

Islamic separatists still a threat on China's borders

AFP, Moscow

China and its neighbours face a continued threat from Islamic separatists on China's borders, Beijing's ambassador to Moscow said yesterday as China and Russia hosted a six-nation counter-terrorism drill.

Ambassador Liu Guchang listed a series of groups that he said were active in and beyond China's north-western Xinjiang region, among them the East Turkestan Islamic Movement.

"Judging from recent years the most real terrorist threat mainly comes from the East Turkestan terrorist forces active both within China and beyond its borders," said Liu.

"China is against terrorism in all its forms and is also against holding certain double or multiple standards when it comes to terrorism," he said.

He was speaking to journalists as the six-nation Shanghai Cooperation Organisation held exercises that started in Xinjiang on Thursday and are to continue near the Russian city of Chelyabinsk on Saturday.

The East Turkestan Islamic Movement is considered a terrorist organisation by the United Nations, as well as by the United States and other powers.

But China faces criticism that it is directing a campaign of repression against the Muslim Uighur minority in Xinjiang in the name of this counter-terrorism struggle.

Liu confirmed that President Hu Jintao will attend the Russian phase of the "Peace Mission 2007" exercises next Friday.

The exercises involve several thousand troops from the six nations of the Shanghai Cooperation

Organisation: China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

The organisation grew out of a regional effort to reduce military forces on member states' common borders and involves both counter-terrorism efforts and economic cooperation, described by Liu as the "two wheels" driving the organisation forward.

Chinese communist armies entered Xinjiang after the establishment of a new China in 1949, ending the short rule of the Republic of East Turkestan which was largely made up of Muslim Uighurs.

Indian court delays Sanjay Dutt's bail plea

AFP, New Delhi

A bail plea by Bollywood star Sanjay Dutt who is serving six years for an arms conviction will be heard in the Supreme Court on August 20, the Press Trust of India said yesterday.

An anti-terror court last month sentenced the burly actor to "rigorous imprisonment" for possessing illegal weapons received from plotters of the Mumbai blasts, which killed 257 people and injured 800 more.

Dutt's lawyers had announced that the appeal would be heard Friday.

The 48-year-old actor was convicted for possessing several guns last year but was cleared of the more serious charge of conspiracy.

Dutt said he bought the guns to protect his family from Hindu zealots.

Pakistan extends anti-polio drive to reach tribal areas

AFP, ISLAMABAD

Pakistan has extended a polio inoculation drive to ensure it reaches children in volatile tribal areas where some vaccination teams have been attacked, health officials said Friday.

The campaign, launched nationwide Tuesday in cooperation with the World Health Organization, has been extended to five days, they said.

Vaccination teams focused on border regions near Afghanistan, where ease of movement between the two countries is seen as especially problematic in curtailing the spread of the crippling disease.

"The campaign went very well in the border regions, including Bajaur, South Waziristan, Mohmand and Khyber," health ministry official Mazhar Nisar Sheikh told AFP.

Earlier this week, armed men briefly abducted a group of health workers in the Bajaur area of remote North Western Frontier Province as they attempted to administer polio drops to local children.

Eleven health workers were held for four hours as their captors smashed vaccination kits after hearing rumours that the drive was a "US plot" to sterilise Muslim children.

Sheikh said no more incidents had been reported.

But he said vaccination teams had not been able to reach all areas of volatile North Waziristan because of the poor security situation in the area.

North and South Waziristan are two of seven conservative tribal regions near Pakistan's border where fiercely-independent tribes have been accused of giving shelter to Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants blamed for plotting bombings and other attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan and around the world.

A Pakistani health official in charge of a polio inoculation campaign was killed in Bajaur area in a bomb blast in February.

Health officials had been trying to dispel rumours - sometimes spread by radio stations or from the loud-speakers of mosques - that the polio campaign was a Western conspiracy to reduce Muslim populations.

"We are confident of achieving our target to vaccinate 32 million children at the end of the five-day campaign," Sheikh said.

This is the second polio vaccination campaign in the last seven months. The government plans to launch two more nationwide drives in October and December.

Pakistan stands with neighbouring Afghanistan, India and Nigeria as one of four countries where polio is endemic.

