


Quote of the day



“This has to be verified, but if it is the case, it is completely unacceptable.... Free press is one of the core values of the European Union.”

EU CHIEF URSULA VON DER LEYEN ON THE SPYWARE SCANDAL INVOLVING AN ISRAELI SOFTWARE FIRM. MEDIA OUTLETS DREW LINKS BETWEEN THE ISRAELI-BASED NSO GROUP, ACCUSED OF SUPPLYING SPYWARE TO GOVERNMENTS, AND A LIST OF THOUSANDS OF SMARTPHONE NUMBERS, INCLUDING THOSE OF ACTIVISTS, JOURNALISTS, BUSINESS EXECUTIVES AND POLITICIANS AROUND THE WORLD.



Commuters not wearing facemasks cross London Bridge in London yesterday. Virtually all pandemic restrictions were lifted in England yesterday but “freedom day” was met with deep concern from scientists as coronavirus cases surge across the nation -- and around the world. The UK government has decided to implement the final step from their four-step roadmap to end lockdown, Covid restrictions have now been replaced with guidelines urging citizens to deploy personal judgement and responsibility on face masks in indoor settings and caution in large gatherings. PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS
IN brief

Taiwan approves local Covid jab for emergency use
Taiwan's government yesterday said it had granted emergency-use approval to a coronavirus vaccine made locally by Medigen, with experts saying early data suggested it was similarly effective to AstraZeneca's jabs. The decision is a boost for the island, which has struggled to secure enough vaccines for its 23 million people, reports AFP. Medigen Vaccine Biologics Corp's vaccine -- known officially as MVC-COV1901 -- has yet to finish clinical trials although it published promising phase-two data last month. Taiwan's health ministry said a panel of experts approved its use on Sunday and that the first inoculations for the public could begin as early as August.

Flood death toll rises to 165 in Germany
The death toll from Germany's worst floods in living memory rose to 165 yesterday as emergency services continued to comb through decimated towns in search of dozens of people still missing. A deluge of rain fell over western Germany over two days last week, sending torrents of water rushing down streets, sweeping away trees, cars and sheds, and destroying swathes of housing. Many victims have been found dead in sodden cellars after attempting to retrieve valuables, while others were swept away by the sheer force of the water, reports AFP. Emergency workers have been out in force to assess damaged buildings and clear debris.

Afghan peace talks fail

Rivals agree to meet again after inconclusive meeting in Doha; foreign missions in Afghanistan call for Taliban ceasefire

REUTERS, Kabul

Fifteen diplomatic missions and the Nato representative in Afghanistan urged the Taliban yesterday to halt their military offensives just hours after the rival Afghan sides failed to agree on a ceasefire at a peace meeting in Doha.

A delegation of Afghan leaders met the Taliban's political leadership in the Qatari capital over the weekend but the Taliban, in a said in a statement late on Sunday, made no mention of a halt to Afghanistan's escalating violence.

"This Eid al-Adha, the Taliban should lay down their weapons for good and show the world their commitment to the peace process," the 15 missions and the Nato representative said, referring to today's Muslim holiday in Afghanistan.



The statement was supported by Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the European Union delegation, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Britain and the United States and Nato's senior civilian representative.

Over recent Eid holidays, the Taliban have called short ceasefires, saying they wanted to let Afghans spend them in peace.

This time there has been no

such announcement as the Taliban made swift territorial gains in near-unprecedented levels of fighting nationwide as US-led foreign forces complete their withdrawal after 20 years of fighting.

Yesterday's statement also condemned rights violations, such as efforts to shut schools and media outlets in areas recently captured by the Taliban.

In Doha, political leaders and the Taliban discussed a political settlement to end the conflict, the chairman of a council for peace, Abdullah Abdullah, who took part in the talks, said yesterday.

"We agreed to continue the talks, seek a political settlement to the current crisis, avoid civilian casualties, facilitate humanitarian assistance and medical supplies to tackle Covid-19 pandemic," he said on Twitter.

ISRAELI MALWARE PEGASUS

Indian ministers, opp leaders among 'targets'

AGENCIES

Spyware Pegasus, which is sold by the NSO Group of Israel, may have been used to conduct surveillance on about 300 Indians, including two serving Cabinet ministers at the Centre, three opposition leaders, a Constitutional authority, government officials, scientists and about 40 journalists, according to French media nonprofit, Forbidden Stories, and Amnesty International.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, election strategist Prashant Kishor and Union IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw are the big names revealed as potential targets of Israeli spyware 'Pegasus' in the second set of explosive revelations by The Wire.

