

CNN published this video item, entitled Clarissa Ward breaks down Wagner Group heads warning to US below is their description.

CNNs Clarissa Ward discusses Russian President Vladimir Putins comments on the threat of nuclear war and the warning from Russian private army, the Wagner Group, to US officials. #CNN #News CNN YouTube Channel

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One of Russias western border regions is forming self-defence units amid the Ukraine invasion. Belgorod governor Vyacheslav Gladkov has said the region will be focusing on forming its own militia for territorial defences. According to Gladkov, several battalions made up of local residents are being formed, many of whom were not able to join Russian Forces. The creation of self-defence units in Belgorod reflects how the small border region has been increasingly dragged into the Ukraine war. Residents of the Belgorod region have said that they have seen heightened military activity in the region since the start of the war. The announcement comes after Wagner Group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin said he was setting up training centres in the Belgorod region. The founder of the Wagner Group, a de facto private army network of Putin, said that the centres were being formed in Belgorod and Kursk. The Wagner group founder added that there should be military units with mobilised men and other facilities with security forces. A man, allegedly recruited by Russias Wagner Group to fight in Ukraine while incarcerated, has been arrested after deserting his post and killing a Russian police officer reports said Wednesday.

The Kremlin-linked infamous mercenary group began turning to Russias penal system earlier this year to bolster its ranks in Ukraine, Western defense officials confirmed in September.

Those incarcerated were offered a release from prison in exchange for their service on the front lines as Russia looked to add men to its fighting force and counter its heavy losses.

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Russian Telegram channel Baza which regularly posts information relating to Russias government or military dealings reported that Nikolin was serving time for charges relating to robbery at a correctional facility near the city of Ufa in eastern Russia.

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The circumstances around the attack when Nikolin fired upon police officers with a Kalashnikov assault rifle a Soviet era weapon dubbed an AK-47 remain unclear.

At least one police officer was wounded in the fight and Russian authorities reportedly closed public transit and encouraged residents to stay indoors as a manhunt ensued, reported RIA.

Nikolin was allegedly found Wednesday on a pig farm, where he resisted arrest before footage on Baza showed him being escorted by Russian officials.

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earlier this year suggests he could face a death sentence.

"Nobody goes back behind bars," Prigozhin told inmates according to September reports. "If you serve six months, you are free. If you arrive in Ukraine and decide it's not for you, we execute you."

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Exclusive

Ukraine's government has promised its full support to British lawyers who are accusing mercenary company the Wagner Group of terrorism in a legal case in the UK.

At a press conference from Kyiv, MP Fedir Venislavsky promised the Ukrainian parliament would provide all necessary information, including daily statistics of crimes committed by Russia's war machine.

Wagner, a Russian private military contractor group whose chief is close to Vladimir Putin, has been accused of war crimes and atrocities in Ukraine.

Speaking alongside lawyers from McCue Jury & Partners, who are bringing the case against Wagner, Mr Venislavsky said the Ukrainian government had documented every citizen affected by Russias war and promised to share this database to help the civil case progress.

Mr Venislavsky a member of the defence committee of the Verkhovna Rada Ukraines parliament added: We know why they died under what circumstances, when they died, and we will provide all that information to be used in future court proceedings against the terrorist associated with the state of [the] Russian Federation.

Jason McCue, partner at McCue Jury & Partners, alongside Ukrainian MP Fedir Venislavsky and other officials (Photo: Supplied)

The court case, launched in November, would be heard at the High Court in London. Lawyers from McCue Jury & Partners will argue that Wagner and its founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, engaged in an unlawful means conspiracy to deploy terrorism to facilitate their illegal invasion of Ukraine.

The case is being brought by a group of Ukrainian victims of Wagner now residing in the UK but it also symbolically represents all Ukrainians who have suffered loss as a result of the war including the 100,000-plus Ukrainians who evacuated to Britain.

