

'Clowning actions'

HK vows it won't be intimidated by US sanctions

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Beijing's top representative office in Hong Kong yesterday said that sanctions imposed by Washington on senior Hong Kong and Chinese officials were "clowning actions" that would not frighten or intimidate Chinese people.

Separately, the Hong Kong government said the sanctions were "shameless and despicable" and represented "blatant and barbaric" interference in China's internal affairs.

"We will not be intimidated," a government spokesman said.

The United States on Friday imposed sanctions on Luo Huining, the head of China's Liaison Office, as well as Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam and other current and former officials that Washington accuses of curtailing political freedoms in the global financial hub.

The move accelerates rapidly deteriorating Sino-US ties, more than a month after Beijing imposed sweeping national security legislation on Hong Kong that drew condemnation from Western governments and sent a chill across the city.

"The unscrupulous intentions of the US politicians to support the anti-China chaos in Hong Kong have been revealed, and their clowning actions are really ridiculous," the Liaison Office said in a statement. "Intimidation and threats cannot frighten the Chinese people."

Luo, the most senior mainland political

official based in the Chinese-controlled territory, said US sanctions on him indicated he was doing what he "should be doing for my country and Hong Kong", according to the statement.

Luo has oversight over the implementation of the contentious security law that allows mainland security agents to be officially based in China's freest city for the first time.

As well as Luo and Lam, the sanctions target Hong Kong police commissioner Chris Tang and his predecessor Stephen Lo; John Lee, Hong Kong's secretary of security, and Teresa Cheng, the justice secretary. Xia Baolong, the director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office in Beijing, was also named.

The sanctions freeze any US assets of the officials, prohibit them from carrying out business in the country and generally bar Americans from doing business with them.

Beijing-backed leader Lam has previously told local media she has no assets in the United States.

The US sanctions come a week after Hong Kong postponed a Sept. 6 election to the Chinese-ruled city's legislature by a year, citing a spike in coronavirus cases, prompting democracy activists to question whether the pandemic was the real reason.

Washington said the election delay was the latest example of Beijing undermining "the democratic processes and freedoms that have underpinned Hong Kong's prosperity."



An aircraft approaches to land over the wreckage of an Air India Express jet at Calicut International Airport in Karipur, Kerala, yesterday. Inset, The Air India plane that crash landed amid rough weather killing 18 people.

PHOTO: AFP

'Step down or hang'

Lebanese vent rage against their leaders after blast

AGENCIES

As Beirut mourned its dead and grappled with the scale of rebuilding after this week's massive blast, some Lebanese angered by their government's response called on foreign states yesterday to topple their leaders and run the country.

Several hundred protesters began gathering in Martyrs' Square in the city centre for a demonstration to criticise the government's handling of the biggest explosion in Beirut's history. The blast in the port killed 154 people, injured 5,000 and destroyed a swathe of the city.

The protesters had mock wooden scaffolds with nooses, and one placard read: "Step down or hang".

Some residents, struggling to clean up shattered homes, complain the government they see as corrupt - there had been months of protests against its handling of a deep economic crisis before this week's disaster - has let them down again.

"We have no trust in our government," said university student



Celine Dibo as she scrubbed blood off the walls of her shattered apartment building. "I wish the United Nations would take over Lebanon."

Several people said they were not at all surprised that French President Emmanuel Macron had visited their gutted neighbourhoods near the epicentre of the blast this week while Lebanese leaders had not.

"We are living in ground zero. I hope another country would just take us over. Our leaders are a bunch of corrupt people," said psychologist Maryse Hayek, 48, whose parents' house was destroyed in the explosion.

Lebanon's Kataeb Party, a Christian group that opposes the government

backed by the Iran-aligned Hezbollah, announced on Saturday the resignation of its three lawmakers from parliament. That brought to five the number of lawmakers who quit since the blast.

The prime minister and presidency have said 2,750 tonnes of highly explosive ammonium nitrate, which is used in making fertilisers and bombs, had been stored for six years without safety measures at the port warehouse.

President Michel Aoun said on Friday an investigation would examine whether it was caused by a bomb or other external interference. 21 people had been detained so far, he added.

Officials have said the blast could have caused losses amounting to \$15 billion. That is a bill that Lebanon cannot pay after already defaulting on a mountain of debt - exceeding 150% of economic output - and with talks stalled on a lifeline from the International Monetary Fund.

A virtual international donor conference launched by Macron, and in which US President Donald Trump and other top leaders will take part, is scheduled for today.

