



A woman walks past a monument to the soldiers killed in action during wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya in the village of Shebikino outside Belgorod, a few kilometres from Ukrainian border, on Thursday. The people of Shebikino is just a stone's throw away the scene of a major geopolitical crisis, but the Russians there see no war on the horizon.

PHOTO: AFP

CIVILIAN DEATHS FROM US STRIKES

Pentagon chief orders reforms

AFP, Washington

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin ordered Pentagon officials Thursday to undertake reforms to reduce the number of civilian deaths from military strikes after multiple unjustified fatal incidents.

"The protection of civilians is fundamentally consistent with the effective, efficient and decisive use of force in pursuit of US national interests," Austin said in a directive issued to Department of Defense leadership.

"It is a strategic and moral imperative," he said.

Austin gave Pentagon officials 90 days to produce a plan for how civilian casualties can be reduced and avoided in combat operations, saying the experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq provide an opportunity to learn lessons and mitigate civilian harm in an institutional way.

The move came after several incidents placed a dark cloud over the Pentagon, most recently the erroneous killing of 10 people, including seven children, in a Kabul drone strike in August 2021 during the last days of the US presence in Afghanistan.

Likewise, the US military has been embarrassed by reporting by The New York Times that showed a poorly managed March 2019 bombing that killed some 70 civilians in the final days of the war against the Islamic State group.

The military avoided investigation and accountability in that incident, the Times said.

Austin's order came after a study of civilian death causes and reporting by RAND Corp, commissioned by the Pentagon, painted an unflattering picture of the US military's processes for dealing with such incidents.

It said that in planning strikes, the military focuses so much on the enemy that it neglects the broader civilian picture -- a problem that can lead to avoidable casualties.

And it says the military does not adequately and consistently investigate and record civilian death incidents, and does not have a central database that would permit study that could lead to solutions.

Rand recommended the Pentagon establish a "center of excellence" with personnel dedicated full time to civilian harm issues and strengthen data collection and analysis.

Rand also called for a review of how the military offers condolence of "ex gratia" payments to the families of those non-combatants killed as a result of US attacks.



'We don't want wars'

Russia softens tone on Ukraine, weighs US answers



REUTERS, Moscow

Russia yesterday sent its strongest signal so far that it is willing to engage with US security proposals and reiterated that it does not want war over Ukraine.

"If it depends on Russia, then there will be no war. We don't want wars. But we also won't allow our interests to be rudely trampled, to be ignored," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told Russian radio stations in an interview.

Russia has massed tens of thousands of troops near the Ukrainian border as it presses demands for a redrawing of post-Cold War security arrangements in Europe.

The United States and its allies have warned President Vladimir Putin that Russia will face swift and tough economic sanctions if he attacks Ukraine.

Lavrov said the West was ignoring Russia's interests but there was at least "something" in written responses submitted by the United States and Nato on Wednesday to Russia's proposals.

Lavrov said he expected to meet US Secretary of State Antony Blinken again in the next couple of weeks. Their last meeting, in Geneva on Jan 21, produced no breakthrough but both sides agreed to keep talking.

Lavrov said, without giving details, that the US counter-proposals were better than Nato's. Russia was studying them and Putin would decide how to

respond.

While the US and Nato responses have not been made public, both have stated they are willing to engage with Moscow on a series of topics, including arms control.

The US ambassador to Moscow, John Sullivan, told reporters that Washington had raised the possibility of "reciprocal transparency measures... including on offensive weapons systems in Ukraine, as well as measures to increase confidence regarding military exercises and manoeuvres in Europe."

He said the size of Russia's build-up near Ukraine would allow an invasion with little warning, and urged it to pull back its forces.

"It's the equivalent of if you and I were having a discussion or a negotiation. If I put a gun on the table and say that I come in peace, that's threatening," Sullivan said.

Russia has dismissed calls to withdraw, saying it can deploy troops as it sees fit on its own territory.

The head of Germany's BND foreign intelligence agency told Reuters that Russia was prepared to attack Ukraine but added: "I believe that the decision to attack has not yet been made".

