

TENSIONS OVER 'INVINCIBLE WEAPONS'

No interest in new arms race

Says Kremlin as Washington accuses Russia of breaching existing treaties

AFP, Moscow

The Kremlin yesterday said Russia will not be part of a new arms race as the United States and Germany voiced concern over Vladimir Putin's boasts of new "invincible" weapons.

Putin stunned the West -- and many in Russia -- on Thursday by using his state of the nation address to unveil a new arsenal of hypersonic weapons and submarines less than three weeks before an election is expected to extend his rule until 2024.

The revelations came with ties between Russia and the West at post-Cold War lows over the Syria and Ukraine conflicts, and accusations that Moscow interfered in the US presidential election in 2016.

US President Donald Trump and German Chancellor Angela Merkel shared concern in a phone conversation over Putin's claims, Berlin said yesterday.

Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert said his government was concerned about "the entire security policy of Russia".

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov rejected accusations Russia was violating any arms control agreements.

"We categorically reject any accusations that Russia is violating any provisions and articles of international law on disarmament and arms control," Peskov said.

"Russia is not going to attack anyone, and these weapons do not present a danger to anyone who is not hatching plans to attack our country. Russia is not going to be pulled into any arms race."

Peskov denied suggestions that one of the videos alleg-



edly used a map of the US to simulate an attack on Florida.

Washington accused Moscow of breaching Cold War-era arms treaties.

Putin presented Russia's military efforts as a response to actions by the United States, which last month unveiled plans to revamp its own nuclear arsenal and develop new low-yield atomic weapons.

"No one really wanted to talk to us basically. No one listened to us then. Listen to us now," Putin said Thursday, prompting a standing ovation from the audience of top officials, lawmakers and celebrities.

Analysts said Putin was effectively challenging Washington to a new arms race.

"This is a formal declaration of a new Cold War," independent security analyst Alexander Golts told AFP.

Underscoring the tension, Russia called off strategic talks with the US set for this month after a Washington delegation snubbed a meeting on cybersecurity.

In his speech, Putin showed tests of a new missile system he said could fly at 20 times the speed of sound and maneuver up and down, and is not owned by any other country. Russia has also developed unmanned underwater devices that move much faster than submarines and torpedoes and can carry nuclear warheads, Putin said, adding: "It's just fantastic!"



An elderly Syrian man shows a family picture after he recovered it from the rubble of his house in Kafar Batna in the Syrian rebel enclave of Eastern Ghouta on Thursday following reported air strikes by Syrian government forces.

PHOTO: AFP

Gunfight kills 10 Maoists in India

AFP, New Delhi

At least 10 suspected Maoist rebels and a police officer were killed yesterday in a firefight deep in the jungles of central India.

Police said hundreds of commandos launched a pre-dawn assault on a suspected rebel hideout in Chhattisgarh state, triggering a gunfight that lasted several hours.

Maoist rebels have for decades been fighting the Indian state, demanding land, jobs and other rights for poor tribal groups.

The officer in charge of the latest operation said a large number of Maoist suspects -- also known as Naxals -- had escaped.

Arms and ammunition were recovered from the site and police are scouring the area for the remaining suspects, he said.

West ups heat on regime

US, France, Germany Warn Syria over Ghouta killings, chemical attacks

AFP, Douma

Western powers yesterday turned up the heat on Damascus as tens of thousands of civilians in Syria's battered rebel enclave of Eastern Ghouta awaited desperately needed aid.

More than 600 civilians have been killed in the enclave outside Damascus since Russia-backed regime forces launched an assault on February 18.

Eastern Ghouta's 400,000 residents have lived under a regime-imposed siege since 2013, facing severe food and medicine shortages even before the latest offensive.

The UN Human Rights Council was to hold an emergency session later yesterday on the crisis, as dozens of aid trucks remained unable to enter the enclave.

The United States, Germany and France upped the pressure on Damascus after a UN Security Council demand for a ceasefire failed to stem the fighting.

US President Donald Trump and German Chancellor Angela Merkel agreed in a phone call that the Syrian regime must be held accountable.

"This applies both to the Assad regime's deployment of chemical weapons and for its attacks against civilians and the blockade of humanitarian support," a German chancellery statement said.

Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron, meanwhile, vowed there would be "no impunity"

WAR IN SYRIA

UN rights council to hold urgent session on E Ghouta

Residents of rebel enclave wait for long-delayed aid

in the event of further chemical weapons use in Syria.

Washington has asked the UN Security Council to set up a new inquiry into chemical weapons attacks in Syria after reports of suspected chlorine use in Eastern Ghouta, according to a draft resolution obtained by AFP on Thursday.

The Syrian government has denied using chemical weapons and Russia has questioned UN findings that it carried out sarin and chlorine attacks.

Yesterday, distrust ran high among civilians in Eastern Ghouta on the fourth day of a daily five-hour "humanitarian pause".

The pause announced by Russia has tempered but not halted the bombing, which has ripped through houses and reduced residential areas to grey rubble.

Embattled Syrian civilians have not left the enclave, despite a Russian offer of safe passage out during the daily halt in fighting. Damascus and Moscow accuse the armed opposition of preventing civilians from leaving.

Early yesterday, before the pause's 07:00 GMT start, warplanes pounded areas including Douma and the town of Zamalka, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Rockets fell on Douma and Harasta during the pause, the Britain-based war monitor said, as regime forces advanced on the southern outskirts of the enclave.

