



DIPLOMATIC ROW Russia may cut US personnel by 155: Putin

AFP, Xiamen

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday threatened to expel up to 155 more US diplomatic personnel from this country as the diplomatic feud between Washington and Moscow rumbled on.

"We reserve the right to make a decision on how many American diplomats there are in Moscow. But we will not do that for the moment," Putin told a press conference after a summit of BRICS nations in southern China.

Moscow had previously ordered Washington to reduce its diplomatic presence to 455 people by September 1, the same number that Russia has in the US.

That number, however, includes 155 people who work for Russia's diplomatic mission to the UN in New York, Putin said, meaning his country could further cut the number of US diplomats to 300: "It's 455 minus 155."

On Saturday Russia was forced to vacate its consulate in San Francisco and two diplomatic buildings in New York and Washington after the US ordered the move, the latest twist in a lengthy feud.

Russia demanded Sunday that the US rethink its shuttering of Moscow's diplomatic premises, insisting that Washington bore sole responsibility for worsening ties after the "hostile act".

US intelligence agencies have accused Putin of orchestrating a sweeping hacking and influence campaign to tip the November 2016 presidential election in favour of Donald Trump -- prompting several investigations, including one led by the FBI.

N Korean ICBM on the move

Says report; Trump offers 'sophisticated' arms to South Korea, Japan amid tensions

AGENCIES

South Korea yesterday said an agreement with the United States to scrap a weight limit on its warheads would help it respond to North Korea's nuclear and missile threat after it conducted its sixth and largest nuclear test two days ago.

South Korean officials believe more weapons tests by the reclusive state are possible, despite international outrage over Sunday's nuclear test and calls for more sanctions against it.

South Korea's Asia Business Daily, citing an unidentified source, reported that North Korea had been observed moving a rocket that appeared to be an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) towards its west coast.

The rocket started moving on Monday and was spotted moving only at night to avoid surveillance, the newspaper said.

South Korea's defence ministry, which warned on Monday that North Korea was ready to launch an ICBM at any time, said it was not able to confirm the report.

Analysts and South Korean policymakers believe North Korea may test another weapon on or around Sept 9, when it celebrates its founding day.

North Korea's fifth nuclear test fell on that date last year, reflecting its tendency to conduct weapons tests on significant dates.

North Korea says it needs to develop its weapons to defend itself against what it sees as US aggression.

South Korea, after weeks of rising tension, is talking to the United States about

agreed on Monday to scrap a warhead weight limit on South Korea's missiles, South Korea's presidential office said, enabling it to strike North Korea with greater force in the event of war.



South Korea's naval ships take part in a military drill for possible attack from North Korea in the water of the East Sea, South Korea, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

deploying aircraft carriers and strategic bombers to the Korean peninsula, and has been ramping up its own defences.

US President Donald Trump and his South Korean counterpart, Moon Jae-in,

Seoul was previously restricted to a maximum warhead weight of 500 kilograms (1100 pounds) on its ballistic missiles, according to a bilateral agreement with the United States signed in 2001.

Trump slams doors on 'Dreamers' Scraps DACA ending amnesty for 800,000 young immigrants

REUTERS, Washington

President Donald Trump on Tuesday scrapped a program that protects from deportation almost 800,000 young men and women who were brought into the United States illegally as children, giving a gridlocked Congress six months to decide their fate.

Trump's action, announced by Attorney General Jeff Sessions, rescinds a program called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). The program, created by Democratic former President Barack Obama, is supported by Democrats and many business leaders. The Trump administration said no current beneficiaries of the program would be affected before March 5.

Sessions said the action does not mean the DACA recipients are "bad people." "To have a lawful system of immigration that serves the national interest, we cannot admit everyone who would like to come here. It's just that simple. That would be an open-border policy and the American people have rightly rejected that," Sessions said.

The move marked the latest action by Trump that is sure to alienate Hispanic Americans, a growing segment of the US

population and an increasingly important voting bloc. Most of the immigrants protected by DACA, dubbed "Dreamers," came from Mexico and other Latin American countries.

Trump's action, deferring the actual end of the program, effectively kicks responsibility for the fate of the Dreamers to his fellow Republicans who control Congress. But Congress has been unable since the president took office in January to pass any major legislation and has been bitterly divided over immigration in the past.

Obama bypassed Congress and created DACA through an executive order.

Trump appeared determined to pressure U.S. lawmakers to act. "Congress, get ready to do your job - DACA!" the president wrote on Twitter yesterday morning before the policy announcement was made.

