

International

Europe steps up pressure on covert Russia over spy attack

Questions arise to expel Russian diplomats

BRUSSELS: European countries are set to take further steps as early as tomorrow to punish Russia over the poisoning of a former spy in England, officials said, as diplomatic pressure builds on Moscow over the nerve agent attack. Russia, for its part, accused London of trying to force its European allies to take "confrontational steps" and unleashing an "anti-Russian campaign".

EU leaders meeting in Brussels have agreed to recall the bloc's ambassador from Moscow over the attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the English city of Salisbury. French President Emmanuel Macron said Friday the poisoning with the Soviet-made "Novichok" agent was an "attack on European sovereignty", after EU leaders unanimously backed London's assessment that it was "highly likely" Moscow was to blame and that there was no plausible alternative explanation.

A number of member states are considering following Britain's lead and expelling Russian intelligence agents posing as diplomats, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel saying further coordinated actions were "necessary" to respond to the attack. The 23 diplomats expelled by Moscow in a tit-for-tat move "have returned to the UK safely", British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said on Twitter late Friday.

The question of whether to expel Russian diplomats will be left to individual member states and EU President Donald Tusk said action was expected as early as Monday. But divisions remain over how far to go, with Austria already ruling out expelling diplomats, and Tusk, a former Polish prime minister, said it was not clear how many states would join the expulsions.

"More than one but I don't think that it will be the

whole group," Tusk said. Macron told a joint news conference with Merkel after the summit in Brussels that the March 4 incident-for which Russia denies responsibility-was "a serious challenge to our security and... an attack on European sovereignty". "It calls for a coordinated, determined response from the European Union and its member states," the French leader said.

'Extraordinary measure'

British Prime Minister Theresa May briefed other EU leaders on the probe into the attack over a summit dinner on Thursday. She managed to overcome resistance from countries like Greece and Italy who were reluctant to put their close Kremlin ties in jeopardy to persuade them to back Britain's conclusion that Moscow was to blame. Merkel said May had shared "certain findings" which left little doubt Moscow was behind the first offensive use of a nerve agent in Europe since World War II.

"We believe that the analyses are already very well-founded and this has not been questioned by anyone," Merkel said. "We agreed-Germany and France at least-that such reactions are still necessary in addition to recalling the ambassador." European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker said the recall of the ambassador was an "extraordinary measure" never before taken by the bloc.

The leaders of former Soviet bloc EU states the Czech Republic and Lithuania, as well as Denmark and Ireland, have said they were considering further unilateral steps, including expelling diplomats. Latvia was the first to commit explicitly to expelling Russians, saying it expected to make an official announcement on Monday.

Attack on European sovereignty

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RIGA, Latvia: Exterior view taken on March 23, 2018 shows the Russia's embassy in Riga, Latvia. Latvia's foreign ministry on March 23 said the Baltic state would expel "one or several" Russian diplomats over the nerve agent attack on an ex-spy in the English city of Salisbury. —AFP

'Confrontational steps'

Moscow denounced the moves by Britain and the EU. "As for the decision taken, we regret in this context that again such decisions are taken using the wording 'highly likely'," President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Friday. "We don't agree with this and we repeat again that Russia absolutely definitely has nothing to do with the Skripal case."

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, on a visit to Hanoi, separately accused Britain of "feverishly trying to force allies to take confrontational steps", suggesting London's

focus was now on making "the crisis with Russia as deep as possible". The Russian ambassador to Britain wrote Friday to a policeman exposed to the nerve agent used against the Skripals, insisting on Moscow's innocence and thanking him for his bravery.

Alexander Yakovenko told Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, who was released from hospital Thursday following two weeks of treatment, that he hoped the officer and the Skripals "get well soon". "I would like to express my sincere gratitude to you for your bravery when reacting to the assault on two Russian nationals," he wrote. —AFP

Pentagon looks to counter ever-stealthier warfare

WASHINGTON: The US military has for years enjoyed a broad technological edge over its adversaries, dominating foes with superior communications and cyber capabilities. Now, thanks to rapid advances by Russia and China, the gap has shrunk, and the Pentagon is looking at how a future conflict with a "near-peer" competitor might play out. Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson recently warned that both Russia and China are experimenting with ways to take out the US military's satellites, which form the backbone of America's warfighting machine.

