

NEW SETTLEMENTS Blinken warns against Israeli expansion

REUTERS, Washington

Secretary of State Antony Blinken pledged continued US commitment to both Israel's security and a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict yesterday, but warned the expansion of Jewish settlements would be an obstacle to peace.

In a speech to the pro-Israel lobby group AIPAC, Blinken also cautioned that moves toward annexation of the Israeli-occupied West Bank or that disrupt the status quo at holy sites would hurt the prospects for a two-state solution. He didn't name the specific holy sites he was referring to.

"Settlement expansion clearly presents an obstacle to the horizon of hope that we seek," Blinken said to muted response from the audience. The top US diplomat drew widespread applause when he outlined the longstanding American commitment to Israel.

SCHOOL POISONING Around 60 Afghan girls hospitalised

REUTERS, Kabul

Around 60 Afghan girls were hospitalised after being poisoned at their school in northern Afghanistan, police said yesterday.

The poisoning, which targeted a girls' school in the Afghan province of Sar-e Pol, comes after intense scrutiny of girls' education in the war-torn nation since the Taliban took over and barred most teenage female students and after a wave of poison attacks on girls' schools in neighbouring Iran.

"Some unknown people entered a girls' ... school in Sancharak District ... and poisoned the classes, when the girls come to classes they got poisoned," said Den Mohammad Nazari, Sar-e-Pol's police spokesperson, without elaborating on which substance was used or who was thought to be behind the incident.

Nazari said the girls had been taken to hospital but were in "good condition." No one had been arrested.

During Afghanistan's previous foreign-backed government, several poisoning attacks on girls' schools had taken place. The Taliban administration has prevented most female students from attending high school and university.

NUKE ARMS CONTROL

US statement is 'positive': Russia

REUTERS, Moscow

The Kremlin said yesterday that a statement by United States national security adviser Jake Sullivan calling for bilateral arms control discussions was "positive", and that Russia remained open for dialogue.

Sullivan said on Friday that the United States would abide by the nuclear weapons limits set in the New START treaty, the last remaining nuclear arms reduction pact between the two Cold War rivals, until its 2026 expiry if Russia did the same.

President Vladimir Putin suspended Moscow's participation in the treaty in February.

"This is an important and positive statement by Mr Sullivan. Of course, we expect it to be de facto confirmed by steps through diplomatic channels, and then the proposed formats for dialogue can be considered," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

Signed by then-US president Barack Obama and his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev in 2010, the New START treaty caps the number of strategic nuclear warheads that the United States and Russia can deploy.

It came into force in 2011 and was extended in 2021 for five more years after Joe Biden took office as US president.

Under the agreement, Moscow and Washington are committed to deploying no more than 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads and a maximum of 700 long-range missiles and bombers.

When operating as intended, the pact allows both US and Russian inspectors to ensure that the other side is complying with the treaty.



Activists dressed up as evil oil executives pour fake oil over a cardboard iceberg during a protest organised by Extinction Rebellion to call for a permanent ban on oil exploration in Antarctica as part of World Environment Day in Cape Town, South Africa yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

'Large-scale' Ukrainian offensive thwarted

Claims Moscow; Wagner chief says Russia lost ground near Bakhmut

REUTERS, Kyiv

Moscow said yesterday it had thwarted "a large-scale" Ukrainian offensive in the south of Ukraine's Donetsk region but Russia's main mercenary leader said Russian forces had lost ground around Bakhmut further north.

Asked whether the attacks represented the start of Ukraine's long-heralded counter-offensive against Russia's invasion, Oleksiy Danilov, Secretary of Ukraine's Security and Defence Council, told Reuters: "The war continues. Until complete victory."

Russia's defence ministry said Ukraine had attacked on Sunday morning with six mechanised and two tank battalions in southern Donetsk, where Moscow has long suspected Ukraine would seek to drive a wedge through Russian-controlled territory.

"On the morning of June 4, the enemy launched a large-scale offensive in five sectors of the front in the South Donetsk direction," the defence ministry said in a statement posted on Telegram at 1:30 am Moscow time (2230 GMT).

"The enemy's goal was to break through our defences in the most vulnerable, in its opinion, sector of the front," it said. "The enemy did not achieve its tasks, it had no success."

Asked to comment, a Ukrainian military spokesperson said: "We do not have such information and we do not comment on any kind of fake."

The commander of Ukraine's ground forces, Oleksandr Syrskyi, said yesterday that Ukrainian forces continued "moving forward" near the long-contested city of Bakhmut in northern Donetsk and an armed forces video showed Russian positions under fire.

Russian mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin said Ukrainian forces had retaken part of the settlement of Berkhivka, north of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine,

calling it a "disgrace".

