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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to France

In keeping with a previously reached agreement, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will make a working visit to Paris on June 29 at the invitation of French Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Development Jean-Marc Ayrault.

The sides intend to conduct an in-depth exchange of opinions on topical issues on the international agenda. Interaction in responding to new challenges and threats and prospects for the Ukrainian, Nagorno-Karabakh, Syrian, Libyan and Middle East settlement will be addressed. The foreign service chiefs of both countries will discuss certain aspects of Russian-French cooperation at the UN and the OSCE, as well as Russia-EU and Russia-NATO issues.

There will be an exchange of opinions on the entire range of Russian-French bilateral ties.

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The signing of a declaration on enhancing the role of international law by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi

During President Vladimir Putin's visit to China (which was officially announced by the presidential Executive Office), the Russian and Chinese foreign ministers plan to sign a declaration on enhancing the role of international law.

This document for the first time spells out the two countries' approaches toward a number of modern issues of international law.

The declaration is designed to stress the importance of Russia and China adhering to the fundamental principles and rules of international law amid the growing instability in many parts of the world.

From our perspective, it is important that it presents the understanding, shared by the two permanent members of the UN Security Council, of such topical components of international law as the principles of the sovereign equality of states, the non-use of force, non-interference in internal affairs of other states and the peaceful settlement of disputes, the unacceptability of overthrowing legitimate governments, the use of unilateral sanctions and the extraterritorial use of national legislation in violation of international law, as well as the legal aspects of fighting international terrorism, and the immunity of states, their property and officials.

The text of the document will be available on the Foreign Ministry's official website. Corresponding agreements between Russian and Chinese media will be signed on the sidelines of the upcoming summit, in particular, between Channel 1 and the Ruptly news agency, which collaborates with the Russia Today TV network. All details will be provided over the course of the visit.

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Closing events of the Russian presidency of the Organisation of Black Sea Economic Cooperation

Between June 29 and July 1, Sochi will host the final events of the Russian presidency of the Organisation of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC).

On June 29 and 30, a meeting of the Committee of Senior Officials will take place. On July 1, the BSEC Foreign Ministers Council meeting will be held. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will chair the meeting.

During these events, BSEC foreign ministers will review the results of the organisation's dynamic and wide-ranging activities over the period January-June 2016.

I will say a few words about the organisation's achievements during the Russian presidency, over the course of which an intensive programme of activities was implemented. Ministers of transport, healthcare, culture and tourism, customs services and agencies responsible for emergency relief operations held issue-specific meetings. Over 20 sessions of thematic working groups have taken place. These events have confirmed the participants' interest in promoting cooperation in the Black Sea region in various fields.

In April, at Russia's initiative, a substantive exchange of opinions in a "brainstorming" format took place on issues related to enhancing the organisation's efficiency and increasing its project related potential ahead of its 25th anniversary, which will be marked in 2017.

The aforementioned upcoming events will also be attended by representatives of observer countries, agencies related to the BSEC (the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank, the International Centre for Black Sea Studies, the BSEC Business Council and the BSEC Parliamentary Assembly) and dialogue partners, as well as representatives of the European Commission, the International Congress of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the International Investment Bank and the business community.

During the Foreign Ministers Council meeting, the ceremony of transferring the BSEC presidency from Russia to Serbia will take place.

The ministerial meeting will be followed by a joint news conference of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Michael Christides, Secretary General of the BSEC Permanent International Secretariat.

On June 29, a biking event will take place – the first of its kind under the BSEC auspices – featuring a motor race on the Olympic Park - Roza Khutor resort route. Deputy Foreign Minister Vasily Nebenzya and Michael Christides, among many others will take part the event. I believe it will be worth watching.

Information for journalists wishing to receive accreditation has been posted on the Foreign Ministry's website (accreditation is open until noon June 27). The programme of events will be provided to accredited journalists later.

Questions regarding the invitation of Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu to Sochi have just arrived from Reuters: Can this step be regarded as Moscow's intention to restore relations with Ankara? Is this the first invitation of a high-ranking Turkish official to Russia since Turkey shot down the Russian aircraft? And so on.

I believe I have provided sufficiently detailed information about the BSEC events. The foreign ministers of all member states of this organisation have been invited to the Foreign Ministers Council meeting. It is strange that only one figure has been singled out from among those invited. Although on the other hand, this can be attributed to the great interest in Russian-Turkish relations. In this connection, I'd like to

inform you that a corresponding invitation to the 34th session of the BSEC Foreign Ministers Council was sent to the Turkish foreign minister and that it was duly transferred. Sending the invitation is Russia's obligation as the organisation's president. We are very meticulous with regard to our obligations as president, so the invitation has indeed been handed over.

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Meeting of ambassadors and permanent representatives of Russia

Between June 30 and July 1, Moscow will host a meeting of ambassadors and permanent representatives of the Russian Federation.

Such meetings have been held regularly since 2002, and the upcoming meeting will be the eight. It will focus on the Foreign Ministry's key activities in order to determine further steps needed to implement the foreign policy of our country. Plenary sessions and panels on various topics will provide opportunities to discuss a wide range of challenges faced by Russian diplomats as they defend the country's interests in the current international context.

There are also plans to publish numerous interviews and other materials on the topics under review, as the meeting participants will no doubt have a stimulating discussion and exchange of views. This meeting is a unique opportunity for Russian ambassadors working abroad to hold a confidential and candid discussion with the Foreign Ministry's leadership and representatives of different ministries and agencies, exchange views on what is happening and, following the discussion, develop new initiatives, proposals and conceptual frameworks. It is a very significant event for Russian foreign policy, so we will cover it in detail.

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The situation in Syria

The situation in Syria remains complicated. Regrettably, even during the month of Ramadan, which is sacred for the Muslims, the intensity of violence has not abated completely. Clashes continue between the Syrian army and volunteer formations and terrorist groups, with the worst occurring near Manbadj where ISIS militants encircled by Kurdish self-defence fighters are trying to break through. The ISIS forces staged several suicide bomber attacks as a diversionary tactic. Government troops are containing an

offensive by Jabhat al-Nusra and extremists loyal to it in a number of suburbs of Aleppo. Sporadic clashes have erupted in the Latakia and Idlib provinces and the Damascus region (Eastern Ghouta). In the middle of June, terrorists reportedly used a homemade shell stuffed with a toxic substance against government troops during a clash at Hosh Al Fara in a suburb of Damascus.

The Russian centre for reconciliation of opposing sides in the Syrian conflict, located at the Hmeymim airbase, has been working steadily to expand the area under the ceasefire. By now, ceasefire agreements have been signed with more than 150 population centres.

It has been reported that on June 18 more than ten Syrian citizens were killed by Turkish servicemen while attempting to cross into Turkey not far from Jisr al-Shughur. This is further evidence of the extremely worrying situation on the Syrian-Turkish border, which remains a source of permanent tension also due to continuing infiltration by militants from the Turkish side and arms and ammunition flows for terrorist groups operating in Syria. For the sake of normalising the situation in Syria, it is important to ensure the reliable closure of the Syrian-Turkish border to the illegal traffic of arms and militants replenishing terrorist ranks, as stipulated by UN Security Council resolutions 2170, 2178 and 2258.

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The situation in Libya

According to media reports, new fierce clashes between armed militiamen and local residents broke out in the Garabuli suburb of the Libyan capital on June 21. As a result, at least 80 people were killed and dozens were wounded. News of armed clashes in other parts of the country has been coming in regularly.

Moscow is very alarmed by the dangerous developments in Libya. We proceed from the belief that such armed incidents fuel the already tense internal political situation, undermining efforts aimed at promoting peace and national accord in that country.

In view of the enduring complexity of the military and political situation aggravated by hostilities in various regions with the use of heavy weapons and in view of greater activity by terrorist and extremist groups, the Russian Foreign Ministry once again urges Russian citizens to refrain from visiting and Russian organisations from sending their employees to that country. We consider it especially important to warn Russian operators engaged in air, sea or automobile transportation as well as Russian crewmembers of both Russian or foreign airliners or ships, against visiting Libya for safety reasons until the situation there normalises.