Apart from opposition leaders like Rahul Gandhi and Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's nephew Abhishek Banerjee, the latest reveal, according to The Wire, includes two current Union Ministers, Prahlad Patel and Ashwini Vaishnaw. Vaishnaw, who joined Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cabinet recently, is IT Minister. He was an MP at the time when the names were targeted - 2018 and 2019.

Vaishnaw defended the government in parliament earlier yesterday, saying there was "no substance" behind the sensational claims. It was "no coincidence" that the news broke a day before the start of the monsoon session of parliament, he said.



Pakistan bus crash kills 28 ahead of Muslim holiday

At least 28 people were killed yesterday when a bus packed with people heading home for the Muslim Eid al-Adha holiday in Pakistan crashed into a truck, officials said. The accident happened around 100 kilometres (60 miles) from Multan, in Punjab province. Government official Shezad ul-Islam said 40 people were injured in the accident, and the death toll was likely to rise as some were in critical condition. Eid al-Adha is one of the biggest celebrations on the Muslim calendar, when families slaughter animals and share the meat with the poor, reports AFP. Huge numbers of people have been crossing the country in recent days to return home to their families. Pakistan has a terrible traffic safety record with thousands of accidents a year due to substandard roads, poorly maintained vehicles and reckless driving.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



JULY 20

1944 - German officers made an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler by planting a bomb under a table in the Nazi leader's "Wolf's Lair" headquarters in East Prussia.

1969 - One giant leap for mankind with Moon landing.

1989 - Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest for her outspoken attacks on the country's military rulers.

2001 - In Italy, anti-globalisation protester Carlo Giuliani was shot dead by a paramilitary policeman.

SOURCE: REUTERS

US, allies condemn China for 'malicious' cyber activity

AFP, Washington

The United States yesterday led allies in a fierce condemnation of China over allegedly "malicious" cyber activity, accusing it of criminal extortion, issuing ransom demands to private firms and threatening national security.

In comments likely to further strain worsening relations between Washington and Beijing, a senior US official said that China's "irresponsible behavior in cyberspace is inconsistent with its stated objective of being seen as a responsible leader in the world."

The United States, the European Union, Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Japan and Nato were united against the threat, the US official said, and would expose how China targets international cyber networks.

China's Ministry of State Security "uses criminal contract hackers to conduct unsanctioned cyber operations globally, including for their own personal profit," the official said.

"Their operations include criminal activities such as cyber-enabled extortion, crypto-jacking, and theft from victims

around the world for financial gain.

"We're aware of reports that PRC (China) government-affiliated cyber operators have conducted ransom operations against private companies that have included ransom demands with millions of dollars."

Later yesterday, the US-led alliance was due to announce details of action against China over the alleged cyber misconduct, and to reveal 50 "tactics, techniques and procedures Chinese state-sponsored cyber actors use."

The official said US allies were sharing technical advice on how to confront China, as Beijing's cyber security behavior "poses a major threat to the US and allies' economic and national security."

The United States will also today formally accuse cyber actors affiliated to China's Ministry of State Security of conducting the massive Microsoft Exchange Server hack disclosed in March.

The hack, which exploited flaws in the Microsoft Exchange service, affected at least 30,000 US organizations including local governments and was already attributed to an "unusually aggressive" Chinese cyber-espionage campaign.

PEGASUS SPYWARE: HOW DOES IT WORK?

Governments around the world are facing bombshell allegations that they used Israeli-made malware to spy on the phones of activists, journalists, corporate executives and politicians. But how exactly does the Pegasus spyware work? How does it get onto people's phones -- and what can it do once it's there?

HOW DOES PEGASUS SNEAK?
Researchers believe that early versions of the hacking software, first detected in 2016, used booby-trapped text messages to install itself onto the phones of targets. The recipient would have to click on a link in the message in order for the spyware to download.

But this limited the chances of a successful installation -- particularly as phone users have grown increasingly wary of clicking on suspicious links. More recent versions of Pegasus, developed by the Israeli firm the NSO Group, have exploited weak spots in software commonly installed on mobiles.

In 2019 the messaging service WhatsApp sued NSO, saying it used one of these so-called "zero-day vulnerabilities" in its operating system to install the spyware on some 1,400 phones.

By simply calling the target through WhatsApp, Pegasus could secretly download itself onto their phone -- even if they never answered the call.

More recently, Pegasus is reported to have exploited weaknesses in Apple's iMessage software. That would potentially give it access to the one billion Apple iPhones currently in use -- all without the owners needing to even click a button.

WHAT DOES THE MALWARE DO?
"Pegasus is probably one of the most capable remote access tools there is," said Alan Woodward, cybersecurity professor at the University of Surrey in the UK. "Think of it as a particular phone has been bugged or not, Woodward said.

