

Blinken, Lavrov hold first talks since war

AFP, Washington

The top diplomats of the United States and Russia spoke Friday for the first time since the Ukraine war, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken describing a "frank" exchange as he pushed to free two Americans.

Blinken initiated the call with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as he pressed Russia to accept an offer to free prisoners.

"We had a frank and direct conversation. I pressed the Kremlin to accept the substantial proposal that we put forth on the release of Paul Whelan and Brittney Griner," Blinken told reporters.

President Joe Biden has faced growing public pressure to find a way home for Griner, a basketball star jailed for transport of cannabis oil, and Whelan, a former Marine jailed on espionage charges he denies.

Russia's foreign ministry, in a statement on the call, said that relations between the two nations "are in strong need of normalization."

"As for a potential swap of Russian and American prisoners, the Russian side insisted that we return to a regime of professional dialogue, free of media speculation, in the framework of discreet diplomacy," it said.

Lavrov also denounced the US military and Nato for their supply of billions of dollars of weapons to Ukraine, saying it "only prolonged the agony of the Kyiv regime, extending the conflict and its victims." the foreign ministry said.

Blinken said he also pressed Lavrov on Russia honoring a Turkish-brokered proposal to ship grain out of Ukraine and on purported plans by Moscow to annex additional parts of Ukraine seized by Russian troops.

Blinken said Russia was preparing "sham referendums" to try to "falsely demonstrate that the people in these parts of Ukraine somehow seek to become part of Russia." The votes would be part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's objective of "gobbling up as much Ukrainian territory as he can," he added.

The telephone conversation was the first between Blinken and Lavrov since February 15, when the top US diplomat warned Russia against invading Ukraine, repeating a message he delivered in person in Geneva a month earlier. Putin went ahead and attacked nine days later, leading the United States and its allies to impose sweeping sanctions and to seek to isolate Russia on the world stage.



Supporters of cleric Moqtada Sadr, protesting against a rival bloc's nomination for prime minister, gather inside Iraq's parliament in the capital Baghdad's high-security Green Zone, yesterday. The protesters today pledged to remain inside the country's parliament, which they have occupied. PHOTO: REUTERS



MONEY LAUNDERING CASE Court summons Pak PM, his son

DAWN/ANN

A special court in Lahore yesterday summoned Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and his son Hamza Shehbaz on September 7 for the framing of charges in a Rs16 billion money laundering case registered against them by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA).

They have already been granted pre-arrest bails in the case.

The FIA had booked Shehbaz and his sons Hamza and Suleman in November 2020 under sections 419, 420, 468, 471, 34 and 109 of Prevention of Corruption Act and r/w 3/4 of Anti Money Laundering Act. Suleman Shehbaz is in the UK and has been declared an absconder.

Fourteen others have also been named in the FIR under sections 5(2) and 5(3) (criminal misconduct) of the Prevention of Corruption Act.

Shehbaz and Hamza were previously set to be indicted on May 14 but it was deferred as the prime minister was not present in the country at the time.

The FIA had in December 2021 submitted the challan against Shehbaz and Hamza to a special court for their alleged involvement in laundering an amount of Rs16 billion in the sugar scam case.

"The investigation team has detected 28 benami accounts of the Shehbaz family through which money laundering of Rs16.3bn was committed during 2008-18. The FIA examined the money trail of 17,000 credit transactions," according to an FIA report submitted to the court.

China accuses US of double standard

As Washington defends Ukraine at UN, Beijing warns against challenge over Taiwan

REUTERS, United Nations

China accused the United States of double standards at the United Nations on Friday for challenging Beijing's sovereignty over Taiwan while emphasizing the principle of sovereignty for Ukraine after Russian forces invaded.

A day after Chinese leader Xi Jinping warned US President Joe Biden in a phone call against playing with fire over Taiwan, deputy UN Ambassador Geng Shuang reinforced the message during a meeting on Ukraine at the 15-member UN Security Council.

"While some country has repeatedly emphasized the principle of sovereignty over the issue of Ukraine, it has incessantly challenged the sovereignty of China over Taiwan, and even deliberately created tension in the Taiwan Strait," Geng said, a clear reference to the United States without naming it.

Russia describes its Feb. 24 invasion of neighboring Ukraine as a "special military operation" to root out dangerous nationalists, but Kyiv and the West say it is an unprovoked war of aggression.

The determination of China to defend its national sovereignty and territorial integrity should not be underestimated, Geng said. "I hope the country concerned will see this clearly and not play with fire."

Beijing is concerned about a possible visit to the Chinese-claimed island of Taiwan by US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Such a visit would be a dramatic, though not unprecedented, show of US support for Taiwan.

A spokesperson for the US mission to the United Nations dismissed China's comment as "an attempt to distract and deflect blame

from the reality: that Russia's aggression against Ukraine is unacceptable under any circumstance."

"China's failure to highlight Russia's role as the clear aggressor in its conflict with Ukraine call into question its commitment to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity," the spokesperson said.

Geng told the council China had always maintained that all countries sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected and legitimate security concerns be taken seriously.

The US mission to the United Nations spokesperson said China's "misleading" argument that Russia has "legitimate" security concerns "appears to justify aggression by larger powers against smaller ones rather than a genuine commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes."

US Ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who addressed the council before Geng's speech, said Russia had "effectively set the UN Charter on fire." The charter says the 193-member world body is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all members and they should settle international disputes by peaceful means.

Deputy Russian UN Ambassador Dmitry Polyanskiy accused Western states of carrying out a proxy war against Russia by supplying Ukraine government forces with weapons.

"The de-Nazification and demilitarization of Ukraine will be carried out in full," Polyanskiy said, using Moscow's official language to describe the invasion. "There must no longer be a threat from this state to Donbas (border region of Ukraine) nor to Russia nor to the liberated Ukrainian territories."



US House passes bill on assault rifle ban

AFP, Washington

The US House of Representatives, spurred by a series of horrific mass shootings, passed a bill on Friday that would ban assault weapons for the first time in decades.

The legislation was approved by a 217 to 213 vote in the Democratic-majority House and now goes to the Senate — where it is likely doomed to fail.

Gun reform remains deeply divisive in the United States — despite the deadly scourge of mass shootings — with only two Republicans joining Democrats to back the assault weapons ban in the House.

In the 100-member Senate, Democrats have just 50 seats and 10 Republican votes are needed to bring a measure to the floor for consideration.

Congress passed a 10-year ban on assault rifles and certain high-capacity magazines in 1994 but lawmakers let it expire in 2004 and sales of the weapons have soared since then.

Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called the latest bill a "crucial step in our ongoing fight against the deadly epidemic of gun violence in our nation."

India to ground MiG-21 fighter jets by 2025

REUTERS, New Delhi

India will ground all its Soviet-era Russian fighter jets, the MiG-21, by 2025, following the death of two officers in a crash, the latest in a series of casualties involving the single-engine jet's failure, a newspaper reported yesterday. The Times of India quoted unnamed Indian Air Force officials as saying the MiG-21s have long past their retirement but must be replaced before being grounded. The report did not specify what portion of India's fighter-jet capability would be affected. The Wion news outlet said the air force has around 70 MiG-21s. The air force and defence ministry have been buying aircraft from Western makers in recent years. A senior defence ministry official declined to confirm or deny the Times of India report, telling Reuters only that discussions on the future of the MiG-21 were underway, as sourcing of spare parts from Russia was increasingly difficult due to the war in Ukraine.

Grenade attack on Kabul cricket stadium kills two

REUTERS, Kabul

Two people were killed in the grenade explosion that shook Kabul's main cricket stadium during a domestic league match on Friday, police said yesterday, updating their previous casualty toll. The blast occurred in the crowd as spectators watched a match between two teams from the local Shpageza cricket league, the Afghan Cricket Board said. "The blast happened due to a grenade, two have been killed and some of our countrymen injured," Kabul police spokesman Khalid Zadran said yesterday, adding that security forces were looking for those responsible for the attack. "The match stopped for a while. After clean-up of the area the match restarted," Zadran told Reuters. No one has claimed responsibility for Friday's attack.

Floods kill at least 53 in Iran

REUTERS

Rescuers searched for the missing in Iran on Friday after landslides and floods triggered by heavy rains killed at least 53 people, officials said.

Mehdi Valipour, head of emergency operations at the Red Crescent Society, told state TV that 16 people were still missing after two days of floods that have affected 400 towns and villages in 18 of Iran's 31 provinces. Many highways were closed.

Friday's worst hit area was Firouz Koo, in the foothills of Alborz Mountains northeast of the capital Tehran, where at least 10 people died, Tehran governor Mohsen Mansouri told state TV.

The town of Firouz Koo, about 140 km, from Tehran, is a favourite retreat for vacationers because of its cool summer temperatures. The area's lush trails are also popular with trekkers.



A house is seen almost completely submerged off of the Bert T Combs Mountain Parkway in Breathitt County, Kentucky, USA. At least 16 people have been killed and hundreds had to be rescued amid flooding from heavy rainfall. The photo was taken on Friday. PHOTO: AFP

'Indeed a genocide'

Pope laments treatment of Canada Indigenous people as he concludes tour

AFP, Aboard the Papal Plane

Pope Francis yesterday said the treatment of Indigenous people in Canada amounted to a genocide, after a six day trip where he apologised to survivors of abuse at Catholic-run schools.

"I didn't say the word (in Canada) because it didn't come to my mind, but I did describe the genocide. And I asked for forgiveness for this process which was genocide. I condemned it too," he told reporters onboard his plane returning to Rome.

"Taking away children, changing the culture, changing the mentality, changing the traditions, changing a race, let's put it that way, a whole culture."

"Yes, genocide is (a) technical word... But I have described what is, indeed, a genocide."

During his trip, the pope apologised for the "evil" inflicted on Indigenous communities at Canada's residential schools, where children were sent as part of a policy of forced assimilation.

He cited the "cultural destruction" and the "physical, verbal, psychological and spiritual abuse" of children over decades.

From the late 1800s to the 1990s, Canada's government sent about 150,000 children into 139 residential schools run by the Church, where they were cut off from their families, language and culture.

Many were physically and sexually abused, and thousands are believed to have died of disease, malnutrition or neglect.

