

US military spending up for first time in 7 years

Says report; worldwide spending rose by 2.6pc

AGENCIES

US military spending has risen for the first time in seven years, reflecting Trump administration policy, according to a new report released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute yesterday.

Worldwide military spending also rose by 2.6 percent to \$1.8 trillion overall last year, SIPRI calculated.

It was the second year running the global figure has risen, bringing military spending to its highest level since 1988.

"The increase in US spending was driven by the implementation from 2017 of new arms procurement programmes under the Trump administration," said Aude Fleurant, director of SIPRI's Arms and Military Expenditure (AMEX) programme.

The US figure alone of \$649 billion was as much as the next eight highest military budgets, reported AFP.

But Chinese as well as US spending helped push the overall spending figures for the year higher, said the report.

China's spending has risen 83 percent since 2009, bringing it up to second place, ahead of Saudi Arabia, India -- which is modernising its armed forces -- and France. China has spent 1.9 percent of its gross domestic output (GDP) on military spending since 2013.

Russia meanwhile dropped out of the top five spenders, with its military budget declining since 2016, said the report.

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Western countries' economic sanctions against Russia, in place since 2014 because of its conflict with Ukraine, have hit the country's military budget.

In Ukraine itself meanwhile, military spending rose 21 percent on the previous year to \$4.8 billion, SIPRI calculated.

Trump has criticised some of Washington's Nato allies in Europe, especially Germany, for failing to meet the alliance's spending target of 2 percent of gross domestic product, reported Reuters.

SIPRI data showed military spending equalled 1.2 percent of GDP in Germany -- Europe's largest economy -- last year, based on GDP estimates for 2018 from the International Monetary Fund.



Indian paramilitary trooper helps an elderly Kashmiri voter after he cast his vote at a polling station during the fourth phase of India's general elections at Damhal Hanjipora, Kulgam district, south of Srinagar yesterday. **Inset**, Bollywood actors Amitabh Bachchan (R), wife Jaya and daughter in law Aishwarya Rai Bachchan (L) pose for a picture after casting their vote at a polling station in Mumbai. PHOTO: AFP



BURKINA CHURCH ATTACK

Jihadists kill pastor, four worshippers

AFP, Ouagadougou

Gunmen killed four worshippers and a pastor in the first jihadist attack on a church in Burkina Faso, security and local sources said yesterday, in the latest violence to rock the formerly peaceful west African nation.

Sunday's raid took place in the small northern town of Silgadji near Djibo, the capital of Soum province.

"Unidentified armed individuals have attacked the Protestant church in Silgadji, killing four members of the congregation and the main pastor," a security source told AFP.

"At least two other people are missing," the source added. It was the first attack on a church since jihadist violence erupted in Burkina Faso in 2015. Former colonial ruler France has deployed some 4,500 troops in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad in a mission codenamed Barkhane to help local forces try to flush out jihadist groups.

"The attack happened around 1:00 pm, just as the faithful were leaving the church at the end of the service," a member of the church who did not want to be identified told AFP.

"The attackers were on motorbikes. They fired in the air before aiming at the members of the congregation," the witness added. Burkina Faso has suffered from increasingly frequent and deadly attacks attributed to a number of jihadist groups, including the Ansarul Islam group, the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.

Spain's socialists win vote

Weigh possible coalition partners after failing to secure majority

AFP, Madrid

Spain faces weeks of coalition talks after Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's Socialists won snap elections without a majority, splitting the right-wing bloc but letting ultra nationalists into parliament.

With the country set to return to the polls on May 26 for regional, local and European Parliament elections, politicians' appetite for clear commitments was muted yesterday and a new government is not likely to be formed before June.

"We should wait and see what will happen in the municipal elections... in many regions and of course in the European Parliament," the president of the Socialist party told Spanish public radio.

The Socialists came first in Sunday's snap polls, winning 123 seats out of 350, or close to 29 percent of the vote -- short of an absolute majority but much better than the 85 seats it got in the last election in 2016.

Nearest rivals the main opposition conservative Popular Party (PP) bagged just 66 seats compared to 137 in 2016, its worst showing in over two decades.

Conservative votes were split among two other parties, centre-right Ciudadanos and ultra-nationalist Vox party, which won just over 10 percent of the vote in a country that has had no far-right party to speak of since the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975.

The three rightist parties together have

and smaller regional groupings.

"We will try," Deputy Prime Minister Carmen Calvo told news radio Cadena Ser.

"We think we have more than enough support to be the rudder of this boat which should continue its journey," she said.

In his victory speech, Sanchez said the party's big challenges were to fight inequality, advance co-existence and halt corruption.

"The future has won and the past has lost," he told cheering supporters.

The support of Podemos is a given. The party was weakened in the election, winning 42 seats compared to 67 in 2016, and is not in a position to dictate conditions.

The Socialists could rely on several other smaller regional parties without the support of Catalan separatists.

All Sanchez would need is for Catalan separatist lawmakers to abstain in the second round of an investiture vote when only a simple majority is needed.

Sanchez could also try to form a coalition with Podemos and the more moderate of Catalonia's two separatist parties, the ERC, which together would provide a majority in parliament.

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147 seats, far from the 176-seat majority in the 350-seat parliament needed to govern.

