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# Embassy of the Russian Federation Newsletter # 199

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## **Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, March 12, 2020**

Today we are conducting an unconventional briefing. We are conducting it now that the WHO has declared the spread of the novel coronavirus a pandemic. We, among others, are guided by the WHO's recommendations to hold large, public events online via ICT whenever possible to prevent the spread of the disease. This is what we have done. Therefore, today the briefing for journalists will be held remotely. This briefing will be devoted to their questions, which are still coming in. I will reply to them during this briefing.

## **Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's participation in Government Hour at a State Duma plenary meeting**

On March 18, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will speak about the Russian Federation's current foreign policy during the Government Hour at a State Duma plenary meeting.

He is expected to cover a broad range of pressing issues in global politics, including relations with leading Western partners, settling the crises in Syria, Libya and Ukraine, countering Western sanction pressure, and coronavirus updates. In addition, Sergey Lavrov will brief the lawmakers about the prospects for building the Union State of Russia and Belarus and deepening integration within the EAEU, as well as other topics.

Regular meetings between the Minister and the State Duma deputies make it possible to enhance interaction between the executive and legislative branches of powers, exchange views on current international developments and better coordinate efforts in carrying out Russia's single foreign policy.

## **Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Burkina Faso Alpha Barry**

Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Burkina Faso Alpha Barry will pay a working visit to the Russian Federation on March 19-21.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will hold talks with him in Sochi on March 20. The foreign ministers will discuss the prospects for expanding bilateral cooperation in the political area, as well as in trade, the economy and culture.

There will be an in-depth exchange of views on pressing international and African matters with a focus on countering terrorism and extremism in the Sahara-Sahel region.

We look forward to Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Burkina Faso Alpha Barry's visit giving a major boost to the traditionally friendly relations between Russia and Burkina Faso in various areas.

## Update on Covid-19

I have received many questions regarding the Foreign Ministry's involvement in countering the spread of the coronavirus infection, including the WHO recommendations, the work of our agencies, and the corresponding legislative measures that are being adopted. I will bring up this issue more than once today.

There was a question as to whether any safety precautions are being taken by the Foreign Ministry.

The Foreign Ministry works with the Operational Headquarters (OH) to prevent the import and spread of the new coronavirus infection in Russia. Also, the Ministry has set up its own headquarters headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov. Decisions are being made in coordination with the Russian authorities.

A very common question is whether the diplomats' schedules have changed. All I can say is that many international events have been postponed; international events are being canceled or dates are being changed. In particular, yesterday, Russia received a notice from the President of the UN General Assembly on additional measures and changes in the General Assembly's programme in March and April. There's a proposal to reduce the number of diplomats who attend UN headquarters for the UN General Assembly meetings; they also proposed refraining from inviting participants who reside outside the state and New York City. There's also a proposal by the head of the UN General Assembly to cancel side events and to postpone or scale down the celebration of national days. An entire package of actions is proposed, and meetings are being postponed. Of course, all this affects the work of the domestic diplomats, both at the central office and for embassy staffs, and permanent missions and consulates general.

The Russian Foreign Ministry decided to reduce short-term business trips to a bare minimum. Russia's foreign missions decide on preventive measures based on the situation in the host country and in coordination with the central office.

As for our ministry, we have put several media events online. We have the technology for that.

Another very common question is how media activities are regulated given the large number of foreign correspondents in Moscow. Each correspondent received an individual answer to this question, as it concerned a particular journalist in person.

I gave you an overview of measures that are being taken by the Foreign Ministry.

I can say a few words about the current situation in general.

Over the past few days, coronavirus cases have been reported in more countries around the world. To date, the infection has affected over 119,000 people in more than 110 countries. To reiterate, the World Health Organisation declared coronavirus Covid-19 a pandemic.

Almost every country, whether affected or not by the virus, are stepping up preventive and control and restrictive measures (more stringent quarantine restrictions are being introduced, border crossings are closed, and large public events are being canceled). In particular, I would like to once again draw your attention to Italy. The Italian government has introduced a number of emergency measures, including entry/exit restrictions. Why am I bringing this up again? First, because, unfortunately, the Italian Embassy in Moscow was disseminating not entirely correct information in response to Russia's measures and warnings and, second, because the ban on domestic travel between regions and holding public events, as well as the closure of educational institutions, museums, cinemas, theatres, ski resorts and recreational sites affects large numbers of tourists.

