

Russia moves Navalny to a prison in the Arctic

REUTERS, Moscow

Jailed Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny has been moved to a penal colony in an Arctic region of northern Russia, his spokeswoman said yesterday after supporters lost touch with him for more than two weeks.

Navalny was tracked down to the IK-3 penal colony in Kharp in the Yamal-Nenets region, about 1,900 km (1200 miles) north east of Moscow, spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh said.

Navalny's lawyer managed to see him yesterday, Yarmysh said.

Navalny's allies, who had been preparing for his expected transfer to a "special regime" colony, the harshest grade in Russia's prison system, said he has not been seen by his lawyers since December 6 and raised the alarm about his fate.

Thousands affected as floods hit Thai south



AFP, Bangkok

Floods caused by intense rainfall have affected tens of thousands of people in Thailand's deep south, officials said yesterday, with some roads and railway lines forced to close.

At least a dozen schools in the provinces of Yala and Narathiwat have been forced to close, while footage from the region showed homes and shops inundated with murky brown waters and residents taking refuge on upper floors.

The heavy rains have also caused problems at sea, with at least seven boats sunk in the Gulf of Thailand and Andaman Sea since Friday.

The kingdom's state railway company said track subsidence meant that trains heading south to Malaysian border were stopping at Yala.

Authorities have warned residents in the provinces to be ready to evacuate if the floods get worse.

Chaiwat Junthirapong, director-general of the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, said provincial offices were working with local administrations to drain water from flooded areas and survey the overall damage so assistance and compensation can be given.

The Thai Meteorological Department previously predicted that the northeast monsoon would affect the Gulf of Thailand and the southern region with strong winds.

On December 24-25, a low-pressure system strengthened along the Malaysian coast, moved through the southern region of Thailand, and made landfall in the Andaman Sea, causing heavy and very heavy rain in some areas in the southern downstream region.

The department has advised people in those areas to take precautions against sudden flash floods and landslides, especially in mountainous areas near waterways.

In the Gulf of Thailand, waves with a height of 2 to 4 meters are forecast. Vessels operating in the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea, especially in stormy areas, are advised to exercise caution.



Migrants walk as they leave Tapachula in a caravan to attempt to reach the US border, in the state of Chiapas, Mexico on Sunday. A sprawling caravan of migrants from central and southern America has set off through Mexico heading north towards the United States border.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Ukraine downs 28 out of 31 Russian drones

Technical facilities in Odesa port damaged

REUTERS, Kyiv

Russia launched 31 drones and 2 missiles at Ukraine overnight, mostly targeting the south of the country, with air defences destroying 28 drones and both missiles, the Ukrainian military said yesterday.

"As a result of air combat, the Ukrainian Air Force and defence forces destroyed 28 Shahed attack drones in Odesa, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Donetsk, Kirovohrad and Khmelnytskyi regions," Ukraine's Air Forces said on the Telegram messaging app.

The drones were launched from Russian-occupied Crimea, it said.

The military said debris from the downed drones damaged technical facilities in the Odesa port as well as "an inoperable administrative building and a warehouse".

In Kherson region, a fire broke out in a warehouse, the military said. "No people were injured," the military added.

The military also repeated previously issued information that two Russian military aircraft were downed near the Russian-occupied city of Mariupol on the Sea of Azov in southern Ukraine and near occupied Donetsk city in eastern Ukraine.

On Sunday, Russian and Ukrainian military officials both reported downing enemy aircraft in different areas of the 1,000-km-long (621-mile) front of their 22-month-old war.

Meanwhile, a top Russian minister said yesterday Russia has the upper hand in weapons production over the West and intends to keep the rate of growth high, after both the West and Russia ramped up arms production for the Ukraine war.

"I don't want to boast, but I can say that we began to gain and picked up the pace of production earlier than Western countries," Denis Manturov, the deputy

prime minister who oversees arms production, told the RIA news agency.

"Another question is how long this race will last," Manturov said, adding that a 2025-2034 armament plan was due to be approved next year.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, have said that production of artillery, drones, tanks and armoured vehicles is soaring.

Some former leaders of the West have spoken about a new Cold War between Russia and China on one side and the United States and its allies on the other, though Russia's \$2 trillion economy would find it hard to counter the entire might of the West alone for long.

According to IMF data, the United States' nominal gross domestic product was \$27 trillion this year while China's was \$17.7 trillion.

In a separate development, Ukraine received \$1.34 billion under the World Bank's public expenditures for administrative capacity endurance in Ukraine, the Ukrainian finance ministry said yesterday.

The ministry said in a statement the financing consisted of a \$1.086 billion loan from the World Bank, \$190 million grant from Norway, \$50 million grant from the United States and \$20 million grant from Switzerland.

The ministry said the funds would be used to partially compensate for non-security and defence-related expenditures of the Ukrainian state budget, including old-age social payments and payments to employees of the state emergency service.

"International financial assistance is a significant contribution to maintaining Ukraine's financial and economic stability and allows us to provide priority social expenditures during the war," Ukraine's finance minister Serhiy Marchenko said.



