

International

France's eye in the sky: Tracking Russian vessels in the Baltic

Equipment may look old-fashioned, but it is full of state-of-the-art technology

ONBOARD ATLANTIQUE 2 OVER THE BALTIC SEA: The cluster of dots on the Atlantique 2's screens may seem like a confusing mess to the untrained eye, but not to the crew of the French naval surveillance aircraft tasked with telling friend from foe in the Baltic Sea. "Another tarantula," says an operator as the Russian corvette of the Tarantul class becomes visible, travelling in a pack with other Russian vessels as several nearby NATO ships also criss-cross the placid northeastern European sea. "It's busy down there," the soldier observes. France's Atlantique 2 aircraft, in service since the 1980s to detect surface vessels and submarines, has been dispatched to track Russian and Russia-friendly ships, a task that became key after President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

'Rapidly distinguish'

The patrol aircraft took off from Brittany, western France, early in the morning and stopped over in Germany before heading north to scour much of the Baltic, now a strategic focal point for Western and Russian forces. Once the aircraft passes the island of Ruegen-where work for the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline between Russia and Germany was abruptly frozen-the eyes of the 14-strong crew (12 men and two women) become focused. The plane's most senior officer Lieutenant Commander Guillaume-who according to French military tradition gives only his first name-gives the order for the radar's protective shell to emerge from the plane's hull. The equipment may look old-fashioned, but it is full of state-of-the-art technology. The sea is calm and the weather clear, but frantic action is visible in a zone, some 50 kilometres (30 miles) wide, between the Swedish and Polish coastlines. "We have to be able to rapidly distinguish between friendly, neutral and suspicious vessels so our forces can find the best navigation path," said Guillaume.

French forces have orders to avoid flying too close to some coastal waters and Russian ships to avert any escalation, or entering potential danger zones where Baltic rim countries may have flagged military activities.



Eyes of the 14-strong crew

various databases hoping to properly identify the ship. "It has a strange crane near the bow," says Christopher as he zooms in on a ship that has attracted their attention despite looking civilian at first glance.

"In fact, it's a Moma class," responds Roxane, confirming that the vessel is a Russian water survey ship suspected of gathering intelligence. It promptly gets an AXRU label on the situation screen, an acronym for Russian auxiliary vessel. There's no shortage of acronyms: DDG UK, PBF LT, MLE FI and FFL SE designate British, Lithuanian, Finnish and Swedish vessels.

'Quite crowded'

Russians are marked in red, such as the Tarantul or Parchim-class corvettes identified on this flight. As soon as the Atlantique 2 flies over a quieter stretch, the Tacco hands his notes to Chief Petty Officer Roman.

Assange, 50, has said he will appeal against the decision. He is wanted to face trial for violating the US Espionage Act by publishing military and diplomatic files in 2010, and could face up to 175 years in jail if found guilty.

The Assange case has become a cause celebre for media freedom and his supporters accuse Washington of trying to muzzle reporting of legitimate security concerns. Wednesday's event slammed the British decision as a "flagrant violation of human rights and a showing of total contempt for freedom of the press".

Pierre Ruetschi, the head of the Swiss Press Club hosting the event, warned that "democracy is being taken hostage". "This attempt at criminalising journalism is a serious threat," Tim Dawson, of the National Union of Journalists of Britain and Ireland, agreed.

"If Julian Assange can be threatened with prosecution as a spy, what might that mean for other journalists?" he said. Assange has been held on remand at a top-security jail in southeast London since 2019 for jumping bail in a previous case accusing him of sexual assault in Sweden. Before that he spent seven years at Ecuador's embassy in London to avoid being removed

"We denounce the murder of our brothers (...) We demand justice and the recovery of the bodies," he said in a separate statement, adding the men had been killed "in the context of the violence this country is experiencing."

Experts say Chihuahua is an important transit route for illegal drugs bound for the United States and therefore violently contested between rival trafficking gangs. More than 340,000 people have been killed in a wave of bloodshed since the government deployed the army to fight drug cartels in 2006.

Father Jorge Atilano Gonzalez, also a Jesuit, told a local television station the priests had attempted to intervene because they knew the assailant, who was from the area. "He wanted to confess" after the shooting, said Gonzalez, citing the testimony of the third priest. "What we believe is that he was in a state of alcoholism or addiction because of the reaction he had," he added. The country's security secretariat on Tuesday evening said the alleged shooter had already been identified and a manhunt was under way.

'Important social work'

The office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Mexico condemned the killings, saying the priests had carried out "important social and pastoral work" among the Indigenous Raramuri, or Tarahumara, people.

