

US to set up military hotline with China

AFP, Shanghai
The United States and China yesterday signed an agreement to establish a telephone hotline between their militaries, a US defence department official said.

The deal was signed in Shanghai alongside another one giving the United States access to China's military archives to search for missing servicemen from the Korean War and other conflicts, the official said.

The signing ceremonies took place at noon -- one part was about the hotline and the other part was about the archives, the official, who asked not to be named, told AFP.

China's state-run Xinhua news agency also reported that the agreement had been signed.

The US official could not comment further on details surrounding the hotline, such as when it would begin, but more details were expected to be released at a briefing in Shanghai today.

The military hotline was first floated by the United States in 2003, and the two nations finally agreed to it in November last year when US Defence Secretary Robert Gates visited Beijing.

In November, the two sides agreed to expand educational exchanges and military cooperation through a number of other methods, including joint naval exercises.

The line will be China's first direct military telephone link with another country.

US and Chinese heads of state have been able to communicate over a similar hotline since the late

1990s. In 2004, a direct telephone link was set up between the US secretary of state and the Chinese foreign minister.

In the other agreement on Friday, US officials will be allowed access to some of China's military archives to help in the search for thousands of servicemen who went missing in conflicts since World War II.

China okays individual pollution fines

AFP, Beijing

China's legislature passed an amendment on Thursday to a pollution law that could result in docking half the salary of individual managers whose factories pollute waterways, state press said.

An amendment to the Water Pollution Prevention and Control Law was passed by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, the country's top legislature, China Central Television said.

Fines of company bosses were part of the amendment to the law, Xinhua news agency said earlier.

"Enterprise heads directly responsible for causing severe water pollution incidents and others with direct responsibility would be fined up to half of their income in the previous year," it said, citing a draft of the amendment.



Prof Anisuzzaman inaugurates a two-day reunion of former students of Bangla department of Chittagong University by releasing balloons in Chittagong yesterday.

'Doomsday' seed vault comes to life in Arctic

AFP, Longyearbyen, Norway

A vault carved into the Arctic permafrost and filled with samples of the world's most important seeds was inaugurated this week, providing a Noah's Ark of food crops in the event of a global catastrophe.

Aimed at safeguarding biodiversity in the face of climate change, wars and other natural and man-made disasters, the new

seed bank has the capacity to hold up to 4.5 million batches, or twice the number of crop varieties believed to exist in the world today.

In sub-freezing temperatures, Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai and Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg inaugurated the vault by symbolically depositing a box containing grains of rice in one of its three spacious cold chambers.

European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, well wrapped up against the cold, looked on.

"This is a frozen garden of Eden, hesaid.

Norway has assumed the entire six-million-euro (8.9-million-dollar) charge for building the vault in its Arctic archipelago of Svalbard, just some 1,000 kilometres (620 miles) from the North Pole.

"We're pretty far away from the dangers of the world here," said Cary Fowler, executive director of the Global Crop Diversity Trust and project mastermind.

Traditional Sami chants mixed with African-inspired jazz and child choirs at the opening ceremony.

Overlooking a fjord and adorned for the occasion with a life-size ice sculpture of a polar bear, the vault forms a long trident-shaped tunnel bored deep into the sandstone and limestone.

Metal shelves stacked with airtight bags filled with seed samples line each of the three cold chambers.

Only the entrance juts out of the snow-covered mountainside, emerging as a narrow, triangular portal made of cement and steel, illuminated with artwork made up of mirrors and bits of metal that create a bluish prism visible for miles around.

Under tight security, duplicates of seed samples from 21 seed banks around the world will be stored in

the new vault at a constant temperature of minus 18 degrees Celsius (minus 0.4 degrees Fahrenheit). Even if the freezer system fails the permafrost will ensure that temperatures never rise above minus 3.5 degrees Celsius.

Contributions from the other 1,300 seed banks worldwide are expected at a later date.

Protected by high walls of fortified concrete, an armoured door, a sensor alarm and the native polar bears that roam the region, the "doomsday vault" has been built 130 metres (425 feet) above current sea level.

That puts it high enough to escape flooding if the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets were to melt entirely, due to global warming.

The concrete cocoon has also been built to withstand nuclear missile attacks or a plunging plane.

The Svalbard Global Seed Vault holds some 268,000 samples. They will remain the property of their countries of origin, which can claim them back if they should disappear from their natural environment.

There are currently more than 200,000 different varieties of rice and wheat in the world, but this diversity is rapidly disappearing due to pests and diseases, climate change and human activities.

In 1949, Chinese farmers grew more than 10,000 different varieties of wheat. Twenty years later, only 1,000 different sorts remained.

Biodiversity is essential because it enables crops to adapt to new conditions, resist diseases, increase their nutritional value and become less dependant on water, according to GCDT.

Twice the size of Belgium and counting just 2,300 inhabitants, the Svalbard archipelago, where ironically no crops grow, is considered the ideal location for the new vault due to its remote location far from civil strife.

Mars project faces problems

AP, Los Angeles

Nasa's flagship mission to land a nuclear-powered, next-generation rover on Mars is facing development problems and ballooning costs that could threaten its scheduled launch next year.

Nasa Administrator Michael Griffin told a congressional hearing this month that engineers had to redesign the heat shield on the Mars Science Laboratory after tests showed the protective layer would not survive entry through the Martian atmosphere.

The extra work is expected to add \$20 million to \$30 million to the \$1.8 billion price tag, already \$165 million over budget.

Nasa is still aiming for a 2009 launch, but the space agency is also mulling alternative voyages in 2010 and 2011, Griffin told the House Science and Technology Committee on February 13.

"Things have gone along more

slowly than we would like," Griffin said.

Any delay of the Mars Science Lab would deal a major setback to Nasa, which already had to push back a mission to send an atmospheric probe to the Red Planet because of an undisclosed conflict of interest in the purchasing process.

The Mars Science Lab will be the most advanced and expensive unmanned probe ever sent to the Martian surface. The 9-foot-long mobile robot is larger and can travel farther than the twin rovers Spirit and Opportunity, that are still alive four years after parachuting to opposite ends of Mars.

Both rovers have uncovered geologic evidence of ancient water on the planet. The goal of the Mars Science Lab is to determine whether the environment could once have been favourable for microbial life using sophisticated instruments to measure for the presence of life's chemical building

blocks and beam the discoveries back to Earth.

Science gleaned by the Mars Science Lab is also expected to help prepare Nasa for its long-term plans to fly humans to Mars after a return to the moon.

Engineers initially wanted to use a heat shield like the type on the space shuttle's external fuel tank, but extensive testing last spring proved it would break. Nasa switched to a stronger cover similar to the one that cocooned the Stardust probe, which returned to Earth in 2006 with comet dust.

Because Stardust re-entered Earth's atmosphere at twice the speed expected for Mars Science Lab, engineers feel confident the new shield will hold, said NASA spokesman Dwayne Brown.

Griffin said development hurdles are to be expected in such a complex project and he didn't consider the problems to be out of the ordinary.



Artists perform at a programme celebrating the 40 years of Dhanmondi Government Boys' High School in the city yesterday. A reunion of former students of the institution was also held.

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