

2009 WAR CRIMES

US bans visits by Lanka army chief

AFP, Washington

The United States yesterday said it would refuse entry to Sri Lanka's army chief over "credible" evidence of human rights violations in the bloody 2009 finale to the civil war. Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva, whose appointment last year drew wide international criticism, will be ineligible to visit the United States, as will his immediate family, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

"The allegations of gross human rights violations against Shavendra Silva, documented by the United Nations and other organizations, are serious and credible," Pompeo said in a statement.

"We urge the Sri Lankan government to promote human rights, hold accountable individuals responsible for war crimes and human rights violations, advance security sector reform, and uphold its other commitments to pursue justice and reconciliation," he said.

Silva was the commanding officer of an army division in the island's northern war-zone in the final months of the military offensive against Tamil Tiger rebels in 2009.

Rights groups say some 40,000 ethnic Tamils were killed in mass atrocities as government forces seized Sri Lanka's predominantly Tamil north.

The United Nations, in a report into the allegations, said Silva played a major role in orchestrating war crimes. The 2009 offensive delivered a death blow to the Tamil Tigers, whose nearly four-decade campaign for a separate homeland had killed 100,000 people and was characterized by the rebels' bloody suicide attacks.

Pompeo nonetheless said that the United States hoped to maintain security cooperation with Sri Lanka, which last year was rocked by Easter Sunday bombings by Islamist extremists.



This photo taken on Thursday shows a train attendant gesturing to medical staff leaving for Wuhan in Nanchang, China's central Jiangxi province. The new coronavirus has infected 1,700 Chinese health workers and killed six, authorities said yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

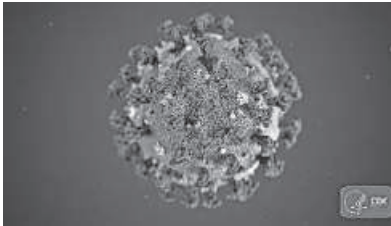
Six medical workers are among the latest victims in China of the novel coronavirus as the death toll nears 1,400. Here are the latest developments:

DEATH TOLL NEARS 1,400

The death toll from China's epidemic nears 1,400, according to authorities, with six medical workers among the victims. Nearly 64,000 people are now recorded as having fallen ill in China. Officials reveal that 1,716 health workers had been infected as of Tuesday, underscoring the risks doctors and nurses have taken due to shortages of protective gear. Japan reports its first death of an infected person -- the third fatality outside mainland China after the Philippines and Hong Kong. More than 500 people have now been contaminated in around 25 countries outside China, which excludes the autonomous territories of Hong Kong and Macao.

US CHANGES TONE

After initially praising Beijing for its response to the virus, Washington says it feels let down by a lack of transparency from China. Larry Kudlow, a senior White House economic official, contradicts President Donald Trump's upbeat message towards Beijing, expressing disappointment that it has declined Washington's offer to send experts to China. China has defended its record on transparency towards the international community in its response to the spread of the new virus.



PASSENGERS LEAVE JAPANESE SHIP

The Japanese authorities start evacuating a quarantined cruise ship off Japan's coast, letting 11 passengers aged 80 and over or in poor health off the Diamond Princess who have tested negative for the virus. More than 200 people on board the ship, the biggest centre of the virus outside China, have been diagnosed with the virus since it arrived off Japan on February 3 and was placed in quarantine.

END OF FRENCH QUARANTINE

The first French nationals repatriated from China and placed in quarantine leave the centre near the southern city of Marseille where they have been confined since January 31 after returning from Wuhan, Chinese epicentre of the virus. The 181 people concerned are given certificates saying they are not contagious.

\$4-5 BILLION LOSS IN AIRLINE REVENUE

The outbreak could mean a reduction of \$4-5 billion in worldwide airline revenue, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) says. The UN agency reports that 70 airlines have cancelled all international flights in and out of China and 50 others have reduced their operations.

SOURCE: AFP

Defence spending soaring

Study attributes the rise on big powers' rivalries, raging conflicts

AFP, Munich

Global spending on defence rose by four percent in 2019, the largest growth in 10 years, led by big increases in the US and China, a study said yesterday.

The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) said the rise was fuelled by growing rivalries between big powers, new military technologies and rumbling conflicts from Ukraine to Libya.

Beijing's military modernisation programme -- which includes developing new hard-to-detect hypersonic missiles -- is alarming Washington and helping drive US defence spending, the IISS said.

Its annual "Military Balance" report said the increase alone in US spending from 2018 to 2019 -- \$53.4 billion -- was almost as big as Britain's entire defence budget.

"Spending rose as economies recovered from the effects of the financial crisis, but increases have also been driven by sharpening threat perceptions," IISS chief John Chipman said, launching the report at the Munich Security Conference.