'I don't want to fly again'

Survivor of Kerala plane accident recalls ordeal

REUTERS, New Delhi/Kochi

Seated on the last row of the plane, Muhammed Junaid sensed something was amiss when Air India Express flight IX 1344 from Dubai was jerked around by strong winds as it approached the southern Indian city of Kozhikode late on Friday.

After an aborted attempt, the aircraft swung around and touched down on the runway, said Junaid, who like many others onboard worked in the Middle East but was forced to return home when his salary halved because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Instead of slowing down, Junaid said, the Boeing-737 appeared to pick up speed, overshooting the runway slickened by heavy rains, hurtling down a sharp slope and breaking in two.

"All these things happened in 15 seconds," he told Reuters by phone yesterday.

Eighteen of the 190 passengers and crew, including both pilots, died, officials said, in India's worst passenger aircraft accident since 2010. Sixteen people were severely injured.

But Junaid and several other passengers, seated at the back of the aircraft, walked

away from the wreckage at Calicut International Airport near Kozhikode almost unscathed.

By midnight, Junaid said, he had driven himself home to Elathur, an hour from the airport.

Only his head was sore from bumping into the ceiling and his lips bled a little after he bit into them. "Nothing happened to me, thank God," he said.

Junaid, 25, moved to Dubai three years ago to work as an accountant at a trading firm. He was returning home after two years as he took leave due to coronavirus fallout.

As he sat dazed near the tail of the wrecked aircraft, Junaid said he remembered even after the disaster cabin crew tried to calm down passengers and helping those crunched between mangled seats.

After a 45-minute wait, during which emergency workers helped passengers out of the wrecked front of the plane, Junaid and the rest at the back were helped down.

Now resting at home and awaiting a coronavirus test, Junaid said he wants to stay away from aircraft.

"I am really afraid," he said. "I don't want to fly again."

Russia, China, Iran trying to meddle in polls

Says US top counterspy



REUTERS, Washington

The top US counterintelligence official on Friday warned that Russia, China and Iran will all try to interfere in the 2020 presidential election, with Russia already trying to undercut Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

In an unusual public statement, William Evanina, director of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center, said the three countries were using online disinformation and other means to try to influence voters, stir up disorder and undermine American voters' confidence in the democratic process.

"It would be difficult for our adversaries to interfere with or manipulate voting results at scale," Evanina said.

Multiple reviews by US intelligence agencies have concluded that Russia acted to boost Trump's 2016 campaign and undercut his rival Hillary Clinton's chances in that election.

Evanina warned on Friday that Russia is already going after former Vice President Biden and what it regards as an anti-Russia US "establishment."

He said his agency assessed that China would prefer that Trump not win re-election, because Beijing regards him as too unpredictable.

Evanina said Iran is likely to use online tactics such as spreading disinformation to discredit US institutions and President Trump and to stir up US voters' discontent.

COVID-19 SCIENCE

The following is a brief roundup of some of the latest scientific studies on the novel coronavirus and efforts to find treatments and vaccines for Covid-19, the illness caused by the virus.

CONVALESCENT PLASMA LOWERS DEATH RISK

Infusions of antibody-rich blood plasma from people who have recovered from the new coronavirus, known as convalescent plasma, can lower the risk of death for hospitalized Covid-19 patients, according to a pooled analysis of data from eight earlier studies of more than 700 hospitalized patients around the world. Researchers found that mortality rates were roughly 13% in patients who received convalescent plasma versus about 25% for those who did not get the treatment. Convalescent plasma was shown to be safe in an earlier study of 5,000 hospitalized adults with severe or life-threatening Covid-19. In that study, fewer than 1% of patients had any serious adverse effects in the first four hours after transfusion.

EXPOSURE TO COMMON COLDS MAY IMPACT COVID-19 SEVERITY

In patients with Covid-19, the immune system's T cells learn to recognize and target the new coronavirus. But some people who were never infected with the virus nonetheless have T cells that also recognize it. Researchers had suspected that in these individuals, past exposure to other coronaviruses, such as those that cause the common cold, had somehow primed their T cells to recognize and attack this new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), and new research appears to confirm that. In studies of human blood samples collected well before the new coronavirus was discovered, researchers found T cells that were equally reactive against the new virus and four types of common cold coronaviruses. The strongest T cell responses to the new coronavirus were associated with the spike protein the virus uses to enter human cells.

