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Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, September 23, 2020

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Coronavirus update

Unfortunately, the coronavirus situation is developing in line with the disappointing forecasts that have recently been made by some of the world's leading epidemiologists and the World Health

Organisation itself. We are witnessing an explosive increase in the incidence of the virus with signs of a second, and in some countries, a third wave of the epidemic. The number of those infected is over 31.7 million around the world, so the heavy burden on medical institutions persists.

The fall back to the extremely unfavourable epidemiological situation seen today in a number of countries, which is comparable to late May, cannot help but raise concerns. For more than six months, the pandemic has remained a trial, like a serious test, for all countries without exception.

Russia, while being actively involved in international efforts to counter COVID-19, recognises the leading role of the WHO as a coordinating body which unites every country's potential to combat the pandemic and makes a significant contribution to promoting the latest medical technology to develop a reliable vaccine and medicines to stop the negative trends of the pandemic.

Cooperation between Russia and the WHO is being discussed at the meetings with WHO Regional Director for Europe Hans Kluge, who is in Russia on an official visit until September 24.

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Russia's humanitarian aid to Central Asian countries in combating the coronavirus

At previous briefings I have talked about Russian aid to some Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. I want to add to this information.

To date, we have sent 700 test kits for 70,000 tests plus the reagents, and six non-contact thermometers to the Republic of Tajikistan. It was decided to send another 500 test kits for 50,000

tests to Tajikistan in the near future. The Federal Service for the Oversight of Consumer Protection and Welfare as well as the World Health Organisation held a joint mission in Tajikistan in May. In June, Russia supplied laboratory equipment to the Gafurov District, Sughd Region, in Tajikistan, where the second republic's virus treatment laboratory was opened, which makes it possible to test up to 200 people a day for the coronavirus. Six specialists sent by the Federal Service for the Oversight of Consumer Protection and Welfare have been working in the country since July to help it set up PCR laboratories that are needed for COVID-19 diagnosis.

We have supplied Turkmenistan with 690 test kits for 69,000 tests and reagents for preparing specimens for 60,000 tests to raise the level of preparedness for the coronavirus infection and have offered related consultations.

In total, Russia has sent 5,245 test kits for performing 524,500 COVID-19 tests as well as reagents like RIBO-prep and REVERTA-L for 541,500 tests to Central Asian countries without charge since February. At the same time they received 16 non-contact thermometers. We are supplying lung ventilators, oxygen concentrators, non-contact thermometers, personal protection equipment, medicines, antiseptics, food, fuel and lubricants. The mobile laboratories provided pursuant to Russian Government instructions serve as the basis for the virus testing in these partner countries.

The Russian medical workers have been sent to the Central Asian countries on several occasions to give practical and consultative aid and to open PCR laboratories to diagnose the coronavirus. They have made a strong contribution to combating COVID-19.

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Evacuation flights completion

For the past six months we have been providing regular and detailed information on our programme to assist Russian citizens in returning home. This programme was designed to assist those who were cornered in other countries due to the coronavirus pandemic and total transport closures. Information on this has been available on our website for several months. The media also ran many stories both positive and challenging due to objective difficulties.

After reviewing this programme over the past six months and the results of the work done to pursue the set tasks, the emergency response centre to prevent the spread of the novel *coronavirus* on Russia's territory decided to end the evacuation flight programme on 21 September. The last flight under the evacuation algorithm will be made from Larnaca, Cyprus to Moscow, Domodedovo, on 25 September. I think that will be a special flight.

As a reminder: national borders were closed one by one all over the world in mid-March. Passenger transport practically came to a complete halt. Hundreds of thousands, and we speak not only about people from Russia, then millions of other countries' nationals around the world were stranded in foreign countries, away from home, without knowing their fate. Among them were tens of thousands of Russian citizens. Each had a reason for going abroad; each had their own circumstances, but, Russia's authorities did everything in their power, and sometimes more, to give their compatriots the opportunity to return home.

As you know, everything that happened in this respect was

unprecedented. The world has never been in such a situation. And the decisions made to bring Russian citizens home were largely being taken for the first time. We developed a process and adopted algorithms. This entire effort started from scratch. It wasn't just our country, nobody had experience with this. It is important to remember this.