"The murder of these two well-known priests reminds us of the situation of extreme violence and

of Putin's two decades in power, remarkably little has emerged about his health, beyond the famous images provided by the Kremlin showing him bare-chested in a bid to project an image of macho strength. But scrutiny has now increased with the war that Putin unleashed against Russia's neighbour.

The most in-depth investigation into Putin's health was published in April by the Russian-language news site Proekt, which used open-source data to conclude that the president's trips to the southern resort city of Sochi were synchronised with those of a large number of doctors. They included specialist in thyroid cancer Yevgeny Selivanov, whose visits to Sochi frequently coincided with Putin's sudden absences from the public eye over the past years. It also alleged that one of the methods used by Putin to ensure longevity were baths in blood extracted from deer antlers in Siberia, a method recommended by his friend Defence Minister

'A strange crane'

The flurry of activity coincides with the end of the annual NATO military exercise BALTOPS, which the Russians responded to with manoeuvres of their own. Both undertakings demonstrate a determination on both sides not to give up any areas, even if it means sending huge numbers of warships into the Baltic where they co-exist with countless merchant ships and pleasure boats. A well-rehearsed procedure kicks off. Radar operator Chief Petty Officer Maxime watches the signals, known as "tracks".

Next to Maxime sits Lieutenant Alain, the tactical coordinator also known as "Tacco", who picks the tracks he believes require more detailed observation, such as traces from ships who fail to activate their automatic identification system (AIS), which is mandatory for civilian vessels.

Alain shares his observations with Chief Petty Officer Christopher, to his right, who operates the Wescam camera placed at the bottom of the aircraft and that yields a detailed picture of targets even tens of kilometres away. —AFP

Finally Christopher and Petty Officers Roxane and Nicolas frantically check



A military operator works on board the French navy patrol airplane Atlantique 2 on mission above the Baltic Sea. The aim of the maritime patrol vessel's mission is "to locate vessels of Russian interest". —AFP

The latter is in charge of electronic warfare and transmissions and sends the plane's observations via a dedicated chat system to French and NATO command centres. A full report can wait until their return. "This small space has gotten quite crowded, which shows how interested everybody is in everybody else," says Lieutenant Henri over the plane's noise.

The Baltic is where Russia's attack on February 24 has prompted rapid geopolitical change. Sweden and Finland have applied to join NATO which, if successful, will isolate Russia even more in the Baltic which Moscow needs for access to the world's oceans.

"The Baltic will in effect become a NATO lake," said Robert Dalsjo at the Swedish Defence Research Agency FOI. Sweden's membership in particular

would remove a factor of uncertainty, he told AFP, "because the Baltic countries couldn't be sure about how Sweden would act in a crisis".

The plane changes direction to fly close to the forbidden Kaliningrad zone to catch a glimpse of the military activity in the highly militarised enclave, then heads north. Once it reaches the latitude of Riga, the plane makes a U-turn and checks on the Russian ships in the southern zone one last time before heading home.

The day's work? Nearly 7,000 kilometres of flight and around a dozen Russian vessels identified including, to the crew's delight, the stunning sail training vessel Sedov, the world's largest sailing ship still in operation. —AFP

Journalists demand Assange be released from UK jail

GENEVA: An international coalition of journalists, editors and publishers demanded Wednesday that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange be immediately released from a UK jail and that all charges against him be dropped. Fifteen representatives of journalist and publishers' unions and organisations from six countries gathered in Geneva for the "call to free Julian Assange in the name of press freedom".

The petitioners also called on Swiss authorities, who have said they have worked to protect Assange, to facilitate his release by offering him a safe haven from further prosecution in Switzerland. The call came after the British government last week approved Assange's extradition to the United States, to the dismay of his supporters and free press campaigners.

Pope mourns priests killed defending sanctuary seeker

MEXICO CITY: Pope Francis on Wednesday mourned the deaths of two Jesuits and a sanctuary seeker whose bodies were spirited away by armed men after they were gunned down inside a church in northern Mexico. The pope, who also belongs to the Jesuit order, expressed sadness and dismay over the killings of men he called his "brothers" in the remote mountains of Chihuahua state.

"So many murders in Mexico. I am close, in affection and prayer, to the Catholic community affected by this tragedy," he said. Priests Javier Campos Morales and Joaquin Cesar Mora Salazar were shot dead in the town of Cerocahui on Monday "while trying to defend a man who was seeking refuge," according to the order also known as the Society of Jesus.

The pursued man, who worked as a tour guide, was also killed. The three bodies were then placed in the back of a pickup truck by armed men, covered with plastic and taken away, according to Father Luis Gerardo Moro Madrid, head of the order in Mexico.

