

US SANCTIONS

Russia promises 'tough response'

AFP, Moscow

Moscow on Friday promised a "tough response" to new US sanctions imposed on seven of Russia's most influential oligarchs following the diplomatic crisis sparked by the poisoning of former spy Sergei Skripal.

"We will not let the current attack, or any new anti-Russian attack, go without a tough response," Russia's foreign ministry said in a statement, after the US sanctions which also target 12 companies owned by the oligarchs, 17 senior Russian officials and a state-owned arms export company.

"Having obtained zero results from the 50 previous rounds of sanctions, Washington continues to employ fear with the refusal to issue American visas, the threatening of Russian businesses with the freezing of companies' assets and property, while forgetting that the requisitioning of private property and other people's money is known as theft," the ministry added.

Such sanctions place the United States in the category of "enemies of the market economy and honest and free competition" as they "use administrative methods to eliminate competitors in foreign markets".

Earlier Friday the United States struck at the heart of President Vladimir Putin's inner circle, stoking a diplomatic crisis that some have dubbed a new Cold War.

Those hit include metals magnate Oleg Deripaska, described by the US as operating for the Russian government, as well as Alexei Miller, director of state-owned energy giant Gazprom. Any assets they hold in areas under US jurisdiction could now be frozen. Russia's state arms exporter, was also added to the sanctions list.

The measures were taken under a US law passed to punish Russia for its alleged bid to interfere in the 2016 presidential election, engage in cyber-warfare and intervene in Ukraine and Syria.



Ultra-Orthodox Jewish anti-Zionism protesters (front row) join a demonstration on Whitehall opposite Downing Street in central London on April 7, 2018 in support of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip calling for a stop to the killing organised by the Palestinian Forum in Britain. PHOTO: AFP

Russian ex-spy 'improving' after poisoning

AFP, London

The former Russian spy who was found slumped in an English city after being poisoned is no longer in critical condition and is "improving rapidly", the hospital treating him said Friday.

It was the first news of Sergei Skripal's health improving since the 66-year-old ex-double agent and his daughter Yulia were found poisoned on a bench on March 4 in Salisbury, southwest England.

The affair has sparked a bitter diplomatic crisis between London and Moscow and prompted a wave of tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats between Russia and the West.

Skripal "is responding well to treatment, improving rapidly and is no longer in a critical condition," according to Salisbury District Hospital director Christine Blanshard.

Britain's interior ministry on Friday rejected a visa application by Sergei Skripal's niece to visit the country, because it "did not comply with the immigration rules", the Home Office said.

Raids kill dozens in Douma

Syria launches assault on last rebel enclave in Ghouta as talks falter

AFP, Beirut

Deadly bombardments pounded the last opposition holdout in Syria's Eastern Ghouta yesterday, after regime troops resumed a military blitz to pressure rebels to withdraw.

Backed up by Russia's firepower, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has ousted his armed opponents from nearly all of Ghouta, their last stronghold on the edge of the capital.

The regime has used a combination of a fierce military onslaught and two negotiated withdrawals to empty out 95 percent of the enclave, but rebels are still entrenched in its largest town of Douma.

Bombing subsided as Moscow pursued talks with Jaish al-Islam, the Islamist faction that holds Douma, putting military operations seemingly on hold for about 10 days.

But the negotiations crumbled this week and air strikes resumed on Friday, killing 40 civilians according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Another eight civilians were killed yesterday as more bombing raids targeted the town, the Britain-based war monitor said.

It could not confirm whether the strikes were carried out

by Syrian government warplanes or those of its ally, Russia.

"The bombing has not stopped. We can't even count all the wounded," said Mohammed, a young doctor inside Douma.

"There are some wounded who we couldn't operate on in time, and they died," he told AFP.

Syrian troops matched their renewed bombing with a ground operation in the orchards surrounding Douma, with state TV saying they had "stormed" the fields.



"The regime is trying to tighten the noose around Douma from the west, east, and south," said Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman.

Six civilians were also killed and dozens more wounded as Douma rebels shelled the capital Damascus on Saturday, Syrian state media said.