We draw your attention to the fact that, as part of the Italian authorities' plan to curb the spread of the disease, foreign tourists arriving in Italy are being asked to return home on the same flight. Many Russians have run into this situation despite our warnings. At the same time, foreign

citizens temporarily residing in Italy are allowed to leave the country provided they do not show symptoms of the disease.

Again, we advise Russian citizens to temporarily refrain from traveling to Italy until it officially announces that the situation has stabilised. Those who are now in Italy should look to return to Russia as soon as possible and take the specific precautions recommended by the corresponding Russian agencies.

To obtain the latest information on the spread of the coronavirus, please follow our posts on the websites of our ministry and foreign missions, including our social media accounts. Of course – and I don't get tired of repeating this – check the Foreign Assistant mobile app's news feed. Please download the app and follow it. We post last-minute information there.

Assisting our citizens who are quarantined in foreign countries, remains, as always, a key priority for Russian foreign missions.

This is not the last thing I will say today on this subject, as questions from various media keep coming.

### **Update on Syria**

A dangerous escalation of tensions in the Idlib de-escalation zone was recently overcome thanks to the agreements reached by President of Russia Vladimir Putin and President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan at their meeting in Moscow on March 5.

In practical terms, the Additional Protocol to the Memorandum of September 17, 2018 made it possible to cease hostilities, as of March 6, along the existing line of contact in the de-escalation zone. The ceasefire is generally being observed, which promotes the stabilization in Idlib. In addition, the presidents made a decision on creating a security corridor along the M4 motor road and organise Russian-Turkish joint patrolling in this zone. According to reports, work on resuming traffic on the M4 is already underway.

The Russian and Turkish defence ministries are maintaining contact to ensure the implementation of the signed agreements. We hope this will help achieve sustainable stabilisation in Idlib, improve the humanitarian situation and allow IDPs to return home.

Importantly, the Additional Protocol contains provisions of principle on the commitment to Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity. The sides also noted their resolve to continue the struggle against all terrorist groups recognised as such by the UN Security Council, up to and including their elimination.

The situation in the northeast of Syria generally remains stable as a result of the implementation of the Russia-Turkey Memorandum of October 22, 2019. We consider the invigoration of the so-called ISIS "sleeping cells" and the illegal presence of the US-led international coalition to be negative variables.

Washington's policy of encouraging Kurdish separatism and stealing Syrian mineral resources does not help enhance security in northern Syria.

Serious apprehensions are caused by the lack of progress in resolving problems at the refugee camps in al-Howl and Rukban that are located on territories outside Damascus's control. We are urging the sides controlling these areas to at least meet the basic needs of their IDPs and to prevent a humanitarian disaster.

We are concerned about Israel's continuing practice of delivering unilateral air strikes at Syrian territory, violating the sovereignty of neighbouring Arab countries. The most recent attack came from Israeli aircraft from Lebanon's air space on March 5. One Syrian army serviceman was killed and over ten were wounded as a result. We believe these arbitrary military actions undermine regional security and lead to the escalation of tensions.

At the same time, we believe it is necessary to step up humanitarian aid to Syria and help its refugees return home against the backdrop of the general stabilisation in the country. We note the coordination of efforts by Damascus and Beirut on these issues. Thus, last week Lebanese Minister of Social Affairs and Minister of Tourism Ramzi Musharrafia paid a working visit to Damascus to hold consultations with Head of the Syrian Coordinating Headquarters on Refugee Return Hussein Makhlof.

In addition, we support the development of effective cooperation between the Syrian Government and international humanitarian agencies. Recently, Damascus was visited by ICRC President Peter Maurer, UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore and Executive Director of the UN WFP David Beasley. Syria is also receiving aid on a bilateral basis. According to reports, China is giving Syria its fifth humanitarian grant worth \$14 million. Japan also announced its intention to give Syria humanitarian assistance of about \$5 million via the agency of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN WFP.

We welcome the gradual normalisation of Syria's contacts with the Arab countries. We believe this process helps enhance regional security and stability.

