

Ukraine, US, UK behind Moscow attack: Russia

Putin And FSB Chief Admit To Islamist Radicals' Role, But Claim They Were Aided By Kyiv & West 'Special Services'

Moscow: The director of Russia's most powerful security agency said on Tuesday that he believed Ukraine, along with the US and Britain, were involved in the attack on a concert hall just outside Moscow that killed at least 139 people.

Ukraine, which has denied any link with Friday's attack, dismissed the Russian accusations as lies. Islamic State, the militant group that once sought control over swathes of Iraq and Syria, claimed responsibility for the mass shooting.

"We believe that the action was prepared by both the Islamist radicals themselves and was facilitated by Western special services," Alexander Bortnikov, director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), said. "The special services of Ukraine are directly related to this," Bortnikov said, adding Kyiv had helped prepare Islamist radicals at an unidentified location in West Asia.

When asked by Russian reporters if Ukraine and its allies, the United States and Britain, were involved in the attack on the concert hall, Bortnikov said: "We think that's the case. In any case, we are now talking about the texture that we have. This is general information."

Bortnikov, 72, who has served as head of the FSB since 2008, said Russia had yet to identify those who specifically ordered the deadliest attack inside Russia for two decades, but said that retaliatory steps would be taken. He offered no specific evidence for the claims, which hardliners in Moscow could use to justify an escalation of the war in Ukraine.

Since President Vladimir Putin sent forces into Ukraine in 2022, the Kremlin has cast



Emergency services personnel at the burnt-out concert venue in Moscow

Zelensky replaces top security official

President Zelensky sacked the secretary of Ukraine's national security council and replaced him with the head of his foreign spy agency Tuesday in a new shakeup that follows the overhaul of the military high command last month. No reason for the changes were given. Oleksiy Danilov had held the post since Oct 2019. The council has a coordinating role on issues of national security and defence under the president and comprises the top political, security and defence chiefs. REUTERS

the West — and particularly the US and the UK — as enemies. Russia has repeatedly said that blasts on the Nord Stream gas pipelines under the Baltic Sea in Sept 2022 were carried out by the US and the UK. Washington and London have denied those accusations.

On Monday, three days after the massacre, Putin said for the first time that radical Islamists had carried out the attack but that the attackers we-

Ukraine: A third of Russia ships affected

Ukraine has sunk or disabled a third of all Russian warships in the Black Sea in just over two years of war, the navy spokesman said Tuesday, a heavy blow to Moscow's military capability. Ukraine's navy spokesman Dmytro Pletenchuk said the latest strike on Saturday hit Russian amphibious landing ship Kostiantyn Olshansky that was resting in dock in Sevastopol in Russia-occupied Crimea. The ship was part of the Ukraine navy before Russia captured it while annexing Crimea in 2014. AP

re trying to flee to Ukraine, and he questioned why Islamists would want to attack Russia at this particular time without being nudged to by others. "We know that the crime was carried out by the hand of radical Islamists..." he said. "We want to know who ordered it."

Analysts have said that the Kremlin may be seeking to deflect attention from what appears to be a startling intelligence failure. S. REUTERS & NYT

India backs Philippines amid muscle-flexing by China in SCS

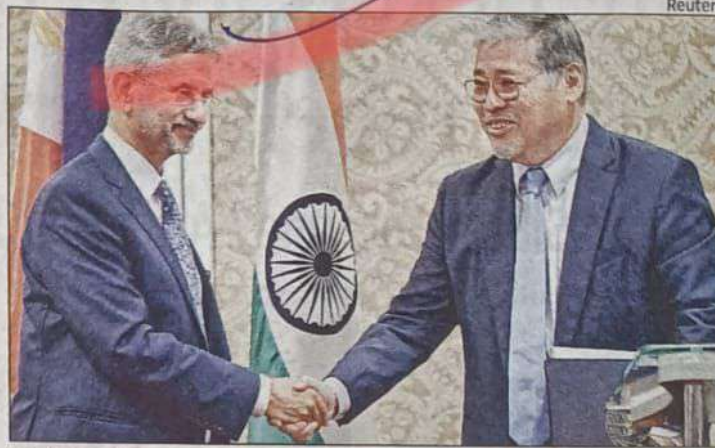
But Stops Short Of Specifically Asking China To Follow UN Order

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New Delhi: Amid increasing China-Philippines tensions in South China Sea (SCS), foreign minister S Jaishankar Tuesday backed the southeast Asian country's efforts to uphold its sovereignty after a meeting with his counterpart Enrique Manalo in Manila.