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Situation in Afghanistan

The security situation in Afghanistan remains complicated.

On June 20, a suicide bomber attacked a bus in Kabul carrying ethnic Nepalese security guards of the Canadian embassy. The blast killed 14 of them and injured four. Interestingly, both the Taliban movement and ISIS have claimed responsibility for the attack.

Tensions in northern Afghanistan persist as Taliban reinforcements are gathering around the administrative centre of the Kunduz province and trying to take control of the territories adjoining the Afghan-Tajik border. The Taliban also remain active in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar.

The recently intensified clashes between Afghan and Pakistani border guards, with the latest incident taking place near the border crossing of Torkham, are causing us serious concern. These conflicts result in casualties among both the military and peaceful civilians. To make things worse, the clashes lead to several thousand people and long-haul trucks being delayed for weeks before they can cross the border.

The complex situation in Afghanistan is clearly not conducive to direct negotiations between the Afghan government and the armed opposition.

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On the Russian draft of the UN Security Council's press release on UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia

The UN Security Council holds regular consultations on the work of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, which we regard as an efficient mechanism for preventing conflicts and resolving a whole range of issues facing Central Asia.

The centre is also making active efforts to help regional countries neutralize regional stability threats coming from Afghanistan. For this purpose, we believe it is important to further promote cooperation between the Centre and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which also have their own agencies dealing with Afghanistan issues.

The UN Security Council has traditionally supported the Centre's efforts through its press releases, drafts of which are submitted to them by the Russian delegation. Unfortunately, the text of this statement failed

to be coordinated during UN Security Council consultations on June 15.

We are deeply concerned because the draft we suggested clearly reflected the situation in the region and the work of the Centre, in particular, welcomed cooperation between the Centre and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, emphasised the growing terrorist threat Afghanistan poses for Central Asian countries. Our draft was blocked by some UN Security Council members for, as we see it, political reasons and in pursuit of their own interests.

We think that if the UN Security Council fails to come up with a statement in support of the Centre, it may produce a false impression of its inefficiency.

I have already commented on our position and our attitude toward this mechanism earlier.

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Problems with international refugees

On June 20 the international community marked another World Refugee Day. With every passing year, the topicality of this event and the concerted efforts of the world community are growing at an exponential rate in various parts of the globe.

According to the United Nations there were about 60 million refugees in the world in 2015. Now this number has exceeded 65 million and is comparable to the migration waves that swept through Europe and the rest of the world during World War II. Regrettably, wars and domestic armed conflicts that are often inspired from the outside as well as political instability are the main reasons for the exodus of people who are compelled to seek peace, stability and tranquillity far from their homes.

A shining example is offered by the massive arrival of refugees in Europe, mostly from the Middle East and North Africa. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over a million refugees reached European shores in 2015. The number of new arrivals in the first five months of 2016 has exceeded 190,000.

Russia is making a vast contribution to settling the refugee issue. We accepted over a million Ukrainian refugees and fully provide for their stay in our territory. Look for details on the websites of relevant Russian agencies and services. Russia regularly sends humanitarian convoys with basic necessities, food products, building materials, equipment and medicines to Ukraine's southeast. We keep the world public and media informed of our actions via various domestic departments. The 52nd humanitarian convoy crossed the Russian-Ukrainian border in late May. The 53rd will follow soon. In all, Russia's Emergencies Ministry delivered over 62,000 tonnes of humanitarian cargo to the region since August 2014. This has been Russia's contribution to the refugee support – practical actions rather than just political declarations.

We contend that it is necessary to eradicate the primary reasons of refugee crises and create the conditions for their return home by achieving political and socio-economic settlement in their countries. We are persistently declaring our view at various international venues, including the UNHCR Office. The latter helped organise a ministerial conference on global division of responsibility in accepting Syrian refugees on March 30, to which Russia contributed as well.