SEVERE COVID-19 MAY BE LESS DEADLY IN CHILDREN

Children with Covid-19 rarely become critically ill, and when they do, they tend to have better outcomes than adults, based on early data from an ongoing study. The Critical Coronavirus and Kids Epidemiology (CAKE) study involves 65 pediatric intensive care units in 18 countries. In a paper published on Wednesday in the journal Pediatrics, the study team reported on the first 17 children with severe COVID-19 from 10 hospitals in Chile, Colombia, Italy, Spain and the United States. Most required respiratory support, with nearly half needing to be put on ventilators. Overall, one child died, four developed inflammation of the heart and three remain hospitalized.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



A protester holds a sign while doing a three-fingered salute during a demonstration to demand the release of activist leaders arrested on Friday and held overnight in connection with recent anti-government protests, in Bangkok, Thailand, yesterday. Dozens of protesters gathered in front of a Bangkok court yesterday to demand the release of the activist leaders, vowing to escalate anti-government demonstrations with a call for a protest in the Thai capital.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Matador gored in the buttocks after stabbing bull

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A leading Spanish matador has been gored in a bullfight after the animal he stabbed rammed its horns into his buttocks, sending him flying.

When Enrique Ponce, 48, went in for the kill at the El Puerto de Santa Maria stadium, the bull flipped him over, causing him to lie on his front shielding his head.

Despite the scare, the Valencian bullfighter was not seriously injured, with Spanish media reporting only torn knee ligaments and bruising. The bull was eventually killed, and Ponce went on to slay a second.

The fight saw thousands gather a historic stadium in Cadiz, Andalusia on the bullring's 140th anniversary.

It is not the first time Ponce, who is one of the country's top matadors, has had to deal with the bull fighting back. Last year, a more severe goring left him requiring knee surgery and a 10cm (4 inch) injury to his buttock.

In 2014, while opening the Las Fallas festival in Valencia, a bull broke his collarbone and several of his ribs.

The pandemic appears to have hit the controversial tradition's popularity, as the first, sparsely attended fight in July after lockdown saw increasing calls for the bloodsport to be banned.

"Have we not already had an overdose of death and pain in these past months?" Carmen Ibarlucea of animal rights group La Tortura No Es Cultura (Torture Is Not Culture) said at the time. "They return to the bullfights and they mercilessly and tearlessly demand more public money to torture and see a peaceful herbivore dying. Meanwhile we, a social majority, are now calling for a true culture of peace and solidarity."

INDIA-CHINA BORDER DISPUTES

Rivals hold major general-level talks

NDTV ONLINE

Talks between senior army commanders of India and China were underway yesterday to take forward the disengagement process along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) at a number of friction points including in Daulat Beg Oldi and Depsang in eastern Ladakh, people familiar with the developments said.

The major general-level talks are being held at a border personnel meeting point in Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) area on the Chinese side of the LAC, they said.

The meeting comes a week after the two armies held the fifth round of Corps commander-level (Lt Gen) discussions in an effort to expedite the disengagement process.

At the military talks, the Indian side has been insisting on complete disengagement of Chinese troops at the earliest and immediate restoration of status quo ante in all areas of eastern Ladakh prior to May 5 when the standoff began following a clash between the two armies in Pangong Tso.

The Chinese Army has pulled back from Galwan Valley and certain other friction points but have not withdrawn its troops from the Finger areas in Pangong Tso, Gogra and Depsang as demanded by India, according to sources.

The formal process of disengagement of troops began on July 6, a day after a nearly two-hour telephonic conversation between National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on ways to bring down tensions in the area.

REDUCTION IN AMAZON DEFORESTATION

Brazil hails July success

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil on Friday hailed figures showing a reduction in July of deforestation that has spooked international investors, though environmentalists warned it was too early to proclaim success.

Official data showed a swath of Brazil's Amazon rainforest about the size of London -- more than 1,600 square kilometers (620 square miles) -- was cleared in July, down from the 2,250 km2 lost in July 2019.

That shows government efforts have achieved an "inversion of the trend," said Vice President Hamilton Mourao, who heads Brazil's National Amazon Council.

An analysis of longer-term figures for the world's largest rainforest is more worrying, however.

The 4,730 km2 of deforestation in the Amazon from January 1 to July 31 was slightly above the 4,700 km2



from the same period in 2019, the country's National Institute for Space Research (INPE) said.

The difference is much greater when examining 12-month figures: The 9,200 km2 lost from August 2019 to July 2020 was sharply higher than the 6,800 km2 cleared in the previous 12 months.

The administration of far-right President Jair Bolsonaro is under pressure to stop Amazon deforestation and forest fires, after

international investment funds that collectively administer close to \$4 trillion in assets wrote an open letter to the leader in June, urging the end of projects that accelerate the area's destruction.

Bolsonaro's policies have opened up protected and indigenous areas to mining and farming, but the investors' call has been taken seriously by a government that needs capital to reignite an economy ravaged by the coronavirus.