

SIPRI RESEARCH INSTITUTE REPORT

US, China dominated arms market in 2019

AFP, Stockholm

US and Chinese companies dominated the global arms market in 2019, while the Middle East made its first appearance among the 25 biggest weapons manufacturers, a report by the SIPRI research institute said yesterday.

The US arms industry accounted for 61 percent of sales by the world's "Top 25" manufacturers last year, ahead of China's 15.7 percent, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Total sales by the "Top 25" rose by 8.5 percent to \$361 billion, or 50 times the annual budget of the UN's peacekeeping operations.

Six US companies and three Chinese firms were in the top 10, rounded out by Britain's BAE Systems in seventh spot.

"China and the United States are the two biggest states in terms of global arms spending, with companies cut to size," Lucie Beraud-Sudreau, director of SIPRI's arms and military expenditure programme, told AFP.

The US has dominated the market for decades, but for China -- whose companies' sales rose by almost five percent in 2019 -- "this increase corresponds to the implementation of reforms to modernise the People's Liberation Army underway since 2015," she said.

US companies Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon and General Dynamics clinched the top five spots, while China's AVIC, CETC and Norinco held spots six, eight and nine. US group L3Harris Technologies was in 10th place.



A farmer plays a snake charmer's flute next to a buffalo, symbolising the government not listening to their demands, as farmers protest against the recent agriculture reforms, at the Rashtriya Prerna Sthal and Green Garden Park in Noida, India yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN BRIEF

China calls for new talks with US after Biden win

China's top diplomat yesterday called for the resumption of talks with the incoming US administration of president-elect Joe Biden, as relations between the world's two largest economies continued to nose-dive. Beijing and Washington have locked horns over issues from trade and China's human rights record to its expansionist ambitions in the South China Sea. But speaking during a video call with the board of the US-China Business Council (USCBC) yesterday, foreign minister Wang Yi said "the two sides should work together." "We need to strive to restart the dialogue, get back on the right track, and rebuild mutual trust in the next phase of China-US relations," he said, according to a readout of his remarks on the foreign ministry website.

Pro-Maduro candidates win control of Venezuela congress

Candidates supporting Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro have secured control of the national congress, the electoral board said yesterday, after a parliamentary election which opposition leaders boycotted because of what they said was fraud. The electoral board's president, Indira Alfonzo, said in comments broadcast on state television that 67.6% of 5.2 million votes cast in Sunday's election were for pro-Maduro candidates, but



only 31% of eligible voters participated in the ballot. The result returns congress -- the last state institution not in the hands of the ruling Socialist Party -- to Maduro's allies despite an economy in ruins, US sanctions that stifle the OPEC nation's oil exports and the emigration of some 5 million citizens.

Australian surfer survives great white shark attack

An Australian surfer told yesterday how he managed to paddle back to shore and walk hundreds of meters to get help after being attacked by a great white shark. The 29-year-old said he had been enjoying a "normal days surfing" on Sunday on Kangaroo Island -- off Australia's southern coast -- when he had a sensation of "being hit by a truck" on his left side. "It bit me around my back, buttock and elbow and took a chunk out of my board," the surfer said in a statement. "I got a glimpse of the shark as it let go and disappeared." Police said a member of the public took the man from D'Estrees Bay and was met by paramedics while on route to the island's main city of Kingscote.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

TACKLING THIRD COVID-19 WAVE

Japan, S Korea deploy military

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

South Korea and Japan are deploying their militaries to assist healthcare workers in combatting Covid-19, with South Korean soldiers called in to expand coronavirus testing and tracing and Japanese military nurses tapped to fill a shortage of staff at hospitals in the hard-hit regions of Hokkaido and Osaka.

Moon Jae-in, the president of South Korea, yesterday ordered the government to mobilise "every available" resource to track infections and to expand testing by deploying the military and more people from the public service, presidential Blue House spokesman Chung Man-ho told a briefing.

The order came as the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) reported 615 new coronavirus cases as of midnight on Sunday, capping a month of triple-digit daily increases that have led to 8,311 confirmed patients in



quarantine, the most ever.

South Korea has avoided lockdowns but used an intensive system of tracing, testing and quarantining to tamp down two earlier waves of infection.

With this third wave, however, the government has faced increasing criticism as cases continue to rise despite measures such as mask mandates, curfews for restaurants and other businesses and restricted public transportation.

Moon said testing sites should

operate longer hours to allow workers to get tested at their convenience and more drive-through testing facilities should be set up, Chung said.

In Japan, chief government spokesman Katsunobu Kato said yesterday Self-Defense Forces nurses were preparing to be deployed to Hokkaido and Osaka to help treat a surge in coronavirus infections as soon as the two prefecture governments request it.

In northern Hokkaido, there has been infection clusters at two hospitals in the city of Asahikawa, according to the NHK broadcaster. The Asahikawa Kosei Hospital has a total of 217 confirmed cases and the privately-run Yoshida Hospital has 184.

The latter sent a request to Hokkaido's governor asking for military assistance, saying the city's medical association "is overburdened and there is no alternative", NHK reported.

Decision time nears as Brexit hit the wall

AFP, Brussels

Post-Brexit trade talks between the EU and UK neared a decisive point yesterday as Europe pushed a leaders summit later in the week as the final chance for a deal.

Chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier told MEPs that Wednesday was the effective deadline for a breakthrough as talks with his UK counterpart David Frost dragged on in Brussels.

Barnier and Frost were wrangling once more yesterday before reporting back to their respective bosses, EU chief Ursula von der Leyen and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

The two leaders were set to speak by phone at around 5:00 pm Brussels time (1600 GMT), a call that a diplomat said would assess where matters stood and likely ask that the negotiators push ahead.

Barnier told a briefing of EU envoys that negotiations were still blocked over fishing rights, rules for fair trade and an enforcement mechanism, still the thorniest problems since talks began eight months ago.

All eyes are on an EU summit on Thursday, when the outline of a deal -- or an admission of the failure to find one -- will be put to the bloc's 27 leaders.

A senior EU diplomat said the leaders would either "welcome a deal" if there was one there, or demand for the urgent preparation of contingency measures in the event talks failed.

"These are going to be decisive hours for the future of our UK relations, and I guess we are at the make it or break it moment," the diplomat told reporters.



Container with Coronavirus disease vaccines from China's Sinovac Biotech Ltd are seen prepared to be brought to PT Bio Farma (Persero), in the first shipment to Indonesia at Soekarno Hatta International airport in Tangerang near Jakarta yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

INCLUSION IN NUKE TALKS

Iran ministry dismisses Saudi call

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday flatly dismissed a call by Saudi Arabia for Gulf states to be consulted on any potential negotiations with the Islamic republic on its nuclear programme.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan had on Saturday sought that the kingdom be "fully consulted" on "what goes on vis a vis the negotiations with Iran."

The request was rejected yesterday by Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh.

"Everyone is free to talk, but it's better that they do not talk above their level so that they don't embarrass themselves," he told reporters.

Japan boosts AI funding to match lonely hearts

AFP, Tokyo

Japan is seeking to boost its flagging birthrate by funding the use of artificial intelligence to help match lonely hearts, an official said yesterday.

Although it might not conjure thoughts of romance, AI tech can match a wider and smarter range of potential suitors, the cabinet official told AFP.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's government plans to allocate two billion yen (\$19 million) in the next fiscal year to back local authorities that run schemes to help their residents find love, he said.

Around half of the nation's 47 prefectures offer matchmaking services and some of them have already introduced AI systems, according to the cabinet office.

The human-run matchmaking services often use standardised forms to list people's interests and hobbies, and AI systems can perform more advanced analysis of this data.

"We are especially planning to offer subsidies to local governments operating or starting up matchmaking projects that



use AI," the official said.

"We hope this support will help reverse the decline in the nation's birthrate."

Japan's fertility rate -- the number of children a woman is expected to have in her lifetime -- was 1.36 last year, one of the world's lowest and far below the rate needed to maintain a population.

Its rapidly ageing population, also a result of long life expectancy, poses a major headache for Japanese policymakers trying to ensure a shrinking workforce can pay for the ballooning cost of welfare.

NEW ANTI-CONVERSION LAW

Police in northern India arrest 10 men

REUTERS, Lucknow

Police in northern India have arrested 10 men for allegedly compelling women to change their religion after getting married, using a new anti-conversion law popularly called the "Love Jihad" law, officials said yesterday.

Last month, Uttar Pradesh state became the first Indian province to pass a law against forced or fraudulent religious conversions, laying out prison terms for anyone compelling others to convert their faith or luring them into these conversions through marriage.

The anti-conversion law does not name any religion but critics call it Islamophobic for being solely imposed with the objective of preventing "Love Jihad", which hardline Hindu groups describe as a conspiracy to convert gullible Hindu women to Islam by misleading them with promises of love and marriage.

Officials in Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state, said the law will help prevent fraudulent religious conversions and was designed to protect young women.

The federal government and the Uttar Pradesh government are both controlled by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

Four senior police officials said 10 men were arrested last week from different parts of Uttar Pradesh based on separate criminal complaints lodged by parents who alleged their daughters were abducted by Muslim men.

"We are using the new law to only arrest those men where we have proof to show it is a clear case of forced religious conversion," said one police official, speaking on conditions of anonymity as he was not authorised to brief the press.

Ethiopia scorns guerrilla war fears

UN team shot at in Tigray

REUTERS, Addis ababa

Ethiopia's government yesterday denied that northern forces whom its troops have fought for a month would be able to mount a guerrilla insurgency, while diplomats said a United Nations team was shot at while trying to visit a refugee camp.

Federal troops have seized the regional capital Mekelle from the former local ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and declared an end to their month-long offensive.

But TPLF leaders say they are fighting back on various fronts around Mekelle. Ethiopia experts fear a drawn-out insurgency with a destabilising impact around east Africa.

"The criminal clique pushed a patently false narrative that its fighters and supporters are battle-hardened and well-armed, posing the risk of protracted insurgency in the rugged mountains of Tigray," Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said in a statement.

"It also claimed that it has managed to undertake strategic retreat with all its capability and regional government apparatus intact."

There was no immediate TPLF response.



Visitors take photographs with their children in front of the Christmas decorations at a terminal of the Changi International Airport in Singapore yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP