

SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW

Australia rejects Beijing's claims

AFP, Sydney

Australia has rejected Beijing's territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea in a formal declaration to the United Nations, aligning itself more closely with Washington in the escalating row.

In a statement, Australia said there was "no legal basis" to several disputed Chinese claims in the sea including those related to the construction of artificial islands on small shoals and reefs.

"Australia rejects China's claim to 'historic rights' or 'maritime rights and interests' as established in the 'long course of historical practice' in the South China Sea," the declaration read.

"There is no legal basis for China to draw straight baselines connecting the outermost points of maritime features or 'island groups' in the South China Sea, including around the 'Four Sha' or 'continental' or 'outlying' archipelagos."

The declaration comes after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared Beijing's pursuit of territory and resources in the South China Sea as illegal, explicitly backing the territorial claims of Southeast Asian countries against China's.

Beijing claims almost all of the South China Sea based on a so-called nine-dash line, a vague delineation from maps dating back to the 1940s.

US relations with China have markedly deteriorated in recent months, especially over trade disputes, the coronavirus pandemic and Beijing's crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong.

On Friday, Beijing ordered the US consulate in Chengdu to shut in retaliation for the closure of its Houston mission over accusations of being a hub for intellectual property theft.



Policemen march past the US consulate in Chengdu, in Sichuan province, yesterday. Inset, A worker removes the sign at the entrance to the US consulate. Security was tight outside the US consulate in Chengdu yesterday as staff inside prepared to leave, a day after China ordered it to close in response to a US order for China to shut its consulate in Houston.

PHOTO: AFP

Trump eases controls on armed drone exports

The Trump administration moved Friday to ease controls on exports of armed drones, saying that allies need US technology and that other countries outside of a non-proliferation pact were taking over the market. The White House announced that President Donald Trump had approved a move to diverge partly from the 1987 Missile Technology Control Regime, in which 35 countries agreed to restrict the sales of unmanned weapons delivery systems. The MTCR was aimed at controlling the spread of missiles that could deliver large payload like nuclear weapons. But it also covered armed drones, at the time not a major component of armed conflict as they are now.

UN calls on US to ensure right to peaceful protests

The UN warned Friday against using excessive force against demonstrators and media in the United States, and said the deployment of unidentified officers increased the risk of human rights violations. Responding to questions about violent clashes in the US city of Portland between federal forces and demonstrators protesting against racism and police brutality, a UN spokeswoman stressed that the right to peacefully assemble and protest must be protected. Protests raged in the US after the killing of George Floyd, an African American man who died at the hands of police in Minneapolis on May 25. Those protests began losing steam earlier this month, before reports emerged of federal officers snatching Portland protestors and taking them away in unmarked vehicles, spurring a fresh wave of demonstrations.

Bolsonaro's poll numbers rise in Brazil despite gaffes



Three polls released this week show gains for President Jair Bolsonaro, putting him as favorite to win re-election in 2022 despite his controversial handling of Brazil's raging coronavirus crisis. The far-right leader, who is himself currently infected with the virus, has downplayed the pandemic even as it has exploded in Brazil, the country with the most infections and deaths from Covid-19 anywhere in the world except the United States. But this week's polls suggest the man dubbed the "Tropical Trump" is weathering the crisis relatively well. The latest, published Friday by news magazine *Veja*, puts the far-right leader comfortably ahead in the first round of the presidential election, with 27.5 to 30.7 percent of the vote, depending on his opponents. Bolsonaro would easily win the second round against any opponent, even his popular ex-justice minister turned nemesis, Sergio Moro, or leftist former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the poll found.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Record cases in every region

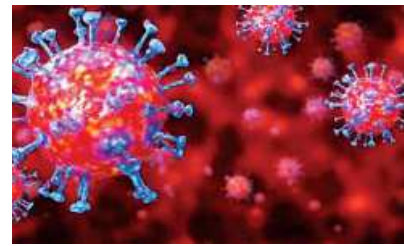
REUTERS, London

Almost 40 countries have reported record single-day increases in coronavirus infections over the past week, around double the number that did so the previous week, according to a Reuters tally showing a pick-up in the pandemic in every region of the world.

The rate of cases has been increasing not only in countries like the United States, Brazil and India, which have dominated global headlines with large outbreaks, but in Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Bolivia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Bulgaria, Belgium, Uzbekistan and Israel, among others.

Many countries, especially those where officials eased earlier social distancing lockdowns, are experiencing a second peak more than a month after recording their first.