McCue Jury & Partners believe Wagners assets can be targeted to uncover billions of dollars in reparations for its victims.

During the 286 days of Russias invasion, Mr Venislavsky said, the Kremlin war machine had destroyed 38,000 homes, 2,719 educational facilities and more than 1,250 medical facilities.

A man wearing a camouflage uniform walks out of the PMC Wagner Centre office block during its official opening in Saint Petersburg last month (Photo: Igor Russak/Reuters)

Lawyers have sent a letter before action to Mr Prigozhin accusing the Russian oligarch, along with the group and Mr Putin, of intentionally causing harm and suffering to the people of Ukraine and causing an illegal war through terrorism, the law firm said. Mr Prigozhin has until 1 February to respond.

It has launched a crowdfunding page to generate public support to identify further victims, find perpetrators of abuses and target billions of dollars in reparations from those responsible for the atrocities in Ukraine.

Speaking at the press conference, Mr McCue said the case would prove to the world that Wagner are terrorists, and that Putin conspired with them to commit acts of terrorism. The world will know that Wagner is a terrorist gun for hire and that Putin is in the business of paying for terrorism.

He called on the international community to do more in support of Ukraine and urged strategic reparation litigation all over the world on behalf of Ukrainians against all aspects of Putins war machine.

Ukraine getting the justice it deserves is in the balance. Peace without justice is unsustainable and justice means reparations, full reparations.

It added that by using law as a weapon of war to attack it will hold accountable those who have committed crimes against Ukraine.

Wagners worldwide reach The Wagner Group, a private military company linked to the Russian Government, has been accused of committing human rights atrocities including mass executions, arbitrary detention, torture during interrogation and the forced displacement of the civilian population. In September, Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin sometimes dubbed Putins chef because of his catering businesses that hosted dinners for the Russian president declared he founded Wagner in 2014. It has carried out missions in a number of countries. It started operating

in Syria in 2015, and was accused by the US of having planted landmines and other improvised explosive devices in and around the Libyan capital, Tripoli. While tasked with guarding diamond mines in the Central African Republic (CAR), it was accused by the UN and the French government of committing rapes and robberies against civilians, and the EU has imposed sanctions as a result. The US Treasury placed Wagner under sanctions in 2020, saying it had been acting as a cover in the countries for mining companies owned by Mr Prigozhin. More recently, a US official said Malis security situation had become significantly worse after the arrival of Wagner mercenaries who were meant to be providing security against Islamist militant groups. Wagners involvement in the region had been a factor in the removal of French troops from the same zone of Africa. In response to the EUs vote to declare Russia a state sponsor of terrorism, Mr Prigozhin sent a bloodied sledgehammer to the EU Parliament. The stunt related to an episode where a captured Wagner defector was bludgeoned to death with a sledgehammer an unofficial symbol of the group because its fighters often use them to kill.

Last month, the European Parliament adopted a resolution to recognise Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism, citing the destruction of civilian infrastructure and other serious violations of international and humanitarian law amounting to acts of terror. The MEPs recognised Russia as a state that uses means of terrorism.

Earlier this week, Russia launched its latest co-ordinated missile strike, with Ukraines air force command saying it shot down more than 60 of over 70 missiles which had targeted the countrys critical infrastructure and power supply.

However, some homes in the south were destroyed and power lines in the north were targeted, killing at least two people, Ukrainian officials said.

An armed man in military fatigues who opened fire at the local police officers on December 6 has been arrested near the mining city of Novoshakhtinsk.

The criminal has been detained, wrote the governor of Rostov region Vasily Golubev on Telegram. As a result of well-coordinated actions, he was discovered in an empty building outside of Novoshakhtinsk.

The Russian news source Baza identifies the detainee as Pavel Nikolin, who was recruited by the Wagner Group but deserted from the front. Before joining the private military company, Nikolin was serving a sentence at the IK-4 penal colony in Ufa.

