

WWII ATROCITIES ON NEIGHBOURS

No fresh apology from Japan PM

Abe expresses 'deep remorse', but says next generation need not apologise

AFP, Hong Kong

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expressed deep remorse yesterday over World War II and said previous national apologies were unshakable, but emphasised future generations should not have to keep saying sorry.

In a closely watched speech a day ahead of the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII, the nationalist premier appeared to tread a fine line between regret over Japanese wartime aggression while also focusing on what his pacifist country had done since the end of the conflict.

"Japan has repeatedly expressed feelings of deep remorse and heartfelt apology for its actions during the war... we have consistently devoted ourselves to the peace and prosperity of the region since the end of the war," Abe said.

"Such position(s) articulated by the previous cabinets will remain unshakable into the future."

When speaking about China, which suffered from Japan's imperial march across Asia, Abe referred to "unbearable sufferings caused by the Japanese military".

Referring to those who perished in the war, Abe expressed "profound grief and my eternal, sincere condolences".

He added that we have "engraved in our hearts" the suffering of Asian neighbours, including South Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines and Taiwan.

But he added later that future generations of Japanese should not have to continually apologise.

"We must not let our children, grandchildren and even further generations to come, who have nothing to do with that war, be predestined to apologise," he said.

China and South Korea had previously made clear they wanted Abe to stick to explicit prime ministerial apologies. They did not give immediate reactions to Abe's speech yesterday.

China says more than 20 million of its citizens died as a result of Japan's invasion, occupation and atrocities, while Tokyo colonised the Korean peninsula for 35 years until 1945.

Japan's wartime history has come under a renewed focus since Abe swept to power in late 2012.

The 60-year-old has been criticised by some for playing down Japan's past and trying to expand the role of the military.

The statement has been top news in Japan as media outlets speculated on whether Abe would follow a landmark 1995 statement issued by then-premier Tomiichi Murayama.

The so-called Murayama Statement, which became a benchmark for subsequent apologies, expressed "deep remorse" and a "heartfelt apology" for the "tremendous damage" inflicted, particularly in Asia.



US marines raise the US flag while watched over by US Secretary of State John Kerry at the US embassy in Havana, Cuba, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

US reopens embassy in Havana

BBC ONLINE

The US yesterday reopened its embassy in Cuba more than 54 years after it was closed, in a symbolic step signalling the warming of ties between both countries.

John Kerry, the first US Secretary of State to visit Cuba in 70 years, presided over the ceremony in Havana.

The US flag was presented by the same US marines who brought it down in 1961.

Cuba reopened its embassy in Washington last month. But issues remain, with Cuban leader Fidel Castro blasting the US for not lifting its trade embargo.

In an open letter on Thursday, Castro said the US owed Cuba millions of dollars because of its 53-year-long embargo. The letter makes no mention of the reopening of the US embassy.

Kerry described the hoisting of the flag as a "historic moment" speaking during the ceremony yesterday.

But he also warned that the US would not stop pressing for political change in Cuba.

"The people of Cuba would be best served by

a genuine democracy, where people are free to choose their leaders," he told a crowd of hundreds gathered outside the embassy building.

In the past, he conceded, US policies have not led to democracy. "Cuba's future is for Cubans to shape," he added.

Three retired marines who lowered the American flag for the last time on 4 January 1961 handed it over to marines to raise it once again in Havana as the American national anthem played.

Cuban leader Raul Castro and US President Barack Obama agreed to restore ties in December last year.

While trade and travel restrictions have been relaxed, the Republican-led US Congress has not lifted the trade embargo the US imposed on the communist-run island in 1960.

Cuba says the embargo - which it calls a blockade - is hugely damaging to its economy. It says relations will be fully restored only once it is lifted.

Fidel Castro's letter was published in state newspaper Granma to mark his 89th birthday.

In it, Castro said Cuba was committed to "good will and peace in our hemisphere" but



Venezuelan, Bolivian Presidents Nicolas Maduro (left) and Evo Morales (centre) visited Fidel Castro on his 89th birthday on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

added: "We will never stop fighting for the peace and welfare of all human beings, regardless of the colour of their skin and which country they come from."

Fidel Castro led his country from the Cuban Revolution, in 1959, until 2006, when he stood down because of undisclosed health problems.

He passed on power to his younger brother, Raul, who embarked on a number of economic reforms.

DEADLY BLASTS AT CHINA PORT CHEMICAL DEPOT

WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW

Massive explosions at a chemical storage facility in one of China's biggest cities this week killed at least 56 people and injured 700. They also raised fears about toxic chemicals poisoning the air. Here are a series of questions and answers explaining what is known about the blasts, but also the fears over a lack of information about the chemicals that may have been dispersed.

How did the explosion occur?

Two massive explosions took place about 11:30pm, with the blasts so powerful that they damaged buildings several kilometres away. Authorities have given no reason for the fire, or how it led to the explosions. Authorities have also said they do not know what exactly was stored at the facility, although the company's business was in dealing with a host of extremely dangerous chemicals.

How many casualties and who were they?

At least 21 of the 56 people confirmed killed were firefighters who came to tackle the initial blaze. Many others were migrant workers who lived in dormitories nearby. More than 700 injured

were hospitalised, 70 of whom were still in critical condition yesterday, according to Xinhua. Eighteen firefighters remained missing, it said.

What was the extent of the damage?

Residents likened the shockwaves to an earthquake, and buildings three kilometres away had their windows shattered. About



A mother searches for her missing son at a hospital after the blasts in Tianjin yesterday.

10,000 new imported cars near the blast site were destroyed, according to Chinese media reports, rows upon rows of shipping containers crushed, and buildings reduced to burnt-out shells. Even a kilometre away, building facades were damaged and showed burn marks. Up to 6,000 people were relocated on Thursday to schools because their homes were damaged by the shockwaves, according to Xinhua.

What has been the government's response?

Authorities have struggled to completely extinguish the blaze, which was still smouldering yesterday morning, and determine exactly what was in the storage facility. They have also moved to limit criticism of handling of the disaster, blocking some critical posts on social media. Executives from the company that ran the storage facility, Tianjin Dongjiang Port Rui Hai International Logistics were quickly detained on Thursday. Firefighters and other rescue workers have continued to search for dozens of people still missing. One missing firefighter was pulled out alive from the debris on Friday morning.

What are the concerns now?

That extremely dangerous chemicals could be floating in the air, may still be leaking from the facility or could cause another explosion. Chinese authorities have given mixed signals about the threat level. Chinese media said late Thursday that there were 700 tons of deadly sodium cyanide at the site, but those reports had by yesterday been pulled off newspaper websites. A military team of 217 chemical and nuclear experts were deployed to test the air for toxic gases, and rescue teams wore protective clothing in the blast area. An environmental expert told an official press conference yesterday that toxic gas indicators were now within normal limits and the air "should be safe for residents to breathe". However, Greenpeace released a statement saying chemicals stored by the company could react violently with water and cause more explosions.

ROW OVER PM BID Rajapakse challenges Sirisena

AFP, Colombo

Former Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapakse openly challenged his successor yesterday, demanding he respect the "will of the people", after the country's new leader vetoed his ambitions to become prime minister.

In a tersely written letter, Rajapakse rejected President Maithripala Sirisena's accusations against him as "baseless" and hinted he should head the government if his party won the vote.

On Thursday, Sirisena accused Rajapakse of fuelling communal hatred on the island and said he would choose one of seven senior members of their United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) as prime minister should it win Monday's general election.

Modi's reform agenda hits roadblocks

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ambitious reform agenda has stalled with crucial bills stuck in India's parliament, which ended its latest session this week in bitter uproar.

After sweeping to power 15 months ago in a landslide election victory, Modi's right-wing government promised a string of business-friendly reforms to attract foreign investment and revive the economy.

But the opposition has blocked flagship tax and land reforms with rowdy protests in parliament, while a much-touted plan to overhaul archaic labour laws has yet to be unveiled.

A year after Modi's first Independence Day speech, hailed as a political tour de force, analysts say he risks failing to deliver on his promises. They will be closely watching his second today for signs that his right-wing government is still committed to pushing through reforms.

"PM Modi promised he would quickly change the economy and get GDP growth back on track," said Satish Misra, a senior

fellow at the Observer Research Foundation think tank in New Delhi.

"People now have a lot of doubt about that. He promised more than he could deliver," he told AFP.

The prime minister this week accused the main opposition Congress party of holding back the economy for its weeks-long protest in parliament to demand ruling BJP leaders resign over graft allegations.

The government is desperate to pass a bill paving the way for a landmark national sales tax to replace a myriad of complex state and national levies and boost the economy. But it failed to secure enough backing and now faces a huge struggle to meet a deadline of next April.

The government has backtracked on another stuck bill meant to make it easier to buy land for infrastructure and other development projects amid protests.

Sonal Verma, chief economist at Nomura, said investors were reassured by some initiatives already introduced. "But the reality is that India is the world's biggest democracy and expectations around reforms have to be realistic," she told AFP.



Former Thai MPs survive impeachment

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's junta-picked parliament yesterday voted against impeaching 248 lawmakers in a rare reprieve for a party that was unceremoniously kicked out of office after last year's coup.

The vast majority of the former MPs facing an impeachment vote hailed from the Pheu Thai party of ousted premier Yingluck Shinawatra, which has been left powerless and silenced since the generals seized power.

The rubber stamp National Legislative Assembly (NLA) had pushed a retroactive impeachment of the MPs over a 2013 attempt to make the upper house a fully elected chamber, a move that was later deemed unconstitutional in the courts.

Greece PM faces confidence vote after party revolt

Parliament narrowly passes third bailout deal

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras will face a vote of confidence after a huge number of Syriza MPs voted against his government's bailout deal.

The €85 billion package - which introduces sweeping austerity measures - was ultimately approved with support from opposition parties after an all-night parliamentary session.

In total, 222 MPs backed the deal, 64 opposed, and 11 abstained. Greek media, however, is reporting that the number of government MPs who voted in favour of the deal was not enough for Tsipras to avoid a confidence vote.

By one calculation, there were only 118 'Yes' votes from coalition partners Syriza and Independent Greeks; two below the number needed for the Prime Minister to maintain his majority.

deal - which will impose fresh tax increases, pension cuts and market reforms.

Former finance minister Yannis Varoufakis was among those who voted against the bailout.

If Tsipras loses the confidence vote - which is expected to be held after August 20 - it could trigger a snap election.

The German government is unlikely to be pleased with that development as they must approve the deal next week.

But Syriza drama aside, the vote means that Greece will probably get its international bailout and avoid default next week, when it is due to repay €3.2bn to the European Central Bank (ECB).

Parliament approved the three-year package after hours of heated debate. MPs voted at 9:30 local time, six hours after the debate began - government procedure had delayed it until the middle of the night.

Eurozone finance ministers was to meet in Brussels to inspect the agreement and decide whether to grant Greece the money.

