

SUDAN CONFLICT

14 civilians killed in battle for Khartoum police HQ

AFP, Khartoum

At least 14 civilians have been killed in war-torn Sudan's capital as rival forces are locked in a key battle over control of the Khartoum police headquarters, activists said yesterday.

The paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which since mid-April has been fighting Sudan's regular army, announced late Sunday a "victory in the battle for the police HQ".

"The headquarters is under out complete control... and we have seized a large number of vehicles, arms and munitions," the RSF said in a statement, noting the capture of pick-up trucks, armoured vehicles and tanks.

If the RSF, led by Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, maintain their hold on the strategic site, it "would have a major impact on the battle of Khartoum", a former army officer told AFP, requesting anonymity.

Nearly 2,800 people have been killed across Sudan since a power struggle between army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his former deputy Daglo spilled into war more than two months ago, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.



The actual death toll is expected to be much higher, with both forces failing to report casualties and many bodies left lying in the streets of Khartoum and in the western region of Darfur, where most of the violence has occurred.

The Khartoum police headquarters, on the southern edge of the city, gives the RSF "control of the southern entrance to the capital", the former officer said.

The presence of the paramilitaries there can also pose "a serious threat to the armoured corps headquarters" nearby, one of the army's most important strongholds in south Khartoum.

While army forces loyal to Burhan vow to recapture the police headquarters, video footage released by the RSF shows the paramilitaries have already seized vast amounts of arms and munitions.

An army source said RSF has lost "more than 400 men" in the battle for police headquarters. The paramilitaries have not provided any casualty figures. On Sunday, "14 civilians including two children were killed" in that area, according to a network of activists evacuating the wounded to the few hospitals still operating.



People attend a mass rally denouncing the US in Pyongyang, North Korea on Sunday in this photo released by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) yesterday. North Korea held mass rallies in Pyongyang where people shouted slogans vowing a "war of revenge" to destroy the US, as it marked the 73rd anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, state media reported yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

TREATMENT OF MUSLIMS

Indian finance minister scoffs at Obama comment

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's finance minister has derided comments by former US President Barack Obama that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government should protect the rights of minority Muslims, accusing Obama of being hypocritical.

During Modi's state visit to the US last week, Obama told CNN that the issue of the "protection of the Muslim minority in a majority-Hindu India" would be worth raising in Modi's meeting with US President Joe Biden.

Obama said that without such protection there was "a strong possibility that India at some point starts pulling apart".

Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said she was shocked that Obama has made such remarks when Modi was visiting the United States aiming to deepen relations.

"He was commenting on Indian Muslims ... having bombed Muslim-majority countries from Syria to Yemen ... during his presidency," Sitharaman told a press conference on Sunday.

"Why would anyone listen to any allegations from such people?"

The US State Department has raised concerns over treatment of Muslims and other religious minorities in India under Modi's party. The Indian government says it treats all citizens equally. Biden said he discussed human rights and other democratic values with Modi during their talks in the White House.

Working as normal despite mutiny

Says Wagner HQ; Lavrov says Russia is checking if Western spy agencies were involved in mutiny

AGENCIES

The headquarters of Russia's Wagner mercenary group, whose leader Yevgeny Prigozhin led a mutiny over the weekend that rattled President Vladimir Putin's rule, said yesterday it was working in "normal mode."

The statement from the office came as the fate of Wagner was uncertain after the rebellion and as Russia appeared to take a business-as-usual approach.

"Despite events that have taken place, the centre continues to work in normal mode in accordance to the law of the Russian Federation," the office, based in Russia's second city of Saint Petersburg, said.

It said Wagner has "worked for the future of Russia" and thanked its supporters, reports AFP.

Wagner's chief Prigozhin has not been seen since Saturday, but the Kremlin said he will be sent to neighbouring Belarus after a Minsk-brokered deal to halt his rebellion.

Russia's intelligence services are investigating whether Western spy agencies played a role in the aborted mutiny by armed Wagner mercenary fighters on Saturday, the TASS news agency quoted Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as saying yesterday.



The group will continue operations in Mali and the Central African Republic, Lavrov said.

Wagner members "are working there as instructors. This work, of course, will continue," Lavrov said in an interview with RT, adding that the revolt would not affect Russia's ties with "partners and friends".

Lavrov said Europe and France in particular had "a b a n d o n e d" the two African countries, which had in turn asked Russia and Wagner to provide military instructors and "to ensure the security of their leaders".

Western powers believe the Wagner group is used to promote Russia's influence abroad and have accused the group of torture and exploiting natural resources.

Wagner, whose very existence Moscow denied until its Ukraine offensive, said it had "created opportunities for the (self) realisation of talented people from all over the country".

