

EU sanctions Russia intel chief over Skripal



Sergei Skripal (left), pictured in 2006, and his daughter Yulia Skripal (Courtesy of Sydney Morning Herald)

Brussels, Belgium

The European Union slapped sanctions on the two most senior officers in Russian military intelligence Monday and identified the two agents accused by Britain of carrying out a chemical attack.

Along with the measures against the four GRU officers, EU member states also imposed asset freezes and travel bans on five Syrians linked to strongman Bashar al-Assad's chemical weapons program.

The EU accused the Russians -- two agents and the head and the deputy head of the GRU -- of orchestrating the "possession, transport and use" of the nerve agent used in Salisbury, England last March, in a failed attempt to assassinate a defector.

The agents are accused of travelling under the pseudonyms Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov, but the sanctions order confirms reports that identify them as Anatoly Chepiga and Alexander Mishkin, both 39 years old.

These identities had previously been revealed by the British-based Bellingcat investigative group, which pieced together evidence from leaks and online data trails to find two decorated GRU field officers.

Russia threatens retaliation

The Russian foreign ministry reacted angrily, insisting that the claims against its personnel had been invented by Britain for its own diplomatic ends.

"We reserve the right to take retaliatory measures over this unfriendly step," the ministry said in a statement.

"An information campaign unleashed by the British authorities over this case primarily has a domestic agenda. It is telling that its new round coincides with a new crisis in Brexit talks."

Russian agents have been blamed for the poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury in March last year using the Soviet-developed nerve agent Novichok.

Cardiff striker Sala feared missing in plane crash: Police

AFP | Nantes, France

Premier League club Cardiff City's record new signing, Argentina-born striker Emiliano Sala, was on board a light aircraft that disappeared over the English Channel on Monday night, police sources said.

Sala, signed by Cardiff on Saturday from French club Nantes for a reported 17 million euro (\$19.3 million) fee, was flying to Cardiff aboard a small plane that disappeared from radars around 20 kilometres (12 miles) north of the island of Guernsey.

A statement from police on Guernsey, a British island just off the coast of France, said lifeboats and helicopters had searched for several hours for the plane, which had two people on board, without success.

"The search was terminated at 02:00, with all search and rescue assets being stood down, due to strengthening winds, worsening sea conditions and reducing visibility," the statement said.

Helicopters from the British and French coastguard joined renewed efforts on Tuesday morning to find the plane which is thought to have crashed.

Sala, 28, who had been at Nantes since 2016 and had scored 12 league goals this season, had signed a three-and-a-half-year contract with relegation-threatened Cardiff subject to receiving international clearance.

When he put pen to paper at Cardiff on Saturday, he said in a statement: "I'm very happy to be here. It gives me great pleasure and I can't wait to start training, meet my new team-mates and get down to work."

"For me it feels special (to be the club's record signing). I have come here wanting to work and to help my team-mates and the club."



This file photo taken on August 25, 2018 shows Nantes' Argentinian forward Emiliano Sala at La Beaujoire stadium in Nantes, western France

Taiwan's 'Bikini Climber' social media star dies after ravine fall



Gigi Wu

Taipei, Taiwan

Taiwanese rescue teams were trying Tuesday to retrieve the body of a dead hiker who became famous on social media for taking selfies on top of mountain peaks dressed in a bikini.

Gigi Wu -- dubbed the "Bikini Climber" by fans -- used a satellite phone on Saturday to tell friends she had fallen down a ravine in Taiwan's Yushan national park and badly injured herself.

Rescue helicopters struggled to reach her because of bad weather and officials eventually located her lifeless body on Monday.

Officials said Wu had told friends she was unable to move the lower half of her body after a fall of some 20-30 metres (65-100 feet) but was able to give her coordinates.

Daring Paris bank raid near Champs-Elysees

Paris, France

Armed robbers held up a bank off Paris' famous Champs-Elysees avenue yesterday, tying up employees for hours and breaking into safety deposit boxes, police said.

The daring raid saw several men rush into Milleis bank at opening time, tie up employees, and spray them with a mysterious liquid before rifling through some 30 safe deposit boxes, a source close to the investigation said on condition of anonymity.

Formerly called Barclays France, the bank is less than 200 metres (218 yards) from the French presidential palace.

Despite high security in the area, the men made an undetected getaway at several hours later, around midday.

A dream came true



This picture shows an aerial view of people crossing the Farafenni Bridge after its inauguration in Farafenni. The bridge built to facilitate trade between Northern and Southern Senegal was inaugurated by the presidents of Senegal and The Gambia. The bridge located on Gambian territory is an elegant work in light concrete more than a kilometre long. It crosses the River Gambia around 10 kilometres (six miles) from the border post of Farafenni where the two leaders met for the inauguration, standing together in an open limousine. The toll bridge is now open for cars and starting in July to trucks and other heavy vehicles. The bridge project dates from the 1970s but faced numerous delays due to the changing relations between Dakar and Banjul. Construction finally began in 2015.

Around 65 killed in Taliban attack on Afghan intel base



An Afghan military vehicle is seen near the attack site after a car bomb detonated on a military base in Maidan Sharar in Wardak province

Ghazni, Afghanistan

Around 65 people were killed in a Taliban-claimed attack on an Afghan intelligence base, a local official said yesterday, raising the toll substantially from 12 announced previously.

"We took about 65 bodies

out of the rubble yesterday," Mohammad Sardar Bakhyari, deputy head of the provincial council in Wardak province, where the attack occurred on Monday in the latest blow to beleaguered security forces.

A senior security official who spoke on condition of anonymity gave an even higher toll of at least 70 killed.

China's second gene-edited foetus is 12-14 weeks old: scientist

Beijing, China

The second woman carrying a gene-edited foetus in China could now be 12 to 14 weeks into her pregnancy, according to a US physician in close contact with the researcher who claimed to have created the world's first genetically-modified babies last year.

Chinese scientist He Jiankui shocked the scientific community after revealing that he had successfully altered the DNA of twin girls born in November to

prevent them from contracting HIV.

State media reported on Monday that a preliminary investigation confirmed that a second woman became pregnant and that she will be put under medical observation, but no other details about her are known.

Professor He, who now faces a police investigation, had mentioned the potential second pregnancy at a human genome conference in Hong Kong in late November, but its status was

unclear until now.

William Hurlbut, a physician and bioethicist at Stanford university in California who has known He for two years, told AFP it was "too early" at the time for the foetus to appear on an ultrasound.

Based on extensive conversations with He, Hurlbut said: "I get the impression the baby was fairly young when the conference happened. It could only be detected chemically, not clinically (at the time).

"So it could be no more than four to six weeks old (at the time), so now it could be about 12 to 14 weeks."

Hurlbut said he met He at a scientific conference co-chaired by Hurlbut two years ago. Since then the pair have met at least four times during He's visits to Stanford.

Hurlbut added he was not involved in He's project in any capacity, and only knows about the second pregnancy from what He has told him.

Wang Haoyi, a Development Biologist at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, told AFP that the experiment's effects on the health of the twin babies is hard to predict, but that their identities should be protected to give them the best chance of a normal life.

"I think we definitely need to take serious measures to protect their privacy," he said.

"We don't even need to let them know that they are any different from others."



He Jiankui