

Security

'Hybrid threats' from Russia, IS: spy chiefs

BERLIN, May 14. (Agencies): European intelligence chiefs warned Monday that Russia is actively seeking to undermine their democracies by disinformation, cyberattacks and more traditional means of espionage.

The heads of Britain and Germany's domestic intelligence agencies, as well as the European Union and NATO's top security officials, pinpointed Moscow as the prime source of hybrid threats to Europe, citing attempts to manipulate elections, steal sensitive data and spark a coup in Montenegro. They also cited the nerve agent attack against a former Russian spy in Britain this year that Britain has blamed on Russia.

"Our respect for Russia's people cannot and must not stop us from calling out and pushing back on the Kremlin's flagrant breaches of international rules," the head of Britain's MI5 spy agency, **Andrew Parker**, told an intelligence gathering in Berlin.

Parker said the March 4 attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury was swiftly followed by Russian attempts to divert blame. That resulted in at least 30 alternative theories about the attack being spread by Russian authorities and media.



Parker

"Whatever nonsense they conjure up, the case is clear," said Parker.

He later told reporters that since allied governments were first briefed on Russia's involvement in the attack by the British government, "the case, if anything, has got stronger since then."

Germany's domestic intelligence chief, Hans-Georg Maassen, said his agency, known as BfV, blames Russian authorities for orchestrating a persistent cyberattack aimed at stealing sensitive data so it can be used in future intelligence campaigns, such as what happened with the Democratic National Committee emails leaked during the 2016 US presidential election campaign.

Maassen said authorities are particularly concerned about the possible funding of extremist groups aiming to divide European societies, and he called for greater awareness of hybrid attacks to counter such threats.

Manipulate

Sir Julian King, the EU's security commissioner, warned that social media had "turbocharged" state actors' ability to spread disinformation, citing the recent revelations about Cambridge Analytica's gathering of personal data from Facebook users to help manipulate elections.

King warned of future threats posed by sophisticated fake videos that are indiscernible from real footage, calling it an example of a "deadly weapon of mass disinformation" that societies need to find ways of becoming resilient to.

He also said the European Commission is working with social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter to better inform users about why they are seeing certain posts and who is paying for them, to help protect against disinformation campaigns by groups or governments outside the country.

NATO's assistant secretary general for intelligence and security, Arndt Freytag von Loringhoven, said the price of launching hybrid attacks needs to increase, citing the expulsion of 150 undeclared spies by Britain and its allies in the wake of the Salisbury attack.

Intelligence chiefs also noted the continued threat posed by Islamist extremism and the need to cooperate closely among European agencies, despite Britain's departure from the EU next year.

Parker, whose speech in Berlin was the first by a serving MI5 director outside Britain, said security agencies had thwarted 12 terrorist plots in the U.K. since Parliament was attacked in March 2017.

"We remain unwaveringly and absolutely committed to working together with European partners," he said, calling for security cooperation to be enshrined in future treaties between Britain and the EU.

Asked about whether disinformation played a role in Britain's Brexit referendum two years ago, Parker said: "I'm not aware of any information that suggests that the outcome was determined by any sort of interference."

He declined to say whether MI5 had registered any attempts at influencing the outcome.

Suited

Maassen, his German counterpart, said the Brexit referendum likely prompted spy chief in some countries "to nearly laugh their heads off" because it suited their interests.

On the question of foreign funding for political parties in the country — an issue that has been repeatedly raised in connection with the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany party — Maassen said: "There is no information I can give to you."

Beside the threat from militant Islamists, including Islamic State operating in Syria and Iraq, Parker described Russia as a hostile state which was seeking to undermine the West, though he said he had no argument with the Russian people and that he had once studied Russian.

Russia under President Vladimir Putin, he said, had sought to regain the clout it lost after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 by carrying out "aggressive and pernicious actions" with its military and intelligence services.

Parker listed Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, Russian meddling in the US and French presidential elections, a coup attempt in Montenegro and cyber attacks against the West as examples of what he called the Kremlin's unacceptable behaviour.

"Instead of becoming a respected great nation it risks becoming a more isolated pariah," Parker said.

Britain blames Russia for the poisoning of Sergei Skripal, a former colonel in Russian military intelligence who betrayed dozens of agents to Britain's MI6 foreign spy service. Skripal and his daughter Yulia were found unconscious on a bench in the cathedral city of Salisbury on March 4.

Britain said the Skripals were attacked with a military-grade nerve agent from the Novichok group of poisons, developed by the Soviet Union in the 1970s and '80s.

Moscow denied any involvement in the first known use of an offensive nerve agent on European soil since World War Two, though the attack sparked the biggest Western expulsion of Russian diplomats since the height of the Cold War.