The number of annual infections in Pakistan was 20,000 to 30,000 in the early 1990s before the inoculation drive, known as the Expanded Programme on Immunization, was launched in 1994.



Unaware of the risk of contracting diseases, children play in flood water on the Aam Bagicha Government Primary School premises in Keraniganj yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Int'l envoys lead fresh Kosovo talks

AFP, Belgrade

Three international mediators arrived in Belgrade yesterday to open talks with Serbian leaders in the latest bid to broker a deal on the future status of the UN-administered Kosovo province. Upon their arrival, the envoys from the United States, the European Union and Russia met Serbian President Boris Tadic, Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica and Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic, as well as other top officials in charge of the issue.

After Belgrade, the three mediators -- Wolfgang Ischinger representing the EU, US diplomat Frank Wisner and Russian official Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko -- will travel to the Kosovo capital Pristina, for talks with the UN

and Kosovo Albanian leadership of the province.

Kosovo Albanian Prime Minister Agim Ceku told reporters that "this is the last delay of the Kosovo status."

"This is an unnecessary delay... We are firm not to move from our positions," said Ceku.

Ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, who make up more than 90 percent of Kosovo's 1.8 million population, want nothing short of independence, favouring the adoption of UN envoy's Marti Ahtisaari's plan backed by the United States and most Western countries.

Before the troika's first trip to the region, EU envoy Ischinger told the BBC that the diplomats "are offering Belgrade and Pristina another opportunity, maybe the last opportunity, to work out a negotiated solution."

"If there's success, it will be their success. If there's failure, it will be their failure," he said, adding that any outcome of discussions between Belgrade and Pristina "will be acceptable to us."

Serbia, backed by its main supporter on the UN Security Council, veto-yielding Russia, has rejected Ahtisaari's plan that called for the internationally-supervised independence of its southern province.

Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic said Belgrade was ready to give Kosovo "the widest possible autonomy in the world," but warned that Kosovo Albanians should also give up some of their independence demands.

Faced with the threat of a Russian veto on the issue, the 15-member Security Council decided to hand back the issue to the

Contact Group, comprising the US, Britain, Italy, France, Germany and Russia.

For Washington and the European Union, the basis for new talks should be Ahtisaari's plan, while Moscow warned the UN envoy's proposal has not been "set in stone."

The Contact Group has also opted for so-called "shuttle diplomacy" between Belgrade and Pristina, but Serbia has insisted on "direct talks."

The last remaining chapter in a bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia in a series of 1990s Balkan wars, Kosovo has been administered by the United Nations since 1999, when Nato bombing ended a Serbian crackdown on the Kosovo Albanian separatist movement.



PHOTO: STAR

Bangladesh Economic Association President Qazi Kholiqzaman Ahmad speaks at a roundtable at National Press Club in the city yesterday. On his left are economist Anu Mohammad, economist MM Akash and Dr A S M Atiqur Rahman. (Story on Page 16)

8 out of 10 working Indians earn less than half a dollar a day

AFP, New Delhi

Eighty-six percent of working Indians earn less than 20 rupees or half a dollar a day, untouched by the country's blistering economic growth, a government-backed study said yesterday.

Out of 457 million workers, 395 million are employed in the so-called unorganised sector -- in areas such as agriculture, construction, weaving and fishing -- the study found.

"Only 0.4 percent of the 395

million unorganised sector workers have access to any form of social security," added the report from the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector.

"... 79 percent of unorganised workers ... earn less than 20 rupees (49 cents) a day," it said describing their living conditions as "sordid," and "utterly deplorable."

"No social security, pitiable working conditions, extreme poverty, no education, acute gender discrimination, and absent or poorly implemented laws - this is what India's workers live by," said author of the report and senior government official Arjun Sengupta.

It was sent earlier this week to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who was elected three years ago on a pro-poor ticket and continually warns that the dividends of India's economic boom must trickle down.

At the same time, the number of Indians with a net asset of at least a million dollars reportedly crossed the 100,000 mark last year.

Singh launched India on the path of economic reforms in 1991 when he was finance minister, but conscious of the growing disparity in wealth, he has called on industry to shoulder social responsibility and give jobs to the socially and

educationally underprivileged.

A draft bill to provide healthcare and pension benefits to some 370 million workers currently outside the existing welfare safety net, is set to go before parliament in the coming weeks.