Both the US and China increased spending by 6.6 percent, the report said, to \$684.6 billion and \$181.1 billion respectively.

Europe -- driven by ongoing concerns about Russia -- stepped up by 4.2 percent, but this only brought the continent's defence spending back to 2008 levels, before



the global financial crisis saw budgets slashed.

Elsewhere, spending in Asia is booming -- growing more than 50 percent in a decade, rising from \$275 billion in 2010 to \$423bn in 2019 in real terms as the continent's economic success has allowed countries to invest more in their militaries.

The collapse last year of the Cold War-era Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty and the doubts surrounding the renewal of the New START arms reduction treaty, which expires in 2021, have contributed to the mood of instability, the IISS report said.

China's programme of military modernisation -- described by the IISS as "striking for its scale, speed and ambition" -- has unsettled Washington as well as its allies in the Pacific. In October, Beijing showed off new technologies including its DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle -- designed to deliver warheads at huge speeds so as to avoid interception.

Russia, pursuing its own modernisation project, has already announced the entry into service of its own hypersonic missile system.

Dubbed Avangard, the system has been tested at speeds of Mach 27, or roughly 33,000 kilometres (20,500 miles) per hour, according to Moscow.

A senior Nato official warned that in a hypersonic missile strike, it may not even be clear what the target is "until there's a boom on the ground".

'US, China, Russia making world more dangerous'

REUTERS, Munich

Germany's president took an indirect swipe at US President Donald Trump yesterday in accusing Washington, China and Russia of stoking global mistrust and insecurity with a "great powers" competition that could threaten a new nuclear arms race.

In opening remarks at the annual Munich Security Conference,

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier deplored the three big powers' approach to global affairs and, without naming Trump, took issue with his vow to "make America great again".

"Great again" - even at the expense of neighbours and partners," quipped Steinmeier, a former Social Democrat foreign minister whose comments on foreign policy carry authority.

"Russia...has made military force and the violent shifting of borders on the European continent the means of politics once again," he said in the text of a speech for delivery at the

opening of the conference.

"China...accepts international law only selectively where it does not run counter to its own interests," Steinmeier said.

"And our closest ally, the United States of America, under the present administration itself, rejects the idea of an international community."

The upshot is "more mistrust, more armament, less security... all the way to a new nuclear arms race," he said.

In response, he said, Germany should raise defence spending to contribute more to European security and to maintain its alliance with the United States, recognising that US interests were gravitating away from Europe toward Asia.

He also called for a European policy towards Russia "that is not limited to condemning statements and sanctions alone". Europe, he added, "must find its own balance with China between intensifying competition between systems and the need for cooperation."



Steinmeier

NEWSIN brief

Israeli attack on Damascus kills 7

AFP, Beirut

Israeli strikes on Damascus airport killed seven fighters, a war monitor said yesterday, the latest in a string of attacks targeting Iran's military presence in Syria. The strikes launched late Thursday hit military targets in the area of the international airport, according to reports.

Philippines lifts virus travel ban on Taiwan

AFP, Manila

The Philippines yesterday lifted a coronavirus travel ban on Taiwan after Taipei threatened retaliation. Taiwan had hit out at countries that "confuse" it with China and included it in travel restrictions. Some 150,000 Filipinos work in Taiwan, enjoying visa-free entry that reports said could have been withdrawn in retaliation.

Erdogan acquitted in terror trial

AFP, Istanbul

A Turkish court yesterday acquitted renowned novelist Asli Erdogan on charges of membership of an armed terror organisation. The court in Istanbul also acquitted Erdogan, who is living in exile in Germany, of disrupting the unity of the state, and dropped charges of spreading terror propaganda. Erdogan, whose books have been translated into various different languages, was an occasional columnist for pro-Kurdish newspaper Ozgur Gundem. Turkish authorities accused the paper -- where Asli worked as a literary adviser -- of being a mouthpiece for the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).



Arrested Indian fishermen sit in a local police station in the Pakistan's port city of Karachi, yesterday. Pakistan Maritime Security Agency arrested 23 fishermen and seized four boats for illegally fishing in Pakistan's territorial water.

PHOTO: AFP

India SC orders telcos to pay \$13b or face action

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday ordered top telecom companies to pay \$13 billion in unpaid spectrum and licensing fees by March 17 or face punishment in a fresh blow to ailing mobile carriers.

Shares in Vodafone Idea, which said it would be hardest hit by the ruling, fell 23 percent on Mumbai's Sensex Index exchange after the court's announcement.

Bharti Airtel and Reliance Jio -- owned by Asia's richest man Mukesh Ambani -- were also hit by the order, which comes after the companies failed to obey an October ruling demanding payment of overdue levies within three months.