The Kremlin said Putin would spend a "lot of time" discussing European security issues with Chinese President Xi Jinping when he visits Beijing next week for the opening of the Winter Olympics.

'PARTYGATE' SCANDAL

Cops 'not delaying' probe into UK PM

AFP, London

London police yesterday denied delaying a long-awaited government report into lockdown-breaking parties in Downing Street that have put Prime Minister Boris Johnson's future in jeopardy.

Weeks of so-called "partygate" revelations forced Johnson to order a senior civil servant to look into the claims, and her report was due to be published this week.

But the fact-finding investigation has yet to appear, prompting speculation the involvement of police this week could prevent full details emerging.



The Metropolitan Police confirmed in a statement it did not want details emerging that detectives were investigating for potential breaches of coronavirus legislation.

The "partygate" revelations have seen calls for Johnson to quit, due to widespread public and political anger about the breaking of rules the government itself had set.

Johnson's opponents accuse him of misleading parliament -- which under the code for ministers is seen as a resigning matter -- by insisting the events were work-related.

He has vowed to "get on with the job" and hopes the report will draw a line under the matter.

First Black woman to US top court!

REUTERS, Washington

President Joe Biden on Thursday said he plans by the end of February to nominate a Black woman to replace retiring US Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, a historic first that he called "long overdue." Biden appeared with Breyer, whom he has known since the 1970s, at the White House after the 83-year-old justice formally announced his retirement in a letter to the president. Biden, who won the Democratic Party's 2020 presidential nomination in large part because of strong support from Black voters, noted that he committed during that campaign to name a Black woman to a lifetime post on the high court and would keep his promise.

40pc in Tigray lack adequate food: WFP

REUTERS, Nairobi

Nearly 40 percent of people in Ethiopia's Tigray region do not have adequate food after 15 months of conflict, according to an assessment released yesterday by the UN World Food Programme (WFP).



The agency surveyed 980 households across the region and found that three-quarters of people are using extreme coping strategies like cutting the number of meals they eat daily. The war broke out in November 2020 and pits the Ethiopian government and its allies against Tigrayan forces loyal to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the political party that

controls Tigray region. The conflict has killed thousands and displaced millions across three regions in Ethiopia and into neighbouring Sudan.

S-400 MISSILE DEAL WITH INDIA

US slams Russia's 'destablising role'

NDTV ONLINE

Russia selling S-400 missile defense system to India "shines a spotlight on the destabilising role" that Moscow is playing in the region and potentially beyond as well, the United States has said.

The US continues to have its concerns over India purchasing the multi-billion missile defense system from Russia. India has asserted that its decisions are based on its national interest.

"Well in many ways, this doesn't change the concerns that we have with the S-400 system. I think it shines a spotlight on the destabilising role that Russia is playing not only in the region but potentially beyond as well," State Department Spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Thursday at his daily news conference. Price was responding to a question on implications of the Russian S-400 system to India on its bilateral ties with New Delhi.

Despite strong objections sanctions threat from the US, India has refused to make any changes in its decision and is going ahead with the purchase of the missile defense system.

"Whether it is India, whether it is any other country, we continue to urge all countries to avoid major new transactions for Russian weapon systems," Price said.



This undated picture released from North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) yesterday shows a slim looking North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (C) inspecting the planned construction site of a large-scale vegetable greenhouse farm in Ryonpho area of Hamju County, South Hamgyong Province, North Korea. Pyongyang has conducted six weapons tests in January, including firing hypersonic missiles, doubling down on Kim's call to build "military muscle" with one of the most intense single-month barrages on record.

PHOTO: AFP

UN rights chief may visit Xinjiang: paper

REUTERS, Beijing

China has agreed that the UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet can visit Xinjiang after the Beijing Olympics, the South China Morning Post said, citing unidentified sources.

Rights groups have accused China of widespread abuses against Uyghurs and other minority groups in its far western region of Xinjiang, including mass detention, torture and forced labour. The United States has accused China of genocide.

Beijing denies all allegations.

The newspaper said approval for the visit by Bachelet after the Games conclude on Feb 20 was granted on condition that it should be "friendly" and not framed as an investigation.



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John Sullivan, US ambassador to Russia, on Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's 'no war' comment