

INDIA-CHINA TERRITORIAL DISPUTE IN LADAKH

Satellite images show new Chinese structures

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China appears to have added new structures near the site of a deadly border clash with India in the western Himalayas, fresh satellite pictures show, heightening concerns about further flare-ups between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

Indian and Chinese military commanders agreed on Monday to step back from a weeks-old standoff at several locations along their disputed border following the June 15 clash in the Galwan Valley in which 20 Indian soldiers were killed.

The satellite images showing new construction activity in the week following the brutal hand-to-hand combat underline the challenge of disengagement and the risk the accord could still fall apart because of overlapping claims in the arid territory.

The pictures shot on Monday by US-based space technology firm Maxar Technologies show what appear to be extensive Chinese structures on a raised river terrace overlooking the Galwan River.

India says the area where the structures have sprung up are on its side of the poorly defined, undemarcated Line of Actual Control or the de facto border between the two Asian giants.

China says the whole of Galwan valley, located at about 14,000ft (4,300m), is its territory and blames Indian troops for triggering the clashes.

The new activity includes camouflaged tents or covered structures against the base of cliff, and a short distance away, a potential new camp under construction with walls or barricades. The camp

was not seen in pictures made available to Reuters the previous week.

Nathan Ruser, a satellite data expert at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, said the buildup suggested there was little sign of de-escalation.

"Satellite imagery from the Galwan Valley on June 22nd shows that 'disengagement' really isn't the word that the (Indian) government should be using," he said in a post on Twitter.

On the Indian side, defensive barriers can be seen in the latest images which were not visible in pictures taken in May. An Indian forward post appears to be scaled back compared with images a month ago.

However, India has reinforced the flashpoint area. Indian jets regularly took off Wednesday from a military base in Leh, the main Indian town in the contested region, and headed towards the mountainous border 240 kilometres away. There were

also checkpoints on main roads out of Leh and a frenzy of military activity around the town, which lies at 3,500 metres (11,500 feet).

Residents reported long lines of military trucks and artillery on nearby roads.

Tashi Chhepal, a retired Indian army captain who has served in the area and is based in Leh, told AFP that the mobilisation was unprecedented in a sensitive region touching Pakistan as well as China.

"I haven't seen this kind of military movement before," he told AFP.

New structures seen on Chinese controlled side of Galwan River

Area is near where 20 Indian soldiers were killed last week

Both sides agreed this week to 'disengage' in contested areas



Maxar WorldView-3 satellite image taken on May 22 shows the PLA (China's People's Liberation Army) Base in Galwan Valley. PHOTO: REUTERS



People walk between graves as they visit the Fatherland Liberation War Martyrs Cemetery on the 70th anniversary of the start of the Korean War in Pyongyang, yesterday. North and South Korea separately marked the 70th anniversary of the war that killed millions of people. Communist North Korea invaded the US-backed South on June 25, 1950, as it sought to reunify by force the peninsula Moscow and Washington had divided at the end of the Second World War. The fighting ended with an armistice that was never replaced by a peace treaty, leaving the peninsula and millions of families split by the Demilitarized Zone. PHOTO: AFP

'Democracy under threat'

Former world leaders warn pandemic being used to undermine democratic principles, silence critics

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The outbreak of Covid-19 and subsequent pandemic has led to an alarming uptick in authoritarian behavior by governments across the globe, who are using the crisis to silence critics, an open letter signed by more than 500 former world leaders and Nobel Laureates claims.

The letter, organized by the Stockholm-based Institute for Democracy and published yesterday, highlights that in the wake of the crisis, both authoritarian and democratically-elected governments the world over have used emergency powers to arrest protestors and sidestep democratic norms.

The letter warns: "Authoritarian regimes, not surprisingly, are using the crisis to silence critics and tighten their political grip. But even some democratically-elected governments are fighting the pandemic by amassing emergency powers that restrict human rights and enhance state surveillance without regard to legal constraints, parliamentary oversight, or timeframes for the restoration of constitutional order.

