

G20 SUMMIT

Putin has no plans to attend meet in person

REUTERS, Moscow

The Kremlin said yesterday that Russian President Vladimir Putin had no plans to attend the G20 summit in India in September in person.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued an arrest warrant for Putin accusing him of war crimes in Ukraine, something the Kremlin strongly denies. This means he risks arrest when travelling abroad.

This week he attended a gathering of leaders from the BRICS group of emerging economies in South Africa by video link.

Meanwhile, India hopes to convince members of the G20 grouping of nations to find amicable solutions to geopolitical issues, its G20 summit negotiator Amitabh Kant said yesterday.



Syrian artists paint a mural on the wall of a house previously destroyed in an airstrike in Binnish in the rebel-held northwestern province of Idlib, showing an image of late Wagenr leader Yevgeny Prigozhin and denouncing Russia's military actions in their country as well as in Ukraine yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar plans to curb rice exports

Aims to control domestic prices

REUTERS

Myanmar is planning to temporarily restrict rice exports to control rising domestic prices, an official of its rice industry body said yesterday, joining India, the world's biggest shipper of the staple amid tightening world supplies.

"We will temporarily limit rice exports for about 45 days from the end of this month," a senior member of the Myanmar Rice Federation told Reuters, adding that rising domestic prices was prompting authorities to limit exports.

Myanmar is the world's fifth-largest rice exporter, selling more than 2 million tonnes a year, according to US Department of Agriculture data.

Last month, India banned exports of non-basmati white rice, reducing supplies on the global market by about 10 tonnes, or 20 percent.

"Myanmar is not a big player in the rice market like India or Thailand but the restrictions are coming at a time when supplies are tightening," said a Mumbai-based dealer with a global trade house.

"This will send a bullish signal to the market and increase the concerns of buyers," the dealer added.

BRICS expansion could hinder bloc's geopolitical aspirations

Analysts say admitting more members will make agreement more difficult

REUTERS, Johannesburg

When a British economist coined the BRIC acronym two decades ago to denote Brazil, Russia, India and China, he didn't have in mind an alliance that would seek to challenge Western dominance in global affairs.

Jim O'Neill, then a Goldman Sachs banker, was writing about investment opportunities in nations set to become among the world's top emerging markets.

The BRIC countries started meeting formally in 2014 to improve economic cooperation, and added South Africa in 2010 to become BRICS. The bloc now seems to have loftier geopolitical ambitions.

In a surprise decision at a summit this week in Johannesburg the group invited Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, Argentina and the United Arab Emirates into the club.

The move is aimed at increasing BRICS' clout as a champion of so-called Global South nations, many of which feel unfairly treated by international institutions dominated by the United States and other wealthy Western nations.

But expansion will likely mean more disagreements in a club that already struggles to make decisions because of the need for consensus. Even a joint declaration

on expansion got stuck in eleventh-hour negotiations on Wednesday over the criteria for admitting new members.

"It's definitely going to be a problem if they are going to do everything by consensus. You need to change the model ... to majority vote," said Patrick Lukusa, a specialist in international cooperation at Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand.



"There are already differences between the five on the common currency. What happens if you have 10 more?"

Pledges by BRICS leaders to defend non-Western countries' interests are part of a gradual shift in emphasis by the group from economics to geopolitics.

"Make no mistake: this is not just about trade. This is about the fragmentation and political polarisation we are seeing in the

world," said Daniel Silke, director of the South Africa-based Political Futures consultancy, noting that China had cited threats of a new Cold War with Washington as a reason to expand.

Yet BRICS nations have a long way to go to transform themselves into a unified global organisation that can effectively challenge Western domination of international bodies such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank.

Its heavyweight members, China and India, are often at odds: New Delhi is more friendly to the West and has military deals with the United States, while it is in sometimes violent conflict with Beijing over their Himalayan border.

For Russian President Vladimir Putin the bloc is a forum to jab at the West that has sought to isolate Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine. In a videolink address on Thursday, he took aim at Western powers whose "neo-liberalism" he said threatened the emergence of a multi-polar world.

His remarks appeared to contradict Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who said in a social media broadcast while at the summit on Tuesday that BRICS was not meant "to be a counterpoint to the G7, G20 or the United States."

'Absolute lie' Kremlin rejects Prigozhin killed on its orders

AFP, Moscow

The Kremlin yesterday rejected rumours it had ordered the death of Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin, presumed to have died in a plane crash two months after leading a mutiny in Russia.

Speculation the Kremlin may have been involved has swirled since Wednesday, when a private jet reportedly carrying Prigozhin crashed between Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

The rumours have been voiced by Western countries, Kremlin critics and even suggested by some pro-Kremlin figures.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the incident as "tragic" to reporters yesterday and acknowledged public discourse around foul play and possible involvement of the authorities.