"They know that we are dominant in space, that every mission the military does depends on space, and in a crisis or war they are demonstrating capabilities and developing capabilities to seek to deny us our space assets," Wilson said. "We're not going to let that happen." The Pentagon is investing in a new generation of satellites that will provide the military with better accuracy and have better anti-jamming capabilities.

Such technology would help counter the type of "asymmetric" warfare practiced by Russia, which combines old-school propaganda with social media offensives and cyber hacks. Washington has blamed Moscow for numerous cyber attacks, including last year's massive ransomware attack, known as NotPetya, which paralyzed thousands of computers around the world. US cyber security investigators have also accused the Russian government of a sustained effort to take control of critical US infrastructure systems, including the energy grid. Russia denies involvement and so far, such attacks have been met with a muted US military response.

Public relations shutdown

General John Hyten, who leads US Strategic Command (STRATCOM), told lawmakers the US has "not gone nearly far enough" in the cyber domain. He also warned that the military still does not have clear authorities and rules of engagement for when and how it can conduct offensive cyber ops. "Cyberspace needs to be looked at as a warfighting domain, and if somebody threatens us in cyberspace, we need to have the authorities to respond," Hyten told lawmakers this week.

Hyten's testimony comes after Admiral Michael Rogers, who heads both the NSA-the leading US electronic eavesdropping agency-and the new US Cyber Command, last month said President Donald Trump had not yet ordered his spy chiefs to retaliate against Russian interference in the 2016 US election.

Russia has also been blamed for the March 4 poisoning of former spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, who were found unconscious on a bench outside a shopping center in England. NATO countries are working to determine when a cyber attack might trigger the alliance's Article 5 collective defense provision, General Curtis Scaparrotti, the commander of NATO forces in Europe, said this month. NATO "recognizes the difficulty in indirect or asymmetric activity that Russia is practicing, activities below the level of conflict," Scaparrotti said.

In 2015, the Air Force opened the highly secretive National Space Defense Center in Colorado, where air-men work to identify potential threats to America's satellite network. After officials told a local newspaper, The Gazette, that the center had started running on a 24-hour basis, Air Force higher ups grew alarmed that too much information had been revealed. —AFP

Trump scraps military ban for transgender

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump late Friday rolled back his blanket ban on transgender people serving in the military-but they will still face major restrictions in the American armed forces. Trump signed a memorandum in August that effectively barred transgender people from the military but the ban faced multiple legal challenges.

The White House has now come back with a modified version of the original plan-as with Trump's efforts to ban travelers from several Muslim-majority countries, which was repeatedly challenged in court. "I hereby revoke my memorandum of August 25, 2017, 'Military Service by Transgender Individuals,' and any other directive I may have made with respect to military service by transgender individuals," Trump's new memorandum said.

Trump instead sought to shift responsibility to two of his cabinet secretaries. "The Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of Homeland Security, with respect to the US Coast Guard, may exercise their authority to implement any appropriate policies concerning military service by transgender individuals," the memorandum said. Trump's memorandum said the two cabinet secretaries recommended people diagnosed with gender dysphoria be barred from military service. The Defense Department released a copy of a report with further details on the restrictions outlined in the memorandum. "Transgender persons who have not transitioned to another gender and do not have a history or current diagnosis of gender dysphoria... are eligible for service" if they meet mental and physical health standards and "are capable of adhering to the standards associated with their biological sex," the report said. People who have undergone gender transition treatment are barred because it may not "fully remedy... the mental health problems associated with gender dysphoria," the report said, also noting the time required for treatment.