The Foreign Ministry's specially established coordination headquarters started operating on March 17, 2020. Its specialists focused on the evacuation of organised tourist groups and also helped private individuals return home to Russia.

Concerted efforts by the Federal Agency for Tourism, tour operators and carriers made it possible to quickly return about 190,000 Russian tourists by around the end of March. It became necessary to draft a special algorithm for accomplishing the second task. Introduced on April 7, the algorithm combined highly important factors, such as a striving to prevent the "importation" of the coronavirus infection from abroad and a striving to support and repatriate Russian citizens abroad.

National ministries and agencies, including the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media, the Ministry of Transport, Rospotrebnadzor, the Federal Security Service's Border Service and the Interior Ministry, as well as public institutions, volunteers and benefactors, helped implement the algorithm. We would like to thank them all. I would like to separately mention the federal and regional commissioners for human and children's rights, the Presidential Human Rights Council, deputies and senators. It is also important to note the efforts of the regional authorities that managed to quickly adapt to the unprecedented conditions and displayed maximum possible flexibility for

repatriating their residents and preventing the spread of the coronavirus infection in their regions, while complying with all the existing restrictions.

In all, over 312,000 people took advantage of the opportunity to return home during the pandemic.

Russian carriers alone have conducted over 570 evacuation flights since the algorithm's introduction on April 7. This implies shuttle flights from Point A to Point B. These flights often merged into more complicated routes for streamlining logistics and evacuating as many compatriots back to Russia as possible. There were also numerous special flights for rotating sailors or employees of foreign production facilities, as well as foreign carriers' flights for expediting the repatriation of Russian citizens, and lots more.

There were over 250 such flights. Nor should one forget about nominal flights in late March when regular flights still continued; however, they were already counted as evacuation flights.

These flights encompassed many regions. Evacuation flights covered virtually all continents, including Latin America and even Africa. This amounted to over 70 countries and about 100 departure points. Russian diplomatic missions and the Foreign Ministry's central administration studied special transit plans whenever it became impossible to directly evacuate compatriots.

Foreign Ministry officials accompanied passengers 24 hours a day at every leg of various routes, regardless of jet lag or time zones. They did this, although they were exhausted and despite difficulties, and they addressed diverse matters, including financial and immigration aspects.

Foreign citizens could also use evacuation flights under existing

sanitary-epidemiological restrictions. We launched particularly constructive cooperation with CIS countries that repeatedly thanked us for helping repatriate their citizens.

We are also grateful to everyone who helped us. We implemented the most active mutual assistance plans while repatriating Russian citizens from the CIS, Latin America, Africa and Asia.

The conclusion of evacuation flights means that the current algorithm, linked with a special procedure for compiling passenger lists, the timeframe of flights and formulating the pricing policy, will be terminated. According to the emergency response centre's explanations, aircraft returning back to Russia after freight, freight-and-passenger and transit flights will be used on a commercial basis as an alternative to evacuation flights. They will be used apart from more or less regular flights from 11 countries, namely, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Tanzania, Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, the Maldives, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and the Republic of Korea (as of September 27). How to book tickets will be specified soon. At the same time, all current sanitary-epidemiological norms, including COVID tests for foreigners and the need to fill out the required documents upon arrival, remain in force.

In elaboration of the emergency response centre's recommendations, I would like to note that, in the current situation, the risks of new transport restrictions and new lockdown measures still persist.

This is fraught with the prospects of becoming indefinitely stranded abroad and being unable to leave the territory of any specific country. We are urging everyone to plan their trips in the most

responsible manner and to do their very best to prevent the above-mentioned risks. For example, people should buy high-quality and long-duration medical insurance policies for themselves and their families. Nor should they travel without return tickets, and they should also reserve contingency funds needed to cover their expenses while staying abroad in case of an emergency situation.

In conclusion, I would like to express hope that the evacuation programme, due to end this week, will go down in history as an unprecedented and, most importantly, one-time event. All of us, including Russian citizens and compatriots experienced bitterness, pain and sometimes the lack of understanding over a period of the past six months.

However, all this was completely compensated by the joy of coming home and reuniting with families, the joy of children who saw their parents after a long period of separation. As I see it, none of us wants to experience all this over again. There are more pleasant and more important reasons for being happy.

The global pandemic situation remains tense. We often discuss this, and we should not forget about it. The chances are that the lessons, learned from the “first wave,” will make it possible to draw the right conclusions and prevent a repetition of these events.

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Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif’s working visit to Russia

On September 24, Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran Mohammad Javad Zarif will be in Moscow on a working visit, during which he will hold talks with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

The two diplomats will discuss a series of current international issues, including the developments around the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's nuclear programme, as well as the situation in Syria, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf region.

They will pay special attention to the bilateral agenda, first of all, the implementation of key joint projects in energy and transport, and the development of trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian ties.

Russia-Iran relations are based on long-term traditions of neighbourliness and mutual respect. The countries hold close or common stances on many international issues.

A key factor of the partnership is the trust-based dialogue at the highest level: this year, the presidents of Russia and Iran spoke by telephone three times. Despite the coronavirus pandemic, active contacts are being maintained between the foreign ministers and representatives of the two countries' parliaments, ministries and agencies.

A news conference will be held following the talks.

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Informal meeting of Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation member states

On September 25, an informal meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation member states will take place. Due to the epidemiological situation, it will be held via videoconference. The

Russian Federation will be represented by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

The meeting participants will discuss the outlook for broader multilateral economic cooperation between the BSEC member states after the pandemic.

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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's meeting with Deputy Prime Minister of Cuba Ricardo Cabrisas

On September 28, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will meet with Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Cuba Ricardo Cabrisas, chairman of the bilateral Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation. Mr Cabrisas is on a working visit to Russia.

In this regard, efforts are underway to boost the entire complex of bilateral relations during these difficult times.

The Republic of Cuba is our reliable ally and loyal friend, with whom we traditionally share relations of mutual respect, trust and solidarity that cannot be affected by negative external factors.

The two diplomats will coordinate the issues of strengthening strategic partnership between Moscow and Havana in the political, trade, economic, investment, cultural and humanitarian areas, including with regard to the results of the meeting of the commission's co-chairs to be held on September 25. They will also discuss the key issues on the global and regional agenda, as well as the further coordination of actions on the global stage, including counteracting the illegitimate US sanctions against the Island of Freedom.

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Foreign Ministry Statement on Russia's parity-based list of representatives of EU member states and European institutions banned from entry to the Russian Federation

The European Union has recently made a number of unfriendly steps in relation to our country and Russian citizens. As before, bypassing the accepted international norms, the EU continues to expand the scope of its sanctions and apply them under far-fetched and sometimes even absurd pretexts.

The European Union has been repeatedly cautioned about this destructive approach. However, the EU has ignored our invitations to a substantive, professional and facts-based dialogue and continues to speak the language of sanctions.

In response to the European Union's actions, the Russian side has made a decision to reciprocally expand the list of representatives of the EU member states and EU institutions that are banned from entry to the Russian Federation. The number of persons on the Russian list has been brought to parity with a similar list drawn up by the European Union.

The restrictions were introduced in accordance with Federal Law No. 114-FZ on the Procedure for Exit from the Russian Federation and Entry to the Russian Federation of August 15, 1996.

In line with standing diplomatic practice, the Foreign Ministry has formally notified the EU Delegation in Russia regarding this step.

If the EU perseveres with this policy of confrontation, we reserve the right to take appropriate response measures.

I would like to emphasise that this step was caused by the

increasingly open manifestations of the EU's confrontational policy with respect to Russia. We reserve the right to take further measures if Brussels takes the path of further increasing sanctions pressure on our country and Russian citizens.

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Situation around Alexey Navalny

We are all witnessing how the West, Western leaders, officials, integration institutions and associations led by the respective Western states have launched a massive misinformation campaign concerning the situation with a Russian citizen, Alexey Navalny. The German political elite has expressed concern over what had happened in an aggressive manner. In particular, Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke about an "attempt to silence" Navalny. German parliamentarians mention the "aggressive regime" in Russia that is allegedly trying to advance its own interests by using violence and breaking international law.

On September 4, foreign ministers of Germany and France, Heiko Maas and Jean-Yves Le Drian, said in a joint communiqué that they were "both appalled by this attack on Mr Navalny, which constitutes a most serious blow to the basic principles of democracy and political pluralism."

