



SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW

CHINA An international court yesterday delivered a damning verdict against China in a Philippine challenge over Beijing-occupied territory in the South China Sea. China claims most of the sea, even waters approaching neighbouring countries, based on a vaguely defined 'nine-dash-line' found on a 1940s Chinese map. The Philippines, and other countries, dispute this claim. Commentators say the 3 million square kilometres (1.2 million square miles) of water are a potential flashpoint for regional conflict.

WHAT'S THERE AND WHO'S DISPUTING IT? It's mostly empty, and hundreds of the small islands, islets and rocks are not naturally able to support human settlement. Significant chains include the Paracels in the north, and the Spratlys in the south. But everyone surrounding the sea -- Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, tiny Brunei, Taiwan and, most significantly, China -- lay claim to some part of it.

IF THERE'S NOTHING THERE, WHY IS THERE ANY DISPUTE? Scientists believe that the seabed could contain unexploited oil, gas and minerals, which would be a boon to any country that can establish their claims to the region's waters, especially in resource-hungry Asia. It's also home to abundant fisheries that feed growing populations. But the sea's key value is strategic. Shipping lanes vital to world trade pass through it, carrying everything from raw materials to finished products, as well as enormous quantities of oil. Beijing views the South China Sea as its own backyard, a place where it is entitled to free, uninterrupted rein and where its growing navy should be able to operate unhindered.

HOW HAVE THESE DISPUTES BEEN PLAYING OUT? For years, claimants have been building up the tiny reefs and islets to bolster their claims to ownership. China's land-reclamation programme has been particularly aggressive. Satellite pictures now show inhabited islands where there was once only submerged coral and many have multiple facilities, including some with runways long enough for huge planes. Beijing insists its intent is peaceful but the US and others suspect China is trying to assert its sovereignty claims and say that it could pose threats to the free passage of ships. Washington says the waters are international and regularly sends its warships there on so-called 'Freedom of Navigation' missions. China says these missions are provocations and warns the US not to interfere. It regularly stages its own exercises in the area as a show of force.

WHAT THE UN-BACKED HAGUE COURT SAID? A five-member UN-backed tribunal of maritime affairs experts in The Hague ruled that China has no historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the so-called 'nine-dash-line'. The tribunal further found that artificial islands that China has been furiously building over recent years do not have the 200 nautical mile 'exclusive economic zone' (EEZ) enjoyed by inhabited land, effectively further shrinking areas of sea that China claims. It said China had behaved unlawfully and damaged the environment. Its decision cannot be appealed although the tribunal and the PCA have no means to enforce the verdict. Manila and its allies -- including the United States -- say China will nevertheless be bound by the ruling. But Beijing has said from the start that the tribunal is invalid and has boycotted its proceedings.

WHAT'S LIKELY TO HAPPEN NOW? Although China immediately dismissed the verdict, saying it "does not accept and does not recognise" the ruling, the decision is likely to embolden other neighbours. Experts have said China may choose to withdraw from the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, or begin building on Scarborough Shoal, a fishing ground within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone that it seized control of in 2012. China could also declare an air defence identification zone over the sea, claiming the right to interrogate aircraft passing through the airspace. Or it could seek to defuse tensions with the Philippines and enter into direct negotiations.

SOURCE: AFP



PHOTO: AFP This picture released yesterday shows smashed carriages thrown across the tracks after a head-on collision between two trains between Ruvo and Corato, in the southern Italian region of Puglia. At least 22 people died and dozens were injured in the accident. There was no immediate indication of what had caused it but the government promised a full and swift investigation.



MED TRAGEDY Four migrants found dead Some 400 rescued

REUTERS, Rome

A humanitarian group said it recovered the bodies of four migrants and rescued around 400 survivors yesterday from an overcrowded wooden boat in the Mediterranean between Italy and Libya.

The dead had suffocated below deck, the Malta-based Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), whose Topaz Responder rescue ship carried out the operation, said on Twitter.

A spokesman for the Italian coast guard said around 500 people had been saved in three rescue missions yesterday, all around 20 miles (32 km) from the coast of Libya.

More than 67,000 sea-borne migrants had arrived in Italy by early July, according to IOM, and 2,499 had died attempting the crossing.

Nepal in fresh turmoil

Maoists withdraw support from ruling coalition, call for new govt

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal was thrown into political crisis yesterday when the main Maoist party withdrew its support from the ruling coalition and called for the formation of a new government, threatening to topple Prime Minister KP Oli.

The Maoists tried to unseat Oli in May but he clung on after reaching a power-sharing deal. An official from the prime minister's communist UML party said Oli would meet officials later yesterday to discuss his next move.

Oli came to power in October when the Maoists offered his party parliamentary backing to build a coalition in the impoverished Himalayan country.

The Maoists - who ended a decade-long insurgency in 2006 before joining mainstream politics - said Oli had broken promises he made in May.

They also accuse him of failing to resolve festering anger in the south of the country over the terms of a new constitution, and of failing to speed up

rebuilding of homes and roads destroyed in an earthquake last year.

"We believe that our decision to withdraw support to this government will help form a new alliance on the basis of national consensus among major political parties," Krishna Bahadur Mahara, a top Maoist official, told reporters in Kathmandu.