On December 6, Nikolin had opened fire on the police at a customs checkpoint on the outskirts of Novoshakhtinsk. The shooter, armed with a Kalashnikov rifle, wounded one of the officers and fled from the scene.

Following the incident, the city had closed its daycare centers and shut down the roads for leaving the city. Residents had been advised to stay indoors.

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A deserter who opened fire at a policeman from a machine gun on 6 December was detained in Rostov Oblast (Russia); according to the information from the media outlets, it appears to be a soldier of the Wagner Group, recruited from one of the penal colonies earlier.

Source: Vasily Golubev, Governor of Rostov Oblast, on Telegram; Baza, a Russian media outlet with sources in the security services; Kremlin-aligned news outlet RIA Novosti

Quote from Golubev: "The criminal is detained. As a result of coordinated operational-search activities, he was detected in an empty building near Novoshakhtinsk. Investigative actions are conducted."

Details: RIA Novosti outlet, citing the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, reported that the detained soldier is 38 years old and was born in another region.

According to the data from Baza outlet, this detained deserter is Pavel Nikolin, a soldier of the Wagner Group.

He was serving a sentence for theft and robbery at the Penal Colony No.4 [city of Ufa, Russia]. He was recruited to the

Wagner Group there. But Nikolin changed his mind about going to war on 24 November and escaped.

As per the Bazas information, Nikolin had been searched for approximately a day and found at an abandoned pig farm. He was trying to fight back during the detainment.

Background:

It was reported on 6 December that a soldier with a machine gun who wounded a policeman was wanted in Novoshakhtinsk city [Rostov Oblast, Russia].

On 13 November, it became known that a citizen of Russia was brutally executed without trial and investigation by tying his head to concrete with tape and hitting him with a sledgehammer from above. Prigozhin, the founder of Wagner Group, hinted that this was the work of his mercenaries. Perhaps, with the help of such a video of execution, Russia is trying to discourage the Russian conscripts from surrendering.

After the publication of the video of the execution with a sledgehammer of Yevgeny Nuzhin, a former inmate recruited by the Wagner Group, the recruitment of convicts in the colonies of Siberia and the Far East intensified: only in November, Wagner has "conscripted" people from at least six regions east of the Urals, taking 150-200 people from each penal colony.

On 22 November, Politico reported that the members of the European Parliament want to recognize the Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, Chief of the Wagner Group, has proposed to give a sledgehammer with fake blood stains to the European Parliament in response to a possible recognition of his group as a terrorist organisation.

On 23 November, the European Parliament recognized Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism and called for Wagner Group to be added to the list of terrorist organisations of the European Union.

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08 December 2022 KNOX THAMES

United States

RNS

Last week, the State Department deployed its most potent tool in its religious freedom toolbox when it released its latest list designating the worst violators of religious freedom worldwide. In what has become an annual ritual, interested observers welcomed new additions and bemoaned notable exclusions, and as usual they make good points.

But the designations beg the question - do they help?

Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaks, seen after viewing the Burmas Path To Genocide exhibit at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, on 21st March. PICTURE: Kevin Lamarque, Pool via AP)File photo.

Under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, the US Secretary of State is authorised to blacklist countries that severely violate the freedom of religion or belief. Blacklisting allows the State Department to levy sanctions, though most administrations have waived any punitive action, or simply piggyback religious freedom sanctions on pre-existing penalties against blacklisted states.

Still, no other country has such a mechanism, which enables the United States to shine a light on abuse.

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most administrations have waived any punitive action, or simply piggyback religious freedom sanctions on pre-existing penalties against blacklisted states."

On Friday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken designated 12 countries as countries of particular concern, signifying they are the worst of the worst. Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have appeared on the list before. Cuba and Nicaragua were new additions. Blinken named Algeria, the Central African Republic, Comoros and Vietnam to the Special Watch List, a second tier of violators.

