

News From Russia: What You Missed Over the Weekend

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Sergei Novikov / TASS

Not Our Mercs

Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russian mercenaries, if there are any in Libya, are neither representing the Russian state, nor are they paid by the state.

Russian private military contractors have clandestinely fought in support of Russian forces in Syria and Ukraine, media have previously reported. The contractors are recruited by a private military group known as Wagner Group whose members are mostly ex-service personnel.

Aggressive approach

Russia denied Saturday that one of its navy vessels had come dangerously close to a U.S. Navy destroyer in the North Arabian Sea.

The U.S. Navy's Bahrain-based Fifth Fleet [said](#) Friday that a Russian ship had "aggressively approached" U.S. destroyer USS Farragut, which had then sounded five short blasts and

requested the Russian ship alter course.

Russia's Defense Ministry said that the U.S. Navy vessel had crossed the Russian ship's path, in an action it deemed "unprofessional" and "an intentional violation of international maritime security norms."

Syria truce

Russia and its allies halted air strikes in Syria's Idlib region Sunday as a ceasefire agreed with Turkey came into force, residents, rebels and respondents said, although few were optimistic the truce would hold.

On the eve of the ceasefire at least 17 people, mostly women and children, were killed in Syrian and Russian bombing of four main towns in Idlib on Saturday, residents and rescuers said.

Rebel ambush

Meanwhile, Russia's military has said that up to 200 rebels in 30 pickup trucks with mounted machine guns attacked Syrian regime troops in an Idlib region town.

The repelled ambush was one of 31 ceasefire violations recorded Saturday, Gen. Maj. Yury Borenkov, who heads Russia's reconciliation center in Syria, [said](#).

'Judge Gramm'

A court in Russia's republic of Tatarstan has placed activist Karim Yamadayev in pre-trial custody for posting a YouTube video in which he plays a judge and sentences actors depicting senior Russian officials to an [off-camera execution](#), the Mediazona news website [reported](#) Saturday.

Yamadayev, who will remain in custody until Feb. 29, was charged with public calls for terrorist activity online, a felony that carries a sentence of up to seven years in prison.

Includes reporting from Reuters.

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