Madrid said the shooter allegedly told a third priest who ran into the church: "I'm sorry, we're going to take the bodies."

Putin's health: Pivotal yet shrouded in uncertainty

PARIS: Baths in blood extracted from the antlers of Siberian deer. Excrements scooped up by loyal officials to evade analysis. Mysterious absences for emergency medical treatment. The claims made about the health of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who will be 70 in October, are lurid and macabre, as well as impossible to verify.

But they illustrate how little is known about the health of a leader whose medical condition is fundamental to the future of Europe, all the more so after he ordered Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Over the course



NEW YORK: Julian Assange's father John Shipton speaks to the media in front of the British Consulate in New York to respond to the decision from UK Home Secretary Priti Patel to extradite Assange to the United States. —AFP

to Sweden. The Australian was arrested when the government changed in Quito and his diplomatic protection was removed. —AFP



VATICAN CITY: Prefect of the Pontifical House, Monsignor Leonardo Sapienza (L) helps Pope Francis reach his seat as he arrives to hold the weekly general audience at St. Peter's square in The Vatican. —AFP

vulnerability faced by the communities of the Sierra Tarahumara in Chihuahua," said Guillermo Fernandez-Maldonado, the UN human rights representative in Mexico.

The Mexican Episcopal Conference also issued a statement Tuesday, calling for a rapid investigation as well as increased security for the country's clergy. Earlier in the day, President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador had confirmed the killings at his daily press conference, conceding several municipalities in Chihuahua state were struggling in the "presence of organized crime." —AFP

Sergei Shoigu, who is from Siberia.

French weekly Paris Match this month said that on visits to Saudi Arabia in 2019 and France in 2017, Putin was accompanied by a team whenever he went to the toilet, to keep his excretions so no foreign power could medically analyse his urine or stools. Even more sensationally, US publication Newsweek said in June that Putin had undergone treatment for advanced cancer in April, citing American intelligence. The US National Security Council denied the existence of such briefings.

Ukraine's military intelligence chief, Major General Kyrylo Budanov, in a mid-May interview with Sky News claimed without evidence that Putin has cancer. Proekt also alleged that the Kremlin set up a fake office in Sochi that purported to look like the one at his suburban Moscow residence to make it look like he was working in the Russian capital rather than resting at the Black Sea resort. —AFP

Iran executed over 100 between January and March: UN

GENEVA: Iran executed more than 100 people in the first three months of 2022, continuing a worrying upward trend, according to a report by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that was presented Tuesday. Speaking before the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, UN deputy human rights chief Nada Al-Nashif presented Guterres' latest report on Iran, decrying that executions in the country were on the rise.

"While 260 individuals were executed in 2020, at least 310 individuals were executed in 2021, including at least 14 women," she said, adding that the trend had continued this year. Between January 1 and March 20, she said, "at least 105 people were executed," many of whom belonged to minority groups.

Guterres' report had noted with deep concern the increase of executions for lesser crimes, including for drug-related offences, Nashif said. "The death penalty continues to be imposed on the basis of charges not amounting to 'most serious crimes', and in ways incompatible with fair trials standards," she told the council. Nashif said that in March, 52 people sentenced to death on drug-related charges were transferred to Shiraz prison for execution. She also lamented the continued use of the death penalty for juvenile offenders, in violation of international law.

'Excessive use of force'

Between August 2021 and March 2022, at least two people who committed their alleged crimes as minors were executed and more than 85 juvenile offenders remain on death row, she said. "In February 2022, in a positive development, the Supreme Court decided to revoke the death sentence against a child offender who had been on death row for 18 years," Nashif added.

The deputy rights chief also decried other rights abuses in Iran, especially in response to protests over a range of significant social, political and economic challenges over the past year. "Excessive use of force constitutes the default response by the authorities to managing assemblies," she said.

"In April and May 2022, at least 55 individuals-teachers, lawyers, labour rights defenders, artists and academics-were arrested during protests, many of whom are facing national security charges." To date, no steps have been taken to establish accountability for violations committed during the nationwide protests in November 2019, she added.

Unnecessary deaths caused by excessive force inflicted by the authorities, against border couriers, peaceful protesters and those in detention, has continued with impunity, Nashif told the council.

"The scale of deaths in detention... is of serious concern," she said. Mehdi Ali Abadi, Iran's deputy permanent representative in Geneva, slammed the report, saying it was based on a malicious mandate forced on the UN by Western countries to stigmatise Iran, insisting it was "biased by default".

"Reducing the lofty code of human rights into a petty political tool is appalling and disgraceful," he told the council. —AFP