We'd like to note the initiative of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to hold a high-level plenary meeting in New York on September 19 within the framework of the 71st session of the UN General Assembly to deal with movements of large groups of refugees. Russia will take a most active part in it.

Let me repeat that data on Ukrainians in Russian territory is published on official websites of specialised Russian agencies.

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US intentions to restrict the movement of Russian diplomats in the US

I would rather speak about achievements, not problems, but times are what they are.

We took notice of media reports on the US Congress debating a bill to step up the monitoring of Russian diplomats and to restrict their movement on US soil. We would like to note in this regard that we have been seeing increased pressure on our Embassy and general consulates in the US. Our employees abroad are regular targets of provocations by US secret services, and face obstacles in their official contacts and other restrictions. There are many such cases, but we do not raise them in public, although we always communicate our concern to the American side.

Among other moves, the US has taken steps towards toughening and expanding the current notification regime that has been in place for decades for trips of junior and mid-level Russian diplomatic staff 25 miles from the centre of the city, in which the relevant mission is located. Russian-US agreements establish this regime on a parity basis and cannot be changed unilaterally, yet this is what is happening.

If Washington proceeds to terminate existing agreements, we will, of course, take reciprocal measures towards US diplomats in Russia. I would like to stress that this is not our choice, and we are not the ones taking yet another step down the road of worsening bilateral relations. Blame for making life more difficult for Russian diplomatic missions rests squarely with the US. I thought that witch hunts were a thing of the past, and that all the lessons were learned many years ago. I would not want to see this once again become a reality in US domestic and foreign policy.

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US Deputy Assistant Secretary Frank A. Rose's remarks on missile defence issues

US Deputy Assistant Secretary Frank A. Rose has alleged that Russia has never put forward to the United States compromise proposals on missile defence, and has only demanded legally binding guarantees [that US missile defence system will not target Russia]. As I promised last time, we will follow everything related to insinuations on the missile defence issue, not only because this is unfair, dishonest and wrong, but also because [we] do have something to say on the issue. This is not so much about political evaluations as it is about the factual data that we will make available.

The US side essentially continues to promote an interpretation of circumstances related to the development of missile defence dialogue during Mr Obama's presidency that is not quite true, to put it mildly. As you remember, we raised this issue at the June 10 briefing, talking about the actual state of affairs in this sphere, citing the relevant facts and showing who has closed the discussion of missile defence issues, and why. The text is available on the Foreign Ministry's official website.

Regarding this particular aspect – legally binding guarantees – it seems to me that US representatives should have explained to the Berlin audience, which witnessed these remarks, what this is all about. As US diplomats did not do this, we will fill in the gap.

The idea of guarantees boils down to this. Russia and the United States could jointly develop a set of military-technical criteria that would make it possible to determine the threshold, beyond which the buildup of the US missile defence system would pose a threat to the effectiveness of Russia's strategic deterrence capability. At the same time, Washington should officially record its lack of intention to disrupt the existing strategic balance.

In other words, we proposed that the [US] administration spell out its statements to the effect that its missile defence activities are not aimed against Russia, doing this in the generally accepted form of international law.

We believe that there is nothing extraordinary or unrealistic about this approach, while this is, in fact, the way US officials try to distort and misrepresent the issue at hand. Guarantees that [the US missile defence system] will not be aimed [at Russia] are the only possible method for resolving the missile defence problem. If US actions are indeed dictated by a wish to minimise the missile threats that Washington talks about, then obviously this agreement with the Russian side will in no way undermine the US side's capability to defend itself, as well as its allies and partners, against them.

We are confident that mutually acceptable solutions to missile defence issues can be found, taking into account the security interests of both Russia and the United States. Otherwise we will have to take retaliatory measures as will be required. President Vladimir Putin reiterated this at a meeting with representatives of international media outlets on June 17. Over the past several years, we have repeatedly warned our Western partners about the possibility of this negative scenario unfolding. Every time we

stated that this was not our choice. We were prepared for a substantive, in-depth conversation, and provided all the necessary conditions for that.