State television broadcast live footage from a hospital in Damascus, where pools of blood stained the floor and wounded could be heard wailing in pain.

One woman cried over the lifeless body of a young man on a stretcher. Another said she had been riding in a taxi when the shelling started, and the car crashed head-on into a wall.

The barrage of rockets on western parts of Damascus kept Wafaa Khalaf, 26, locked at home on Saturday.

'Several dead' as vehicle hits crowd in Germany

AFP, Berlin

Several people were killed and injured yesterday when a vehicle ploughed into pedestrians in the German city of Muenster before the driver killed himself, police and local media said.

A police spokeswoman in the western city told AFP that the driver of the vehicle "shot himself" after driving into a crowd of people and leaving about 30 bystanders with injuries.

"There are deaths and injured. Please avoid the area, we are on scene," the regional police service said on Twitter.

Police also urged people to refrain from spreading "speculation" about the incident.

According to the online edition of the Spiegel magazine, German authorities were "assuming" the incident was an attack, though there was no immediate official confirmation of a motive.

Images broadcast by German television showed several police and firefighting vehicles clustered around a street in the centre of the picturesque medieval city of 300,000 people.

Armed police were deployed and officers urged residents to avoid the city centre to allow investigators to get to work.

Germany has experienced a number of terror attacks in recent years, including through the deadly use of vehicles.

In December 19, 2016, Tunisian national Anis Amri, 24, hijacked a truck and slammed it into a crowd of people at a Christmas market in Berlin, killing 12 people and injuring 48.

Amri was shot dead by Italian police in Milan four days later after travelling through several European countries. The Islamic State (IS) group claimed responsibility for that attack.

IS also claimed several similar attacks in Europe, including a rampage along Barcelona's Las Ramblas boulevard in August 2017 that killed 14 and left more than 100 injured.

The deadliest such incident in recent years was in the French resort city of Nice in 2016, where a man rammed a truck into a crowd on France's national July 14 holiday, killing 86 people.

Facebook to verify identities, require labels for political ads

AFP, Washington

Facebook announced Friday it will require political ads on its platform to state who is paying for the message and would verify the identity of the payer, in a bid to curb outside election interference.

The social network, which is under fire for enabling manipulation of its platform in the 2016 election, said the new policy would require any messages for candidates or public issues to include the label "political ad" with the name of the person or entity paying for it.

Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg said the change will mean "we will hire thousands of more people" to get the new system in place ahead of US midterm elections in November.

"We're starting this in the US and expanding to the rest of the world in the coming months," Zuckerberg said on his Facebook page.



"These steps by themselves won't stop all people trying to game the system. But they will make it a lot harder for anyone to do what the Russians did during the 2016 election and use fake accounts and pages to run ads."

