

EYEING RUSSIA, US LEADS FRESH MILITARY DRILLS IN UKRAINE

YAVORIV: Ukrainian and US troops launched fresh drills yesterday near the war-torn country's Polish border in a bid to show unity and resolve in the face of an increasingly resurgent Kremlin.

The annual Rapid Trident exercises involve 1,800 soldiers from 18 countries and last for just under two weeks. Their immediate aim is to build resolve and cohesion within the ex-Soviet state's outdated and woefully underfunded armed forces-caught in a 15-month east Ukrainian quagmire against pro-Russia militias that has claimed more than 6,500 lives.

But they also deliver a transparent message to the Kremlin about Washington and its allies' determination to thwart any expansionist ambitions Russian President Vladimir Putin may have.

"These joint manoeuvres... display a broad support for Ukraine in its struggle for freedom and sovereignty," Ukrainian forces commander Olexandr Syvak told the festive flag-raising ceremony.

His US counterpart Alfred Renzi said the participating countries-most of them NATO member but also such former Soviet nations as Moldova and Azerbaijan-"will prove an ability to cooperate as one unified force for stability".

Russia's counter-strike

Putin has always denied charges of orchestrating Ukraine's separatist revolt to unsettle the pro-Western leadership that rose to power in the wake of last year's ouster of a Moscow-backed president.

But the veteran Russian leader-immensely popular at home for his patriotic fervour and increasingly isolated abroad-has done little to hide that he sees much of eastern Europe as part of Moscow's traditional sphere of influence.

Russia set nerves jangling across Europe by sending its fighter jets shooting toward the skies of Baltic and Nordic nations with increasing regularity in recent

months. Washington and NATO have denounced such steps as both hostile and dangerous to civilian aircraft.

The Kremlin counters that it is only doing what the United States has been for decades-flexing its military muscle in far-off countries to build a "unipolar world".

The launch of Rapid Trident was quickly followed by the Russian navy's announcement that one of its warships stationed off Ukraine's Kremlin-annexed Crimean peninsula would conduct live rocket fire drills Sunday.

"After a long interruption and in order to demonstrate the navy's combat capabilities, the Ladny frigate will attack a dummy target from an anti-submarine system," Black Sea Fleet spokesman Vyacheslav Trukhachyov told Moscow's news agencies.

Russia marks its annual navy day Sunday and such activities are planned well in advance. But the scale of Russia's celebration this year has been grander than most. Trukhachyov said that more than 30 naval ves-

sels and another 30 jets and military helicopters would show off their capabilities near their tsarist-era base in the Crimean port of Sevastopol.

The ships will be accompanied by Su-27 interceptor and Su-25 ground attack jets. It was not immediately clear if any senior Russian officials intended to oversee the festivities.

Both Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev have stirred outrage in Kiev by visiting Crimea in the past year. Yet the Western drills in Yavoriv-a village lying just 15 kilometres (about 10 miles) east of Poland-are upsetting to Moscow as well.

Russia accuses the United States of funding and arming the nationalist forces that spearheaded the pro-European protests in Kiev last year.

Much of Moscow's state media now portrays the West's military involvement in Ukraine as an effort to intimidate Russia and deny its legitimate geopolitical interests. — AFP

MCCAIN: TRUMP OWES APOLOGY TO VETERANS, NOT TO HIM

WASHINGTON: Sen John McCain said yesterday Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump doesn't need to apologize to him for remarks about his captivity in Vietnam, but should tell veterans and their families that he's sorry.

Appearing in a nationally broadcast interview, the Arizona Republican said, "When Mr. Trump says he prefers to be with people who are not captured, the great honor of my life was to be in the company of heroes." But the occasionally fiery McCain had a calm demeanor, saying simply: "I am not a hero."

At another point in his interview on MSNBC, he said, "I'm in the (political) arena," suggesting he's fair game for criticism as a US senator.