The policy of hardline accusations was quickly picked up by other Western countries. In particular, French President Emmanuel Macron qualified the incident as "attempted murder" and demanded that Russia "urgently shed light" on "the circumstances of this attempted murder and who is responsible." The French President even used the UN platform to make public comments on the matter.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in unison with his European colleagues, threatened to impose more sanctions on Russia for the alleged use of a chemical weapon against Alexey Navalny.

We consider this kind of rhetoric unacceptable. There is no and can't be any evidence to support Russia's involvement, no "Russian trace," as they put it, in what has happened. We have to state with regret that it is not the first time the US diplomacy has built its position on unconfirmed rumours. I would say the US State Department is the agency that is most vigorously engaged in public speculation.

Once again, the United States and its European allies, for purely political reasons, have deliberately aggravated their relations with Russia, preferring a policy of escalating system-wide confrontation to constructive partnership. Unfortunately, this pattern of behaviour is increasingly becoming their new normal.

Washington is not showing even the slightest interest in moving away from its stereotypes. Had it been otherwise, instead of groundless accusations and threats against Russia, they would have long advised their German colleagues Washington continues to exert strong pressure on to satisfy the repeated requests from the Russian Prosecutor General's Office for legal assistance and for the documents Russia has requested. None of the public statements made by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo contain any such calls to the German authorities. At the same time, we are registering endless calls from the American side at different levels to the German side, such as to halt the Nord Stream 2 project. Isn't that interesting?

In this context, I would like to clarify how things stand in reality

using a few specific facts as examples. As I said, the German authorities have still not responded to the official requests of the Russian Prosecutor General's Office to provide practical support to the Russian law enforcement agencies in their pre-investigation inquiry into the facts concerning Alexey Navalny's emergency hospitalisation in Omsk on August 20. A corresponding request was sent to Germany's Federal Office of Justice on August 27 and September 14 in line with the European Convention on Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters of 1959 and the Protocols thereto.

Berlin has still not provided any biological samples from Alexey Navalny or the results of their tests, which German military doctors believe contain traces of the so-called Novichok class poison; they have not provided any information about the nature of the treatment the Russian citizen received in the Charite clinic in this connection. The German side gave no assistance in organising a meeting between investigators from the Russian Interior Ministry and Mr Navalny.

All of the above evidence is crucial for the aforementioned pre-investigation check, which cannot be completed; according to the Russian legal procedure, it is an indispensable precondition to opening a criminal case with regard to the alleged poisoning of Navalny – something the German side keeps insisting on as an ultimatum. Russian law enforcement agencies have repeatedly confirmed their readiness to consider and take into account all the data and materials available to the German doctors that they believe is evidence of a crime committed against a Russian citizen. But Berlin does not seem to be in a hurry to share them, while simultaneously declaring the need for immediate action on the Russian side. The situation is grave, but Moscow has neither

grounds nor intentions to take Berlin's word for it. This must be understood.

On the whole, it seems that our German counterparts are using deliberate tactics and intentionally wasting time in responding to the Russian Prosecutor General's Office's requests, citing various excuses each time we remind them about it. We believe this is all being done, among other things, to keep the idea of Russia's alleged unwillingness to clarify the reasons that caused Navalny's dire health condition afloat in the international information space. We would like to declare with full responsibility that such statements are false. While waiting for the information requested from Berlin, the Russian Ministry of the Interior has even extended the timeframe of the mandatory pre-investigation check, while simultaneously carrying out a scope of investigative actions and intelligence-gathering activities. About 200 people have been questioned. We would like to emphasise once again that the key to completing the investigation lies with the German authorities. In this case, everything depends on Berlin. I would very much like the German media to put special emphasis on this.

Statements by German officials are also in line with this counterproductive policy, as they suggest the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is the only authority Russia should request for the relevant biomaterials and documents. Now I would like to ask our German colleagues a direct question: does this mean the German side is refusing to respond to requests from the Russian Prosecutor General's Office for legal assistance? This is not a rhetorical question and we would certainly like to hear a clear answer.

