

Biden approves \$800M in new military assistance for Ukraine

BY ZEKE MILLER AND ROBERT BURNS
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In anticipation of a new Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine, President Joe Biden on Wednesday approved an \$800 million package of military assistance, including additional helicopters and the first provision of American artillery.

The Ukrainians also will receive armored personnel carriers, armored Humvees, naval drone vessels used in coastal defense, and gear and equipment used to protect soldiers in chemical, biological, nuclear and radiological attacks.

"This new package of assistance will contain many of the highly effective weapons systems we have already provided and new capabilities tailored to the wider assault we expect Russia to launch in eastern Ukraine," Biden said in a statement.

"The steady supply of weapons the United States and its allies and partners have provided to Ukraine has been critical in sustaining its fight against the Russian invasion," Biden added. "It has helped ensure that (Russia President Vladimir) Putin failed in his initial war aims to conquer and control Ukraine. We cannot rest now."

Biden announced the aid after a call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. It is the latest in a series of U.S. security assistance packages valued at a combined \$2.6 billion that has been committed to Ukraine since Russia invaded on Feb. 24. The weaponry and support material has played an important role in Ukraine's successful defense thus far.

Biden is under pressure from members of both parties in Congress to expand and accelerate U.S. aid.

Robert Gates, a former CIA director and

Kremlin crackdown silences war protests, from benign to bold

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A former police officer who discussed Russia's invasion on the phone. A priest who preached to his congregation about the suffering of Ukrainians. A student who held up a banner with no words — just asterisks.

Hundreds of Russians are facing charges for speaking out against the war in Ukraine since a repressive law was passed last month that outlaws the spread of "false information" about the invasion and disparaging the military.

Human rights groups say the crackdown has led to criminal prosecutions and possible prison sentences for at least 23 people on the "false information" charge, with over 500 others facing misdemeanor charges of disparaging the military that have either led to hefty fines or are expected to result in them.

"This is a large amount, an unprecedented large amount" of cases, said Damir Gainutdinov, head of the Net Freedoms legal aid group focusing on free speech cases, in an interview with The Associated Press.

The Kremlin has sought to control the narrative of the war from the moment its troops rolled into Ukraine. It dubbed the attack a "special military operation" and increased the pressure on independent Russian media that called it a "war" or an "invasion," blocking access to many news sites whose coverage deviated from the official line.

Sweeping arrests stifled antiwar protests, turning them from a daily

event in large cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg into rare occurrences barely attracting any attention.

Still, reports of police detaining single picketers in different Russian cities come in almost daily.

Even seemingly benign actions have led to arrests.

A man was detained in Moscow after standing next to a World War II monument that says "Kyiv" for the city's heroic stand against Nazi Germany and holding a copy of Tolstoy's "War and Peace." Another was reportedly detained for holding up a package of sliced ham from the meat producer Miratorg, with the second half of the name crossed off so it read: "Mir" — "peace" in Russian.

A law against spreading "fake news" about the war or disparaging the military was passed by parliament in one day and took force immediately, effectively exposing anyone critical of the conflict to fines and prison sentences.

The first publicly known criminal cases over "fakes" targeted public figures like Veronika Belotserkovskaya, a Russian-language cookbook author and popular blogger living abroad, and Alexander Nevzorov, a TV journalist, film director and former lawmaker.

Both were accused of posting "false information" about Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure in Ukraine on their widely followed social media pages — something Moscow has vehemently denied, insisting that Russian forces only hit target military targets.

defense secretary, said Wednesday he believes the administration needs to push hard for weapon donations by NATO members in Eastern Europe, whose arsenals include Soviet-era tanks and other weaponry and equipment that could help Ukraine immediately.

"The United States ought to be acting, 24/7 — how do we mobilize the equipment and how do we get it into Ukraine and into the hands of the Ukrainians," Gates said in an online forum sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"It's critically important and critically urgent, and we ought to be sort of ransacking the arsenals of those states, and I think they would be cooperative, particularly" if they are given assurances that the Pentagon will provide American replacements for the donated weapons.

The Pentagon said the \$800 million package announced by Biden includes weapons and equipment that will require some training for a Ukrainian military not fully accustomed to American military technology. U.S. and allied forces had been present

inside Ukraine to provide training for eight years before pulling out in advance of the Russia's latest invasion.

The new arms package includes 18 of the U.S. Army's 155mm howitzers and 40,000 artillery rounds, two air surveillance radars, 300 Switchblade "kamikaze" armed drones, and 500 Javelin missiles designed to knock out tanks and other armor. Also included are 10 counter-artillery radars used to track incoming artillery and other projectiles to determine their point of origin for counter attacks.

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Destructive wildfires rage in New Mexico, Colorado

BY SUSAN MONTYOYA BRYAN AND PAUL DAVENPORT
The Associated Press

Firefighters scouted the drought-stricken mountainsides around a New Mexico village as they looked for opportunities to slow a wind-driven wildfire that a day earlier had burned at least 150 homes and other structures while displacing thousands of residents and forcing the evacuation of two schools.

Homes were among the structures that had burned, but officials on Wednesday did not have a count of how many were destroyed in the blaze that torched at least 6.4 square miles (16.6 square kilometers) of forest, brush and grass on the east side of the community of Ruidoso, said Laura Rubin, spokesperson for the Lincoln National Forest.

Rubin announced emergency evacuations of a more densely populated area during a briefing Wednesday afternoon as the fire jumped a road where crews were trying to hold the line. She told people to get in their cars and go.

New Mexico State Police released a statement late Wednesday saying two people have been found dead in a residence. Their identities will not be released until the Office of the Medical Examiner can positively identify them.