The court has threatened contempt proceedings against the companies and Department of Telecommunications government officials for non-compliance with that ruling.

The long-running row between the government and India's big telecoms has centred on how licence and other fees paid by the firms should be calculated.

Companies argue they should be based

on income from only their telecoms business, while the court ruled they should be calculated on the amount earned from all business dealings, including handset sales and other income.

On Friday the companies asked the court for more time to pay, which Justice Arun Mishra described as "complete nonsense".

Vodafone Idea, a joint venture of Britain's Vodafone Group and India's Idea Cellular will have to stump up about \$3.9 billion.

Airtel has to pay \$3 billion while Jio, which escaped with a lighter fee has already paid \$1.8 billion.

Analysts said Airtel and Reliance Jio would benefit the most from any Vodafone Idea collapse, which could lead to the Indian market being dominated by two leading companies.

Baburajan said such a duopoly would "weaken" the Indian telecoms sector and limit choice for its 900 million subscribers.

Jio, which was launched in 2016 and is the top operator in terms of subscribers and revenue, has a relatively light \$1.8 billion bill.

Taliban, Afghan forces clash again

REUTERS, Kabul

Afghan government forces and Taliban insurgents waged war against each other in the past 24 hours despite US officials saying there had been a breakthrough in recent days in peace talks to end the 18-year-old conflict.

While negotiators from the warring sides pressed on with meetings in Doha, Qatar, the Taliban and the Afghan government both reported fighting on the ground.

The Afghan defence ministry said an air strike had killed a senior Taliban commander in northern Balkh province on Thursday evening.

"As result of a targeted air strike by Afghan air forces, Mawlawi Sardar Mohammad, a key member of the Taliban military commission was killed along with eight others," the ministry said in a statement.

The Taliban did not confirm the air strike.

A Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, said the insurgents had killed six Afghan soldiers, including two officers, in an attack on a checkpoint in northern Kunduz province.

Afghan, Taliban and US sources said a peace deal could be signed this month, allowing a withdrawal of some of 13,000 US troops and thousands of other Nato personnel that remain in Afghanistan following the US intervention to oust the Taliban in 2001.

US President Donald Trump said on Thursday there was a "good chance" of reaching an agreement with the Taliban on a reduction of US troops in Afghanistan.

Justice chief blasts Trump for making job 'impossible'

AFP, Washington

US Attorney General Bill Barr on Thursday delivered a highly unusual public rebuke of Donald Trump, saying the president's tweets were making his job at the Justice Department "impossible".

"I have a problem with some of the tweets," Barr said in an interview with ABC News, adding: "I cannot do my job here at the department with a constant background commentary that undercuts me."

"I think it's time to stop the tweeting about Department of Justice criminal cases," said Barr.

His interview came as Trump stands accused of interfering with the sentencing recommendation for his former advisor, Roger Stone -- prompting four Justice Department prosecutors to resign from the case this week.

The outburst was all the more remarkable as Barr has emerged as a powerful defender of Trump, earning the nickname of the

"president's attorney" from critics.

Barr has been at the center of allegations that he decided -- allegedly under pressure from Trump -- to overrule his own prosecutors and seek a lighter prison sentence for Stone.

He has previously been criticized by Democrats and legal experts for seeming to assist Trump during the independent investigation into whether the president was helped by a Russian influence campaign during the 2016 election.

The two men are so close that there was immediate speculation that Barr's television interview may have been more about managing public opinion than a real outcry against

Trump's alleged interference in judicial affairs.

The controversy comes about a week after the Senate acquitted Trump of impeachment charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress related to pressure on Ukraine to announce investigations, including into Trump's political opponent Joe Biden.



Where's the love?

Indonesia says no to Valentine's Day

AFP, Makassar

Indonesia wasn't feeling the love for Valentine's Day on Friday as authorities arrested couples in one city, scolded stores over condom displays and warned students they would be reprimanded for amorous activities.

Makassar on Sulawesi island doled out some tough love with raids at hotels and guest houses Thursday evening which netted about two dozen unmarried offenders, including a German national.

"We caught the German with his Indonesian partner in a motel and they weren't husband and wife so that's why we arrested them," Iman Hud, head of the local public order office, told AFP.

The unlucky lovers were quickly released after a lecture about the evils of pre-marital sex, but five sex workers caught in the dragnet would be sent to a rehabilitation centre, he added.

"These social illnesses must be prevented. We need to remind the public to uphold our culture and ethics," Hud said.

Valentine's Day is controversial in parts of the majority Muslim nation, with many Islamic clerics and conservative Indonesians criticising its Western roots and what they say is its promotion of pre-marital sex.

Still, many others practise a moderate form of Islam and celebrate the day with chocolates and flowers for their loved ones, and displays were set up at malls and cafes in the capital Jakarta.