In an opinion piece published yesterday in USA Today, Trump said McCain had abandoned the nation's veterans and made America less secure through his votes in Congress. The real estate executive also lashed out at fellow GOP presidential aspirants who have criticized his remarks, calling them "failed politicians." Trump said he did not need "to be lectured by any of them."

"The reality is that John McCain the politician has made America less safe, sent our brave soldiers into wrong-headed foreign adventures, covered up for President (Barack) Obama with the VA scandal and has spent most of his time in the Senate pushing amnesty," Trump wrote. "He would rather protect the Iraqi border than Arizona."

The op-ed comes as Trump is on the defensive for dismissing McCain's reputation as a war hero because McCain was captured in Vietnam and, "I like people who weren't captured."

In a contentious appearance on the NBC's "Today" Show Monday, Trump took issue with the media's reporting on his comments about McCain's war record, made at a conservative forum in Iowa. He insisted in a telephone interview with anchor Matt Lauer that he had said "four times" that he respected those captured in war. In his appearance, McCain said he believed it was "totally inappropriate for Mr. Trump to say he doesn't like to be with people who are captured."

"I think the point here is that there are so many men and women who served and sacrificed - and happened to be held prisoner - and to denigrate in any way that service, I think, is offensive to veterans."

"The best thing to do is put it behind us and move forward," McCain said earlier. GOP White House hopefuls shed their cautious approach to Trump's remarks in apparent

efforts to calm the intraparty storm.

Trump has refused to apologize for disparaging comments he made about McCain's military service. He's also sought to use the furor over his remarks to remind supporters, especially those frustrated with Washington, that he's not a typical politician.

"You know the Republican Party - of course I was one of their darlings when I was a contributor," Trump said in an interview with The Associated Press. "I went from a darling to somebody that they're not happy with because I'm not a politician."

During a conservative forum in Iowa Saturday, Trump dismissed McCain's reputation as a war hero because he was captured in Vietnam and "I like people who weren't captured." His rivals spent much of the weekend condemning his comments and suggesting he was unfit to serve as commander-in-chief. "It's not just absurd," said Florida Sen. Marco Rubio. "It's offensive. It's ridiculous. And I do think it is a disqualifier as commander-in-chief." Numerous other GOP candidates, including Jeb Bush, Rick Perry and Scott Walker, were similarly critical of Trump. The Republican National Committee also put its thumb on the scale, issuing a statement saying "there is no place in our party or our country for comments that disparage those who have served honorably."

Until now, Republicans have been largely cautious in their handling of Trump and his provocations.

While officials privately fretted about the damage he could do to the party, they are also worried about alienating voters drawn to his celebrity, brashness and willingness to take on establishment Republicans. He's emerged as one of the favorites early in a race that is bound to see shifts in the standing of many of the candidates.

Trump has made other eyebrow-raising comments since declaring his candidacy, most notably his assertion that Mexican immigrants are rapists and drug dealers. Many GOP candidates were slow and halting in their response to those comments, underscoring a continuing struggle to hit the right notes on immigration when they want to appeal to Hispanics without alienating traditional GOP voters.

But for a party that prides itself on its support for the military, Trump's comments about McCain were an easy opening. McCain, the 2008 GOP presidential nominee, spent more than five years as a prisoner of war, enduring torture and refusing release ahead of fellow captives. — AP



DAKAR: Former Chadian dictator Hissene Habre (C) is escorted by prison guards into the courtroom for the first proceedings of his trial by the Extraordinary African Chambers in Dakar yesterday. More than a quarter-century after his blood-soaked reign came to an end, former Chadian dictator Hissene Habre went on trial in a Senegalese court yesterday in what is seen as a test case for African justice. — AFP

SENEGAL PUTS EX-CHAD DICTATOR HABRE ON TRIAL FOR ATROCITIES

TRIAL WILL BE HEARD BY SENEGALESE, BURKINA FASO JUDGES

DAKAR: Senegal prepared yesterday to begin the trial of former Chadian dictator Hissene Habre, 25 years after he fled there following an eight-year blood-soaked reign of terror at home. Once dubbed "Africa's Pinochet", the 72-year-old has been in custody in Senegal since his arrest in June 2013 at the home he shared in an affluent suburb of Dakar with his wife and children.