The meeting took place a day after the Philippines summoned the Chinese ambassador and lodged a protest against China's "aggressive actions" in the SCS, nearly 90% of which is claimed by Beijing. Last week, US also condemned China's "dangerous" actions against what it called lawful Philippine maritime operations.

Calling for strict adherence to a rules-based order, Jaishankar reiterated "firmly India's support to the Philippines for upholding its national sovereignty". The minister underlined the significance of UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) 1982 as the



Foreign affairs minister S Jaishankar with Philippines' secretary of foreign affairs Enrique Manalo in Manila, Philippines, on Tuesday

constitution of the seas, calling upon all parties to adhere to it in its entirety, both in letter and in spirit.

However, unlike after their last meeting in India in June 2023, the ministers stopped short of asking China specifically to abide by a 2016 legally binding ruling that strongly refuted China's expansive claims in its dispute with the Philippines. India had then joined Manila for the first time, as stated in a joint statement, in categorically asking China to abide by the 2016 Arbitral Award on the SCS that Beijing continues to ignore.

The UNCLOS arbitration tribunal had called Beijing's nine-dash line, which claims sovereignty over 90% of SCS water, and its reclamation activities in the Philippine waters unlawful.

Jaishankar said as a nation deeply invested in that region because of its Act East policy and Indo-Pacific vision, India follows all developments with great interest. "We are strongly supportive of ASEAN's centrality, cohesion and unity. We are also convinced that the progress and prosperity of this region is best served by staunch adherence to a rules-based order," said the minister. Jaishankar also briefed Manalo about the Indian Navy's deployments in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea to counter ongoing threats.

India has been looking to ramp up ties with the Philippines, most notably in the defence sector, and has offered Manila a concessional line of credit that could help it meet its requirements.

Third party not in a position to interfere in dispute: China

Beijing: China Tuesday urged India to respect its sovereignty claims over South China Sea where it is locked in a bitter row with Philippines, saying that no "third party" will be in a position to interfere in maritime disputes between the two countries.

"Maritime disputes are issues between the countries concerned and any third party is not in a position to interfere," Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said. "We urge relevant side to face facts of issues of South China Sea, respect the sovereignty and maritime interests of China and the efforts made by the countries in upholding peace and stability in the South China Sea," he added.

Jian was replying to a question at a media briefing on the remarks made by external affairs minister S Jaishankar that India supports the sovereignty of Philippines.

China claims most of the South China Sea as its own, while Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan have counterclaims. PTI

Bridge collapses after snag-hit freighter rams it in US; 6 missing

Mayday Call By All-Indian Ship Crew Saves Lives

Baltimore: A massive freight ship stacked high with containers smashed into a bridge while sailing out of Baltimore early on Tuesday, sending cars and people into the river below and closing one of the busiest ports on the US eastern seaboard.

The entire 22-member crew of the cargo ship are Indians who alerted authorities about a "power issue" before the collision. Rescuers pulled out two survivors, one of whom was hospitalised, and were searching for more in the Patapsco river after huge metal spans of the 2.6km Francis Scott Key Bridge crumpled into the icy water at around 1.30am.



Dali crashed into Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge, causing it to collapse and taking down vehicles and people. Six of the 8 workers who stopped traffic to the bridge after hearing the mayday call were missing

Officials halted the flow of traffic on the bridge between the mayday call and the collision, Maryland governor Wes Moore said at a briefing. "By being able to stop cars from coming over the bridge, these people are heroes. They saved

lives last night," he said.