Strong winds prevented forced a suspension of the

aerial attack on the flames and kept authorities from getting a better estimate of how large the fire has grown. But some planes returned to the air as winds subsided late in the day, and seven airtankers and two helicopters have now been assigned to the fire, Forest Service officials said Wednesday evening.

While the cause of the blaze was under investigation, fire officials and forecasters warned Wednesday that persistent dry and windy conditions had prompted red flag warnings for a wide swath that included almost all of New Mexico, half of Texas and parts of Colorado and the Midwest.

Five new large fires were reported Tuesday, and nearly 1,600 wildland firefighters and support personnel were assigned to large fires in the southwestern, southern and Rocky Mountain areas, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

Hotter and drier weather coupled with decades of fire suppression have contributed to an increase in the number of acres burned by wildfires, fire scientists say. And the problem is exacerbated by a more than 20-year Western megadrought that studies link to human-caused climate change. The fire season has become year-round given changing conditions that include earlier snowmelt and rain coming later in the fall.

NOTICE OF INTENT AND NOTICE OF PUBLIC SCOPING
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE





YOU ARE INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN PUBLIC SCOPING!

Environmental Impact Statement addressing T-7A Recapitalization at Columbus Air Force Base, Mississippi

The U.S. Department of the Air Force (DAF) is conducting public scoping for its proposal to recapitalize the T-38C Talon flight training program at Columbus Air Force Base (AFB) with T-7A Red Hawk aircraft. The proposal supports the Secretary of the Air Force's strategic basing decisions to recapitalize existing T-38C pilot training installations, and Columbus AFB would be the second installation to be environmentally analyzed for possible recapitalization. The purpose of this proposal is to continue the T-7A recapitalization program by recapitalizing Columbus AFB to prepare pilots to operate the more technologically advanced T-7A aircraft. Recapitalization is needed because the current training practices with the older T-38C aircraft fail to prepare pilots for the technological advancements of fourth and fifth generation aircraft.

Recapitalization entails introduction of T-7A aircraft and flight operations at Columbus AFB and associated airspace to replace all T-38C aircraft assigned to the installation; introduction of nighttime (between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m.) T-7A flight operations; changes to the number of personnel and dependents in the Columbus AFB region; and construction and upgrade of support and maintenance facilities. DAF is considering the Proposed Action, Alternative 1, Alternative 2, and the No Action Alternative. For the Proposed Action, Columbus AFB would receive 61 T-7A aircraft and perform sufficient operations for sustaining pilot training while simultaneously phasing out the T-38C aircraft and phasing in the T-7A aircraft. Alternative 1 also would result in 61 T-7A aircraft being delivered to Columbus AFB; however, T-7A operations would be performed at an intensity approximately 25 percent greater than the Proposed Action to cover a potential scenario in which DAF requires a surge or increase in pilot training operations above current plan. For Alternative 2, Columbus AFB would receive 77 T-7A aircraft to cover a potential scenario in which another military installation is unable to accept delivery of all their T-7A aircraft and some of those aircraft need to be reassigned to Columbus AFB. T-7A operations for Alternative 2 would be performed at an intensity equivalent to Alternative 1. The No Action Alternative would not implement T-7A recapitalization at Columbus AFB.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT (EIS). Pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act, DAF is preparing an EIS, which will assess the potential environmental consequences of the Proposed Action and alternatives for the T-7A recapitalization at Columbus AFB. DAF anticipates potential for the following notable environmental impacts from the Proposed Action and action alternatives: 1. Increased air emissions, particularly nitrogen oxides. 2. Increased noise from aircraft operations because the T-7A is inherently louder than the T-38C and the addition of nighttime operations may be bothersome to some residents. Increased noise could have a disproportionate impact on certain populations and impact off-installation land use compatibility. 3. Increased potential for bird/wildlife aircraft strike hazards. 4. Construction may have a minor impact on downstream water quality. The EIS will model air emissions, noise levels, and the number of sleep and school disturbance events and compare to current conditions. DAF will also consult with appropriate resource agencies and Native American tribes to determine the potential for significant impacts. Consultation will be incorporated into the preparation of the EIS and will include, but not be limited to, consultation under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act and consultation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. Additional analysis will be provided in the Draft EIS, which is anticipated in late 2022. The Final EIS and a decision on which alternative to implement is expected in mid-2023.

PUBLIC SCOPING MEETING. DAF encourages interested local, state, and federal elected officials and agencies, as well as interested members of the public and others, to participate in public scoping for the proposal and assist DAF in identifying issues to evaluate in the EIS. In accordance with DAF guidance, in-person public scoping meetings will not be held. Public scoping is being accomplished remotely, in accordance with the 2020 version of 40 Code of Federal Regulations Part 1506.6, via the project website at <https://columbus.t7anepadocuments.com/>. The website provides posters, a presentation, an informational brochure, other meeting materials, and a capability for the public to provide public scoping comments. Scoping materials are also available in print at the Columbus-Lowndes Public Library (314 7th Street North, Columbus, Mississippi). Requests for printed scoping materials may be made to Mr. Nolan Swick at 210-925-3932 or at the addresses below. For printed material requests, the standard U.S. Postal Service shipping time will apply. Please consider the environment before requesting printed material.

PUBLIC COMMENT. DAF welcomes comments, suggestions, and relevant information on the proposal. Please submit comments in English by visiting <https://columbus.t7anepadocuments.com/>, emailing nolan.swick@us.af.mil, or sending via postal mail to Mr. Nolan Swick, AFCEC/CZIN, Attn: Columbus AFB T-7A Recapitalization EIS, Headquarters AETC Public Affairs, 100 H East Street, Suite 4; Randolph AFB, TX 78150.

To ensure DAF has sufficient time to consider public input in the Draft EIS process, please submit comments by May 2, 2022.

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