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US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's statements on the formation of a coalition against Nord Stream 2

We have taken note of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's recent interview with the German Bild. I'd like to emphasise what I've just said. Our US colleagues are going all-out to brainwash Berlin. They have been doing this regarding Nord Stream 2 for many years in different ways: first, their previous ambassador led the way, then the media, and now the US Secretary of State has joined in.

In this interview Mr Pompeo again expressed doubt that Nord Stream 2 will be built at all. I'm tempted to ask him how this project is the United States' concern. We can look at the map to see where the US and Europe are located. In principle, the answer to this question is obvious. First, the Americans consider everything to be their business. Second, they are particularly concerned about the projects from which the Europeans get direct benefits.

We denounce the appeals to create some coalition against a pipeline in which German and other companies have already invested billions of dollars. By investment we mean not only big capital, transnationals, business flagships and industrial giants but also the investments based on the daily labour of millions of people from different countries. They are the ones who create a real product that later on allows large companies to invest in projects. Mr Pompeo, have you thought about these people, about their future? Or are they unworthy of consideration?

Such statements by Secretary of State Pompeo only reflect the real intentions of Washington, which is trying to take hold of the West European gas market by unfair competition and tie this

region to future supplies of its expensive LNG. All this is perfectly clear.

For our part, we reaffirm our strong determination to remain reliable suppliers of energy resources for our partners in Europe. Let me repeat what I have said today. The quality of our cooperation has been tested by decades, not by interviews of US Department of State representatives or statements by politicians that will be forgotten tomorrow. The names of countries and political systems have changed but our energy cooperation with the Europeans has always remained at a high level. We have never let them down.

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Statement by the European External Action Service on a verdict by Russian court

We have to state with regret that the practice of distorting facts with a view to misleading the world public is becoming a brand identity of EU diplomacy.

Speaking about recent examples, I would mention the recent press release by the European External Action Service (EEAS) on the verdict issued by the district military court in Rostov-on-Don in a case of seven individuals accused of involvement with a political organisation.

We consider it important to clear up this issue and to do so publicly. The matter deals with the participants of the Crimean cell of the Islamist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir. They received different terms in prison for the proven terrorist crimes. Contrary to Brussels' allegations, their political views, nationality or ethnic origin have nothing to do with the court's verdict.

This is not the first time we are seeing attempts by our Western partners to divide terrorists into good, bad and moderate guys. Regrettably, residents of the EU countries who have first-hand experience of the horrors of terrorist attacks know what tragic consequences such attempts have.

We resolutely denounce any actions undermining or eroding the efforts of the international community to counter the terrorist threat.

To conclude, I'd like to say that by virtue of its mandate the EEAS is responsible for implementing a common foreign policy of the EU member countries. Since 2003, the activities of Hizb ut-Tahrir have been banned by law in Germany, which has always declared its unflagging commitment to the supremacy of law and national judicial procedures. It would be interesting to hear what Berlin thinks about such overt attempts by EU diplomacy to put the said terrorist group on the same footing with a political organisation. This is not a rhetorical question. Or do the ends justify the means and it is possible to simply ignore obvious transgressions of one's own law when it comes to politicised attacks on our country?

We still hope to receive an answer to this question.

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Hearings resume in Assange case

Over the past few days, we have been alarmed to see the developments around the resumed court hearings of the case on extraditing Julian Assange to the United States. The British justice system continues a longtime policy of persecuting the famous journalist, unleashed by Washington.

This September, a London court resumed hearings on Assange's

extradition to the United States. The judge will have to decide whether Washington's request meets the British-US extradition agreement that does not call for extraditing persons charged with so-called political crimes. The human rights community, the concerned experts, Julian Assange's colleagues and journalists are convinced that the US-instigated campaign is politically motivated. They fear that a positive decision will be made on the US request. It appears that they have every reason for saying this.

Since Assange's arrest in April 2020, the US side has brought up an entire array of new serious charges against him, including the organisation of efforts to hack into government computers and a collusion to obtain and disclose information which is reportedly important for national security. Additional provisions of the US lawsuit were made public in June 2020.

At the same time, no one notified Assange's defence counsels about this. We would like to ask our US and British colleagues: What does this have to do with human rights, democracy and freedom? European agencies could also speak their mind on this score.