"Of course, in the West, this speculation is being presented from a certain angle. All of this is an absolute lie," Peskov said, urging patience and adding that ongoing probes would reveal facts around the fatal crash.

Russian officials have opened an investigation into air traffic violations but have so far not disclosed details of the probe or the incident.

Ukraine fires missile towards Moscow

Sends 42 drones to Crimea; Russian air defences destroyed all

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia said yesterday Ukraine had fired a missile towards Moscow and attacked Crimea with 42 drones, in what would be one of the biggest known coordinated Ukrainian air attacks to date on Russian-held territory.

The Russian defence ministry said a modified S-200 missile had been shot down over the Kaluga region, which borders the Moscow region. The city of Kaluga is less than 200 km (124 miles) from Moscow.

"The missile was detected and destroyed by air defences over the territory of the Kaluga region," the defence ministry said. There were no casualties, said Kaluga governor Vladislav Shapsha.

Ukraine did not immediately comment on the reports, and almost never publicly claims responsibility for attacks inside Russia or on Russian-controlled territory in Ukraine.

The Russian defence ministry also said Crimea, which Russia seized and annexed in 2014, was attacked. Nine drones were destroyed by air defence forces while 33 were suppressed by electronic warfare and crashed over Crimea without reaching their targets, it said.

Mikhail Razvozhayev, the Moscow-installed governor of the port city of Sevastopol in Crimea, said on the Telegram messaging app that a number of drones had been destroyed on Sevastopol's outskirts.

There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage from the attacks.

Respect press freedom

African media urges Niger

AFP, Abidjan

Dozens of African media figures yesterday called on the new military regime in Niger to respect press freedoms after a series of incidents. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) organised the appeal of some 80 people, including media owners in francophone Africa. "We ask the junta to respect the right to information, to pluralism and media independence," said the statement. It urged the regime to "contribute towards the safety of local and international journalists". The appeal cites several incidents since the July 26 coup which saw foreign and Nigerian reporters targeted at demonstrations or face intimidation and threats.

AI risks repeating mistakes: Microsoft

AFP, New Delhi



Breakneck development of artificial intelligence risked repeating mistakes made by the tech industry at the start of the social media era, Microsoft president Brad Smith told a business forum yesterday. Rapid advancements in AI have stoked global alarm over the technology's potential for disinformation, misuse and upheaval of the labour market. But Smith suggested these misgivings were not reflected by the developers of the potentially revolutionary technology, whose optimism reminded him of the early years of social media platforms. Back then, the tech industry "became a little too euphoric about all the good things that social media would bring to the world -- and there have been many -- without thinking about the risks as well," he said. "We need to be clear-eyed... And we need to construct the guardrails from the outset," he added.

INDIA'S HIMALAYAS

Global warming link to intense rains: scientists

REUTERS, New Delhi

Torrential rains that have battered India's Himalayas in recent years, killing hundreds of people and causing billions of dollars worth of damage, are becoming more intense due to a clash of weather systems triggered by global warming, scientists said.

At least 240 people have died this year in the mountainous region as landslides and flash floods triggered by heavy rains buried homes and destroyed crops and infrastructure.

Seasonal monsoon showers are vital for India's \$3 trillion economy, bringing nearly 70 percent of the rain the country needs to water farms and refill reservoirs and aquifers. But the monsoon's convergence with a low-pressure weather system in the Himalayas in recent years has caused extremely heavy rains, something that scientists blamed on rising temperatures.

"Think of it as a collision of two forceful systems," said Kuldeep Srivastava, head of the India Meteorological Department's regional centre in New Delhi.

"It causes significant rain, or even cloudbursts ... we are noticing in the last few years, intense spells of rain lasting short durations," he said, adding that this was due climate change driven by global increase in temperatures.

The number of very heavy to extremely heavy rainfall days per decade in Himalayan states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand increased to 118 between 2011 and 2020 from 74 in the preceding decade.



An aerial photograph taken on Thursday above Gletsch, in the Swiss Alps shows insulating foam covering a part of the Rhone Glacier to prevent it from melting next to a glacial lake due to the ice melting. A leading Swiss glaciologist warned on August 16, 2023 that 2023 was looking "not good" for the country's glaciers, a year after they suffered a record melt.

PHOTO: AFP

ILLEGAL CONTENT

EU brings down the hammer on big tech

AFP, Brussels

The world's major tech titans must crack down on illegal content and keep European users safe online from yesterday, when far-reaching EU rules force digital firms to fall into line.

The landmark Digital Services Act (DSA) compels tech companies to better police content to protect European users against disinformation and hate speech.

And it also demands the firms are more transparent about their services, algorithms and how ads are targeted.

The first phase of the regulation came into force on Friday, affecting 19 "very large" digital platforms including social media networks, websites and online retailers with at least 45 million monthly active users in the European Union.