There were some signs that Congress might be willing to act, with a number of senior Republican lawmakers coming forward to express an interest in protecting the Dreamers.

The president's decision may have been forced by nine Republican state attorneys general, led by Texas, who had threatened a legal challenge in federal court if Trump did not act to end DACA. A number of Democratic state attorneys general have threatened legal action to defend the program.



Caribbean braces for monster hurricane

AFP, Marigot

Irma strengthened into an "extremely dangerous" Category Five hurricane yesterday, meteorologists warned, sparking alarm and flooding alerts as it barrelled towards the Caribbean.

The monster hurricane coming on the heels of Harvey, which struck Texas and Louisiana late last month is expected to make landfall along the string of French islands including Guadeloupe late yesterday before heading to Haiti and Florida.

The Miami-based National Hurricane Center in its 1200 GMT bulletin said Irma had strengthened to the most powerful Category Five, packing winds of 175 miles (280 kilometers) per hour.

The front was moving west at 14 miles (22 kilometers) per hour, and is expected to drop between four and eight inches (10 and 20 centimeters) of rain when it hits land.

"These rainfall amounts may cause life-threatening flash floods and mudslides," the NHC warned.

Irma's centre was located about 320 miles (515 km) east of the West Indies' Leeward Islands, the NHC said, urging that "preparations to protect life and property should be rushed to completion" in the region.

The governor of the US state of Florida, Rick Scott, declared a state of emergency, saying Irma posed "a severe threat to the entire state of Florida", barely a week after Harvey claimed at least 42 lives.

Category Five hurricanes are rare and are capable of inflicting life-threatening winds, storm surges and rainfall.

NY Daily News sold for \$1

AFP, New York

The New York Daily News, the storied century-old tabloid known for its provocative headlines, has been sold for \$1, in the latest sign of turmoil in the newspaper sector.

The deal which closed over the weekend allows Tronc, the owner of the Los Angeles Times and Chicago Tribune, to acquire the New York daily for virtually nothing while assuming its pension and operating liabilities, according to a regulatory filing.

The Daily News has won 11 Pulitzer awards since its founding in 1919, including a prize this year for its reporting on police abuse of eviction rules to oust poor residents from their homes.

Ironically, the sale returns the newspaper to its roots, founded by Joseph Medill Patterson, who was a co-publisher of the Chicago Tribune, which eventually became part of Tribune Co.

Still, the deal underscores the deep woes of the print newspaper sector, where values have been plummeting over the past two decades as more readers and advertising turn to online sources.

Earlier this year, Tronc acquired the Chicago Sun-Times newspaper, also for \$1.

Tribune Co. owned the New York paper until 1991, when it was bought by British newspaper magnate Robert Maxwell. The latest owner, real estate billionaire Mortimer Zuckerman, purchased the daily in 1993.

Throughout its history, the Daily News has been known for its colorful and provocative headlines.

Among its most famous was the "Ford to City: Drop Dead" in 1975 when president Gerald Ford refused federal aid to stave off imminent municipal bankruptcy.

POLITICAL IMPASSE IN KENYA

Odinga sets conditions after SC clears way for poll re-run

AFP, Nairobi

Kenyan opposition leader Raila Odinga yesterday sought the sacking of several poll commission officials and set other conditions for taking part in a presidential vote re-run in October after the landmark scrapping of last month's poll won by President Uhuru Kenyatta.

On Friday, Supreme Court Chief Justice David Maraga created history in Africa by declaring Kenyatta's victory in the August 8 election "invalid, null and void", citing widespread irregularities in the electronic transmission of vote results.

It was the first time a presidential election result was overturned in the continent and followed three failed bids by the 72-year-old Odinga for the presidency -- in 1997, 2007 and 2013.

"There will be no election on the 17th of October until terms and conditions which we have spelt out in this statement are met," a combative Odinga told reporters.

He said the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) had set the new date after only consulting Kenyatta's Jubilee grouping and not his National Super Alliance.

Odinga said all eight presidential candidates who took part in the earlier poll should be allowed to contest this time as well.

Odinga said the IEBC had not given the opposition access to its servers despite a Supreme Court injunction and called for a revamp of the system.

After the shock ruling, an enraged Kenyatta said he would respect the decision but lashed out at the judges, saying: "Every time we do something a judge comes out and places an injunction. It can't go on like this... there is a problem and we must fix it."