### **Update on Yemen**

Moscow continues to watch closely the military, political and humanitarian situation in the Republic of Yemen.

Unfortunately, the relatively long period of time during which tensions have been easing across the board seems to have come to an end. According to incoming reports, there are fierce clashes in the Marib and Al Jawf governorates, while the aircraft of the [Saudi Arabia-led] Arab coalition that sided with Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi have again started to bomb the positions of the Houthi Ansar Allah movement. In turn, the Houthis have resumed shelling areas in Saudi Arabia.

No progress has been made so far in implementing the Stockholm Agreement, which the parties to the conflict reached in December 2018. Many provisions of this agreement relating, in particular, to disengaging the troops in the area near the city of Hudaydah and lifting the siege of Taiz have remained only on paper.

It is still important to implement the Riyadh Agreement between President Hadi's Government and the Southern Transitional Council of November 5, 2019. We believe not only the situation in the south of Yemen depends on this but also the prospects for ensuring stability across the country.

We reaffirm Russia's principled stand on the need to end the armed conflict as soon as possible and begin inclusive intra-Yemen talks under the auspices of the UN. We also firmly believe that progress towards resolving numerous problems facing Yemen, including its administrative divisions and government structure, is only possible through a dialogue and respect for the interests of all of the country's leading political forces.

We will further do all we can, in contact with involved and interested parties, to facilitate the efforts to achieve this objective.

### **Project to build Hidase hydroelectric dam on the Nile**

**Question from Egyptian Ten-TV Channel:** The dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia has worsened of late because of the Hidase dam project on the Nile River and Ethiopia's refusal to sign an agreement to regulate the operation of the dam. At the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, Russia said it could mediate in resolving this dispute. Can Russia propose this initiative again, given that the situation has escalated?

**Maria Zakharova:** First, I would like to note that relations between Russia and Egypt and Russia and Ethiopia have traditionally been friendly. We are keeping a close eye on the situation that is evolving around the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Hidase Dam) on the Blue Nile River. Russia is interested in that Cairo and Addis Ababa resolve their differences as soon as possible through negotiations and using existing mechanisms as equitable partners and in compliance with international law, and also taking into account the legitimate interests of each country.

We will further assist the efforts to seek a mutually acceptable compromise in contact with all relevant parties.

### **Fake media stories on the possibility of sending Russian troops to Afghanistan**

We have noted an online publication about a statement made by Presidential Special Representative for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov at a briefing at Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency. He reportedly spoke about the possibility of sending Russian troops to Afghanistan to fight terrorism there should the Afghan authorities request it.

I would like to state with all responsibility and deliberately using such wording that this assertion is absolutely untrue, and that the Russian special representative never made it in any form. Not one single media outlet whose representatives attended the briefing, except this online publication, has published such headlines, stories or data. At best, we can perceive this as an extremely unsuccessful interpretation of the Russian diplomat's words. I hope that we are not talking about a deliberate distortion or fake news. I am more convinced that those who prepared this story for the website had trouble choosing the appropriate wording.

Everyone knows the Russian position on this matter: Under no circumstances, has Russia planned to send its troops to Afghanistan nor does it intend to do this. One can only talk about the possibility of expanded cooperation with Afghanistan in the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking through current collaboration in the military-technical sphere and in the field of training skilled specialists. Everyone is well aware of the forms of such collaboration. We have regularly published material on this matter.

We are urging the media to be more professional and to fulfil their duties in a highly responsible manner because such interpretations and even distortions of data and statements can spell major problems during the interpretation of these stories in various countries. We are always ready to give answers to the issues of interest and to provide any additional explanations.

### **Continued discrimination against the Russian language in Ukraine**

We have pointed out more than once that the Ukrainian authorities' policy of forceful Ukrainisation not only violates the general international norms in the fight of minority rights, but is also splitting society and fomenting hatred in the already polarised Ukrainian society.

There are many examples of this. For example, just a matter of days ago, nationalists launched a hate campaign on Lvov Lyceum No. 45 for announcing the enrolment of primary school pupils in Russian-language classes. Some social media users even called for torching the school.

This uncivilised nationalism looks absurd in the 21st century in a country that claims to be committed to European values and seeks to join the European Union.