Moreover, according to our sources, lawyers were unable to speak with Assange for several months, under the pretext of the coronavirus lockdown. Predictably, the London court turned down a request to deny the new charges.

The journalist who did not commit any crimes has been staying at a maximum-security prison in London for 16 months now.

However, doctors are alarmed in connection with his extremely weak physical and mental health, undermined by years of living in isolation at the Embassy of Ecuador to the United Kingdom.

We have repeatedly stated our position regarding human rights and ethical aspects of this case which is turning into an open farce. We believe that Julian Assange is being subjected to rude political short work with elements of torture and efforts to exhaust him. They are accusing the journalist who published authentic information of espionage. As is known, Assange himself never engaged in espionage, and he published information provided by informants from among former US Army service personnel. As a journalist, he has the right to protect his sources of information. I believe that our Western partners know this only too well.

Nils Melzer, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Dunja Mijatovic, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, and former OSCE Representative on Freedom of the *Media*, Harlem *Desir*, insisted that the British authorities abstain from extraditing Assange. Most specialised human rights organisations continue to slam the journalist's persecution.

The professional community unanimously agrees that the inhuman treatment of the Wikileaks chief concerns all journalists without exception and seriously undermines the future of investigative journalism. This persecution of media representatives sends a message to those making short work of undesirable journalists that their actions will go unpunished. This concerns persons following the example of Mafia organisations that ordered the murder of Caruana Galizia, the famous author of an anti-corruption blog, in Malta.

We are urging international agencies and human rights organisations and the professional community to continue exerting every effort to simply save the life of Julian Assange and defend

his honour. On the whole, this implies a challenge to the entire professional journalist community.

Latvian Saeima passes first version of a bill banning St George ribbons

The other day, members of Latvia's Saeima passed the first version of a bill banning the use of St George ribbons. Apart from monuments, the European Union is now fighting ribbons that symbolise WWII and the Great Patriotic War.

We resolutely condemn yet another attempt to revise history and to virtually contest the results of WWII that are not subject to revision.

In effect, this provocative idea is also directed against those Latvians who fought shoulder to shoulder with representatives of other nations for the liberation of Europe and Latvia from Nazi enslavement.

Instead of bowing low to them for a chance to live in peace, members of the Latvian Parliament who have made a legislative motion to ban the St George ribbon symbolising Victory are insulting the memory of these people.

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47th anniversary of Guinea-Bissau's independence

On September 24, Guinea-Bissau will mark the 47th anniversary of independence. This nation is connected with Russia by long-standing relations of friendship and cooperation, has a rich historical past and unique traditions and customs.

Guinea-Bissau had to face many trials and pass through a difficult

period of colonial dependency and slavery. In 1446, the first Portuguese expedition of slave traders landed on the territory of today's Guinea-Bissau, and the country became a West African platform for exporting slaves to Latin America for many centuries. In 1956, the establishment of the African Independence Party, which would later lead Guinea-Bissau's fight for sovereignty, became a milestone event. This selfless fight, including with weapons in hands, concluded with the declaration of the independent Republic in 1973.

The Bissau society holds grateful memories of the comprehensive support the Soviet Union provided over the years for the young African state's development, establishment of the national economy, creation of effective armed forces and training of personnel. Today bilateral relations are based on a high level of trust. Russia invariably supports the Bissau leaders' commitment to expanding the entire complex of bilateral relations and is ready for further mutually beneficial cooperation in politics, trade, the economy, culture and other areas.

We believe that the time-tested friendly bilateral ties will continue to develop fruitfully in the interests of both nations. We would like to congratulate the people of Guinea-Bissau on the national holiday and wish them success, peace and prosperity.

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Independence Day of the Republic of Botswana

On September 22, the Republic of Botswana celebrates the 54th anniversary of independence.