Prigozhin's private Wagner army captured Bakhmut last month after the longest battle of the war and handed its positions there to regular Russian troops.

The daily report from Ukraine's General Staff said only that there were 29 combat clashes in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine.

Ukraine's Centre for Strategic Communications did not address Russian statement directly but said, without providing evidence, that Russia would seek to spread lies.

"To demoralize Ukrainians and mislead the community (including their own population), Russian propagandists will spread false information about the counter-offensive, its directions, and the losses of Ukrainian army," it said.

Ukrainian Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov published a cryptic message on Twitter on Sunday, quoting Depeche Mode's track "Enjoy the Silence".

Russian war bloggers reported fighting at several points across the front, particularly around Vuhledar, some 150 km (93 miles) southwest of Bakhmut.

Russia's defence ministry released video of what it said showed several Ukrainian armoured vehicles in a field blowing up after being hit. Reuters geo-located it to near Velyka Novosilka, a village west of Vuhledar but could not verify the date.

"There is a tough fight going on," wrote prominent Russian military blogger Semyon Pegov, who blogs under the name War Gonzo, saying Ukrainian forces were attacking in the area.

The ministry said Russian forces killed 250 Ukrainian troops as well as destroying 16 tanks, three infantry fighting vehicles and 21 armoured combat vehicles. Reuters was not able to verify the figures. Both sides have exaggerated casualties suffered by the other.



WASHINGTON DC 4 dead in plane crash that sparked alert

AFP, Washington

US officials said yesterday there were no survivors from the Virginia crash of a small plane carrying four people, a day after the unresponsive aircraft prompted the scrambling of fighter jets from Washington.

The Cessna Citation slammed into mountainous terrain Sunday afternoon some 170 miles (275 kilometers) southwest of the capital, according to the Federal Aviation Administration which was investigating the incident.

F-16s earlier chased the aircraft at high speed - triggering a sonic boom across Washington and its suburbs, startling residents and rattling windows and walls for miles.

Virginia State Police said in a statement sent to AFP that first responders reached the site near the town of Staunton by foot four hours after crash.

"No survivors were located" and the search efforts were suspended, state police said.

President Joe Biden, who was at the White House and also played golf Sunday, was briefed on the incident, an official said without specifying whether any emergency precautions were implemented.

The civilian plane had taken off from Elizabethton, Tennessee bound for Long Island MacArthur Airport in New York, the FAA said.

EU DISINFORMATION CODE Twitter 'chose confrontation'

AFP, Brussels

Twitter "chose confrontation" by exiting a voluntary EU disinformation code of practice that lays ground rules for an incoming European law on digital services, a European Union commissioner said yesterday. "We believe this is a mistake of Twitter. Twitter has chosen the hard way. They chose confrontation," commissioner Vera Jourova said. She said Twitter's compliance with the new Digital Services Act entering force on August 25 "will be scrutinised... vigorously and urgently". The European Commission announced May 27 Twitter had decided to leave the code of practice, to which other major online platforms such as Google, Microsoft and TikTok continue to adhere.

LEADERSHIP ROLE

Ardern receives NZ top honour

REUTERS, Sydney

Former prime minister Jacinda Ardern yesterday received one of New Zealand's top honours, recognising her efforts for leading the country

through the Covid-19 crisis, the terror attacks on two Christchurch mosques and the White Island volcanic eruption. Ardern was named "Dame Grand Companion," the second highest honour in New Zealand, on King Charles' birthday holiday celebrated by the country on June 5, and she made the coronation honours list for this year. The awardee is usually chosen in New Zealand by the prime minister and then approved by the British monarch, the head of state.



INDIA TRAIN CRASH

Trains resume service 48 hrs after disaster

OUR CORRESPONDENT,
New Delhi

A little over 48 hours after India's worst train disaster in three decades, the movement of trains resumed at the site of the incident after hundreds of workers toiled non-stop to clear the wreckage of the derailed bogies from the tracks.

The trains, including a high-speed one connecting Howrah with the popular temple town and sea resort Puri in Odisha, rumbled past the debris of carriages hit by Friday night's three-train crash near Balasore in Odisha where nearly 275 people were killed and nearly 1,200 injured.

Barely two hours after the restoration of the downline, the upline was also restored. Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw was seen folding his hands in prayer as he saw the first train cross the site of the disaster at around 10:40pm on Sunday.



This photo taken on Sunday and released yesterday, shows an under construction bridge collapsing into the river Ganges in Bhagalpur district in India's eastern state of Bihar. Eight men were on the bridge at the time of its collapse on Sunday, with one guard reported missing.

PHOTO: AFP