The Ukrainian authorities go to stupid lengths in their zealous fight against all things Russian. In late February, the notorious National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine banned the retransmission of three Russian channels, citing "the protection of Ukraine's information space from the audio, video and print propaganda of the aggressor country." This

serious wording could hint that the banned channels broadcast high-profile political or analytical programmes which can be perceived as promoting the Russian point of view, or talk shows, analytical and weekly programmes on Ukrainian agenda. Not at all, the shocking ban was imposed on Evrokino (EuroCinema), TopShop TV and Zoopark (Zoo) which are guilty of broadcasting in Russian.

The Ukrainian authorities' actions show open disregard for the Ukrainian Constitution, whose Article 10 guarantees the protection of the Russian language. Moreover, Kiev is not honouring its commitments under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, the Concluding Document of the CSCE meeting in Vienna (1986) and the Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE (1990). The list of international documents disregarded in Kiev is much longer.

We once again urge international human rights organisations to give a clear and appropriate assessment of Ukraine's violation of the Russian speakers' rights, and make Kiev abandon its policy of discrimination against the Russian language.

## **The 52nd anniversary of the declaration of independence of the Republic of Mauritius**

On March 12, the Republic of Mauritius is celebrating the 52nd anniversary of the declaration of independence. It is common knowledge that Portuguese explorers discovered Mauritius Island in the early 16th century. The Dutch occupied it in 1598, in 1715 it was taken over by France, and the United Kingdom established control over the island from 1810. On March 12, 1968, Mauritius was declared an independent state, within the Commonwealth of Nations.

On March 17, 1968, several days after the liberation of Mauritius from colonial dependence, our two countries established diplomatic relations that continue to develop successfully.

Nevertheless, the process of Mauritius' decolonisation cannot be considered absolutely complete. For many years, this country's diplomacy has been prioritising the issue of restoring the sovereignty of Port Louis over territories, sequestered by the United Kingdom in 1965, or the Chagos Archipelago. By the way, we have repeatedly commented on this matter.

London is unwilling to address this problem and to honour the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 of December 1960), as well as UN General Assembly Resolution 2066 of December 1965 that urges the United Kingdom to refrain from any action violating the sovereignty of Mauritius.

In June 2017, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution seeking the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on the issue. This launched the relevant court proceedings, and, in February 2019, the International Court ruled that the decolonisation of Mauritius was not duly completed as long as the disputed islands remained under British rule.

In May 2019, the majority of UN General Assembly members, including Russia, supported a new Mauritius draft resolution on the legal consequences of the Chagos Archipelago's separation from the territory of Mauritius. Citing the International Court's decision, the document demanded that London withdraw its colonial administration from Chagos no later than six months after the resolution's approval. Unfortunately, the United Kingdom declined to fulfil the UN General Assembly's resolution.

We welcome the friendly nature of relations between Russia and Mauritius. In November 2017, Vishnu Lutchmeenaraidoo, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade of Mauritius, paid a working visit to Moscow. He had very fond memories of

various meetings and of Russia in general. Notably, he had talks with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. On March 17, 2018, the heads of both countries' foreign policy agencies exchanged congratulatory messages in connection with the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

On October 24, 2019, President of Russia Vladimir Putin had a meeting with Acting President of the Republic of Mauritius Barlen Vyapoory on the sidelines of the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi.

We would like to congratulate our friends on their national holiday and to voice confidence that the traditional relations of friendship and fruitful cooperation between our states will continue to develop successfully for the benefit of both nations and in the interests of peace and stability in the East African region.

### **The Foreign Ministry's presentation of the UNOCT project on the exchange of air traveller data**

On March 5, the Foreign Ministry hosted a presentation highlighting a global project on the exchange of air traveller data, launched by the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT). Held at the initiative of the Department for New Challenges and Threats, the event was intended for representatives of Russian security agencies.

Chief of the Countering Terrorist Travel and Aviation Security Section Jelle Postma presented the relevant software that the UNOCT suggests the member-states use to track suspected terrorists.

The participants also discussed some other practical aspects of Russia-UN cooperation on counter-terrorism and crime prevention, primarily related to countering foreign terrorists and the consolidation of border security for this purpose.

Russia reiterated its full support for the UNOCT's antiterrorist efforts.