"Parliaments are being sidelined,

journalists are being arrested and harassed, minorities are being scapegoated, and the most vulnerable sectors of the population face alarming new dangers as the economic lockdowns ravage the very fabric of societies everywhere."

However, the letter's chief warning is that countries with strong democratic traditions could use the pandemic to introduce extraordinary measures that in the long run become ordinary, doing permanent damage to global democracy.

"Democracy is under threat, and people who care about it must summon the will, the discipline, and the solidarity to defend it. At stake are the freedom, health, and dignity of people everywhere."

Among the letter's signatories are Stephen Harper, the former PM of Canada, and Malcolm Rifkind, the UK's former Foreign Secretary, Klára Dobrev, the Vice President of the European Parliament, Cecilia Malmström, the former European Commissioner for trade, as well as institutions attached to former world leaders, including The George W. Bush Institute and The Carter Center.

Japan confirms scrapping US missile defence system

Japan has scrapped the deployment of a multibillion-dollar US anti-missile system, the government confirmed yesterday, days after saying the programme had been suspended.

Interceptors for the Aegis Ashore system were to be placed in two regions under the costly and controversial programme. But the government reversed course under pressure from local residents concerned about the risks posed by a missile defence system in their backyard. The Aegis Ashore system, the purchase of which was approved in 2017, was estimated to cost Japan \$4.2 billion over three decades. The deal to buy the system was seen both as part of attempts by Tokyo to bolster defensive capabilities after North Korean missile launches, but also as a way to foster closer ties with Washington.

Pak airline grounds a third of pilots over 'fake licenses'

Pakistan International Airlines yesterday said it had grounded almost a third of its pilots for holding fake or dubious licences, a month after one of its planes crashed into houses killing 98 people. The move comes after the government released a preliminary report into the May 22 crash in Karachi. Investigators largely blamed the two pilots, who ignored flight protocols and had been discussing the coronavirus outbreak when they first attempted to land the Airbus A320. Details of the government probe were made public Wednesday when Pakistan's aviation minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan told parliament the review found more than 260 of the country's 860 active pilots had fake licenses or had cheated on exams. PIA, Pakistan's flag carrier, currently has a fleet of 31 planes and employs around 14,500 staff.

Assange conspired with hacking groups: US



Wikileaks founder Julian Assange sought to recruit hackers at conferences in Europe and Asia and conspired with members of hacking groups - including LulzSec and "Anonymous" - to obtain government secrets, the United States Justice Department has said. The new allegations against Assange were outlined in an updated indictment on Wednesday. The "superseding indictment" does not contain additional charges beyond the 18 counts the Justice Department unsealed last year. But prosecutors said it underscored Assange's efforts to procure and release classified information, allegations that form the basis of criminal charges he already faces. The 48-year-old Assange was arrested last year after being evicted from the Ecuadorian embassy in London and is at the centre of a continuing extradition tussle over whether he should be sent to the US.

SOURCE: REUTERS, AFP

GLOBAL CORONAVIRUS VACCINE DRIVE

Production of 4b doses a year possible: CEPI

REUTERS, Chicago

An influential foundation focused on preparation and response to epidemics that is backing nine potential coronavirus vaccines has identified manufacturers with capacity to produce four billion doses a year, the group's top manufacturing expert told Reuters.

The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovation (CEPI) plans to have two or three manufacturing plants for each vaccine, James Robinson, a longtime biopharma executive leading CEPI's vast manufacturing push, said in an interview.

"Right now, we know we can do the two billion doses that we have as our kind of our minimum target" by the end of 2021, he said.

The group is planning for eight to 10 regional distribution sites "so that we don't have to make everything centrally and try and ship it around the world," he said.

Even with no existing approved vaccines, CEPI is already getting manufacturing and supply chains lined up in a quest to ensure coronavirus vaccines are distributed equitably around the globe.