Rights groups say 40,000 Chadians were killed between 1982 and 1990 under a regime propped up by fierce crackdowns on opponents and the targeting of rival ethnic groups he perceived as a threat to his stranglehold on the central African nation. Delayed for years by Senegal, the trial will set a historic precedent as until now African leaders accused of atrocities have been tried in international courts. Senegal and the African Union signed an agreement in December 2012 to set up a court to bring Habre to justice. The AU had mandated Senegal to try Habre in July 2006, but the country stalled the process for years under former president Abdoulaye Wade, who was defeated in 2012 elections. Habre was also wanted for trial in Belgium on war crimes and crimes against humanity charges after three Belgian nationals of Chadian origin filed a suit in 2000 for arbitrary arrest, mass murder and torture.

Historic

Macky Sall, Wade's successor who took office in April 2012, ruled out extraditing Habre to Belgium but vowed to organise a trial in Senegal. "This is the first case anywhere in the world-not just in Africa-where the courts of one country, Senegal, are prosecuting the former leader of another, Chad, for alleged human rights crimes," Reed Brody, a lawyer at Human Rights Watch (HRW) told AFP.

Brody said it was also the first time that the concept of "universal jurisdiction"-that a suspect can be prosecuted for their past crimes wherever in the world they find themselves-had been implemented in Africa. "So there are a lot of historical aspects to this. But, for me, the most important kind of thing is that it is the survivors who have pushed for 25 years," he added.

Habre will be judged by the Extraordinary African Chambers, set up by Senegal and the African Union in February 2013 to prosecute the "person or persons" most responsible for international crimes committed in Chad during Habre's rule. The trial will be heard by two Senegalese judges and one from Burkina Faso, who will serve as president of the process.

The chambers indicted Habre in July 2013 and

placed him in pre-trial custody while four investigating judges spent 19 months interviewing some 2,500 witnesses and victims and analysing thousands of documents. Around 100 witnesses will testify during hearings expected to last around three months, although 4,000 people have been registered as victims in the case. Habre has said he does not recognise the court's jurisdiction and vowed that he and his lawyers will play no part, although under Senegalese law he could still be forced to turn up. "When we began this case, when we started working with the victims-I started in 1999-one of the victims said to Human Rights Watch 'since when has justice come all the way to Chad?'," Brody told AFP. "The African Union saw the importance of being able to show that you can have justice in Africa," he added.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein described the opening of the trial as a "milestone for justice in Africa". "This trial before the Extraordinary African Chambers is of tremendous significance in a number of ways," Zeid said. "This shows that leaders accused of serious crimes should not assume they can evade justice for ever. Nowadays, there is a good chance their crimes will eventually catch up with them," he said. — AFP



WASHINGTON: US President Barack Obama speaks with Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari during a meeting in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC, yesterday. Obama welcomes Nigeria's freshly elected president after the country's first ever democratic transition. — AFP

OBAMA WOOS BUHARI AFTER HISTORIC ELECTION

WASHINGTON: Barack Obama welcomed Nigeria's freshly elected president to the White House yesterday, lending a personal endorsement after the country's first ever democratic transition.

Obama praised the March vote as "an affirmation of Nigeria's commitment to democracy." He said the people of the oil-rich and diverse nation "understand that only through a peaceful political process can change take place."

Obama-facing criticism for not including the continent's most populous country and biggest economy on an Africa tour later this week that will take in Kenya and Ethiopia-turned on the charm, lavishing praise on the former military ruler.

"President Buhari comes into office with a reputation for integrity and a very clear agenda," he said. "And that is to make sure that he is bringing safety and security and peace to his country." Buhari reciprocated the praise, saying US pressure helped ensure the elections were "free, fair and credible." "We will ever be grateful," he said.