I'd like to remind you about a wide-ranging conference on missile defence issues in Moscow, which was attended by politicians, military officials, experts, political commentators and public representatives, with facts, figures, maps and the relevant indices. Unfortunately, none of our warnings, attempts or proposals has been heeded.

To reiterate, we would like our US colleagues to proceed from facts in dealing with the missile defence issue. However, if this is their choice and if they make assessments that they make, then, as you know, we are always here.

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Russian participation in the international project to upgrade the Sobibor Museum

In January 2013, the Polish Ministry of Culture invited Russia to join an international project to upgrade the Sobibor Museum located on the site of a former Nazi death camp. The invitation was confirmed in July 2014.

The project, initiated by Poland, Israel, the Netherlands and Slovakia, calls for the building of a new memorial to commemorate the October 1943 prisoners' uprising led by a Soviet officer, Lieutenant Alexander Pechersky. This was the only successful concentration camp rebellion during WWII, as a result of which over 300 prisoners fled to liberty. President Vladimir Putin decorated Lt. Pechersky with the Order of Courage posthumously.

The Russian side immediately agreed to join the upgrade project. In January, Minister of Culture and head of the Russian Military Historical Society Vladimir Medinsky visited Sobibor and laid a wreath at the site of the future memorial.

However, neither Warsaw nor the international organising committee has sent us any official confirmation of Russia's involvement. The Polish side has pointed to various technical reasons for this, which do not seem to have prevented other countries from joining the project. We find this lack of a decision confusing and see it as an indication that Poland is deliberately dragging feet on its own invitation. Hopefully, the Polish side will take into consideration our comment and our assessment of what is happening and we will both hear a public response and see concrete efforts to move the situation off the dead centre. This is what I had in mind when making this comment.

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Tajikistan-related media comments by Russian experts and political scientists

I cannot but comment on numerous questions we received before this briefing about certain Russian media publications on Tajikistan and bilateral relations. These comments belong to political scientists and experts perplexed by issues related to the potential and prospects for bilateral relations and a putative change of course. In this connection, I'd like to set the record straight.

Russian-Tajik relations are based on the principles of equality and mutual respect, develop in the spirit of strategic partnership and alliance, and are traditionally of friendly and trusting nature. Russia proceeds from the assumption that their further comprehensive promotion meets the interests of both Russia and Tajikistan and is an important factor of stability and security in Central Asia as a whole. The Russian leaders have been pursuing a policy of all-round support for our friend Tajikistan.

Let me remind you that fairly recently Russia was bearing its part of responsibility for the peacekeeping process in that country, which resulted in the signing of the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord on June 27, 1997. The deal, which was actively mediated by Russia, put an end to the five-year civil war. Incidentally, the 19th anniversary of this landmark event in the modern history of both Tajikistan and the entire region will be celebrated in near future.

In this connection, I'd like to stress that the publications I've mentioned (I won't even name or quote them) and comments by individual experts have nothing to do with Russia's official position.

Let me reiterate my request: if you are writing stories on bilateral relations, we are always ready to provide you with information. Even if it doesn't tally with your point of view, you can always add it to your content.

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State symbols on the Russian Embassy building in Kiev

There's an issue I cannot help addressing due to the large amount of materials in the press, social media and the blogosphere.

We were somewhat surprised by a series of publications and comments on the issue of the flag and emblem on the Russian Embassy building in Kiev. In this connection, some intriguing conclusions were drawn that subsequently developed into political statements. I'd like to set the record straight and say that

since the coup in Kiev, which was carried out by radical nationalist forces in February 2014, the Russian Embassy and general consulates in Lvov, Odessa and Kharkov have been repeatedly attacked by similar nationalist elements. The activity of Russian missions has been obstructed, and pickets and demonstrations have been held – illegal and totally uncontrolled or perhaps specially controlled to ratchet up the aggression. All of that happened with the tacit support or lack of control on the part of the state, from the standpoint of Kiev’s international obligations. As a result of the acts of vandalism by so-called activists, but in fact by hooligans, buildings have been defaced and real damage caused. Contrary to Ukraine’s international obligations and the generally accepted rules and norms, the Ukrainian authorities and law enforcement agencies do not ensure the required level of security for the operation of Russian diplomatic and consular missions and, putting it diplomatically, do not provide conditions for the normal work of our diplomats. Today, there is still the threat of all kinds of provocations against our personnel on the part of various extremist elements, which feel at home in the current environment in Ukraine.