The Oslo, Norway-based group is backed by 14 governments, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Britain's Wellcome Trust.

CEPI has deployed up to \$829 million so far in the search for a COVID-19 vaccine through partnerships with nine developers, with the hope that at least some will be successful.

They are Inovio Pharmaceuticals Inc, the University of Queensland with CSL Ltd, CureVac, Moderna Inc with U.S.



government backing, Novavax Inc, the University of Oxford with AstraZeneca, Clover Biopharmaceuticals, the University of Hong Kong, and a consortium led by Institut Pasteur and including the University of Pittsburgh and Themis Bioscience.

Effective vaccines are seen as critical to stopping a pandemic that has infected more than 9.3 million people and killed nearly 480,000 globally with little sign of letting up.

TERROR FINANCING

Pakistan stays on 'grey list'

PTI, New Delhi

The global terror financing watchdog, FATF, on Wednesday decided to keep Pakistan in the "Grey List" as it has failed to check flow of money to terror groups like the LeT and the JeM, officials said.

The decision was taken at the Financial Action Task Force's third and final plenary held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

With Pakistan's continuation in the "Grey List", it will be difficult for the country to get financial aid from the IMF, World Bank, ADB and the European Union, thus further enhancing problems for the nation which is in a precarious financial situation.

If Pakistan fails to comply with the FATF directive by October, there is every possibility that the global body may put the country in the "Black List" along with North Korea and Iran.

Siberian heat wave is a 'warning cry' from Arctic

REUTERS, London/Geneva

Pine trees are bursting into flames. Boggy peatlands are tinderbox dry. And towns in northern Russia are sweltering under conditions more typical of the tropics.

Reports of record-breaking Arctic heat - registered at more than 100 Fahrenheit (38 Celsius) in the Siberian town of Verkhoyansk on June 20 - are still being verified by the World Meteorological Organization. But even without that confirmation, experts at the global weather agency are worried by satellite images showing that much of the Russian Arctic is in the red.

That extreme heat is fanning the unusual extent of wildfires across the remote, boreal forest and tundra that blankets northern Russia. Those blazes have in turn ignited normally waterlogged peatlands. Scientists fear the blazes are early signs of drier conditions to come, with more frequent wildfires releasing stores of carbon from peatland and forests that will increase the amount of planet-warming greenhouse gases in the air.

Although peatland covers only 3% of the Earth's land surface, those deposits contain twice as much carbon as all the world's forests together.

Scientists have known climate change is causing the Arctic to warm twice as quickly as the rest of the world, and the Siberian heat wave, which began in May, is typical of that trend.

The peat fires make the need to cut man-made emissions all the more urgent, say scientists, who warn that wider changes in the Arctic could trigger bigger impacts on the global climate system.

"It's a huge warning cry that's going off, but it's not the only systemic problem that's happening in the Arctic related to climate change," said Gail Whiteman, incoming professor of sustainability at Britain's University of Exeter and founder of the Arctic Basecamp group of scientists advocating for rapid climate action.

Whiteman and other researchers are also worried about the rising heat thawing Arctic permafrost faster than expected, which is liable to produce far larger quantities of carbon dioxide and methane than are being released by the fires. Scientist say the fires were stripping away peat and vegetation that normally would form a protective blanket over the permafrost.

ISRAEL'S WEST BANK ANNEXATION PLAN

US nods as world voices opposition

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Secretary of State Mike Pompeo indicated that Israel had the US green light to annex Palestinian land, amid wide criticism of the Jewish state's plans.

"Decisions about Israel's extending sovereignty to those places are decisions for the Israelis to make," Pompeo told reporters.

"We are talking to all of the countries in the region about how it is we can manage this process for our end-state objective," he said. He was speaking moments after the United Nations and the Arab League, during a UN Security Council session, joined in calling for Israel to abandon its plans to annex parts of the occupied West Bank.

Arab states, notably US ally Jordan, have voiced alarm at Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's indication that



he will move ahead as soon as next week to annex much of the occupied West Bank, saying that it would kill prospects for peace.