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NEWSIN brief

38 killed as floods worsen in Mozambique
AFP, Pemba

Heavy rain battered northern Mozambique yesterday as residents and relief workers confronted the widespread devastation wrought by Cyclone Kenneth, the strongest cyclone to ever hit Africa, which killed 38 people and destroyed thousands of homes. Roads have been washed away, fields submerged and many buildings wrecked by the storm, which came weeks after Cyclone Idai hit the Mozambican city of Beira.

Afghan leaders gather for peace meeting
AFP, Kabul

Thousands of tribal leaders, religious figures and politicians from across Afghanistan gathered in Kabul yesterday amid tight security to discuss the war and American efforts to forge a peace deal with the Taliban. More than 3,000 people were attending the rare "loya jirga", which is being billed as the largest in modern Afghan history, in a bid to set possible conditions under which they might accept a peace settlement.

Floods in Indonesia kill dozens
AFP, Bengkulu

Floods sparked by torrential rains have killed nearly 40 in Indonesia with a dozen more still missing, officials said yesterday, marking the latest calamity for a disaster-prone nation. Landslides and floods are common during the monsoon season between October and April, when rains lash the vast Southeast Asian archipelago.

Russia will still be meddling 'in 2050'

Says Mike Pompeo

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday warned that Russia would seek to interfere in elections for decades ahead and vowed that Washington would try to thwart its efforts.

Pompeo was asked if he expected Russia to meddle in next year's US election, after a long-awaited report by Special Counsel Robert Mueller found that Moscow tried to sway the 2016 presidential race to Donald Trump.

The top US diplomat said to expect a similar Russian campaign next year but criticized the spotlight inside Washington on the Russian role, which has infuriated President Donald Trump.

"It goes without saying, they were a threat to our elections in 1974, too, and they interfered in our elections in the '80s," Pompeo told a forum of The Hill newspaper.

"The fact that this town seems shocked by the fact that the Russians don't care for us -- in that case the Soviet Union -- I find stunning," he said.

"And we should expect in 2050, the Russians will be at it still."



A Sri Lankan Special Task Force (STF) soldier checks a Muslim burial ground in Colombo yesterday, a week after a series of bomb blasts targeting churches and luxury hotels on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka. PHOTO: AFP

UN warns of worsening humanitarian situation

Four dead, 20 wounded in Tripoli air raids

AFP, Tripoli

Fierce fighting for control of Libya's capital that has already displaced tens of thousands of people threatens to bring a further worsening of humanitarian conditions, a senior UN official has warned.

"As long as the situation continues, even if it just stagnates and continues like this, we can expect to see a continuing deterioration," UN humanitarian coordinator for Libya Maria do Valle Ribeiro told AFP.

Strongman Khalifa Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) launched an offensive against Tripoli, the seat of the internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), on April 4.

"When we see the use of air power, the indiscriminate shelling of densely

populated areas, it is very difficult to be optimistic," do Valle Ribeiro, who is also the deputy UN envoy to Libya, said late Sunday.

She was speaking after air raids by the LNA on Tripoli on Saturday killed four people and wounded 20 others, according to the GNA.

"We continue to call for a respect of civilians, we continue to call for humanitarian pauses and most of all we continue to hope that the situation can return to a more peaceful settlement of the crisis," she said.

The fighting has killed at least 278 people and wounded more than 1,300, according to a toll released Wednesday by the World Health Organization.

It has also forced 41,000 people to flee combat areas around Tripoli, do Valle Ribeiro said, while many remain trapped and in need of humanitarian assistance.



LIBYA UNREST

France holds 4 over 'violent' attack plot

AFP, Paris

Three adults and a teenager have been arrested over a planned attack on the security forces in the coming days, prosecutors said yesterday, which a minister described as "extremely violent".

All four were arrested on Friday as part of an investigation into a terrorist conspiracy, but there were no immediate details on the nature of the planned attack.

"Four people are being held over a plan to carry out an extremely violent terror attack," Interior Minister Christophe Castaner told reporters.

Norway finds 'Russian spy whale' off Arctic coast

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A harness recovered from an unusually friendly white whale in north Norway may indicate the animal had been trained by the Russian navy as part of a marine mammal special force, experts have said.

The beluga whale was first sighted last week in waters off Finnmark -- Norway's most northerly county which borders Russia.

"We were going to put out our nets when we saw a whale swimming between the boats," 26-year-old fisherman Joar Hesten told Norwegian public broadcaster NRK.

Fishermen said the whale had repeatedly sought them out, and they spotted it had a harness on which it was apparently trying to rub off against the hulls of their boats.

After several failed attempts by the Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries, Hesten, was able to remove the two straps attached to the animal late on Friday.

Hesten was accompanied by staff from the directorate and wore a survival suit before leaping into the icy waters near the island of Rolfsøya to try and undo the harness.

"When I was in the water, it came really close ... and I managed to reach and unfasten the front buckle," he told NRK.

The second strap was harder to remove, but Hesten eventually managed to attack a hook to it, and as the whale swam off the harness was pulled free.

The fisherman recovered the harness, which had the words "Equipment of St. Petersburg" labelled on it.

"This is not something any Norwegian scientist has been doing. What we think is that this may come from Russia," said Audun Rikardsen, professor at the Department of Arctic and Marine Biology at the University of Tromsø.

"If this whale has this on for a long time, then it is not good for it," he said.