Eight people were on the bridge at the time and six remained unaccounted for, the state's transportation secretary said hours after the collision, which closed one of the busiest ports in US. A prelimi-

nary investigation pointed to an accident, Moore said, and there were no credible reports of terrorism. Ship traffic was suspended at Baltimore port until further notice. AGENCIES

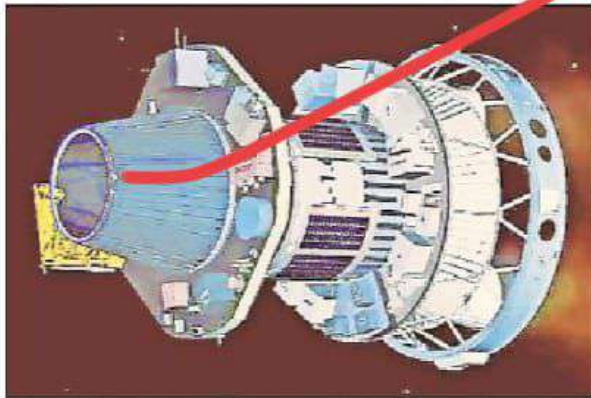
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ISRO rocket achieves zero orbital debris mission

BENGALURU, Mar 26 (PTI)

ISRO on Monday said its Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) has accomplished zero orbital debris mission, and described it "another milestone."

This was achieved on March 21, when the PSLV Orbital Experimental Module-3 (POEM-3) met its "fiery end" through a re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere. "The PSLV-C58/XPoSat mission has practically left zero debris in orbit," the space agency said. The PSLV-C58 mission was accomplished on January 1. According to ISRO, after completing the primary mission of injecting all satellites into their desired orbits, the terminal stage of



PSLV was transformed into a 3-axis stabilised platform, the POEM-3.

The stage was deorbited from 650 km to 350 km, which

facilitated its early re-entry, and was passivated to remove residual propellants to minimise any accidental break-up risks, it said. POEM-3 was config-

ured with a total of nine different experimental payloads to carry out technology demonstrations and scientific experiments on the newly developed indigenous systems. Out of these, six payloads were delivered by Non-Government Entities (NGEs) through Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre. The mission objectives of these payloads were met in a month. The orbital altitude of the upper stage continued to decay under the influence of natural forces, primarily atmospheric drag with the module (NORAD ID 58695) expected to have impacted the North Pacific Ocean (Lat 6.4 N and Long 158.7 W) on March 21, 2024, at 14:04

UTC (19:34 hrs IST), ISRO said. Through the POEM, which serves as a very cost-effective platform for carrying out short-duration space-borne experiments, ISRO has opened up new vistas for academia, startups, and NGEs to experiment with their new payloads, it said. This novel opportunity has been effectively utilised by numerous startups, universities, and NGEs for carrying out experiments in space, which included electric thrusters, satellite dispensers, and star-tracking.

POEM also incorporates new features such as total avionics in single-chain configuration, industrial-grade components in avionics packages.

US & Israeli defence chiefs meet to discuss Gaza plans as tensions between allies spike

Washington: US defence leaders met with Israel's minister of defence on Tuesday as the US warned against a ground invasion of the southern Gaza city of Rafah, but rising tensions between the two allies put any progress in question.

In remarks at the start of the Pentagon meeting, defence secretary Lloyd Austin said they would discuss alternative ways to target Hamas in Rafah, and he described civilian casualties in Gaza as "far too high" and aid deliveries as "far too low." But he also repeated the belief that Israel has the right to defend itself and the US would always be there to help.

Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant, meanwhile, emphasised the ongoing threats to Israel, and said the meeting would address ways to destroy Ha-



Gaza authorities said Tuesday that several people had drowned while trying to retrieve airdropped aid that had fallen into Mediterranean Sea, the latest such tragic incident

mas and get the Israeli hostages released. Austin made no mention of threats to limit or condition future military aid to Israel on humanitarian gains, a growing sentiment among members of Congress. And Gallant only said that the meeting would include discussions about the important cooperation between the two co-

Israel recalls truce team from Doha, official blames Hamas for 'dead end'

Israel has recalled its negotiators from Doha after deeming mediated talks on a Gaza truce "at a dead end" due to "delusional" demands by Hamas, a senior Israeli official said on Tuesday. The official, who is close to the Mossad spymaster, accused Hamas' Gaza leader Yahya Sinwar of sabotaging the diplomacy "as part of a wider effort to inflame this war over Ramzan". The warring sides had stepped up negotiations, mediated by Qatar and Egypt, on a six-week suspension of Israel's offensive in return for the proposed release of 40 of the 130 hostages still held by Hamas in Gaza. REUTERS

untries to "ensure Israel's military edge and capabilities."