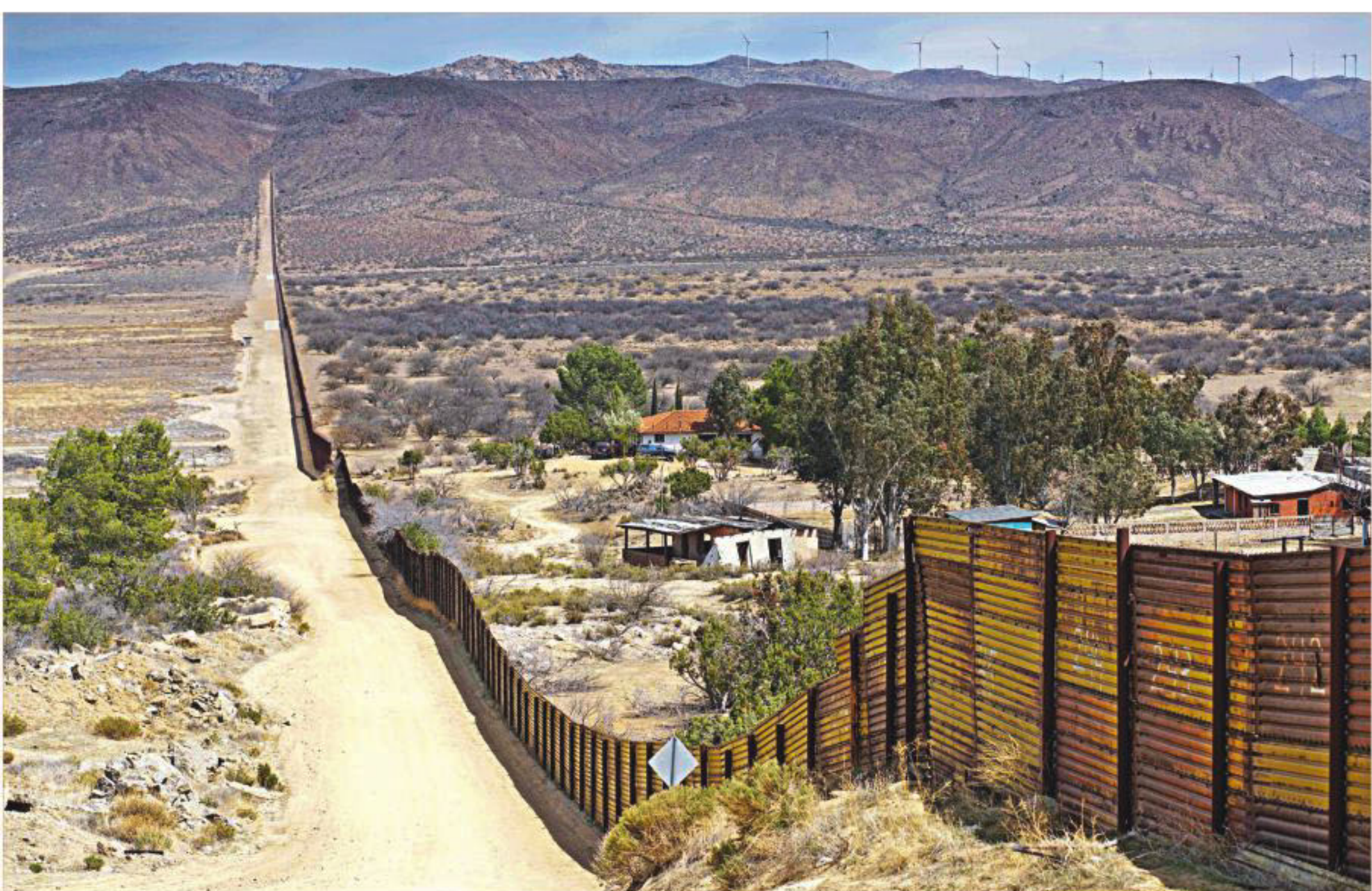
A separate Facebook statement said the changes would help improve transparency and accountability of the network around political campaigns.

"We believe that when you visit a page or see an ad on Facebook, it should be clear who it's coming from," the statement said.

To get authorized by Facebook, "advertisers will need to confirm their identity and location," the

statement said.

Facebook made the announcement as Zuckerberg prepared to appear before Congress next week to answer questions about the harvesting of personal data on 87 million users by Cambridge Analytica, a British political consultancy working for Donald Trump's presidential campaign.



Houses are seen on the Mexican side of the US/ Mexico border fence on Friday in Jacumba, California. The US states of Texas and Arizona on Friday announced plans to send National Guard troops to the southern border with Mexico after President Donald Trump ordered a thousands-strong deployment to combat drug trafficking and illegal immigration. PHOTO: AFP

Russell Crowe holds 'divorce auction'

CNN ONLINE

Russell Crowe is sharing mementos from his marriage -- for a price.

The actor hosted a divorce-themed auction in Sydney yesterday, which also happens to be his birthday and wedding anniversary.

As part of the auction by Sotheby's Australia, Crowe will part with an eclectic mix of items and movie souvenirs collected during his nine-year marriage to Danielle Spencer. The couple called it quits in 2012.

Items on sale at the auction included his leather jock-strap and midnight blue satin boxers, along with art, watches, diamond rings and a Mercedes Benz.

The official poster for the auction, aptly titled "The Art of Divorce," features a tuxedo-clad Crowe grinning as he raises a cocktail glass in a toast.