13 killed in Pak rains

AFP, Karachi

Flooding caused by torrential rains has killed at least 13 people in Pakistan's southern port city of Karachi, officials said yesterday.

Severe weather has forced the provincial government to declare a state of emergency in Karachi's hospitals, with holidays cancelled for doctors and paramedics, they said.

Most of the city was inundated by knee-deep rainwater, causing traffic chaos.

Authorities have closed schools and colleges due to transportation difficulties and hazards like falling power lines.

Four of the dead were reportedly electrocuted by power lines wrecked by the rainstorms in several areas of the city.

Officials said Karachi had received 142mm (more than 5.5 inches) of rain in the previous 24 hours, with more expected.

Arctic sea ice 'lowest in recorded history'

AFP, Washington

Sea ice in the northern hemisphere has plunged to the lowest levels ever measured, US polar specialists said, adding they expect the record low to be "annihilated" by summer's end.

In data posted on the Internet Thursday, William Chapman and colleagues at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana said that sea ice in the Arctic region had plunged to new lows some 30 days before the normal point of the annual lows.

"Today, the Northern Hemisphere sea ice area broke the record for the lowest recorded ice area in recorded history," Chapman, a researcher on Arctic meteorology of the university's Department of Atmospheric Sciences, wrote Thursday in the online publication 'The Cryosphere Today.'

"The new record came a full month before the historic summer minimum typically occurs. There is still a month or more of melt likely this year. It is therefore almost certain that the previous 2005 record will be annihilated by the final 2007 annual minima closer to the end of this summer."

The drop in sea ice this year is more geographically sweeping than in previous low years, the scientists said.

In earlier low years, big drops in the level of sea ice were confined to specific areas, such as the North Atlantic, the Bering Sea, the Beaufort Sea, or other locales.

"The character of 2007's sea ice melt is unique in that it is dramatic and covers the entire Arctic sector. Atlantic, Pacific and even the central Arctic sectors are showing large negative sea ice area anomalies," they said.



PHOTO: STAR

Magistrate Rakan-ud-Dowla distributes relief among the flood-affected people at Trimohini Nasirabad School Centre in the city yesterday.

Chinese environmental activist gets three years

AFP, SH

The prominent Chinese environmental activist Wu Lihong, who campaigned for years against industrial pollution of a major Chinese lake, was jailed for three years yesterday, his lawyer said.

"He was sentenced to three years on blackmail and fraud charges," his lawyer Yan Bingjie told AFP by telephone after the near seven-hour trial in eastern China's Jiangsu province.

"Wu Lihong looked a bit upset, he said he would appeal."

Wu was additionally fined for 3,000 yuan (396 dollars) and was ordered to return his alleged "illegal gains" of 45,000 yuan.

He was accused of swindling 55,000 yuan out of local businesses, according to the Information Center for Human Rights and Democracy.

The 39-year-old has campaigned for years against the pollution of Taihu lake, which lies in the centre of the Yangtze River Delta plain, a region known for its natural beauty but littered with polluting light industry and chemical factories.

Taihu lake, which borders China's eastern Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces, is also a major source of drinking water for the heavily populated area including neighbouring Shanghai, China's financial hub.

Wu told the court yesterday that while in jail, he had five days of sleep and food deprivation and was beaten on his back and feet, his sister Wu Lying told reporters earlier.

His wife and several family members attended the trial, after a brief confrontation with court officials who tried to stop them from entering the courtroom, according to an AFP reporter.

Security surrounding the court house was tight and reporters trying to cover the case was heavily monitored by plain clothes officials.

Wu was arrested on April 13 when dozens of police stormed his house, ransacked it and took his computer and personal documents, according to his wife Xu Jiehua at the time.

In an interview with AFP last year, Wu said the government's economic interests continued to take precedence over environmental protection.

"The government and industry are connected to each other like a

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chain, they are inseparable," he said at the time.

"The central government is good but it can't see what's happening here with the local government colluding with the factories."

Although China has vowed to step up protection of its heavily degraded environment, local politics often trumps national policy and effective independent policing, Wu said.

Wu, who has repeatedly been threatened by the authorities, was last formally arrested in 2002, when police held him for 10 days.

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