The meeting, which also included chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, comes as tensions have spiked between the US and Israel, stemming from the widespread global frustration over the escalating humanitarian crisis in Gaza and political discord surrounding ef-

orts to achieve a cease-fire.

On Monday, Israeli PM Netanyahu cancelled a high-level visit to Washington this week in protest over the UNSC decision to call for an immediate ceasefire. The US abstained, deciding not to use veto power, and the resolution passed 14-0. Israel says it cannot defeat Hamas without going into Rafah. NYT

Respect our claim over SCS: China to India

■ By K J M Varma

BEIJING, Mar 26 (PTI)

CHINA on Tuesday urged India to respect its sovereignty claims and maritime interests over the disputed South China Sea where it is currently locked in a bitter row with the Philippines, saying that "third parties" have no right "whatsoever" to interfere.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said this while replying to a question at a media briefing here on the remarks made by External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar that India supports the sovereignty of the Philippines. "Maritime disputes

are issues between countries concerned. Third parties have no right to interfere whatsoever," Lin said.

"We urge relevant parties to squarely face the facts and truth on the South China Sea issue, and respect China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests and the efforts of regional countries to keep the South China Sea peaceful and stable," the Foreign Ministry spokesperson said. Jaishankar is currently in Manila on an official visit during which he held talks with Philippines Foreign Secretary Enrique Manalo.

India firmly supports the Philippines in upholding its national sovereignty and wants to explore

new areas of cooperation, including in defence and security, Jaishankar said earlier in Manila amid the Southeast Asian nation's maritime dispute with China in the South China Sea.

In his joint press conference with Manalo, Jaishankar while answering a question on the China-Philippines dispute over the South China Sea said, "UNCLOS 1982 is particularly important in that regard as the Constitution of the seas. All parties must adhere to it in its entirety, both in letter and in spirit. I take this opportunity to firmly reiterate India's support to the Philippines for upholding its national sovereignty."

At 34.6°C, it's hottest day of season. Today is set to be worse, says IMD

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: The city recorded the hottest day of the season on Tuesday after the maximum temperature rose to 34.6 degrees Celsius, three degrees above normal.

This was 1.6 degrees higher than Monday's day temperature recorded at base station Safdarjung.

The Met department has predicted that mercury is likely to touch 36 degrees Celsius by Wednesday.

However, a drizzle on Friday may lead to a brief relief as the temperature may drop by one-two degrees.

India Meteorological Department's (IMD) data shows Pitampura was the hottest station at 35.9 degrees Celsius on Tuesday, followed by Najafgarh at 35.8 and Ridge at 35.2. The minimum temperature was 17.7 degrees Celsius.

Kuldeep Srivastava, head



Anindya Chattopadhyay

of IMD's Regional Weather Forecasting Centre, said, "Maximum temperature did not drop on Tuesday due to the presence of higher clouds. As there was clear sky and light winds, the day temperature saw a rise."

The day temperature is expected to rise in the next

two days, he added.

IMD says the maximum temperature may hover around 36 degrees Celsius on Wednesday and Thursday. "However, a western disturbance would impact the region from March 28 night to March 30 morning. The hilly areas are expected to witness

The Met department predicted that mercury is likely to touch 36 degrees Celsius by Wednesday. A drizzle on Friday may lead to a brief relief as the temperature may drop by one-two degrees

intense rain activity and heavy rainfall is likely in isolated places in Jammu and Kashmir," said Srivastava.

"Delhi may witness drizzling on March 29. Due to cloudiness under the influence of a western disturbance, the day temperature may dip by one to two degrees," he added. After hovering around 35 degrees Celsius on Friday, the maximum temperature may dip to 34 degrees on Saturday and further to 33 on Sunday.