

OSCE gives warning of war but no solutions in stand-off with Russia

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DPA
VIENNA

DIPLOMATS warned of a possible military escalation between European nations and Russia on Thursday, but offered no solutions in the face of searing tensions.

They were speaking at a meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna, against the backdrop of a major build-up of Russian troops near the border with Ukraine.

"It seems that the risk of war in the OSCE area is now greater than ever in the last 30 years," said OSCE chairperson Zbigniew Rau, who is also the foreign minister of Poland.

Addressing representatives of the 57 OSCE member states, including Russia and the United States, he advocated using the organization to reduce regional tensions with the help of dialogue.

"Some of the participating states believe that it is enough to make a speech instead of debating," he said at a press conference following the meeting.

He did not answer questions about his concrete plans for facilitating dialogue within the OSCE framework.

The meeting followed crisis talks between the US and Russia in Geneva on Monday and a rare meeting between NATO and Russia in Brussels on Wednesday.

From NATO's perspective, the large number of Russian troops massed on the border poses a security threat to Ukraine. Moscow, in turn, sees itself threatened by NATO expansion and demands pledges



Zbigniew Rau, Polish Foreign Minister and Chairperson-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, in Vienna on Thursday. (AFP)

that countries such as Ukraine and Georgia will not be granted membership in the future.

The OSCE is the only regional security forum where the US and Russia regularly sit at the same table. OSCE observers are also monitoring the situation in eastern Ukraine, which is partly controlled by pro-Russian separatists with Moscow's support.

Ahead of the talks in Vienna, Washington's delegate to the OSCE, Michael Carpenter, outlined the issues his side wanted to discuss.

These included the exchange of information between armed forces and confidence-building measures to



Dialogue

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However, no regional spheres of influence should be demarcated in the process

and the right of states to freely choose their alliances must not be curtailed, Carpenter stressed.

Russia's permanent representative to the OSCE, Alexander Lukashevich, said his country wanted an early decision on the security guarantees Moscow has recently demanded from NATO.

Delaying negotiations on Russian demands that NATO's eastward expansion end could lead to an "inevitable deterioration of the security situation of all states without exception," Lukashevich told the other OSCE delegates.

"Russia is a peace-loving country. But we don't need

peace at any price," Lukashevich added.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov views the talks with the West so far as unsuccessful, according to the Interfax agency.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told the RTVi broadcaster that without a concession from the US side on the issues central to Russia, he saw no basis for further talks in the coming days.

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov gave his assessment of the progress so far: "As expected." Amid the flurry of diplomatic activity, US Democrats introduced a bill that would impose extensive sanctions on the Russian banking sector and Russian leaders in the event of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Under the proposal, put forward by US Senator Bob Menendez and 26 of his colleagues, President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, Foreign Minister Lavrov and senior members of the Russian military would be banned from entering the US and their assets there would be frozen.

The draft, dubbed the "Defending Ukraine Sovereignty Act," has not yet been debated in the Senate.

Moscow nevertheless reacted indignantly. "The timing of this statement is an attempt to put pressure on Moscow," Peskov said. If the punitive measures were to be imposed, it could lead to a breakdown in relations, he warned.

Lavrov described the move as "a kind of nervous breakdown."

Queen strips Prince Andrew of honorary military roles

DPA
LONDON

BRITAIN'S Queen Elizabeth has agreed to strip the Prince Andrew, the Duke of York, of his honorary military roles and royal patronages, Buckingham Palace has announced.

The move is a major blow to Andrew who is facing a looming civil sexual assault court showdown after a judge ruled on Wednesday that the case could go ahead.

The Palace said in a statement: "With the Queen's approval and agreement, the Duke of York's military affiliations and royal patronages have been returned to the Queen."

"The Duke of York will continue not to undertake any public duties and is defending this case as a private citizen." It comes after more than 150 veterans joined forces to express their outrage, writing to the Queen to demand Andrew was removed from the honorary military positions.

Accusing the duke of bringing the services he is associated with into disrepute, the 152 former members of the Royal Navy, RAF and Army said that "were this any other senior military officer it is inconceivable



Prince Andrew (AFP)

able that he would still be in post." The Queen is head of the armed forces, and honorary military appointments are in her gift.

The Palace said previously that the duke's military appointments were in abeyance after he stepped down from public duties in 2019.

But until now he still retained the roles, which left the eight British regiments, including the Grenadier Guards of which he was Colonel, in limbo more than two years on.

Virginia Giuffre is suing the duke in the US for allegedly sexually assaulting her when she was a teenager.

She claims she was trafficked by Epstein to have sex with Andrew when she was aged 17 and a minor under US law.

The duke has strenuously denied the allegations.

News in brief

Hundreds of schools evacuated in Russia due to wave of bomb threats

MOSCOW: Russian schools received a barrage of anonymous bomb threats on Thursday, with more than 100 schools evacuated in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk alone, the Echo of Moscow radio station reported.

In other cities, such as Samara and Stavropol, classes were temporarily suspended after receiving bomb threats via email. Hundreds of schools were affected across the country. According to the report, nothing suspicious was found during inspections. Russia has had to deploy police in response to such threats repeatedly over the years. Schools, courthouses and shopping centres are often targeted.

Authorities do not know what the motive might be in this most recent case. (DPA)

Germany hopes faster vaccine drive will lessen record Omicron wave

BERLIN: The vaccination rate appears to be picking up in Germany, as the government tries to meet its target of having 80 per cent of the population double-vaccinated by the end of the month.

Some 780,000 doses of coronavirus vaccines were administered on Wednesday, 66,000 more than on Tuesday and considerably more than the average of 593,000 per day in the past week. Many of these were for booster shots, which have been received by 37.5 million people, or 45.1 per cent of the population. The government is particularly trying to reach those who have not been vaccinated yet, with a debate raging in parliament and among the public about a planned national vaccine mandate. (DPA)

Russian-led forces begin departure as stability returns to Kazakhstan

DPA
MOSCOW

THE withdrawal of Russian-led forces from Kazakhstan began on Thursday, a week after several former Soviet states deployed troops to quell anti-government unrest that rocked the Central Asian nation.

The Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) handed "socially important objects" back to the Kazakh authorities, according to the Defence Ministry in Moscow.

The peacekeepers were deployed following a request from the Kazakh government for outside help with restoring order in Kazakhstan's biggest city, Al-



Foreign soldiers attend a ceremony marking the end of the mission in Almaty, on Thursday. (AFP)

maty, as well as in other regions where demonstrations and riots broke out last week.

Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev called the first CSTO deployment of this kind a success and thanked his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin for the quick intervention.

The redeployment of soldiers from Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is expected to last 10 days. According to the Russian Defence Ministry, it is being carried out in close coordination with the Kazakh side. Preparations are also under way to

move military equipment and other special assets back to their locations, it said.

According to the ministry, Russia also evacuated some 2,000 civilians from Kazakhstan in the past few days, including foreign nationals and its own citizens. Oil- and gas-rich Kazakhstan, which has long been considered a model of stability in Central Asia, saw peaceful protests at the doubling of fuel prices spiral into violent anti-government insurrection last week. Tokayev shortly afterwards issued an order to shoot the protesters, whom he called "terrorist gangs," resulting in more than 100 deaths, hundreds of injuries and more than 10,000 arrests.

Iran, Venezuela lose voting rights at UN General Assembly

DPA
NEW YORK

IRAN and Venezuela have temporarily lost their voting rights at the UN General Assembly because of payment arrears.

In a letter published Wednesday, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said the minimum payment required from Iran to restore voting rights was 18.4 million dollars, while for Venezuela it was 39.8 million dollars.

Sudan and Congo are among the other nations who lost voting rights. Under UN rules, the right to vote is withdrawn from states whose debts to the body are equal to or higher than the amount of their membership fees for the past two years.

Nigeria to lift Twitter ban after more than half a year

DPA
LAGOS

TWITTER is to become accessible again in Nigeria after the government said on Wednesday it would lift a ban on the microblogging website in

place for seven months. After talks with the US company, it was agreed that Twitter would open an office in Nigeria, a government official said, without disclosing further details. President Muhammadu Buhari had given

instructions on June 5 to shut down the service in the country of around 200 million people.

Previously, Twitter had deleted a controversial message from the president about the Nigerian civil war and suspended the head of state's ac-

count for 12 hours.

The government did not give a specific reason for the suspension at the time. However, it did state that the platform was repeatedly used for activities that could undermine Nigeria's existence.

1960s music icon Ronnie Spector dies at 78

DPA
LOS ANGELES

RONNIE Spector, whose towering voice propelled indelible early 1960s hit records including "Be My Baby," "Baby, I Love You" and "Walking in the Rain," died Wednesday after a brief battle with cancer. She was 78.

Spector, born Veronica Bennett, teamed with her older sister Estelle and their cousin Nedra Talley to form the Ronettes in 1957. They went on to become one of the most enduring trios of the so-called



Ronnie Spector

girl-group era, and long after the group, and her marriage to record producer Phil Spector, disbanded, she was hailed as a symbol of artistic and personal resiliency.

"She was with family and in the arms of her husband, Jonathan," her family said in

a statement. "Ronnie lived her life with a twinkle in her eye, a spunky attitude, a wicked sense of humor and a smile on her face. She was filled with love and gratitude.

Her joyful sound, playful nature and magical presence will live on in all who knew, heard or saw her." Spector - then still Bennett - famously promised a similar brand of attention in "Be My Baby."

"I'll make you happy, baby, just wait and see / For every kiss you give me I'll give you three," she pleaded.

The future Ronnie Spector

earned her most prominent commercial success early on, when Phil Spector signed the group in 1963. They promptly fell for each other.

"I was so much in love. That energy comes back to me every time: when I'm singing 'Be My Baby,' I'm thinking of us in the studio," Ronnie said in a 2013 interview. The song, which peaked at No. 2 on Billboard's Hot 100 chart in October 1963, earned a second life when Martin Scorsese featured it in the opening montage of his gritty 1973 crime drama "Mean Streets."

France demands release of French academic in Iranian jail

DPA
PARIS

FRANCE responded with outrage on Wednesday after French anthropologist Fariba Adelkhah was again imprisoned in Iran.

The 62-year-old was allowed to move from a prison to house arrest in October, where she has since been monitored with an electronic ankle bracelet.

Without any justification or prior notice, the Iranian authorities have taken her back into custody, the French Foreign Ministry said late Wednesday.

A spokesperson demanded her immediate release.

The academic, who also has Iranian nationality, was arrested together with her colleague and partner Roland Marchal at Tehran airport in June 2019. Both were convicted of endangering national security and spreading anti-regime propa-



Colleagues of the French-Iranian academic Fariba Adelkhah, hold placards depicting her as they gather in front of high education school Science-Po, in Paris, on Thursday. (AFP)

ganda.

Marchal, 64, was released in March as part of a prisoner exchange between Paris and Tehran.

The Foreign Ministry spokesperson described Adelkhah's return to prison as "purely political and arbitrary." Her renewed detention could

only have a "negative" impact on relations, the official said.

President Emmanuel Macron had previously demanded Adelkhah's immediate release but this was rejected by the Foreign Ministry in Tehran. At the time, Iran accused France of interfering in its internal affairs.