Six killed in Turkish strikes on Syria

AFP, Beirut

Turkish air strikes killed six civilians in Syria's Kurdish-held northeast yesterday, a war monitor and local media said, as Ankara launched operations in Iraq and Syria following deadly attacks on its soldiers.

On Saturday, Turkey announced a new wave of air strikes in retaliation for two separate attacks on its bases in northern Iraq that killed 12 soldiers, which Ankara blamed on Kurdish militants.

"Six civilians have been killed in separate Turkish air strikes," said Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The head of the Britain-based monitor, which has a network of sources inside Syria, said four of the victims were employees of a printing press in the northern city of Qamishli, near the Turkish border.

"A strike on a mill near Qamishli killed a civilian while another was killed in a gas storage facility," he added.

The strikes hit about a dozen targets, all of them facilities run by the semi-autonomous Kurdish administration, the monitor and AFP correspondents in the region said.

SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW

Philippine actions 'extremely dangerous': China

REUTERS, Beijing

Chinese state media yesterday accused the Philippines of repeatedly infringing on China's territory in the South China Sea, spreading false information and colluding with extraterritorial forces to cause trouble.

The Philippines has relied on US support to continually provoke China, with such "extremely dangerous" behaviour seriously harming regional peace and stability, China's Communist Party mouthpiece, the People's Daily, wrote in a commentary yesterday.

The Philippines foreign ministry and a national task force handling the South China Sea did not immediately respond on Christmas Day to requests for comment on the report.

Tensions between Beijing and Manila have heightened in recent months as both sides trade accusations over a spate of run-ins in the South China Sea, including charges that China rammed a ship this month carrying the Philippine armed forces chief of staff.

China claims most of the South China Sea, parts of which are also claimed by the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan, Vietnam and Indonesia. An international tribunal in 2016 invalidated China's claim in a ruling on a case brought by the Philippines, which Beijing rejects.

In an unusually direct warning, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said last week any miscalculation in the dispute with the Philippines would bring a resolute response from China, and called for dialogue to address "serious difficulties".

Afghans marry in mass ceremony in bid to cut costs

AFP, Kabul

Fifty couples married yesterday in a joint ceremony in the Afghan capital -- a growing practice to reduce the astronomical cost of traditional weddings in the impoverished country. The couples were joined in matrimony in one of the dozens of glitzy wedding halls that punctuate Kabul, but the ceremony itself

was somewhat austere. Since the return of the Taliban in August 2021 weddings have become low-key affairs, with dancing and music effectively banned after authorities deemed such activities un-Islamic. In front of

the City Star wedding hall near the airport, around a hundred turbaned men dressed in traditional shalwar kameez chatted in groups -- not a single woman present. They decorated cars with green ribbons and red plastic roses forming hearts to carry the newlyweds away. Roohullah Rezayi, 18, due to leave with his wife in a few hours, told AFP he could not afford a solo wedding. "A traditional wedding would have cost us at least 200,000 to 250,000 Afghanis (\$2,800 to \$3,600), but this time it will be between 10,000 and 15,000 Afghanis," he said. The young man, a member of the Hazara Shia minority and from Ghor province, earns barely 350 Afghanis per day doing odd jobs. "We invited 35 people from our two families, otherwise it would have been 300 to 400," said the groom, a plastic flower in the breast pocket of his waistcoat worn over a white tunic. Donations to each couple from the Selab Foundation, who organised the event, are equivalent to \$1,600 -- a huge amount in one of the poorest countries in the world. They will also leave with a cake, a kit containing toothpaste, shampoo and moisturiser, and a carpet, blanket and a few household appliances to start married life. Hundreds of male guests wrapped in traditional patu shawls attended the ceremony in a large, chilly hall, festooned with garlands.



HUMAN TRAFFICKING LINKS

Indian passenger plane held in France takes off

AFP, Vatry

A plane with close to 300 Indian passengers detained near Paris over suspicions of human trafficking took off yesterday after being cleared for departure by French police, an AFP reporter said.

The Airbus A340 carrying 303 Indians had been bound for Nicaragua when it was detained last Thursday at Vatry airport, east of Paris, where it had stopped for refuelling.

It had arrived from Dubai and there was an anonymous tip-off that it was carrying potential victims of human trafficking.

Of the original passenger list, 276 were on the plane that took off just before 3:00 pm (1400 GMT).

Among the passengers staying behind were two people questioned by French police over suspected people trafficking, but a judicial source said they had now been released. The others have sought asylum in France.

After questioning the passengers for two days, French prosecutors on Sunday gave the go-ahead for the plane to leave.

A source close to the inquiry told AFP that the Indians were likely workers in the United Arab Emirates who had been bound for Nicaragua as a jumping off spot for the United States or Canada.

Legend Airlines has said it believes it has done nothing wrong and is ready to help the authorities with the investigation. It will also "seek damages from (the) client" who chartered its plane.



Security personnel stand guard as Christian devotees leave after attending a Christmas mass at St Joseph's Cathedral church in Rawalpindi, Pakistan yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP