

NEW AIR DEFENCE ZONE

John Kerry warns China leaders

AFP, Beijing

US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday warned China against unilateral moves to set up a new air defence zone, saying such a step could threaten regional stability at a time of heightened tensions.

After a day of talks with senior Chinese leaders including President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Kerry stressed that he had also highlighted the need to ease concerns over Beijing's territorial ambitions.

The top US diplomat's trip comes at a pivotal moment for the region, with flaring disputes between Beijing and Tokyo over their World War II history and disputed islands in the East China Sea sending relations between the Asian powers plummeting to their lowest point in recent years.

The issue of North Korea was also high on the agenda, with both sides putting specific ideas on the table for how to prod Beijing's belligerent ally to take concrete steps towards denuclearisation.

Washington was deeply angered when Beijing last year declared an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea which includes the disputed islands, saying it could lead to confusion high in the skies.

Kerry told reporters he had warned Beijing against any further such moves, amid reports that China is considering a similar ADIZ over the South China Sea, where it has competing claims with several countries including US allies.

"We've made it very clear that a unilateral, unannounced, unprocessed initiative like that can be very challenging to certain people in the region, and therefore to regional stability," Kerry stressed.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State John Kerry, left, listens to Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, yesterday. Kerry met with Xi amid increasingly tense territorial rows between Beijing and Washington's security allies Tokyo and Manila.

NEWSIN brief

'Terrorist attack' kills 15 killed in Xinjiang

AFP, Beijing

A total of 15 people died in an "attack" in China's Xinjiang region yesterday, with eight "terrorists" shot dead by police and three blowing themselves up, having killed four people, authorities said.

The incident in Aksu prefecture is the latest violence in the restive region home to mostly Muslim ethnic Uighurs. The vast and resource-rich region of Xinjiang has for years been hit by occasional unrest carried out by Uighurs, which rights groups say is driven by cultural oppression, intrusive security measures and immigration by Han Chinese.

Facebook launches new gender options

AFP, San Francisco

Facebook on Thursday freed members from the bonds of being either male or female, letting people opt for custom genders such as transsexual or "intersex" at the social network.

Facebook said it worked with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender activist groups to create a thorough list of gender options, which can be found in an "other" category on profile About pages.

Nepal to slash fees to climb Everest

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal will slash climbing fees for Everest and other Himalayan peaks to attract more mountaineers, despite existing concerns of overcrowding during the climbing season, a tourism ministry official said yesterday.

The government will cut licence fees for foreign individuals trying to scale the world's highest peak from \$25,000 to \$11,000 from next year, Dipendra Paudel said. However fees for group expeditions to Everest will go up, in a bid to discourage large numbers climbing together and to reduce tensions on the mountain during peak months, Paudel said.

Quitting smoking makes you happier: Study

AFP, Paris

Moderate or heavy smokers who quit tobacco get a boost in mental wellbeing that, for people who are anxious or stressed, is equivalent to taking anti-depressants, a study said Thursday.

Lead investigator Gemma Taylor of the University of Birmingham's School of Health and Population Sciences said she hoped the findings would dispel a widespread misconception about smoking.

Massive snowstorm stalks US northeast

Death toll rises to 18

AFP, New York

A deadly winter storm crept through the northeastern United States early yesterday after spelling drudgery for millions and tragedy for a few, including an expectant mother killed by a snowplow.

US media counted some 16 to 18 people dead as a result of the storm, which has dumped a thick blanket of snow over the southern and eastern US states and on Thursday shut down federal government operations in Washington. The snow was up to two feet in places.

The National Weather Service warned that the storm had edged its way up the battered east coast and was "bringing significant winter weather to the northeast."

Forecasters are predicting yet more snow and wintry weather for the US east coast today.

Thousands of travelers were stranded on Thursday as major air hubs such as Atlanta and New York were closed down. Washington's Dulles International reported 14 inches (35 centimeters) of snow.

Some 6,500 flights were canceled outright, and more than 3,800 delayed, spelling misery for hundreds of thousands of passengers.

Nearly 800,000 homes and businesses lost power across 11 states along the eastern seaboard, with 340,000 outages in North and South Carolina, the Department of Energy said.

Russia shouldn't weigh in on Egypt's vote: US

AFP, Washington

The United States scolded Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday for endorsing Egyptian military chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in the key US ally's presidential polls.

Washington also assured that a warming of relations between Cairo and Moscow wouldn't harm the "historic" ties shared between Egypt and the United States, which have soured in recent months.

"Of course we don't endorse a candidate and don't think it's, quite frankly, up to the United States or to Mr Putin to decide who should govern Egypt," said State Department deputy spokeswoman Marie Harf.

"It's up to the Egyptian people to decide."

Putin publicly threw his support behind Sisi's as yet undeclared presidential bid during talks with the Egyptian defense minister in Moscow.

In remarks broadcast on Russian television, Putin spoke with Sisi about his presidential ambitions.

"I wish you luck both from myself personally and from the Russian people," Putin said.



The 59-year-old Egyptian field marshal is overwhelmingly predicted to run in the presidential elections set to be held later this year, after Islamist president Mohamed Morsi was ousted in July.

Sisi came to Moscow with Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy for talks aimed at securing Russian assistance, particularly for the military.

Russia -- one of the world's top weapons exporters -- is keen to revive military ties with Egypt, which had been extensive through the 1960s and early 1970s.

Cooperation between the two sides dropped after Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty and Cairo began receiving generous aid from a United States eager to encourage adherence to the peace deal, secure its own access through the Suez canal and support the most populous Arab country amid the "war on terror."

But Washington ultimately froze a portion of its military aid to Cairo in October as punishment for Egypt's bloody crackdown on Morsi supporters.



PHOTO: AFP

A man wades through a flooded road in Runnymede, south-west of London and a woman, inset, looks out of her front door over the sand bags as the river Severn rises to record heights in Gloucester, western England, yesterday. Britain faced a fresh battering yesterday as a new Atlantic storm barrelled in, threatening to dump a month's worth of rain on flood-hit communities already struggling to cope after the wettest January for 250 years.

Syria foes admit no progress in talks

Car blast outside mosque kills dozens

AFP, Geneva

Syria's warring sides yesterday admitted there was "no progress" in breaking through the deadlock in their faltering peace process, as doubts increased that international pressure could save the talks from collapse.

On what was expected to be the last day of the current round of the UN-brokered peace talks, there was no sign that rival negotiators would even sit down in the same room, something they have done just twice since the session began on Monday.

Just as they did during the debut round of talks in January -- the biggest international push so far to end the war in Syria -- the foes have this week sparred over what should top the agenda, which blocked any possible negotiation.

The opposition insists the focus must be on shifting Syria from one-party rule under President Bashar

al-Assad. But government negotiators refused to discuss a 24-point opposition proposal set out this week for a so-called Transition Governing Body to halt violence and pave the way for elections.

Observers said the talks were hanging in the balance.

"We are in a dead end," said a Western diplomat, warning the prospects looked "grim" and that it would be tough for Brahimi to organise a third round.

On the ground, regime air attacks and fighting have sent the death toll in Syria soaring, with 236 people killed on average each day since the talks began in January, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Thursday.

And yesterday, a car bombing outside a mosque in southern Syria killed 33 people yesterday and rebels detonated mines under a hotel in the north, killing five soldiers, monitors said.

Koreas talks end with rare accord

AFP, Seoul

Rare talks between the rival Koreas ended on an even rarer note of agreement yesterday, allowing an under-threat reunion for divided families to go ahead and fuelling hopes of further constructive engagement.

As well as ensuring the reunion would take place as planned, the two sides agreed to stop trading verbal insults and to continue their nascent dialogue.

The agreement pointed to a significant concession by North Korea which had strenuously objected to annual South Korean-US military drills that would overlap with the February 20-25 reunion for family members separated by the Korean War.

1 in 4 Americans unaware that Earth circles Sun

AFP, Chicago

Americans are enthusiastic about the promise of science but lack basic knowledge of it, with one in four unaware that the Earth revolves around the Sun, said a poll out Friday.

The survey included more than 2,200 people in the United States and was conducted by the National Science Foundation.

Nine questions about physical and biological science were on the quiz, and the average score -- 6.5 correct -- was barely a passing grade.

Just 74 percent of respondents knew that the Earth revolved around the Sun, according to the results released at the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Chicago.

Fewer than half (48 percent) knew that human beings evolved from earlier species of animals.

The result of the survey, which is conducted every two years, will be included in a National Science Foundation report to President Barack Obama and US lawmakers.

One in three respondents said science should get more funding from the government.

Nearly 90 percent said the benefits of science outweigh any dangers, and about the same number expressed interest in learning about medical discoveries.

Letta resigns as Italy PM

AFP, Rome

Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta yesterday resigned in a fast-paced political drama in Rome that paves the way for 39-year-old centre-left leader Matteo Renzi to take his place.

Financial markets cheered as Letta submitted his resignation to President Giorgio Napolitano after just 10 tumultuous months at the head of a fragile coalition with the centre-right in which he struggled with a rampant economic crisis.

Napolitano will now begin consultations with political leaders to pick a nominee to replace Letta, which the presidency said would conclude today.

Letta was forced to announce his resignation on Thursday after his own Democratic Party overwhelmingly backed a motion by its new leader Renzi calling for a new government.

Yesterday, he "submitted the irrevocable resignation of the executive that he pre-



sides," the presidency said.

The outgoing premier smiled as he arrived at the presidential palace and thanked his supporters in a tweet after losing in the showdown with Renzi.

Letta was sworn in last April at the head of a coalition government, formed after some three months of uncertainty following inconclusive elections.

Italy, the third largest economy in the eurozone, has had more than its share of political turmoil over recent years. The last election to produce a leader was in 2008, when Berlusconi became prime minister for a third time. Since then, all the country's leaders have been appointed.

VALENTINE'S DAY

'Kissathon' in world's coldest city

AFP, Moscow

Loved-up couples in Russia's coldest city, Yakutsk, yesterday braved plunging temperatures to take part in an outdoor kissing contest, with the winners locking lips for almost 1 hour and 30 minutes.

Eighteen couples took part in the Saint Valentine's Day contest called "Love warms you up" on a snowy central street in Yakutsk, where the daytime temperature was -29 degrees centigrade, the Interfax news agency reported.

"The first couple dropped out after half an hour," organiser Natalya Argunova told Interfax. "The winning couple kissed for one hour and 20 minutes."

The winners, named by local media as Artiom and Galina, beat the runners-up by one minute. The couple, who have been dating for six months, won a dinner at an Italian restaurant.



Valentine clashes!

AFP, Peshawar

At least three students were wounded yesterday in a clash at a university in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar, following a dispute over Valentine's Day celebrations in the deeply Muslim country, police said.

Students from the left-leaning Pakhtun Students Federation were marking the international day of romance with red balloons and cake when they were attacked by students from the rival Islami Jamiat Tulba (IJT) group.

The IJT, the student wing of Pakistan's hardline Jamaat-e-Islami party, had been celebrating "Haya ("Modesty") Day" in response to Valentine's Day which they oppose as un-Islamic.

Pakistan remains a deeply traditional Muslim society where many disapprove of Valentine's Day as a Western import.