"We will not be going back to the 'old normal'. The pandemic has



already changed the way we live our lives," World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said this week. "We're asking everyone to treat the decisions about where they go, what they do and who they meet with as life-and-death decisions - because they are."

The Reuters data, compiled from official reports, shows a steady rise in the number of countries reporting record daily increases in the virus that causes COVID-19 over the past month.

At least seven countries recorded such increases three weeks ago, rising to at least 13 countries two weeks ago to at least 20 countries last week and to 37 countries this week.

The true numbers of both cases and deaths are almost certainly underreported, particularly in countries with poorer health care systems, health experts and officials say. For this report, the Reuters data was restricted to countries that provide regular daily numbers.

A surge in cases usually precedes a rise in deaths by a couple of weeks.

The United States remains at the top of the case list, this week passing more than 4 million cases and recording more than 1,000 deaths for four consecutive days. Brazil and India - which epidemiologists say is still likely months from hitting its peak - have also exceeded 1 million cases.

PROTEST OVER UNPAID WAGES

HRW urges Maldives to free migrant workers

AFP, Malé

Human Rights Watch yesterday urged the Maldives to drop charges against 80 migrant workers arrested for demanding their unpaid wages in a country otherwise known for its upmarket tourism.

The New York-based group said authorities detained the foreign workers during separate demonstrations against inhumane living conditions and work without pay.

"The authorities should drop charges and release all those held for engaging in peaceful protest, and address allegations of human trafficking and other abuses..." HRW said in a statement.

Workers in the construction sector had not been paid even before the country went into coronavirus lockdown in March, according to officials. Sporadic clashes erupted since May.

Bangladeshi worker Mohammad Mohsin told AFP by phone that clashes with police broke out two weeks ago as they had not been paid for six months.

"Our families are dying at home starving and being hunted by loan sharks," Mohsin said, referring to many borrowing money to travel to the Maldives in search of what they believed would be well-paid jobs.

Maldives has 3,175 coronavirus cases. 15 people have died. The majority of infections have been among Bangladeshi workers who often live in squalid conditions on the highly congested capital island.



Trump signs orders to force lower prices for drugs

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

President Donald Trump on Friday signed four executive orders aimed at lowering some prices that US citizens pay for prescription drugs that may have appeal as he faces an uphill re-election battle and criticism over his handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

At a White House ceremony, Trump laid out his plan to sign four executive orders regarding drug prices. One is about importation. The others would direct drugmaker rebates straight to patients and provide insulin and EpiPens at steep discounts to low-income people.

The fourth, which might not need to be implemented if negotiations with drug companies are successful, would require Medicare to buy drugs at the same price that other countries pay, Trump said.

Democrats are eager to draw a contrast between Trump's orders and their sweeping plans to authorise Medicare to negotiate prices with pharmaceutical companies, an idea the president had backed as a candidate.

Consumers may not notice many immediate changes from the new orders, which must be carried out by the federal bureaucracy and could face court challenges.

Trump came into office complaining that pharmaceutical companies were "getting away with murder" and promising to bring them under control. Nearly four years later, things are much the same despite some recent moderation in price increases.

'Mr President, don't go!' Video of woman begging Peru president for a hospital bed to save her husband goes viral

AFP, Arequipa

A video of a mother running behind a van carrying Peru's President Martin Vizcarra and begging him to save her husband from COVID-19, has gone viral.

"Mr. President, Don't go!" screams a tearful Celia Capira as she begs for a hospital bed for her husband in the video shot on Sunday in Peru's second largest city, Arequipa.

But the 32-year-old mother of three's story did not have a happy ending, as her husband Adolfo Mamani, 57, died on Tuesday.

Arequipa's overwhelmed hospital system which lacks both beds and oxygen couldn't save him.

"They killed him; he was well, they told us he was stable, in the morning I took him breakfast," Capira told local reporters on Tuesday.

Images of Capira's tear-soaked cheeks covered with a mask and face shield have come to reflect the desperation of a local population that wants answers from authorities.

Outside the Honorio Delgado hospital where Mamani died, authorities have set up an overflow tent where he was initially

given treatment.

"Mr President, you have to go to the tent, don't leave the hospital until you've seen the condition (patients) are in," sobs Capira in the video as the presidential cavalcade moves away.

"Mr president, it's bad and inhuman," she screams.

On Monday, Mamani was transferred from the tent to a hospital bed, but he died the next day.

The couple ran a store in Arequipa, in the country's south. "What will I do with my children, how will I tell them their father isn't here any more?" Capira, who's children are aged one, six and 14, asked reporters.