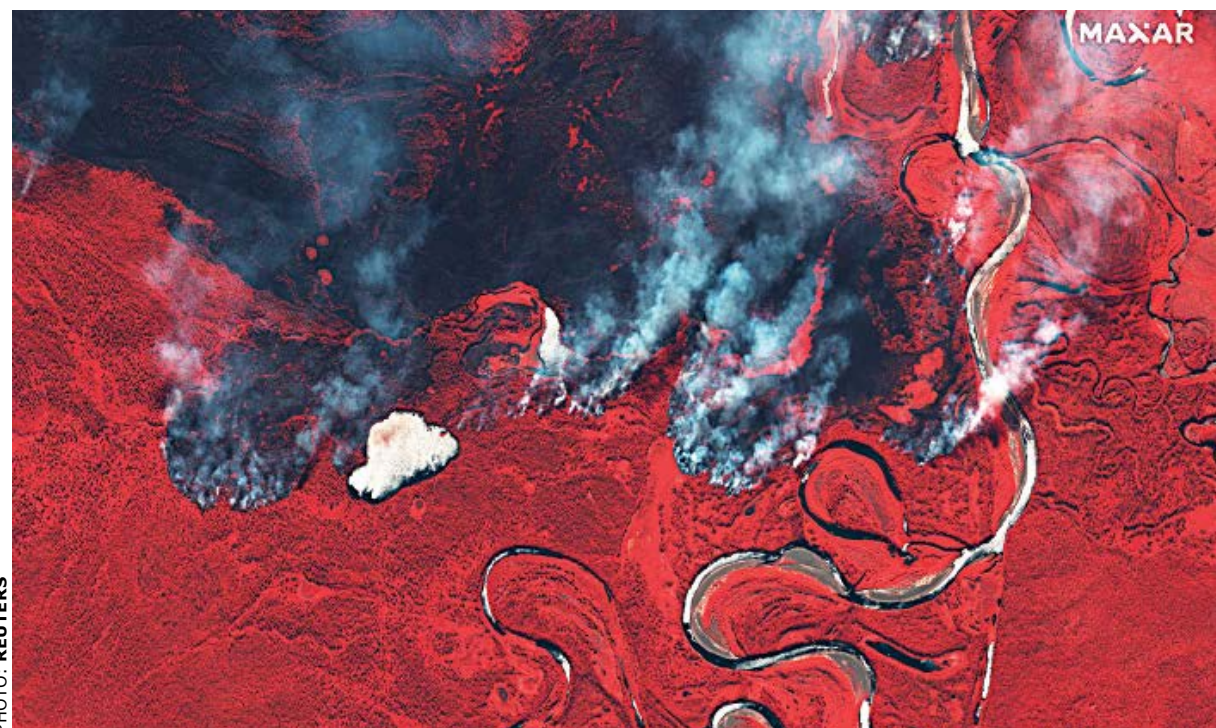
More than 1,000 European lawmakers from 25 countries urged their leaders Wednesday to step in and stop Israel's planned annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank. In a letter published in newspapers and sent to European foreign ministers, the 1,080 parliamentarians said they were

"deeply worried about the precedent this would set for international relations".

But Pompeo said that both Netanyahu and Gulf states backed a Middle East plan unveiled in January by President Donald Trump, which gives the blessing to Israel for annexation and allows for a demilitarized Palestinian state. But the plan falls far short of Palestinian aspirations, with a state on reduced territory and without east Jerusalem as a capital.

Meanwhile, Gaza rulers Hamas yesterday said Israel's planned annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank would be a "declaration of war".

Hamas and Israel have fought three wars in recent years, with the latest conflict in 2014 killing 2,251 Palestinians and 74 people on the Israeli side.



Smoke rises from wildfires near Berezovka River in Russia in this color infrared image. Photo was taken on June 23. PHOTO: REUTERS