'Many' could be disqualified

"Although the precise number is unknown, the department recognizes that many transgender persons could be disqualified under this policy," it said. The number of transgender troops among America's approximately 1.3 million active duty service members is fairly small, with

Peru president sworn in after impeachment row

LIMA: Martin Vizcarra was sworn in as Peru's new president Friday, catapulted to the post when Pedro Pablo Kuczynski resigned to avoid impeachment. Vizcarra, who had been serving as both vice president and his country's ambassador to Canada, took the oath of office and donned the red-and-white presidential sash before the Peruvian Congress. The ceremony came shortly after lawmakers voted to accept Kuczynski's resignation, rather than push ahead with impeaching him over corruption allegations. "We will stand firm in the fight against corruption. Transparency will be a pillar of our administration," said Vizcarra, a former cabinet minister known for his meticulous management and unflashy style. "Better times will come," he told his fellow Peruvians in his first address as president.

Just a day before, the engineer and technocrat was far removed from the political hornet's nest that brought down Kuczynski, leading a relatively placid diplomat's life in Ottawa. He flew home Thursday night, on his 55th birthday, and now takes over the remainder of Kuczynski's term, until 2021 — though early elections are still possible.



FLORIDA: US President Donald Trump and Barron Trump arrive at Palm Beach International Airport. —AFP

estimates topping out at 15,000. There are some exceptions to the restrictions: people who have a history of gender dysphoria may join the military if they "can demonstrate 36 consecutive months of stability-ie absence of gender dysphoria-immediately preceding their application," the report said. And those diagnosed with gender dysphoria after joining the military who do "not require gender transition" may remain.

There is also an exception for people currently in the military who were diagnosed with gender dysphoria between the implementation of an Obama-era policy allowing transgender people to serve and the start of the new Trump administration policy. But the US Senate's top Democrat Chuck Schumer said the policy still amounted to a ban, calling it "yet another Trump-Pence decision intended to drive a wedge in our society."

"No matter what @realDonaldTrump says, this is a transgender ban - plain and simple," Schumer tweeted.

Kuczynski, 79, had a short tenure as president: the former Wall Street banker was elected by a razor-thin margin in June 2016, and took office the following month. But he lacked a majority in Congress, and was almost immediately embroiled in a messy conflict with the main opposition party, Popular Force, led by Keiko Fujimori, the daughter of disgraced ex-president Alberto Fujimori.

When reports emerged linking Kuczynski to Brazil's scandal-plagued construction giant Odebrecht-accused of paying massive bribes to politicians around Latin America for juicy public works contracts-Popular Force mounted a relentless push to remove him from office. Odebrecht revealed in December that it had paid nearly \$5 million to consulting companies linked to Kuczynski when he was finance minister.

Fujimori truce?

The former president survived a first impeachment vote that month. Three days later, he granted a pardon on medical grounds to former president Fujimori, who had been in jail for corruption and human rights violations. That sparked speculation of a back-room deal with an opposition faction led by Keiko Fujimori's brother and rival Kenji. When video tapes emerged of Kenji-who has now split from his sister's party-apparently offering bribes to a fellow lawmaker to vote against the December impeachment, the political damage to Kuczynski proved to be too much. Facing a new impeachment vote, he announced his resignation Wednesday, proclaiming his innocence but saying it

"This decision breaks faith with those serving today and those who aspire to serve." The American Civil Liberties Union rights group condemned the new policy, calling it "transphobia masquerading as policy." "This policy is not based on an evaluation of new evidence," the ACLU's Joshua Block said in a statement.

"It is reverse-engineered for the sole purpose of carrying out President Trump's reckless and unconstitutional ban, undermining the ability of transgender service members to serve openly and military readiness as a whole." "The policy effectively coerces transgender people who wish to serve into choosing between their humanity and their country." The Human Rights Campaign, a major LGBTQ rights group, also took aim at the restrictions. "There is simply no way to spin it, the Trump-Pence Administration is going all in on its discriminatory, unconstitutional and despicable ban on transgender troops," the organization's president Chad Griffin said. —AFP



LIMA: Peru's new President Martin Vizcarra leaves the Congress in Lima and heads to the presidential palace after his swearing in. —AFP

was best for the country if he quit.

Vizcarra inherits a country still reeling from the drama and deeply mistrustful of its politicians, just as its strong economy is slowing. Like Kuczynski, he will face an opposition-controlled Congress, though he may benefit from the fact that he has no connection to traditional political parties. Keiko Fujimori appears willing to declare a truce-at least for now. —AFP