It said that on top of developing "domestic drones", it had also worked on "preparing information fighters and countering the information war".

Prigozhin is known to have led an infamous troll farm in Saint Petersburg.

Despite Putin calling the Wagner mutiny "treason" and warning of civil war,

some of the group's offices around Russia were still recruiting fighters, Russian media reported.

The TASS state news agency said Wagner recruitment reopened in Siberia's Novosibirsk and Tyumen.

"Recruitment is ongoing," TASS quoted a Wagner worker in Novosibirsk as saying.

In the Duma -- Russia's lower house of parliament -- however, lawmakers said the group could no longer recruit convicts.

Prigozhin had recruited thousands of Russian prisoners to fight in Ukraine, promising an amnesty upon their return if they survive.

"There was a time when (Wagner) could take those who were convicted and sign a contract with them," senior lawmaker Pavel Krashenninikov said, according to the Interfax news agency.

"Now the law says there is a different procedure, under which contracts can only be signed with the defence ministry," Mikhail Mishustin, who leads Putin's cabinet as his appointed prime minister, acknowledged yesterday that Russia had faced "a challenge to its stability", and called for public loyalty, reports Reuters.

"We need to act together, as one team, and maintain the unity of all forces, rallying around the president," he told a televised government meeting.

Russia's national Anti-Terrorism Committee said the situation in the country was stable. Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, who had told residents to stay indoors on Saturday as the mutinous fighters raced to within a few hundred kilometres of the capital, said he was cancelling a counter-terrorism security regime.

Chained Indians rescued from debt slavery: rights body

AFP, NEW DELHI

About a dozen shackled workers in India were rescued from "torture" in a chain gang digging wells for 12 hours a day without wages, a government rights body said yesterday. The case has shone new light on the long-outlawed practice of bonded labour, dubbed "debt slavery" by rights campaigners, in which debtors are forced to work to pay back borrowed cash. The reports of the 11 labourers from Maharashtra state emerged after one slipped his chains, told Maharashtra police about the use of "torture" and brought them to free the others on June 17, the NHRC said.

Montreal has worst air of any major city

AFP, Montreal

Forest fires in Canada left Montreal blanketed with smog on Sunday, giving it the worst air quality of any major city in the world, according to a pollution monitor. Quebec province's most populous city had 'unhealthy' air quality according to IQAir, as hundreds of wildfires burned across the country. Environment Canada issued smog warnings in several Quebec regions due to the fires, saying, "high concentrations of fine particulate matter are causing poor air quality and reduced visibilities," with conditions to persist until yesterday morning.

Russian air strikes kill 13 in Syria

AFP, Jisr Al Shughur

Russian air strikes killed at least 13 people in rebel-held northwest Syria on Sunday, the deadliest attack on the country this year, a war monitor said. At least nine civilians, including two children, were among the dead, with most killed at a fruit and vegetable market in Jisr al Shugur in the Idlib region. "These Russian strikes are the deadliest in Syria this year and amount to a massacre," said Rami Abdel Rahman, who heads the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Russian forces which back President Bashar al-Assad's regime were responding to rebel drone strikes over the past week that killed four civilians including two children, according to the Observatory. Saad Fato, 35, a labourer told AFP he helped efforts to try to rescue the wounded.

Energy sector CO2 emissions hit record in 2022

AFP, London

Global energy sector carbon dioxide emissions hit a record peak last year counter to Paris commitments, a key study warned yesterday, and highlighted the "worst ever" impacts of climate change. UK-based Energy Institute laid out the main findings of its Statistical Review of World Energy, conducted with consultancies Kearney and KPMG. "Carbon dioxide emissions from energy use, industrial processes, flaring and methane... continued to rise to a new high growing 0.8 percent in 2022," read the study.



Students look at a pile of seized illegal drugs during a destruction ceremony to mark the "International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking" in Yangon, Myanmar yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Synthetic drugs boom fuels illicit markets: UN

AFP, Vienna

The cheap, easy, and fast production of synthetic drugs has radically transformed illicit drug markets around the world, with "lethal results", the United Nations warned Sunday.

While more people are battling drug addiction, criminals continue to exploit conflicts and global crises to expand drug production, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said in its annual report.

"Fentanyl has drastically altered the opioid market in North America," the UNODC said in a statement accompanying the report.

In 2021 alone, the majority of about 90,000 opioid related overdose deaths in North America involved the synthetic opioid drug.

Moreover, "there are signs" that the war in Ukraine "could trigger an expansion of the manufacture and trafficking of synthetic drugs, given the existing know-how and the large markets... developing in the region", it said.