"Apart from watching as an online bidder, you can just tune in as an observer as it will be live-stream on Facebook," Crowe tweeted.

Hundreds of items are up for grabs, and come with descriptions of their role in the Academy-winning actor's personal or movie life.



Trump to again snub White House correspondents' dinner

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump will again snub the annual White House correspondents' dinner, organizers said Friday, amid sustained attacks by the president on US media.

While other members of his administration are expected to attend the dinner in Washington on April 28, it will be the second year in a row that the president himself will stay away.

"The White House has informed us that the president does not plan to participate in this year's dinner," Margaret Talev, the president of the White House Correspondents' Association, said in a statement.

Trump regularly accuses major media organizations such as CNN, The New York Times and The Washington Post of bias, and he organized a rally of supporters on the same evening as last year's dinner.

The Republican president's assaults on the "fake news" media have sharpened in recent weeks and have included attacks on CNN president Jeff Zucker and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, who owns The

Washington Post.

Since taking up the presidency, Trump has strongly favored news outlets that provide glowing coverage such as Fox News, the Daily Caller, Newsmax and Sinclair, a group of almost 200 local TV stations.

Sinclair sparked controversy by recently forcing reporters to read a script about "fake stories" in the mainstream media.

- 'Celebrate the First Amendment' -

A recent Knight-Gallup Poll showed 43 percent of Americans have a negative view of the news media, but more importantly for Trump, that figure is 68 percent among Republicans.

Talev said that while Trump would not attend the dinner, the White House had said the president would "actively encourage members of the executive branch to attend and join us as we celebrate the First Amendment," which guarantees freedom of speech.

"In keeping with tradition, Press Secretary Sarah Sanders also will represent the administration at the head table," Talev added.

14 killed in Canada hockey bus crash

AFP, Montreal

Hockey-mad Canada was in mourning yesterday after a bus carrying a junior ice hockey team collided with a semi-trailer truck in Saskatchewan province, killing 14 people.

In a country where love of the sport is almost a religion, the crash sparked an outpouring of grief among players and fans on social media, while national political leaders expressed their sympathies.

"We can now confirm 14 people have died as a result of this collision," the Royal Canadian Mounted Police said in a statement, which did not say how many of the victims were players or coaches of the Humboldt Broncos team.

Of the total 28 people on the team bus, including the driver, 14 were taken to hospital with injuries.

"Three of these people have injuries that are critical in nature," the RCMP said.

They gave no information about the status of the truck driver. The crash took place at around 5:00 pm (2300 GMT) Friday on Highway 35 about 28 kilometers (18 miles) north of the town of Tisdale, a trading center in an overwhelmingly agricultural region of the western province.

The team was heading north for a Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League playoff game against the Nipawin Hawks.

Police gave no indication of the cause, but early yesterday special police investigators were still at the scene, which is roughly 150 kilometers east of Prince Albert City.

TRUMP-KIM SUMMIT

US, N Korea in secret, direct talks

CNN ONLINE

The United States and North Korea have been holding secret, direct talks to prepare for a summit between President Donald Trump and North Korea leader Kim Jong Un, a sign that planning for the highly anticipated meeting is progressing, several administration officials familiar with the discussions tell CNN.

Central Intelligence Agency Director Mike Pompeo and a team at the CIA have been working through intelligence back-channels to make preparations for the summit, the officials said.

American and North Korean intelligence officials have spoken several times and have even met in a third country, with a focus on nailing down a location for the talks.

Although the North Korean regime has not publicly declared its invitation by Kim Jong Un to meet with Trump, which was conveyed last month by a South Korean envoy, several officials say North Korea has since acknowledged Trump's acceptance, and Pyongyang has reaffirmed Kim is willing to discuss the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

The North Koreans are pushing to have the meeting in their capital, Pyongyang, the sources said, although it is unclear whether the White House would be willing to hold the talks there. The Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar has also been raised as a possible location, the sources said.

The talks between intelligence officials are laying the groundwork for a meeting between Pompeo and his North Korea counterpart, the head of the Reconnaissance General Bureau, in advance of the leaders' summit.