Blinken also identified Entities of Particular Concern - non-state actors who severely violate religious freedom. The list included al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Houthis in Yemen, ISIS-Greater Sahara, ISIS-West Africa, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, the Taliban and the Wagner Group based on its actions in the Central African Republic".

Overall, the announcement contains hits and misses. The United States designating countries like China and Russia doesn't surprise, based on current global events. The redesignation of nations such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, both pivotal players in US foreign policy, however, demonstrates a willingness to name friend and foe alike. Naming Russia's Wagner Group recognised a Western nonstate group as a persecutor for the first time.

Many welcomed Vietnam's appearance on the Special Watch List, though many advocates believed it deserved redesignation as a CPC, which it was in 2004-5. Boat People SOS, a group focused on human rights violators in the country, and Abraham Cooper, vice chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, both welcomed the decision while believing, in Cooper's words, that conditions in Vietnam meet the CPC standard".

But others pointed out several glaring omissions, foremost India and Nigeria's absence on all lists. USCIRF Outraged by Omission of Nigeria and India from State Departments List of Countries of Particular Concern, said the commission's press release, and its chair, Nury Turkel, stated, There is no justification for the State Department's failure to recognize Nigeria or India as egregious violators of religious freedom, as they each clearly meet the legal standards for designation as CPCs.

The fact that Blinken chose not to name either country to even the lower Special Watch List is deeply problematic. Their trendlines are unmistakably in the wrong direction. Certainly, policymakers in Washington have high hopes for both countries for expanding US influence in Africa and Asia, but ignoring their persecution of Christians, Muslims and atheists hinders effective partnership.

Likewise, Blinken's relisting of the Taliban as an entity of particular concern pulled a punch. With their uncontested control of Afghanistan, the Taliban are the de facto power, no longer hiding in caves. Their inclusion on the CPC list would have been stronger, which the United States did before 9/11 without recognising their government.

The State Department's choices on these violators not only fails to deliver appropriate messages of concern, they hinder proactive diplomacy and weaken the United States leverage abroad.

This is important because in my two decades in government working on these issues, I have found that these lists do help - but only if they are followed up with consequential diplomacy. These designations are just one tool, and they need to be used. They will not work if they are regarded as boxes to check.

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In Uzbekistan, the Trump administration used Uzbekistan's CPC designation to bring about long-needed reforms, but also worked with new leadership in Tashkent that was looking to reset relations. Without CPC and the threat of penalties, change would not have come as far or as fast.

Similarly, in Vietnam and elsewhere, the State Department and US religious freedom ambassador Rashad Hussain have an opportunity to complement listing or delisting with energetic diplomacy to create political will where none exists.

India, Nigeria and others will require energetic advocacy. The downside of having these lists is that countries that escape them hear an unmistakable message that religious persecution ranks low in the hierarchy of priorities.

In the State Department release, the secretary said the United States will regularly engage countries about our concerns regarding limitations on freedom of religion or belief, regardless of whether those countries have been designated.

Hopefully so, but better if backed by consequences.

Knox Thames, the State Department special adviser on religious minorities in the Obama and Trump administrations, is writing a book on ending religious persecution. Follow him on Twitter @KnoxThames.

Belgrades permission for Russia Today channel to broadcast on the territory of Serbia and the visit of Serbian far-right politician Damjan Knezevic, the leader of the ultra-right organization Narodna Patrola, to the St.Petersburg Wagner Center are interconnected events that clearly show the Kremlins plans to destabilize the Balkan region and fuel one more conflict in Europe that supposedly should shift attention away from Russias war against Ukraine.

The Kremlin believes that the Balkans are the region vulnerable enough to provoke a large-scale conflict.

Read also: Russian GRU involved in fueling religious tensions in Balkans

NATO membership of some countries in the region gives Russia an opportunity to cause confrontation between some members of the Alliance in case of a conflict.