Regarding the Russian Embassy building, it was in need of repair and restoration to eliminate the effects of the incidents that have occurred. When the repair work is completed, all of Russia’s national symbols that were on our Embassy building will naturally return to their rightful places. For some reason, there are attempts to ascribe some political significance to the process of carrying out repairs. We have repeatedly commented on and responded to media questions on the issue, but today I wanted to put it all out there so that there are no doubts regarding this issue.

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Konstantin Yaroshenko’s case

Moving on to the issue of Russian citizens abroad. In connection with the continuing abuses of Russian air pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko in the United States, we would like to reiterate that his fate is a constant focus of ours. We know that he has ended up in a critical condition in a US prison due to inadequate medical care and the local authorities’ obstruction of all attempts to appeal the unjust verdict.

I would like to remind you of the background to this case. Mr Yaroshenko was abducted six years ago by US Drug Enforcement Administration agents in Liberia, beaten and tortured. He was then sentenced in the United States, without any real evidence of guilt, to an enormous term: 20 years.

From the very outset of this tragic story, we demanded that an end be put to this arbitrariness and that measures be taken to ensure the fundamental rights of the Russian citizen who was severely punished, not for a specific crime but for a so-called conspiracy fabricated by US special service agents.

Our missions in the United States are in constant contact with Konstantin, his lawyers and his family. We are urging Washington to provide him with the necessary medical care due to the serious condition of his health, which was exacerbated in prison as a result of harsh treatment.

In our contacts with US President Barack Obama's administration on all levels, we have been raising the issue of returning Mr Yaroshenko to Russia, for example, based on the Council of Europe's 1983 Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons. However, we are encountering the strong reluctance of US officials to approach this case in an objective manner. US State Department functionaries tell us bluntly that he must remain in prison as a lesson to other Russians who have ended up in the hands of US law enforcement agencies so as to intimidate them into admitting their guilt – something that Mr Yaroshenko has courageously refused to do.

This situation can hardly be described as anything other than a disgrace. It shows that the US authorities, who always pretend to champion civil rights, ignore the rights and freedoms not only of convicted US citizens but also of foreign nationals who have nothing to do with the US. In this case, they are completely ignoring the rules of international law and principles of humanity. This is an element of their prejudiced attitude toward Russians.

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Detention of Russia football fans by the Cologne police

According to information received by the Russian Consulate General in Bonn from the Cologne Main Police Department, six Russian nationals were detained on the evening of June 16 on the charge of fighting at the railway station. After the preliminary investigation, one of the detained was released on June 17 due to the lack of evidence of involvement in the incident. The judge responsible for verifying the lawfulness of detentions issued a warrant for the arrest of the remaining five Russian nationals on June 18.

On June 16, the Consulate General's employees visited the Russian nationals at the pretrial detention facility and had a detailed conversation with each of them. They explained that they met on the way from Lille to Cologne, where they planned to fly back to Russia. The fight near the Cologne Cathedral was allegedly provoked by Spanish tourists, two of which later reported injuries to the police. The Russian nationals deny resisting arrest. All of them were examined by a doctor, but no one needed medical care. The men did not have any complaints about the conditions of their detention, as all requests were brought to the attention of the facility's administration and promptly satisfied. The diplomats did not record any violations of the Russian nationals' rights or of the investigative procedure.

The Consulate General's employees also met with representatives of law enforcement agencies and the judge. According to the police, the Russian nationals allegedly behaved aggressively and were the first to attack the Spanish nationals; the police had to use special devices when arresting them. During the search, the police confiscated scarves, which could have been used as masks, mouth guards used by boxers, and special gloves to protect hands from cutting and piercing objects. The police think this was grounds to assume that the Russian nationals are aggressive football fans, so they are investigating their possible involvement in the riots in Marseille. Currently, they are accused of disturbing public order and inflicting

bodily injuries, under the German Criminal Code. I would like to note that forensic experts qualified the injuries as grave until June 21, but then the wording was softened to resisting arrest.

