

The UN is close to agreement with Syria on establishing a constitutional committee, the UN secretary general's Syria envoy Geir Pedersen told reporters on Wednesday, Reuters reported.

Boeing falls behind Airbus in deliveries as 737 MAX crisis bites

Boeing is on track to overtake Airbus in commercial plane deliveries for 2019 after outpacing its US rival at midyear following the 737 MAX grounding, according to data released.

Boeing, which has halted deliveries of the top-selling plane since mid-March, reported 239 commercial plane deliveries in 2019 through the year's midpoint, down 37 percent from the year-ago period, AFP reported.

Airbus reported 389 deliveries for the same period, up 28 percent from the same period in 2018, according to data on its website.

If the numbers hold throughout the year, Airbus could replace Boeing as the world's largest aircraft maker.

Boeing's big decline in deliveries confirms the extent to which the 737 MAX crisis has dented its standing following two recent crashes that killed 346 people.

Boeing in June again reported no new orders for the 737 MAX.

Plane deliveries are tied to company revenues and closely monitored by Wall Street. Leading analysts have slashed their profit forecasts for Boeing due to the 737 MAX crisis, which has halted deliveries and forced the company to store planes after they are manufactured.

At the Paris Air Show in June, Boeing announced that it signed a letter of intent to sell 200 737 MAX planes to British Airways parent International Airlines Group, but the IAG order has not been officially booked yet.

On Monday, Saudi budget carrier fly-



Boeing 737 MAX airplanes are being stored on employee parking lots near Boeing field in the State of Washington. STEPHEN BRASHEAR/AFP

deal said it withdrew a provisional order for up to 50 Boeing's grounded 737 MAX jets and would instead buy up to 50 Airbus planes.

Morningstar analyst Danny Goode said he does not expect other carriers to follow flyadeal as long as Boeing is able to ensure reentry of the 737 MAX by the end of the year.

"While flyadeal's withdrawal is a bit

concerning, we would seriously revisit our delivery forecast if a flagship customer like Southwest or Ryanair flipped to Airbus' A320neo or A220 platform," Goode said in a note.

"We remain confident in the 737 MAX's return to service."

Boeing has developed a software upgrade to the 737 MAX after problems with a flight handling system were tied

to Lion Air and Ethiopian Airlines crashes. But the jet has still not been cleared by regulators to resume work.

The Federal Aviation Administration last week identified a fresh problem during simulator testing, further clouding the outlook for the plane's return to service.

Boeing shares rose 0.6 percent to \$353.23.

France says its missiles found on pro-Haftar base in Libya

The French government said Wednesday that its missiles had been found in Libya on a base used by rebel forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar, in an embarrassing admission that raises fresh questions about its role in the conflict.

Confirming a report in The New York Times, the Defense Ministry said in a statement that US-made Javelin missiles discovered in a camp south of Tripoli at the end of June had been purchased by France, AFP reported.

But it denied supplying them to rebel commander Haftar and breaching a UN arms embargo, saying French forces operating in the war-torn country had lost track of them after they were judged to be defective.

"Damaged and out-of-use, these weapons were being temporarily stocked in a warehouse ahead of their destruction," the statement said. "They were not transferred to local forces."

The anti-tank missiles, worth 170,000 dollars (150,000 euros) each, were seized when forces loyal to the UN-recognized government in Tripoli overran the rebel base in Gharyan, 100 kilometers (60 miles) south of Tripoli.

Three of them, as well Chinese-made shells bearing the markings of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), were shown off to journalists including AFP reporters on June 29.

The statement from

the French ministry did not explain how the missiles had been lost and will likely increase suspicions that Paris is backing Haftar on the ground while also giving him diplomatic support internationally.

France has publicly called for the UN arms embargo to be enforced, while an EU naval mission off the Libyan coast called Operation Sophia is trying to stop the flow of foreign weapons into the conflict.

French special forces and members of its DGSE intelligence service are known to be operating in Libya, which descended into chaos after a 2011 uprising and NATO-backed military campaign against former leader Muammar Gaddafi.

"These weapons were for the protection of forces undertaking intelligence and counter-terror missions," the French statement added.

Proxy war

The Libyan conflict has drawn in a range of regional and international actors who are all competing for influence.

Analysts say Haftar has been backed by some countries including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt during offensives against terrorists that have brought most of the country under his control.

But he has been branded a warlord and dictator-in-the-making by his opponents and on April

4 he launched an offensive on Tripoli seeking to overthrow the government of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj.

The fighting has claimed at least 1,000 lives and displaced tens of thousands of people.

The UN-recognized government in Tripoli headed by Sarraj controls a much smaller amount of territory in the east and draws support from Turkey, Qatar and Italy, analysts say.

France's role in the conflict under President Emmanuel Macron has caused tensions.

Macron threw himself into diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict after his elections in May 2017, seeing the instability across the Mediterranean as a major security worry and a source of migration to Europe.

He invited Haftar along with Sarraj to a peace conference in Paris in 2017 which was seen as giving the rebel commander international legitimacy for the first time.

The move also ruffled feathers in Italy, the former colonial power in Libya which had led European policy in the country until then.

When Haftar launched his offensive on Tripoli in April, France was accused by Sarraj of being complicit in the violence which was condemned by the international community.

France vehemently denied claims that it had been made aware of the offensive beforehand.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel insisted she was "very well", despite suffering her third trembling spell in less than a month on Wednesday that revived questions about her health.

Merkel began shaking



TOBIAS SCHWARZ/AFP

involuntarily as national anthems were being played at the reception of Finnish Prime Minister Antti Rinne, AFP reported.

But she attended a press conference as planned just around an hour later, telling journalists that her health was no cause for concern.

"I feel very well, there is no need to worry," she said, adding that she was simply still in a phase of "processing" a previous shaking spell, but that "there has been progress."

"I must now keep going with that," added Merkel, who turns 65 next week.

A source close to the government had said the cause of the repeat shaking was now psychological, with memories of the first incident provoking renewed trembling at events with similar set-

tings. The shaking on Wednesday was visible although less severe than during the first episode in June.

On that occasion she appeared unsteady and shook as she stood in

the middle sun next to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, whom she was welcoming with military honors.

That first bout of shaking was blamed on dehydration, but a second episode struck a week later at the end of June, just hours before she was due to board a plane for a G20 summit in Japan.

Officials had sought to play down fears over her health then, saying that she was fine and that she would not be cancelling any planned engagements.

Earlier that same year, she had fractured her pelvis while cross-country skiing in Switzerland and was ordered to cut back her schedule dramatically and stay in bed as much as possible for three weeks.

A keen hiker too, Merkel herself once revealed that she has a "camel-like" ability to store energy for sleepless all-night summits.

In case of emergency, Merkel would be replaced by Vice Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who would carry out her duties until parliament elected a new leader.

Boeing shares rose 0.6 percent to \$353.23.

Turkey warns US against harmful steps over Russian S-400s

Turkey called on the United States on Wednesday to avoid steps harmful to bilateral relations after the US State Department spokeswoman reiterated Ankara would face "real and negative consequences" for acquiring Russian S-400 defense systems.

Turkey's Foreign Ministry spokesman said the comments by the State Department's Morgan Ortugus on Tuesday were not in line with the spirit and content of talks between presidents of the two countries at the G20 summit last month, Reuters reported.



REUTERS

"We invite the US side to avoid taking wrong steps, excluding diplomacy and dialogue, that will harm relations," spokesman Hami Aksoy said, adding Ankara had still not received a response to its proposal to set up a working group to look into the impact of the S-400 purchase.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said after meeting President Donald Trump in Osaka that the United States did not plan to impose sanctions on Ankara for buying the S-400s, which he said would arrive in the first half of July. Trump said Turkey had not been treated fairly but did not rule out sanctions.

The United States says the S-400s are not compatible with NATO's defense network and could compromise its Lockheed Martin F-35 stealth fighter jets, an aircraft Turkey is helping to build and plan to buy.

Buying military equipment from Russia leaves Turkey vulnerable to US retribution under a 2017 law known as the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, or CAATSA, the possibility of which has spooked investors and caused a selloff in the lira this year.

Ankara says it is not an enemy of the United States and therefore should not be subject to such sanctions.

Turkey could face expulsion from the F-35 program and other US sanctions if it goes ahead with the S-400 delivery. Washington has already halted training of Turkish pilots in the United States on the aircraft.

At least 24 killed in Papua New Guinea massacres

At least 24 people, including two pregnant women and their unborn children, were killed in a three-day spasm of tribal violence in Papua New Guinea's lawless highlands, prompting the prime minister on Wednesday to promise swift justice.

Officials said the deaths occurred in Hela Province – a rugged region in the west of the country – when rival tribes apparently clashed over control of local gold deposits in the mineral-rich soil, AFP reported.

Highland clans have fought each other in Papua New Guinea for centuries, but an influx of automatic weapons has made clashes more deadly and escalated the cycle of violence.

Hela provincial administrator William Bando told AFP on Wednesday that the death toll could rise.

"We are still waiting for today's brief from our officials on the ground," he said, calling for at least 100 police to be deployed to reinforce some 40 local officers.

The incident has shocked both the country and recently appointed Prime Minister James Marape, whose constituency includes the district where the killings occurred.

He vowed more security deployments and warned the perpetrators "your time is up."

"Today is one of the saddest days of my life," he said in a statement. "Many children and mothers innocently murdered in Munima and Karida villages of my electorate."

In the Karida attack, six women and eight children – as well as two pregnant women and their unborn children – were hacked and shot to death in a 30-minute rampage.

PNG tribal unrest

Marape blamed the violence on three related warlords who have been fighting against the Tagali tribe over local gold deposits.

Tribal clashes are a frequent occurrence in Papua New Guinea's highlands, where old rivalries prompted by rape or theft, or disputes over tribal boundaries or resources, often prompt violence.

But this is the most serious incident in years and the government – which has only 40 police and 16 soldiers in the area according to Bando – is struggling to respond.

In nearby Enga Province, a similar surge in violence prompted the establishment of a makeshift military garrison and the deployment of a company of around 100 government soldiers under the command of a Sandhurst-trained major.

But even those forces lack the resources to tackle difficult terrain.