The 55-year-old president also branded the judges "hyenas" and "crooks", sparking a strong reaction about his "veiled threats" which they called an "assault on the judiciary."



Israeli policemen evict a Palestinian man of the Shamasneh family from their home, in which they lived for over half a century, in the Arab neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah in east Jerusalem, yesterday, making way for Israelis deemed the legal occupants. Plans for the eviction had been criticised by the European Union, United Nations and various Western governments, though not the United States.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Majority of Britons have no religion

AFP, London

Britain is becoming an increasingly faithless society, according to a new survey that found 53 percent of people now describe themselves as having no religion.

This proportion is the highest ever, up from 48 percent in 2015 and 31 percent in 1983 when the British Social Attitudes survey was begun by the independent National Centre for Social Research.

The trend is evident across all age groups but is particularly marked among young people, with 71 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds surveyed in 2016 saying they had no religion, up from 62 percent the previous year, said the survey on Monday.

The majority of older people still have some faith -- only four in ten of those aged 65 to 74 describe themselves as having no religion, and only 27 percent of those aged 75 and over.

Six percent of Britons said they follow a non-Christian faith, down from eight percent in the previous year but up from two percent in 1983. The survey did not go into more detail.

The 2016 survey involved interviews with 2,942 people, who were asked: "Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion. If yes, which?"

Syria breaks siege on Deir Ezzor

AFP, Deir Ezzor

Syria's army broke a years-long Islamic State group siege on the government enclave of Deir Ezzor city yesterday as it battles to expel the jihadists from a key stronghold.

The jihadist group has already lost more than half of its nearby bastion of Raqa to US-backed forces, and its expulsion from Deir Ezzor city and the surrounding oil-rich province of the same name would leave it with only a handful of isolated outposts.

Syria's army and allied fighters, backed by Russian air support, have been advancing towards Deir Ezzor on several fronts in recent weeks, and on Tuesday entered the Brigade 137 base on its western edge, in what Moscow hailed as a key "strategic victory".

"The Syrian Arab Army this afternoon broke the siege on Deir Ezzor city after its advancing forces arrived from the western province to Brigade 137," state news agency SANA said.

A local journalist contributing to AFP on the ground said a minesweeper moved ahead of troops as they arrived at the base.

As they reached soldiers who had been besieged inside the base and adjacent parts of the city, the troops embraced and shouted patriotic slogans.

WAR ON IS

Assad congratulates army for defending the city

New US commander takes control of anti-IS coalition

Others fired in the air and flashed victory signs, as Syrian and Russian warplanes flew overhead.

"We promised that we would not let Deir Ezzor fall, and it did not fall," General Issam Zahreddine, commander of the 7,000 soldiers in the city, shouted jubilantly to journalists.

Civilians gathered on either side of

the road connecting the base to neighbourhoods of the city to welcome the arriving troops.

President Bashar al-Assad congratulated troops in a call to commanders at the base, his office said.

And Russia hailed the breaking of the siege as a "very important strategic victory", with President Vladimir Putin congratulating his country's troops in Syria and the government forces.

The army still faces a potentially difficult battle to break the siege on the south of the city and free its remaining neighbourhoods, and the surrounding province, from IS.

But for the government, its success would be "one of the most symbolic victories in its six-year war," wrote Syria analyst Aron Lund in a recent analysis.

"The reopening of the Deir Ezzor road is a strategic disaster for IS, which is now at its weakest since 2014 and seems unable to break out of an accelerating spiral of defeats," he added.

Last Colombia rebels agree ceasefire

AFP, Bogota

Colombia's government and the country's last active guerrilla group, the ELN, announced a ceasefire Monday, a key step toward sealing a "complete peace" to end Latin America's longest civil war.

President Juan Manuel Santos and National Liberation Army (ELN) negotiators announced the ceasefire two days before a visit by Pope Francis.

ELN chief negotiator Pablo Beltran said his force's ceasefire was "the first miracle of the pope's visit."

The ceasefire follows a separate accord that saw the disarmament last month of Colombia's biggest rebel group, the FARC.

Santos said it was "great news that we are sure will delight" the Argentine-born pontiff.

Under the ceasefire, "there will be an end to kidnappings, attacks on oil pipelines and other hostilities against the civilian population" by the ELN, Santos said in a televised address.

The government for its part promised to improve conditions for imprisoned ELN members and protect civil leaders from attacks in the conflict zone.

The 1,500-strong ELN has been in negotiations with the government since February.