I would also like to note that families of the detained are free to consult with the Foreign Ministry's Consular Department. They can also receive current information by calling or emailing the Consulate General.

The diplomats of the Russian Embassy in Berlin and the Consulate General in Bonn are in constant contact with the local law enforcement agencies and prosecutors. They are closely monitoring the situation to ensure that the Russian nationals' rights and procedural rules are being upheld by the German side and are providing all necessary assistance and support to the detained. These actions will continue.

Moreover, according to the Cologne Prosecutor's Office on June 21, three of the detained have lawyers hired by their families, and the other two still choose sides. This is the latest information as of yesterday.

I would like to remind everyone that we track everything related to Russian nationals abroad, including sports fans, tourists and Russian citizens permanently living abroad. We regularly respond their requests, monitor situations in which they find themselves and keep an eye on these situations. We provide you with detailed information on the most high-profile cases. But every day, our embassies, consulates general and permanent missions have to deal with hundreds of cases related to Russian nationals.

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The status of three under-age children that became orphans in Norway following the murder of their mother and arrest of their father

On June 15 the Russian Embassy in Norway received a report from the Norwegian police on initiating criminal proceedings regarding the murder of a Russian citizen. The police found her body with knife wounds a day before, on June 14. Her husband, a Norwegian citizen, was detained as a suspect.

Employees of the Russian Embassy's Consular department contacted the relatives of the murdered woman, who live in Russia, and informed them of her death. Naturally, they explained to the relatives the procedure for processing documents for repatriation of a deceased body and helped them contact the local police. The relatives also received a list of Russian-speaking attorneys in Norway and the rest of the package of services provided by our offices abroad in such cases.

In reply to the inquiry by the Russian Embassy, the Norwegian Guardianship Service reported that the children of the murdered woman (one of them is a Russian citizen and the other two are Norwegian citizens) are now staying with one of her friends. The children's relatives are going to come to Norway to decide where the children will go from here. The final decision on guardianship will be made after the relatives file all the required papers. I'd like to mention that this horrible, high-profile case is also being

monitored by Russian diplomats.

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Yellow fever epidemic in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) announced the outbreak of a yellow fever epidemic. This disease is transmitted to people by mosquitoes and affects the tropical areas of Africa, as well as Central and South America.

Russian citizens visiting the DRC should take into account the long-standing requirement on vaccination against yellow fever, which is mentioned at the Russian Foreign Ministry's open website in the section on emergencies posing a threat to life, health and safety.

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From answers to media questions:

Question: To what extent have the sides' positions on the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement been brought closer together in light of the tripartite talks that the presidents of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia held in St. Petersburg? Will the OSCE Minsk Group mechanism be used to its potential?

Maria Zakharova: I talked about this in a media interview. The St. Petersburg meeting dispelled all concerns that Russia was purportedly developing a new format for the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue by removing the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs from the negotiating process (it was even alleged that Russia was concentrating everything under its own control). The presidential meeting has shown that this is nothing more than baseless rumours and possibly unprofessional analysis.

As you know, the meeting has taken place. Remember that the parties used this format previously to deal with sensitive issues. Naturally, not only the connection with the OSCE Minsk Group is in place but also close contact with the representatives of the Troika co-chair countries. We also spoke about this before the meeting. As you know, representatives of the co-chair countries have been informed. Corresponding discussions were held in St. Petersburg. The issue received due attention at the meeting. This is not about the provision of information post factum. On the contrary, issues were addressed and the co-chair countries were informed long before the meeting. I'd like to remind you that a notice was posted on the

Foreign Ministry's website, which was later edited because announcements of these kinds of summits are not the ministry's prerogative. The notice said Deputy Foreign Minister and State Secretary Grigory Karasin had met with French Ambassador to Russia, Jean-Maurice Ripert, and that they had discussed, among other things, the upcoming event in St. Petersburg – its preparation, agenda and other matters.