Russian officials suggested Britain had carried out the attack to stoke anti-Russian hysteria.

Hans-Georg Maassen, head of Germany's BfV domestic intelligence agency, said Moscow was behind a series of cyber attacks carried out by a Russian hacking group called APT28.



Migrants gather as they receive food aboard rescue ship MV Aquarius, off the coast of Sicily on May 14. Some 73 migrants of various nationalities, including women and children were rescued by MV Aquarius on May 12. The rescue vessel which has been chartered by SOS-Mediterranee and Doctors Without Borders (MSF) is heading to the Italian port of Messina. (AFP)



Left to right: Liberal Democrat MP Nick Clegg, Conservative MP Nicky Morgan and former British foreign secretary David Miliband deliver a joint speech on Brexit and trade in Rainham, Essex on May 14. (AFP)

Britain

Settle border by June: France

Brexit clock ticking: EU

BRUSSELS, May 14. (Agencies): The European Union on Monday warned Britain time was running out to seal a Brexit deal this autumn and ensure London does not crash out of the bloc next March adding to pressure on Prime Minister Theresa May.

But May's spokesman said the "focus is on getting this right" rather than meeting a deadline.

Diplomats and officials in Brussels note little progress in Brexit negotiations since the EU leaders last met, raising doubt about whether the bloc and London would be able to mark another milestone at the next top-level summit on June 28-29.

"We are concerned that there is no clear stance, no clear position from the British. The clock is ticking," German EU Minister Michael Roth told his EU peers meeting in Brussels.

"We need now to be making substantial progress, but that is not happening. What is worrying us in particular is the Northern Ireland question where we expect a substantial accommodation from the British side."

At home, May is stuck between a rock and a hard place with staunch Brexit supporters pushing to sever ties with the EU and others advocating keeping close customs cooperation with the bloc to reduce frictions in future trade.

May's spokesman said London was working on two options for post-Brexit customs cooperation.

Under a customs partnership, Britain could collect tariffs on goods entering the country on the EU's behalf. Under a second idea, for a streamlined customs arrangement, traders on an approved list would be able to cross borders freely with the aid of automated technology.

But the EU has said London must come up with a solution for the Irish border conundrum and highlights that has not happened. Both sides worry that reinstating a physical border between EU-member Ireland and Britain's province of Northern Ireland

— including to manage customs — could revive violence there.

Other outstanding issues include guarantees for expatriate rights, agreeing on security cooperation and trade rules after Brexit, to ensure a deal is in place when Britain leaves in March 2019, and an adaptation period ends at the end of 2020.

Also:

DUBLIN: The European Union should set a "final deadline" of next month for Britain to resolve the conundrum of its border with Ireland after Brexit, France's top diplomat said Sunday.

The issue has become a major source of contention within Brexit negotiations.

London has committed to avoid a "hard border" with checkpoints between Northern Ireland, part of the UK, and EU-member Ireland, which all sides agree is vital to maintaining the 1998 Good Friday peace accords.

But Britain has also said it will not enter into a customs union with the EU post-Brexit and has been urged to find a solution to reconcile the two positions.

The EU has suggested a "backstop" proposal, in which only Northern Ireland would stay in a customs union with the EU post-Brexit.

French foreign minister **Jean-Yves Le Drian** said all sides should set themselves a clear deadline of next month to come to a decision.

"What we want is for things to go quickly and a June deadline chosen as the final deadline otherwise the withdrawal agreement will be more complicated," he told reporters in Dublin before a meeting with his Irish counterpart **Simon Coveney**.

Britain is due to leave the European Union in March 2019 and Brussels wants negotiations completed by October.

Britain wants to be free of the EU customs union in order to be able to strike trade deals with the rest of the

Khamzat Azimov, a French citizen born in the Russian republic of Chechnya, killed one person and wounded four others in Saturday's attack, before police fatally shot him. The Islamic State group claimed responsibility.



Macron



Azimov

Azimov's parents and a friend from the eastern city of Strasbourg were being detained by police. Under French law, people questioned in an investigation relating to alleged terrorism can be taken into custody for up to four days.

A judicial official said Monday the suspect was living in the northern 18th district of Paris with his family, which had previously lived in Strasbourg.

The official wasn't authorized to speak publicly on the ongoing investigation. Counterterrorism investigators want to know if the assailant had help or co-conspirators.

French authorities said the suspect was on a police watch list for radicalism, but he had a clean criminal record.