However, Amnesty International's Security Lab, one of the organisations investigating Pegasus, said it had found traces of successful attacks on Apple iPhones as recently as this month. Woodward said Apple, which prides itself on a reputation for security, had "made some fairly big efforts" to identify weak spots. But "inevitably there will be one or two" flaws in such complex software.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO REMOVE THE SPYWARE?
Since it's extremely difficult to know for sure if your phone is carrying the malware, it's also difficult to know definitively that it has been removed. Woodward said Pegasus may install itself onto the phone's hardware or into its memory, depending on the version.

If it's stored in the memory, rebooting the phone could in theory wipe it off -- so he recommended that people at risk of being targeted, such as business leaders and politicians, regularly switch their devices off and on again. "It sounds like overkill to a lot of people, but there is anti-malware software out there for mobile devices," he added.

SOURCE: AFP

Climate change sees Swiss Alps add over 1,000 lakes

AFP, Geneva

Climate change has dramatically altered the Swiss Alps landscape -- at a quicker pace than expected -- as melting glaciers have created more than 1,000 new lakes across in the mountains, a study published yesterday showed.

The inventory of Swiss Glacial lakes showed that almost 1,200 new lakes have formed in formerly glaciated regions of the Swiss Alps since the end of the Little Ice Age around 1850.

Around 1,000 of them still exist today, according to the study published by the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology (Eawag).

That is far more than the few hundreds the researchers had expected to find at the beginning of the project.

"We were surprised by the sheer numbers," Daniel Odermatt, head of the Eawag Remote Sensing Group that carried out the study, said in a statement.

He said the "marked acceleration

in formation" was also surprising, pointing out that "180 have been added in the last decade alone."

Glaciers in the Swiss Alps are in steady decline, losing a full two percent of their volume last year alone, according to an annual study published by the Swiss Academies of Science.

And even if the world were to fully implement the 2015 Paris Agreement -- which calls for capping global warming at at least two degrees Celsius -- two-thirds of the Alpine glaciers will likely be lost, according to a 2019 study by the ETH technical university in Zurich.

The Eawag assessment showed that there was an initial peak in glacial lake formation in the Swiss Alps between 1946 and 1973, when nearly eight new lakes appeared on average each year.

After a brief decline, the lake formation rate surged between 2006 and 2016, with 18 new lakes appearing each year on average.

Russia test fires Zircon hypersonic cruise missile

AFP, Moscow

Russia said yesterday it had carried out another successful test of its Zircon hypersonic cruise missile, a new addition to an arsenal of weapons called "invincible" by President Vladimir Putin.

Moscow has in recent years touted the development of futuristic weapons which it hopes will give it the edge in any arms race with the United States. Footage distributed by the defence ministry showed the Admiral Gorshkov warship launching the cruise missile at a target on the Barents Sea coast in northern Russia.

"The Zircon missile successfully hit a target directly at a range of over 350 kilometres. The flight speed reached nearly Mach 7," the ministry said. Putin revealed the development of the new weapon in a state of the nation address in February 2019, saying it could hit targets at sea and on land with a range of 1,000 kilometres and a speed of Mach 9.

The defence ministry has said it plans to equip both warships and submarines with the Zircon. The missile has undergone several recent tests and in October last year Putin described one of the test firings as a "great event not just in the life of our armed forces but for all of Russia".

Rajapaksa to seek 2nd term as Lanka crisis deepens

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa announced yesterday he would stand for a second term, reversing a promise to only stay for five years, media reports said.

The 72-year-old nationalist leader told top media executives he needed more time to fix Sri Lanka's worsening economic crisis, reports said.

During his triumphant 2019 election campaign, Rajapaksa said he would be a one-term president.

He reaffirmed in March last year that one five-year term was sufficient to implement his ambitious manifesto, triggering a succession struggle within the powerful Rajapaksa family that dominates the government.

Elections are not due until 2024, but Rajapaksa now says he needs five more years to implement his "Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour" manifesto after the economy contracted by a record 3.6 percent in his first year. The government has banned many imports because of a foreign currency crunch.

Rajapaksa "today declared that he would contest for a second term", the pro-government The Morning website quoted him as telling media owners.

Other media also reported on the comments, which set off new speculation about the intentions of the ruling family.

The elevation of the president's youngest brother Basil, 70, as finance minister earlier this month was widely seen as a move to groom him for the presidency.

Basil was thought to have edged out his nephew, Namal, the minister of sports and eldest son of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, to be the next family leader. "Another U-turn and maybe this squashes Basil's chances for the next presidency," said Jamila Husain, a deputy editor of the Daily Mirror newspaper, on Twitter.

