

Kyiv calls for calm amid war fears

REUTERS, Kyiv

The Ukrainian government yesterday urged citizens to stay calm and united, saying the armed forces are ready to repel any attack on the country amid concern that Russia may be poised to invade.

"It is now critical to remain calm and united within the country, and avoid actions that undermine stability and sow panic," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

"Ukraine's Armed Forces are constantly monitoring developments and are ready to repel any encroachment on the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine," it added.

Russia has massed more than 100,000 troops near its border with Ukraine and the United States said on Friday an invasion could come at any time. Washington also urged its citizens in Ukraine to leave as soon as possible, a call echoed by countries including Britain, Japan and Australia.

Moscow denies plans to invade, saying it is defending its own security interests against aggression by Nato allies.

US President Joe Biden and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin were due to speak on Saturday. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken also said he would talk to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Some US media suggested the invasion could begin shortly after German Chancellor Olaf Scholz concludes talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Tuesday.



This handout video grab released by the Russian Defence Ministry yesterday, shows rocket launcher systems Smerch (Tornado) in action during joint exercises of the armed forces of Russia and Belarus as part of an inspection of the Union State's Response Force, at a firing range near Brest.

PHOTO: AFP

Pandemic's 'acute phase' could end by midyear: WHO

US study says Covid booster efficacy wanes by fourth month

AFP, Cape Town

The head of the World Health Organization said the acute phase of the pandemic could end this year, if around 70 percent of the world gets vaccinated.

"Our expectation is that the acute phase of this pandemic will end this year, of course with one condition, the 70 percent vaccination (target is achieved) by mid this year around June, July," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, told reporters in South Africa on Friday.

"If that is to be done, the acute phase can really end, and that is what we are expecting. It's in our hands. It's not a matter of chance. It's a matter of choice." He was speaking during a visit to

Afrigen Biologics and Vaccines, which has produced the first mRNA Covid vaccine made in Africa using Moderna's sequence.

The world panicked late last year following the outbreak of the highly contagious Omicron variant which led at its peak to four times more daily infections than previous waves.

But after the surge which lasted for three-and-a-half months, the average number of global daily cases dropped for a second week in a row, receding by 17 percent, according to an AFP tally on Thursday.

Meanwhile, a new study by the US Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said the efficacy of third doses of the Pfizer and Moderna mRNA vaccines wanes

substantially by the fourth month after administration.

Though it's now well documented that vaccine efficacy goes down after two doses, relatively little has been published on the duration of protection after a booster.

During the Omicron predominant period, vaccine efficacy against Covid-associated emergency department or urgent care visits was 87 percent during the two months after a third dose, but fell to 66 percent by the fourth month.

Vaccine efficacy against hospitalization was 91 percent in the first two months, but fell to 78 percent by the fourth month after a third dose.

The study said more research are needed to determine the efficacy of boosters.



US to reopen Solomon Islands embassy

AFP, Nadi

The United States will re-establish an embassy in the Solomon Islands, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said yesterday, in an effort to counter China's influence in the politically troubled Pacific island. Blinken announced the move during a visit to nearby Fiji, where he met virtually with around 18 Pacific island leaders to stress Washington's attention to the region in an attempt to curb Beijing's push for greater influence. The United States closed its embassy in the Solomons Island capital Honiara in 1993 and is now represented by a consulate there, directed from the US embassy in Papua New Guinea. The decision on the embassy was revealed on Blinken's visit to Fiji, the first US Secretary of State to arrive on the island in 37 years.

UK police send PM questionnaire in 'partygate' probe

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has received a legal questionnaire from police investigating claims of lockdown-breaking parties in his Downing Street office, his spokesperson said. "We can confirm the Prime Minister has received a questionnaire from the Metropolitan Police. He will respond as required," his spokesperson said in a statement. The "partygate" scandal has placed Johnson in political jeopardy with several MPs from his Conservative party publicly calling for his resignation, although he denies any wrongdoing.

Police confirmed on Wednesday that they would be sending "formal questionnaires to more than 50 people" by the end of the week to ask about their activities on the dates of at least 12 gatherings in Downing Street over 2020 and 2021. The document "has formal legal status and must be answered truthfully" within seven days, the police noted. Johnson faces a fine unless he can give credible reasons as to why he was at events held during coronavirus restrictions.

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