi on Sunday pledged \$124 billion for the new "Silk Road", which aims to bolster China's global leadership ambitions by building infrastructure and trade links between Asia, Africa, Europe and beyond.

Some Western diplomats have expressed unease about the initiative, seeing it as an attempt to promote Chinese influence globally. They are also concerned about transparency and access for foreign companies.

Germany said its firms were willing to support the Belt and Road initiative, but more transparency was needed.

European Commission Vice President Jyrki Katainen told Reuters yesterday that EU member states would not be signing ministerial statements connected to the summit.

"The European Commission, who has a mandate, who has the capacity to negotiate on behalf of member states on trade-related issues, we were not given a chance to negotiate on the text," he said.



India asks ICJ to bar Pak from executing 'spy'

REUTERS, The Hague

India asked World Court judges yesterday to order Pakistan to stay the execution of an Indian citizen Islamabad says is a captured spy, a case that has escalated tensions between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

India argued in a preliminary hearing at the UN court, formally known as the International Court of Justice (ICJ), that Pakistan violated the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations by denying the condemned man access to legal and other assistance from India. Pakistan was to respond later yesterday.

Yesterday's hearings focused on India's request for so-called "provisional measures" that can be granted at short notice to ensure a dispute between states does not deteriorate during full ICJ proceedings, which typically take several years.

At the core of the dispute is the fate of Kulbhushan Sudir Jadhav, an Indian former naval officer who was arrested in March 2016 in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan. There has been a long-running conflict in Baluchistan between Pakistani security forces and a militant separatist movement.

According to Islamabad, Jadhav confessed to being tasked by India's intelligence service with planning, coordinating and organising espionage and sabotage activities in Baluchistan "aiming to destabilise and wage war against Pakistan".

In April, a Pakistani military court sentenced him to death. No date was set for the execution. Pakistan has said Jadhav's conviction and sentence remain open to appeal.



This picture taken on May 14, 2017 and released from North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) yesterday shows North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un (2nd L) reacting during a test launch of a ground-to-ground medium long-range strategic ballistic rocket Hwasong-12 at an undisclosed location. PHOTO: AFP

Coalition air strike in Syria kills 23

AFP, Beirut

An air strike by the US-led coalition yesterday killed 23 civilians in a Syrian town held by the Islamic State group on the border with Iraq, a monitor said.

The deaths came after 12 women were killed in a strike by the US-led coalition fighting IS in the east of Syria's Raqa province on Sunday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The strike hit the town of Albu Kamal in the early hours of the morning, Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman said. "They hit a residential area at 3:00 am while people were sleeping, causing the high toll," he said.

He added that IS was using some apartments in the area targeted as local headquarters.

The deaths came after 12 women were killed in a US-led coalition strike on Sunday.

The Observatory said that strike hit vehicles carrying farmworkers home from fields in the afternoon.

IS has lost swathes of the territory it once held in Raqa province, though it still holds Raqa city and some areas to the east.

A US-backed alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters known as the Syrian Democratic Forces is battling towards Raqa city, the jihadist group's most important remaining Syrian bastion.

ROHINGYA CRACKDOWN

EU pushes for aid access in Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

A senior European Union official has urged Myanmar to allow full aid access to the north of Rakhine state, where thousands have fled their homes after a months-long army crackdown on Rohingya Muslims.

The area along the country's northwestern border has been under lockdown since October, when the military launched a campaign to hunt down Rohingya militants who staged deadly attacks on police posts.

Some 100,000 people from the Muslim minority were displaced by the violence, most of them fleeing to Bangladesh and bringing with them harrowing stories of rape, torture and mass killings by soldiers.

Myanmar has rebuffed UN claims that its security forces may have committed crimes against humanity and has refused to allow international observers into the area.

De facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi this month publicly rejected a UN mission to probe the violence after meeting the EU's diplomatic chief Federica Mogherini.

European Union commissioner for aid Christos Stylianides said he pushed for unrestricted humanitarian access during a three-day visit to Myanmar, which included a tour of northern Rakhine.

"A lot of problems remain in order to see what we want... about humanitarian access," he told AFP late on Sunday at the end of his trip.

Will frame a law if SC bans triple talaq: India govt

PTI, New Delhi

The government yesterday told the Supreme Court that it will come out with a law to regulate marriage and divorce among Muslims if triple talaq is held invalid and unconstitutional by the court.

Attorney General Mukul Rohatgi told a five-judge Constitution Bench headed by Chief Justice JS Khehar "If the practice of instant divorce (triple talaq) is struck down by the court, then Centre will bring a law to regulate marriage and divorce among the Muslim community."

Rohatgi's submission came when the court asked him what are the remedies for a Muslim man to come out of a marriage if such practices are struck down.

Angry voter confronts campaigning British PM

AFP, Abingdon

British Prime Minister Theresa May was confronted by an angry voter over welfare cuts yesterday as she made a rare public walkabout ahead of the June election.

The woman, who gave her name as Cathy, said she had learning difficulties and challenged May over changes to state handouts for disabled people.

"I can't live on £100 (118 euros, \$129) a month!" she said.

May, who has been accused of avoiding the public in the campaign for the June 8 vote, tried repeatedly to answer Cathy but was interrupted.

"The fat cats keep the money and us lot get nothing," Cathy said in the Oxfordshire market town of Abingdon, west of London.

May responded by saying that "we've got a lot of plans" and the goal was to ensure welfare payments are "focused on those who are most in need".

Some shoppers stopped to shake the prime minister's hand during the 11-minute visit, and she posed for pictures.

One man told her to "keep it up", while May was also told she was the "best of a bad bunch", to which she responded: "I'll take that as flattering."

The prime minister called the snap vote in a bid to increase her parliamentary majority ahead of Britain's complex talks to leave the European Union.

Opinion polls give her Conservatives a double digit lead over the main opposition Labour party.



NEWSIN brief

Merkel's party wins in key state vote

AFP, Düsseldorf

Chancellor Angela Merkel dealt a devastating blow to her main rival on Sunday, four months before national elections, when early results showed her party securing a strong win in a regional vote in Germany's biggest state.

Her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) clinched 34.3 percent of the vote in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), first results showed.

MPs reject Duterte's impeachment

AFP, Manila

Philippine lawmakers yesterday rejected an impeachment complaint against President Rodrigo Duterte that accused him of a crime against humanity over the deaths of thousands of people killed in his war on drugs. The complaint alleged Duterte had adopted a state policy of extrajudicial killings that led to more than 8,000 deaths in his first eight months as president.

Italy busts mafia clan in migrant scandal

AFP, Rome

Italy has broken up a mafia ring accused of infiltrating one of the country's largest migrant reception centres and capitalising on asylum seekers with the help of a Catholic association, police said yesterday. The Arena clan, a family belonging to the powerful 'Ndrangheta crime syndicate, allegedly made a fortune by supplying services for the centre at Isola di Capo Rizzuto.