

SIBNEFT has bought Belarus' minority stake in Slavneft, boosting its chances of acquiring the majority stake. — PAGE 5



RUSSIA



SERBIANS went to the polls to vote for a new president Sunday, amid fears the ballot may fail again. — PAGE 7

Briefs

Canadians expelled

OTTAWA — Canada and Russia have both recently expelled two of each other's diplomats for allegedly engaging in activities inconsistent with their status, a term which is short-hand for spying, officials said Saturday.

In Ottawa, a foreign ministry spokesman said Russia had last week ordered two Canadian diplomats to leave Moscow but he denied the suggestion they had been spying.

"Not at all. Russia felt obliged to request the departure of two diplomats whose activities had been beyond reproach," Reynald Doiron said.

"We are clearly disappointed with this turn of events given that in all other respects the bilateral relationship is strong and growing," he said.

Moscow reacted after Ottawa decided a few weeks ago to insist on the withdrawal of two Russian diplomats who had "been involved in activities in Canada inconsistent with their diplomatic status," said Doiron.

Bush, Putin talk

WASHINGTON — President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke by telephone on Friday and discussed the importance of making North Korea give up its nuclear weapons program, the White House said.

The United States is applying pressure to North Korea by working in partnership with Russia and China — both of which have called on Pyongyang to comply with its treaty obligations — as well as Japan and South Korea.

Putin had just returned from a trip to China, India and Kyrgyzstan. Bush and Putin spoke for 14 minutes.

"The two of them discussed the situation on the Korean Peninsula and the importance of North Korea making certain that they comply with the international community in a denuclearized Korean Peninsula," said White House spokesman Ari Fleischer.

Air strike ends

Air traffic controllers in several Siberian cities who monitor flights between Moscow and Central Asia and Russia's Far East suspended a hunger strike after officials agreed to negotiate their demands, Russian media reported Saturday.

The strike demanding higher wages involved at least 100 people and closed some swaths of western Siberian airspace. The controllers suspended the protest on Saturday after aviation officials in Moscow agreed to talks. They said the protest would resume on Dec. 22 if their demands are not met. — Reuters, AP

Russia slams Britain over Zakayev

The Chechen rebel is released on bail ahead of extradition hearing

By Andrew Cawthorne
Reuters

LONDON — Russia reacted furiously Friday to Britain's release on bail of top Chechen rebel envoy Akhmed Zakayev — wanted by Moscow for alleged terror crimes — after his arrival in London from Denmark.

Acting on a request from Russia, which is waging a lengthy war against separatists in its southern Chechen province, British police arrested Zakayev as he flew into London's Heathrow Airport on Thursday.

But he was later released on bail pending an extradition hearing at a London magistrates' court on Wednesday.

"What if another terrorist had come to London — [Osama] bin Laden, who, like Zakayev, is under an international search?" said Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, at a Lisbon meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. "And if bin Laden had said new terrorist acts were being prepared against civilian targets in the United States, how then he be dealt with? Like Zakayev? Take him into the police station and then let him out on the street?"



BRITISH ACTRESS Vanessa Redgrave speaks during a media conference in London after she posted bail for senior Chechen official Akhmed Zakayev late Friday. Zakayev is wanted by Russian authorities on charges of murder and armed rebellion.

Zakayev has said the only way to prevent militant attacks in Russia is to hold political talks with fugitive rebels on a settlement to war in Chechnya. Russian officials say this shows that rebel leaders are preparing such attacks.

Current European Union president Denmark had arrested Zakayev while he was there for a meeting of Chechen exiles, but released him earlier this week after 34 days in custody, saying Moscow's evidence was insufficient for extradition.

Russia also lashed out at Denmark on Friday.

"Sadly, we are forced to note that behind the connivance of the Danish authorities is their position as a point of support for Chechen terrorists and their accomplices," a Foreign Ministry statement said. "How many more innocent people must be sacrificed for 'Danish democracy' before Copenhagen understands it is responsible for carrying out a policy of 'double standards' in the fight against terrorism?"

Zakayev, a top aide to fugitive

Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov, has won high-profile support from British actress and human rights activist Vanessa Redgrave. She paid his bail so he could walk free before next week's hearing.

"Mr. Zakayev is not a warlord and he is not a terrorist," the Oscar-winning actress told a news conference in London.

She said Zakayev, who was scheduled to attend the news conference but did not turn up, had contacted British authorities via his lawyers before his arrival to tell them he was on his way to Heathrow.

Redgrave said Zakayev had a valid multiple entry British visa, granted in July, but declined to say whether he had applied for, or would apply for, asylum. He had gone to London to join his family, and was now with them.

Zakayev's arrival and Moscow's response puts Britain's stance on Chechnya under the international spotlight.

Prime Minister Tony Blair's government has put great store in building relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin despite sharp criticism of Moscow by human rights groups for alleged abuses in Chechnya.

Blair and Putin spoke for 15 minutes by phone on Friday but a spokeswoman for Blair would not say if the "wide range of international issues" they discussed included Zakayev. ■

Top Chechen official survives ambush

The Associated Press

VLADIKAVKAZ — A top Chechen administrator escaped unharmed after his car was ambushed by gunmen firing submachine guns and grenades, an official in the Chechen administration said Sunday.

Usman Masayev, Chechnya's first deputy administration head, was traveling Saturday in the town of Mairtup in the Kurchaloi region, 30 km east of the capital Grozny, when three unidentified gunmen opened fire on his car, the official said. Masayev's driver and bodyguard

were wounded, but Masayev escaped unharmed. One of the attackers was killed by the bodyguard and the others escaped, he said.

One Russian soldier was killed and two were wounded in 10 attacks by rebels on Russian positions and outposts over the past 24 hours, the official said. Two soldiers were killed Saturday when their jeep was attacked by rebels, he said. In Grozny, a Russian soldier and an OMON paramilitary policeman opened fire on Chechen civilians, wounding three, the official said. They had apparently been drinking. ■

Dirty tactics seen in vote

The Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG — Voters in St. Petersburg went to the polls Sunday to elect a new Legislative Assembly following a campaign marked by trickery and accusations of vote-buying.

Hundreds of fake leaflets, along with money and vodka distributed in the names of some candidates, clouded the campaign, which takes place every four years.

In one fake leaflet, a candidate demanded an end to the war in Chechnya. In another, a candidate proposed giving Kaliningrad back to Germany and a third threatened

to commit suicide if not elected.

The leaflets were alleged to have come from a block formed by the parties Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces, who joined forces to challenge supporters of the city's governor Vladimir Yakovlev.

"I'm scared to think that someone can take my seat in the Legislative Assembly," said a leaflet purportedly from Mikhail Amosov, the leader of the Yabloko faction in the city's parliament.

"I've taken the firm decision to commit suicide if on Dec. 8 my electoral district doesn't support my candidacy," the leaflet said. "Please vote for me." ■

Russia may extend draft to students

Reuters

Russia may strip university students of their exemption from mandatory military service as it struggles to fill the ranks of a huge,

cash-strapped army, a senior officer in charge of conscription said Friday.

Col-Gen. Vasily Smirnov said 89 percent of those who were called up this season were exempt, and the system could now be reexamined. ■

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