Tough task ahead

But Buhari, who ruled as a military strongman between 1983 and 1985, returns to office facing a Boko Haram insurgency that has resulted in the deaths of at least 15,000 people and displaced 1.5 million. Since 2009 the group has been trying to establish an Islamic state in northeast Nigeria. Buhari's visit was foreshadowed by a uptick in terror attacks, including suicide bombings in neighboring Cameroon and Chad. Rights groups say atrocities have been committed both by Boko Haram and the Nigerian military. US laws banning the transfer of weapons to countries suspected of rights abuses have sometimes pushed a wedge between the two allies. Obama's administration last year blocked the sale of Cobra attack helicopters to Nigeria, hampering cooperation amid efforts to find the hundreds of still-missing kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls. Since being elected in May, Buhari has indicated a readiness to address problems in the army he once ran as a general and as Nigeria's military ruler. — AFP

SYRIANS FIND SANCTUARY WITH POLISH FAMILIES

WARSAW: Magdalena Chudzicka, a mother of four, is rolling out her welcome mat. Her family is among dozens in Poland opening their homes to Syrian Christians fleeing war and Islamic State (IS) persecution, part of a ground-breaking drive by the Catholic nation's tiny Protestant community to save lives. "The war in Syria is all over our TV screens, but until now we couldn't really help," said the 42-year-old who lives with her physician husband in Izabelin, a town just north of Warsaw.

"We're expecting a family with children-we have lots of toys," she told AFP. "It's like receiving Christ in your home," added the deeply religious graphic artist, explaining her motives. But not all her neighbours support her decision to host refugees from the Middle East, she said. Surveys show a 70 per cent majority are reticent in the country of 38 million people.

The Polish government only unlocked the door to 158 Syrian Christian asylum-seekers after the Estera Foundation-a Warsaw-based charity run by the Protestant minority-secured funds for their flights from the Middle East and guaranteed a year's worth of living expenses.

"When the Polish government told me there was no budget for Syrian refugees in 2015, I realised I had to raise all the money to bring them over," foundation chief Miriam Shaded told AFP.

Despite a recent demand by Pope Francis for an immediate end to what he termed "a genocide" of Christians in the Middle East, Poland's dominant Roman Catholic Church has not contributed, preferring instead to work with Christians on the ground in Syria and Iraq.

Solidarity

The daughter of a Syrian-born Presbyterian pastor in Warsaw, Shaded says offers to host Syrian Christians have come mostly from members of various Protestant churches, though some Catholics have also volunteered. The UK-based Barnabas Fund, providing relief to persecuted Christians worldwide, is covering the lion's share of funding

amounting to "several hundred thousand pounds", spokesman Andrew Carey told AFP. "We're now in confidential talks with other European countries as part of our 'Safe Havens' project aimed at resettling Christians under threat in the Middle East."

Britain's Lord George Weidenfeld, a 95-year-old Holocaust survivor rescued by British Protestants from the Nazis, has also pledged support via the Barnabas Fund, Carey said. In all, Estera has requested Poland grant entry to around 1,500 Syrian Christians.

Bill Frellick, director for refugee rights at Human Rights Watch, told AFP he was "not aware of similar private sponsorship initiatives for Syrian refugees in the EU." "This is a laudable example of grassroots

solidarity and empathy by the fortunate to reach out to rescue less fortunate people in harm's way."

A widowed teacher from Damascus, Inshra al Badawi says she survived regime aerial bombardments and the explosion of a booby-trapped car that killed 17 other pedestrians.

"Now, it's like we've landed on another planet," she told AFP after she and her son spent their first days with a Warsaw family. "We feel very welcome, the food's delicious. Above all, we're safe." Her host, Miriam's Polish-born mother Stefania, said she did not think twice about offering her home as a refuge. "Love thy neighbour as you love yourself" are words I do my best to live by," she told AFP, quoting a Biblical passage. — AFP



WARSAW: A photo taken on July 10, 2015 shows Pastor Moner Shaded (R) translating as two Syrian women (far right) speak with journalists at Warsaw Airport after over 150 of Christian refugees from Syria arrived in Poland to find asylum from the war and ISIS fighters. — AFP