The post-war rise of national liberation movements in Africa

marked the beginning of the liberation struggle for self-determination of the British protectorate of Bechuanaland (now Botswana). In 1962, Seretse Khama, the first president of the country, established the Bechuanaland Democratic Party, whose activists peacefully gained independence from Great Britain in 1966. In October 1966, the republic became a member of the United Nations. From the outset Botswana declared its firm commitment to the policy of the Organisation of African Unity and began to play an important role in regional politics and the Africans' fight against the apartheid in South Africa. In 1974, Botswana, together with other countries, initiated the group of Frontline States. Gaborone makes a significant contribution to integration processes in the southern Africa region as part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

On March 6, 2020 Russia and Botswana marked an important date: the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations. On this occasion, the two countries' foreign ministers exchanged greetings. These 50 years reaffirmed the traditional friendly relations between Russia and Botswana as well as the mutual willingness to expand comprehensive bilateral cooperation for the benefit of the two nations' prosperity and in the interest of strengthening peace and international security.

We congratulate our Botswanian friends on Independence Day and wish them well-being, peace and prosperity.

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Answers to media questions:

Question: The Russian Foreign Ministry has repeatedly stated that Russia or the Soviet Union have never developed,

produced or stockpiled toxic chemicals under the Novichok brand, which has become a popular name in the West. However, a number of Russian media outlets, including national media, have published an interview with Leonid Rink, Dr. of Chemical Sciences, who was part of the Novichok development team. Mr Rink said in an interview that a group of specialists worked on Novichok. He said that the Soviet Union or Russia didn't have a programme for developing chemical weapons named "Novichok," but claims that the military gave this name to the agent.

Also on September 15, Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service Sergey Naryshkin said "it was destroyed" when answering the question on whether Russia is stockpiling Novichok.

Tell me, please, has Russia or the Soviet Union ever developed and produced Novichok, or did this agent exist, but under a different name? What is the Foreign Ministry's official position on the existence of the Novichok toxic agent in Russia?

Maria Zakharova: You correctly noted that we had repeatedly stated that, unlike the Western countries, neither the Soviet Union nor Russia had ever carried out R&D projects codenamed Novichok. I can only reaffirm that Russia's position and the state of affairs regarding this matter have not changed.

With regard to numerous deliberations on this matter by private individuals and inaccurate interpretation by the media of the statements made by representatives of the Russian authorities, we believe it is unnecessary to comment on them. I just reiterated our

stance to you.

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Question: In his video message on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the UN General Assembly, President of Ukraine Vladimir Zelensky said that Russia is trying to return to a division of spheres of influence in the world. He also accused Russia of aggression against Ukraine. What does the Russian Foreign Ministry think about these statements?

Maria Zakharova: We are not surprised by yet another bellicose remark by the President of Ukraine and his attempt to scare the world with Russia as a threat to the international community. This is an old and tired cliché, which is still popular. Of course, we reject and condemn the phantasmagoric accusations of the top “servant” of the Ukrainian people about Russia’s alleged plans to re-divide the world. However, it should be noted that by talking about Russia’s attempts to re-divide spheres of influence, Vladimir Zelensky admits that he believes his country is in the sphere of someone else’s (clearly, not Russia’s) influence.

Here’s something else that caught our attention. In his remarks, President Zelensky is clearly proud that the Ukrainian SSR was one of the founding countries of the UN as an independent entity.

Here’s a brief historical overview. We would like to remind Mr Zelensky that Ukraine owes this to the Soviet leaders of that period. The Soviet period was the high point in the prosperous life of that republic, when, thanks to major investments by the Soviet Union, it went from a predominantly agrarian land to a centre of unparalleled industrial and high-tech production and took a dignified place in the family of Soviet peoples.

Thus, no matter how much Mr Zelensky would like to rewrite history and forget about our common roots, the truth will always prevail.

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Question: India refused to take part in multinational military exercises in Russia for no reason. Nine countries take part in these exercises, including China and Pakistan. What does Russia think about India's decision not to take part in these exercises and the tensions in Ladakh and Northern Kashmir?

Maria Zakharova: I have regularly commented on the second question. All of my answers remain applicable. In this case I can only reiterate them.

As for the military exercises, you should address our colleagues from the Defence Ministry.

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Question: I'd like to ask you about the US pressure on sovereign countries as regards the implementation of energy projects. Today, you talked about Nord Stream 2 and statements by US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo in an interview with Bild. Is there a real risk that some energy projects will be given up, including Nord Stream 2, because there are ambitious attempts to stop them and establish some special coalition for this purpose? We heard today that the ships that are part of building Nord Stream 2 were denied insurance. What is Russia's response to this conduct? It is clear that Russia is not afraid of these attempts, but other countries are worried and have withdrawn from the project. What needs to be done to complete the construction of the

pipeline?

