

Russia mocks West over war 'paranoia'

AFP, United Nations

The Kremlin and senior officials yesterday made fun of Western media for running with February 16 as the "invasion date" when Russia might attack Ukraine, some even went further suggesting western leaders should see a doctor for their war "paranoia".

"I'd like to ask if US and British sources of disinformation ... could publish the schedule of our upcoming invasions for the year. I'd like to plan my holidays," Russia's foreign minister spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova wrote on social media.

Western intelligence had warned that Moscow could choose Wednesday to escalate an ongoing separatist conflict in Ukraine. Some media, citing those reports, specified Russian attacks could begin early Wednesday morning.

"The night passed as usual. We slept peacefully. In the morning we started the day calmly and professionally," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said yesterday.

On Tuesday, Russia's deputy ambassador to the United Nations told western leaders they should see a doctor for their "paranoia" over fears that the 100,000 or so Russian troops massed on Ukraine's borders might invade.

"I think they need to have a good doctor, I recommend them to do it. Specialist on such paranoia cases," said Dmitry Polyanskiy, denying that Russia intended to attack its neighbor, a former Soviet state.

"Our troops are on our territory, (they) represent (a) threat to no one," he told reporters.

West disputes Russian claims

Nato demands proof of troops pullback; US says invasion fear persists



Residents carry Ukrainian national flag as they gather in the Olympic Stadium to mark the Unity Day, the day Western intelligence agencies allegedly said they'd be invaded by Russia, in Kyiv, Ukraine, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

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Russia said more of its forces surrounding Ukraine were withdrawing yesterday but Nato urged Moscow to prove it was pulling back, saying there were signs that more troops were on the way.

In Ukraine, where people raised flags and played the national anthem to show unity against fears of an invasion, the defence ministry said a cyber attack was into its second day. Russia said it had nothing to do with that.

The Russian defence ministry said its forces were pulling back after completing exercises in the southern and western military districts near Ukraine.

It published video that it said showed tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and self-propelled artillery units leaving the Crimean peninsula, which Moscow seized from Ukraine in 2014.

Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said a pullout would be welcome but that moving troops about did not confirm it.

"It remains to be seen whether there is a Russian withdrawal ... What we see is that they have increased the number of troops, and more troops are on the way," he told reporters at the start of a two-day meeting of Nato defence ministers at the alliance's headquarters in Brussels.

His comment was echoed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and

Canadian Defence Minister Anita Anand.

The Kremlin said Nato's assessment was wrong. Moscow's ambassador to Ireland said forces in western Russia would be back to their normal positions within three to four weeks.

Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei yesterday said no Russian soldiers or military equipment will remain in the country after the pair's joint military drills come to an end.

- ▶ Russia announces end of Crimea military drills
- ▶ China accuses West of 'playing up the threat of warfare'
- ▶ US sees chance for diplomacy, keeps pressure on Moscow

The deployment in the Crimean peninsula was part of a huge build-up of Russian forces to the north, east and south of Ukraine since November that had prompted London and Washington to warn in recent days that a Russian invasion looked imminent.

China, which has cultivated closer ties with Russia as both countries have come under increasing criticism from the West,

accused the United States of "playing up the threat of warfare and creating tension".

"Such persistent hyping up and disinformation by some Western countries will create turbulence and uncertainty to the world full of challenges, and intensify distress and division," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told reporters at a regular briefing in Beijing.

Military analysts say a key indicator of a significant pullback will be whether field hospitals and fuel stores are dismantled and units from Russia's far east, which are taking part in huge exercises in Belarus this week, return to their bases thousands of miles away.

US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that more than 150,000 Russian troops were still amassed near Ukraine's borders and an invasion remained "distinctly possible". He said Washington had not yet verified any pullout.

Biden has warned repeatedly of steep costs for Russia if it attacks Ukraine, including sanctions against Russian businesses and the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany.

Russia has always denied planning to invade Ukraine but has been pressing for a set of security guarantees from the West including a promise that its neighbour Ukraine will never join Nato. The United States and its allies have rejected that.

Anger in UK over Prince Andrew's '£12m' settlement

AFP, London

Disgraced British royal Prince Andrew was urged yesterday to "live out his retirement in ignominy" after reportedly settling a sexual assault lawsuit for a whopping £12 million (\$16.3 million, 14.3 million euros). The lawyer for US accuser Virginia Giuffre said on Tuesday that both parties had settled out of court, sparing Andrew the public humiliation of a trial. The details were not revealed. Giuffre, 38, has said she had sex with Andrew when she was 17 and a minor under US law, after meeting him through US financier Jeffrey Epstein. He took his own life in prison while awaiting trial for sex crimes. The prince, 61, has not been criminally charged and has denied the allegations. The Daily Telegraph newspaper reported that Andrew was to pay £10 million to Giuffre and £2 million to a charity for victims of sex trafficking.

North Korea celebrates ex-leader's birthday

AFP, Seoul

North Korea marked the 80th birthday of leader Kim Jong Un's late father with a mass outdoor meeting in sub-zero temperatures, state media reported Wednesday, but no missiles or military parade. Kim was joined by top officials in celebrating the "Day of the Shining Star" in snowy Samjiyon, a city near Mt Paektu, where official narratives say Kim Jong Il was born in a secret guerilla camp on February 16. The North Korean calendar is peppered with anniversaries related to the nation's official history, in particular to Kim's father and his grandfather Kim Il Sung, the country's founding leader. This year's anniversary has been closely watched as it comes amid fresh tensions on the peninsula.

Some observers had anticipated a military parade by the North to showcase its new weapons. Pyongyang carried out an unprecedented seven weapons tests in January, including of its most powerful missile since 2017. It has also warned it could abandon its self-imposed moratorium and resume testing intercontinental ballistic missiles or nuclear weapons.



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