In fact, Russia Today introduction in Serbia is the preparation stage for formation bipolar public opinion. This Russian military intelligence-affiliated propaganda channel has already conduct such information and psychological operations in Ukraine in late 2013 early 2014 before the annexation of Crimea, as well as in early 2022 on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine. It is absolutely clear that the activity of Russia Today in Serbia will be aimed at discrediting the West and escalating ethnic conflicts in the region. The fact that the Serbs are quite loyal to Russia and they do not need any psychological operations prove this opinion. However, the Serbian government and elites are pretty cautious and try to avoid violence. That is why, Moscow has to make the public opinion formation scenario in Serbia that will push the government and elites to provoke a conflict. Knezevics visit was covered by Yevgeny Prigozhins Patriot Media Group (PMC Wagner) and Komsomolskaya Pravda, Russian military intelligence-affiliated newspaper.

Moscow is crucially interested in preventing Serbia from the EU integration. Such a scenario would isolate Serbia from Europe but push it closer to Russia.

Knezevics visit to the Wagner Center shows that in the nearest future Russia is likely to start training Serbian nationalists at the Wagner PMC bases in Russia, as it has previously practiced with members of other far-right groups in Europe.

We still believe that the Wagner Group serves as the Expeditionary Forces and Special Operations Forces in Russia. Thus, perhaps, the Wagner PMC units may be deployed to Serbia to coordinate and assist Serbian paramilitary groups in the local operations.

For the Russians, Knezevics visit alongside the founder of the Russian-Serbian Center Orlovi, a locally based civic group, appeared aimed at countering perceptions of Russian isolation nine months into an unpopular invasion of Ukraine supported in part by Vagner mercenaries and, more rarely, Serbian and other foreign fighters.

Read also: Russia on a hunt to destabilize Kosovo through Serbia

A suspected Russian deserter who brought the war against Ukraine to Russian soil on Tuesday by opening fire on cops with a machine gun was reportedly a prison inmate tossed onto the battlefield by the notorious Wagner Group.

Rostov Gov. Vasily Golubev confirmed on Telegram early Wednesday that the gunman had been apprehended, noting that hed been found in an empty building near Novoshakhtinsk after sparking a panicked manhunt there.

The Russian outlet Baza, citing unnamed sources, identified the shooter as a convicted felon from a penal colony in Ufa who had been serving a prison sentence for theft and robbery when he was signed up for the war as part of Wagners prison-recruitment scheme.

It was not immediately clear when he joined Russias war against Ukraine, but Baza reports that he fled the battlefield there in late November and had apparently been on the run ever since.

Decked out in camo and a ski mask, he emerged from a wooded area about 12 miles from Russias border with Ukraine on Tuesday and took aim at cops who were in the area for a missing-persons case. Both cops were wounded in the chaotic barrage of gunfire but were expected to survive.

The incident has largely been played down in Russian state media, where the gunmans reported links to the war against Ukraine were conveniently left out. The Investigative Committee confirmed the gunman had previously been convicted of theft and robbery, however, according to RIA Novosti.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Putin-friendly businessman behind Wagner, issued a bizarre statement in which he appeared to question why an alleged crime committed by a mercenary under his command was not properly covered up by Russian law enforcement authorities.

If [he] was indeed a Wagner fighter and committed an offense, then it is necessary to separately investigate how this kind of incident, which should be classified as top secret, fell into the hands of journalists, and also how this person crossed the border of the Russian Federation, Prigozhin said in a statement released by the press service for his company Concord Management.

He did not confirm if the gunman had in fact been recruited by the mercenary group. Numerous reports on the twisted prison-recruitment scheme have noted that inmates were told at times by Prigozhin personally that they would be executed if they tried to retreat.

The public execution of former Wagner fighter Yevgeny Nuzhinkilled with a sledgehammer to the head in a video circulated by a Wagner-linked Telegram channel in mid-November was widely seen as a warning to other would-be defectors that they face the same fate for any such betrayal.