Maria Zakharova: You talk about the risk. How can it be otherwise? If the United States, one of the world's largest powers in many areas, is undermining the project, is that a risk or not? I think this is a risk that shows that US political forces spare no money, opportunities or conscience in its all-out bid to prevent this project from being completed. The beginning was fairly innocuous. It was expressed at talks and by statements that mostly emphasised the benefits of the US proposal in the market. However, it ended with direct threats and blackmail. And this is just what the public can see, but I'd like to emphasise that there is also an underwater part of this US campaign, which is not evident to the public. It can be seen by the experts dealing with these issues. Who is more threatened by the risks you asked about? Of course, the attacks are targeted against the project, the investments and the European countries – not only their government associations but also the nations that were supposed to receive a benefit, certain dividends from Nord Stream 2.

I would like to mention one more aspect that will certainly take a loss. I'm talking about global competition, the foundation of free competition in the current world order. The world economy has been built on this for many years and even decades. For decades, we heard US statements (sometimes they were very loud, even too loud in the early 2000s) about the impossibility of using political instruments for resolving strictly economic issues. You might recall that this was an American concept. The US said that the economy must be free of politics, not to mention pressure, threats and blackmail.

Now all of this is turned upside down. It is the US that is using its arsenal in an anticompetitive struggle to push through its interests. These actions are creating a threat to the entire global economic model. The use of blackmail, threats and subversion to promote one's goods and services is unacceptable, and not just for individual states. These are the rules that all states must abide by. At any rate, nobody has cancelled these rules. These are not just theoretical rules and traditions of the past few decades. They were followed for years at all global venues, as well as informal and government forums. Now they are threatened by these absolutely illegal US actions.

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Question: Intra-Afghan talks have been going on for the second week running. However, Taliban attacks on government and foreign forces have become more frequent. The UN and the EU have called on the Taliban to cease fire during the talks. What is Russia's position in this situation?

Maria Zakharova: Indeed, we have recently seen an increase in the Taliban's armed activity against the Afghanistan Government forces. However, after the Taliban and the United States signed a peace agreement in February, there were no attacks against foreign forces. We assume that the Taliban is trying to stick to the understandings reached with the Americans.

As for the upsurge of fighting with Afghanistan military units, we think this could be primarily attributed to the protracted process of agreeing on the procedural matters for the intra-Afghan talks in Doha. In this context, we are calling on both sides to complete the technical aspects of this work and start substantive talks on the

national reconciliation agenda.

That said, we are sure that a lasting ceasefire should be a key issue for discussion during the first round of intra-Afghan dialogue.

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Question: Is Russia planning to participate in the WHO mechanism called COVAX, which is meant to arrange equitable vaccine access for all countries?

Maria Zakharova: We are closely following the WHO initiatives in combatting the coronavirus and often comment on them (practically every week of late). Russian representatives took part in several meetings on the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator. On September 10, Russian Healthcare Minister Mikhail Murashko participated in the first meeting of the ACT Accelerator Facilitation Council. He represented our country at the online vaccine summit organised by the WHO and the UK this June.

The COVAX mechanism is part of the ACT initiative, which provides for the development, production and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, as well as for the financing of these activities. Russia has been hard at work in these areas. One of the results was the registration of the first COVID-19 vaccine called SPUTNIK V. We are making efforts in coordination with the WHO to re-qualify the vaccine for export. And new vaccine preparations created by Russian scientists are also going to be available soon.

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Question: Would you address the quoting of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov by Azerbaijani media and government entities

following today's meeting with the Azerbaijani side?

Maria Zakharova: As for the correctness of quoting the Russian minister, I would forward these questions to the sources of that information. I am not going to dwell on this issue.

Regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement, I can say the following. Today's meeting with the Azerbaijani side focused on the previously mentioned basic principles of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement, including the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh status issues and the liberation of the areas around it. You are well aware of our position on this matter. Please rely on this position rather than on various interpretations that are made not by the Russian side.

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