CATALAN CRISIS

Puigdemont won't run for presidency

AFP, Barcelona

In self-exile in Belgium and wanted in Spain, Catalonia's deposed leader Carles Puigdemont abandoned his bid to return as regional president Thursday in an attempt to unblock the region's political crisis.

"I will not put myself forward as candidate to be appointed regional president," Puigdemont announced solemnly from Belgium in a video posted on social media, standing in front of Catalan and EU flags.

The 55-year-old called for a new candidate to be chosen "as soon as possible" from Catalonia's separatist bloc, which won December elections in a region deeply divided over



Afghan security personnel arrive at a site after a car bomb targeting foreign troops in Kabul, yesterday. The strong blast which rocked Kabul early yesterday killed at least one person and wounded four, the Afghan interior ministry said.

Azerbaijan rehab centre fire kills 25

AFP, Baku

Twenty-five people perished in a fire which tore through a drug rehabilitation clinic in the Azerbaijani capital Baku early yesterday, with activists saying safety standards had not been met.

Video footage broadcast on local television showed huge flames leaping through barred windows of a one-storey wooden hospital ward.

It took some three hours for 10 squads of firefighters and rescuers from the emergency ministry to extinguish the blaze, the APA news agency reported.

President Ilham Aliyev, who went to the scene, has set up a governmental commission to probe the cause of the blaze and ordered financial aid to be allocated for the families of the victims, his office said.

Four more people were hospitalised with serious burns, a statement said, citing a power grid defect as the initial cause of the blaze.

More than 200 patients and medical staff were evacuated unharmed, the statement added.

The General Prosecutor's office said it has launched a criminal investigation over alleged violation of fire safety norms.

Civil activists blamed official corruption and the failure to respect safety regulations as the factor causing large numbers of casualties in increasingly frequent fires in Azerbaijan.

INDIA-CHINA TIES OVER DALAI LAMA

New delhi denies change in stance

TNN, New Delhi

India yesterday said it has not changed its position on the Dalai Lama to please China and added that he's free to carry out his religious activities in the country.

The Centre was reacting to media reports that it had asked government officials to stay away from events related to commemorate 60 years of the exile in India of the Buddhist spiritual leader. This alleged directive was attributed to India not wanting to rock the boat vis-à-vis relations with Beijing, which considers the Dalai Lama a "dangerous separatist", and which considers Tibet a part of China.

The government didn't specifically deny that it issued such a directive. All it said was that its position on the Dalai Lama hasn't changed.

"The government's position on His Holiness the Dalai Lama is clear and consistent. He is a revered religious leader and is deeply respected by the people of India. There is no change in that position. He is accorded all freedom to carry out his religious activities in India," said a statement issued yesterday by the ministry of external affairs (MEA).

A whole host of events have been planned to mark 60 years of the Dalai Lama being in India. The spiritual leader fled Lhasa in Tibet in March 1959 when the Chinese government cracked down on the Tibetan independence movement.

May sets out 'hard facts'

Says UK will be leaving the single market; backs free trade deals with EU

AFP, London

Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday called for a wide-ranging free trade deal with the EU after Brexit, but said it was time to face up to "hard facts" about the economic consequences of leaving the bloc.

In a detailed speech just weeks before starting negotiations on the future partnership with Brussels, May confirmed Britain would leave the European Union's single market and customs union after Brexit in March 2019.

She called for the "broadest and deepest possible agreement, covering more sectors and co-operating more fully than any free trade agreement anywhere in the world today".

But she acknowledged for the first time that Britain may suffer new trade barriers as a result of her move, which is driven by a desire to end mass migration and throw off EU regulations.

because the reality is we all need to face up to some hard facts... In certain ways our access to each other's markets will be different," she said.

She promised to commit to some regulations and minimum standards on goods in a bid to maintain close

BREXIT NEGOTIATIONS



trade ties, while reserving the option for Britain to diverge in the future.

The EU has already dismissed this as "cherry-picking", but May pointed out that each of the bloc's existing trade deals with other countries was slightly different.

"We both need to face the fact that this is a negotiation and neither of us can have exactly what we want," she said in London.

The EU's chief negotiator Michel Barnier welcomed Theresa May's Brexit speech, saying she had brought "clarity".

"I welcome PM @theresa_may speech. Clarity about #UK leaving Single Market and Customs Union & recognition of trade-offs will inform #EUCO guidelines re: future FTA," Barnier tweeted after May's address in London, in which she said it was time to face up to "hard facts" about the economic consequences of leaving the bloc.

The main opposition Labour party this week came out in favour of a new customs union, which is already backed by the main business lobby groups.

Their change in stance raises the stakes in parliament, which will vote on the final exit deal and where May has only a slim majority.



Netanyahu grilled again on fraud case

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli police yesterday arrived at Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's home where media reports said they were to question him for an eighth time over allegations of fraud and bribery.

An AFP journalist saw police arriving at Netanyahu's official Jerusalem residence in two vehicles at around 9:00am (0700 GMT).

Police issued no official confirmation that questioning was under way.

Investigators were at the same time to take a statement from his wife Sara at national fraud squad headquarters near Tel Aviv, media said.

Nir Hefetz, a former media adviser to the Netanyahu family, and Shaul Elovitch, the controlling shareholder of telecoms group Bezeq, were among seven suspects arrested last week as fraud suspicions against Netanyahu snowballed.

Police suspect Elovitch was given business concessions in return for Netanyahu receiving good press on Walla!, a news website he owns.

In addition, Israeli army radio yesterday said that "a former senior communications ministry official close to the prime minister was detained this morning for questioning in the Bezeq affair."