We are keeping the entire potential that has been gained within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group both in form and in substance. Its entire experience, as well as the format itself, remains an effective tool for further progress. It seems to me that the fact that the parties have spoken publicly in favour of the St. Petersburg meeting shows that this format is relevant to them. The question is how to ensure that Armenia and Azerbaijan move forward. If the parties themselves have highly appraised this meeting and the efforts that were made, this is the best possible evidence that it has been useful.

I've read plenty of comments in support of the outcome of the meeting from our US and European partners and they have evaluated it as highly.

Question: Can you comment on the way Azerbaijan has interpreted the outcome of the Nagorno-Karabakh meeting in St. Petersburg?

Maria Zakharova: I've seen these reports. I can tell you that this is an attempt by Azerbaijan to interpret the agreements that have been reached in its own way.

As you know, the presidents of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia have adopted a tripartite declaration, which states in no uncertain terms that they reaffirm the agreements reached at the last Armenian-Azerbaijani summit in Vienna on May 16, aimed to stabilise the situation in the conflict zone and promote an atmosphere conducive to the peace process. To this end, they have agreed, in particular, to increase the number of international observers in the conflict zone. They also expressed their satisfaction with the continuing ceasefire on the line of contact. I'm citing a statement that was published and is available on all official sites. I'd like to ask you to use the original statement, not the questionable interpretations of the results of the meeting.

There is a specific statement that has been made public and is an official document. You should proceed from it, not from somebody's loose interpretations or misrepresentations.

Question: Can you comment on yesterday's ballistic missile tests in North Korea? According to media reports, Russia can request approval from the UN Security Council to open an official bank account for financial transactions with North Korea, in particular regarding the Rajin-Hasan railway project. What is the Foreign Ministry's position on this?

Maria Zakharova: We have commented on North Korean missile launches many times. Let me reiterate our position. We again express regret over Pyongyang's actions that run counter to the UN Security Council resolution and the efforts to ease military and political tensions on the Korean Peninsula and to restore peace and stability in Northeast Asia. We hope that North Korea will act responsibly and honour its commitments as a UN member state.

In addition, I would like to urge all of the parties concerned to refrain from any actions that could further complicate the situation on the Korean Peninsula. We consider any attempt to turn the region into another area of confrontation as inadmissible and proceed from the assumption that the existing problems should

be addressed exclusively by political and diplomatic means.

As for any aspects of our interaction with the DPRK, we are acting in strict conformity with the procedures set out in UN Security Council Resolution 2270 and the decisions of the sanctions committee. We strictly abide by its provisions.

Question: You said in your opening remarks that Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu would visit Sochi.

Maria Zakharova: I did not say this. Please, try to be more accurate. I said that we had sent an invitation to the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs [for the ministerial meeting of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation] in Sochi. As to whether he will come to Sochi or not, this question should be addressed to Turkey.

Question: If he does come, will he hold an official meeting with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov?

Maria Zakharova: All BSEC foreign ministers will meet with each other on the sidelines of the event, as is usual in such cases. A separate meeting between Sergey Lavrov and his Turkish counterpart is not on the Russian foreign minister's schedule. However, his schedule is yet in the making.

Question: Can you formulate Russia's attitude to Britain's widely discussed referendum on withdrawal from the EU? What impact could voting results have on Russian-UK and Russian-EU relations?

Maria Zakharova: I'd like to remind you that the UK referendum is being held today, June 23. At this very moment, British subjects are making their choice regarding their country's future. We have said repeatedly that this is an exclusively internal matter for the UK and the EU. At the same time, I can tell you that Britons are facing a very difficult, landmark choice. Their decision will definitely have a very serious impact on the future of the UK and the European Union as a whole. We respect the idea of referendums and the choice of people in any country, and believe that this choice must be made without any pressure, let alone external pressure, and it is in this spirit that we are watching Britons cast their ballots today. When the referendum results are made public, we will be able to provide our assessments.