Conservative leader **Laurent Wauquiez** on Sunday criticized the government's

"blindness" and "inaction." His Republicans party called on centrist President Emmanuel Macron to take measures to "preventively intern the most dangerous individuals" listed as radicalized. (AP)

Catalonia elects Torra as leader:

The Catalan parliament voted in a hard-line separatist as leader on Monday, heralding an end to seven months of direct rule from Madrid but also more political uncertainty in a region that retains a mandate to seek a split from Spain.

The election of

Quim Torra as regional leader will allow the wealthy region to run its own affairs for the first time since October, when Madrid imposed direct rule after sacking the previous administration after it declared independence.



Torra

It should also lead to Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy securing the backing he needs from regional parties to implement much-delayed central government budget plans. But it is unlikely to ease tensions between Madrid and Barcelona.

The deeply-divided Catalan parliament voted 66 in favour, 65 against and 4 abstentions for the election of Torra, a former lawyer and publisher with little political experience. The simple majority was what he needed to be voted leader after failing to get an absolute majority in a ballot on Saturday.

Following the vote, pro-independence lawmakers stood to sing the Catalan anthem. Torra, who was hand-picked as candidate by former regional leader Carles Puigdemont, then embraced members of parliament who formed a line to congratulate him.

Many wore yellow ribbons in honour of Catalan politicians held in custody in jail for their role in October's illegal independence referendum.

In a speech to parliament on Saturday, Torra promised to work towards a Catalan republic and referred to Puigdemont, who is in Berlin waiting for a German court to rule on an extradition request from Spain, as the legitimate leader of the region. (RTRS)

5-Star, League near deal: Italy's 5-Star Movement and League neared a deal on Monday they hope will fuse their very different election platforms into a workable coalition government, hours before pivotal talks with the country's president.

Bidding to end a 10-week political stalemate, the parties met at the weekend to hammer out a policy programme, with 5-Star leader Luigi Di Maio and his League counterpart Matteo Salvini aiming to pick a prime minister who would be acceptable to both.

Their choice has not yet been announced, though Di Maio said on Sunday they were close to an "historic" agreement.

President Sergio Mattarella, who has the final word on nominating a premier, reminded the parties in a speech on Saturday that he is not obliged to accept their recommendation.

The anti-establishment 5-Star will go to the presidential palace at 4:30 pm (1430 GMT) and the far-right League at 6 pm.

If Mattarella is satisfied with their choice, Italy could have a government in place by the end of the week. But should no agreement be reached, new elections are likely.

The two parties — the largest groups in the legislature and together able to muster a majority in both houses — were adversaries before the March 4 national election, which produced a hung parliament.

Five-Star won 32 percent of the vote at the election and the League took 17 percent.

They have been negotiating since Thursday to try to settle on a "contract" of mutually acceptable policy commitments.

Mattarella, normally a low-profile figure, warned over the weekend about the importance of Italy running sound public finances and maintaining its traditional pro-European Union positions. (RTRS)

Germany charges suspected al-Shebab: German authorities have charged a Somali man who allegedly was a member of the foreign extremist group al-Shebab and is accused of attempted murder and assistance to murder.

Federal prosecutors said Monday that 20-year-old, identified only as Abduquadir A., joined the group in 2012 in Mogadishu, and was trained to use pistols and hand grenades. During his training, he accompanied other al-Shebab members to a mosque where they assassinated a person with three shots to the head.

He was later assigned to kill a Somali government employee with the help of another group member at a restaurant. There, he shot several times at the man, wounding but not killing him. He was therefore arrested by al-Shebab until he managed to flee in October 2012.

Prosecutors say the accused came to Germany in June 2014, and was arrested in February. (AP)

'Moscow ties won't change': New Armenian premier Nikol Pashinyan on Monday assured Russia's Vladimir Putin that Yerevan's ties with Moscow will remain close following his rise to power on the back of mass anti-government protests. Pashinyan met the Russian president on the sidelines of the Eurasian Economic Summit in Sochi. It was his first meeting with a foreign leader since being elected prime minister last week.

"I can assure you that on this issue (of relations with Russia), there is consensus in Armenia, and nobody has or will question the strategic importance of Russian-Armenian relations," he told Putin.

The 42-year-old former newspaper editor also thanked Putin for Russia's "balanced position" during the Caucasus country's political crisis during which Pashinyan led weeks of protests and civil disobedience campaigns.

"This was highly appreciated not only by our government, but by Armenian society as a whole," he said.

Moscow has previously intervened in several political crises in former Soviet countries, most notably in Ukraine in 2014.

Acknowledging Armenia as "our closest partner in the region," Putin wished Pashinyan "success" in his new role, saying he hoped relations would "develop as steadily as they did until now." (AFP)