On Tuesday, Vizcarra apologized to the widow, saying he hadn't seen her.

"It's unfortunate that madam Celia's husband has died. I give her my condolences and sincere apologies for not having heard her, and we are at her service and everyone's that has lost a loved one," said Vizcarra.

But soaring coronavirus cases in Arequipa show no sign of abating.

With more than 370,000 cases and over 17,000 deaths, Peru is one of the worst affected countries in Latin America by the coronavirus.



People carry a portrait of Sergei Furgal, the governor of the Khabarovsk region, during an unauthorised rally in his support in the Russian far eastern city of Khabarovsk, yesterday. Residents of Khabarovsk near the border with China have taken to the streets en masse since the Furgal was arrested by federal law enforcement and flown to Moscow on murder charges earlier this month. He was replaced this week by a Kremlin appointee who never lived in the fraught region.

PHOTO: AFP

New arms race in space?

Russian mystery projectile adds new front in US-Russia rivalry

AFP, Washington

The United States this week accused Russia of having tested an anti-satellite weapon in space, a charge Moscow has denied, saying the device was a "special instrument" for inspecting orbiting Russian equipment.

Whatever it was, the incident marks for Washington a rare military escalation in space.

The ability of one satellite to attack another was until now merely theoretical.

The United States, Russia, China and, since 2019, India, have been able to target satellites with Earth-launched projectiles, but these explosions create millions of pieces of debris in orbit, prompting the world powers to refrain from such tests.

This week's incident may be seen as a message to Washington, which under President Donald Trump is building up a new "Space Force" wing of its military.

Space Force's commander, General Jay Raymond, on Friday reiterated that "space is a warfighting domain just like air, land and sea."

In November 2019, Russia launched a satellite named Cosmos 2542. A week later, that satellite surprised observers when it released a sub-satellite, Cosmos 2543, capable of maneuvering in orbit to observe, inspect or spy on other



satellites.

This sub-satellite moved close to a US spy satellite, USA-245, and to another Russian satellite. A game of cat and mouse began in orbit, easily observable from Earth by astronomers and the US military, which publicly expressed its concern.

On July 15 at around 0750 GMT, Cosmos 2543 (the sub-satellite with a surface area of less than a square meter, according to the US military), released an object at a high relative speed, around 200 meters per second, said astronomer Jonathan McDowell.

Dubbed "Object E" by the United States, it is still in orbit and appears not to have hit anything. Its size, shape and purpose remain a

mystery, but that does nothing to diminish the threat it may pose.

In orbit, satellites speed through the void at tens of thousands of miles per hour. The smallest contact with another object risks smashing a hole in its solar panels or damaging or even destroying it, depending on the size of whatever it may hit.

In space, the difference between a satellite and a weapon is therefore theoretical: whatever its function, "Object E" is a de facto "projectile" and therefore a "weapon," the US says.

Spy satellites are enormous, extremely costly and rare.

Russia is far less dependent upon satellites than the United States, and its satellites are much less expensive, he said.

That was echoed by the Space Force commander on Friday, who noted that ever since the Gulf War in the early 1990s, the entire US military, from war planes to infantry, depend on space-based technology for navigation, communications and intelligence.

"There's nothing we do... that doesn't have space enabled in it every step of the way," the general said.

The United States and Russia will have the chance to hold direct talks next week in Vienna, during their first meeting on space security since 2013.

FOREIGN MEDDLING IN 2020 US POLLS

Counterintelligence chief warns voters

REUTERS, Washington

Voters should be on high alert for foreign interference in the Nov 3 US election, the US counterintelligence agency chief said on Friday in a rare warning that the public should screen information and report suspicious actions.

William Evanina, chief of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC), said that with just over 100 days to the election, it was "imperative" his agency share with voters some of the information about possible interference that US spies have given to campaigns and legislators.

"The American public has a role to play in securing the election," said Evanina, who directs the counterintelligence branch of the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

Given the complexity of US vote counting and auditing systems, Evanina said it would be "extraordinarily difficult" for foreign adversaries to broadly disrupt or change vote tallies without detection.

However, Evanina said US spy agencies now see foreign adversaries trying to compromise US political campaigns and candidates, as well as elections infrastructure. He said foreign nations are trying to influence US voters via social and traditional media, using issues including the coronavirus pandemic and domestic protests as disinformation fodder.

Evanina said his agency was mainly concerned with interference by China, Russia and Iran, though other unnamed countries and non-state actors "could also do harm to our electoral process."