Mahara said the opposition Nepali Congress party was ready to throw its support behind Maoist leader Prachanda to form a new government. Congress party officials were not immediately available for comment.

Commentator Lok Raj Baral said the Maoists' move could force a no-confidence vote and end Oli's term in

office. "I suspect these two parties have already made a deal, but we will need to wait and see how Oli and the UML respond," he told Reuters, referring to the Maoists and the Congress.

The Maoists' withdrawal of support is the latest political twist for Nepal since it adopted its first post-monarchy constitution in September.

The passing of the constitution looked like a rare moment of political consensus for the country, which became a republic in 2008, but it soon sparked protests.

Minority Madhesi, who live mostly in Nepal's lowlands near India, imposed a four-month border blockade to protest against a proposal to carve Nepal into seven federal states, which they say would divide their homeland and deprive them of a fair say.

More than 50 people were killed in clashes before protesters called off the blockade in February.

Neighbours India and China compete for influence in Nepal and are both likely to be concerned by the prospect of more instability.

Syria extends ceasefire

AFP, Damascus

Syria's army has extended a nationwide truce for another three days, but continued yesterday to press its campaign against rebels in the battered northern city of Aleppo. In a statement late Monday, the armed forces said it would "extend the freeze on fighting on all Syrian territory for 72 hours beginning at 00:01 on July 12."

Corbyn wins vote on leadership rules

BBC ONLINE

Jeremy Corbyn will be automatically included on the ballot in Labour's leadership contest, the party's National Executive Committee has ruled. Unions said party rules were clear the incumbent who is challenged must be allowed to stand but his opponents said he needed support of 51 MPs or MEPs. The leadership contest was sparked after former shadow minister Angela Eagle challenged Corbyn's leadership over his role in Brexit vote.

Peshwar school attack mastermind killed

PTI, Peshawar

The mastermind of the Pakistani Taliban attack on an army school here that left over 140 schoolchildren dead in 2014 has been killed in a US drone strike in Afghanistan, security officials said. Officials said Umar Mansour, alias Umar Naray, had been killed along with another militant leader Qari Saifullah, in the US drone attack in Nangarhar province on Saturday.

J&K violence toll hits 31

AGENCIES

Kashmir yesterday saw sporadic violence which left one person dead, raising the death toll to 31. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi chaired a high-level meeting to review the situation in the state and also appealed for calm. The violence has also injured around 300 people, including nearly 100 police.

North Korea severs last tie with US

AGENCIES

North Korea said Monday that it had cut off its only official channel of diplomatic communications with the United States in retaliation for Washington's sanctions against its leader, Kim Jong-un, over human rights abuses.

The North's diplomatic mission to the United Nations in New York notified the United States government of its decision on Sunday to sever the channel, the North's official Korean Central News Agency said.

Although the countries have no diplomatic ties, the United Nations mission has long served as a point of contact and was often used to arrange talks aimed at ending the North's nuclear weapons program.

"Because the United States did not accept our demand that the sanctions be retracted, we are taking concrete actions one by one, the first of which is to completely cut off the New York channel of communication, the only official point of contact that has existed between the two sides," KCNA said, citing the notice.

Meanwhile, satellite imagery indicates a high-level of activity at North Korea's nuclear test site to ensure the facility is always ready for use on any orders from Pyongyang, a US think-tank said.

The US-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University said images from July 7 of the Punggye-ri site show what appear to be supplies and/or equipment stacked next to the North Portal where the North conducted its fourth nuclear test in January, reports AFP.

"Based on imagery alone, it is not possible to determine whether this activity is for maintenance, excavation or preparation for a fifth nuclear test", it said Monday on its website 38 North.

"Nevertheless, it is clear that North Korea is ensuring that the facility is in a state of readiness that would allow the conduct of future nuclear tests should the order come from Pyongyang," it added. Tensions are high since Pyongyang carried out its fourth nuclear test in January, followed by a series of missile launches.



Dallas police officers take part in a candlelight vigil at Dallas City Hall following the multiple police shootings in Dallas, Texas, US, on Monday. President Barack Obama was scheduled to address a memorial service in Dallas yesterday for five policemen killed last week in a sniper attack, as he seeks to repair social divisions inflamed by the deadliest day for US law enforcement in more than a decade.

We're stronger together

Clinton, Sanders join forces to take on Trump

AGENCIES

After months of bitter campaigning, Bernie Sanders yesterday offered his long-awaited endorsement for Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton, saying he would work hard to help his former rival win the White House.

The joint appearance at a high school in Portsmouth, New Hampshire -- their first -- was the culmination of weeks of talks between the two campaigns aimed at unifying the party to most effectively take on Republican Donald Trump in November.

"She (Hillary Clinton) will be the Democratic nominee for president and I intend to do everything I can to make certain she will be the next president of the United States," Sanders told a cheering crowd, with Clinton at his side.

Putting aside the acrimony, Clinton thanked Sanders for his endorsement.

"I am proud to be fighting alongside you," she said. "We are stronger together."

In a statement, the Trump campaign said Sanders was now officially part of the rigged system he had criticized during his long primary battle with Clinton.

Clinton hopes the joint appearance will help her win over Sanders supporters. In recent Reuters/Ipsos polling, only about 40 percent of Sanders backers said they would back Clinton.

The appearance in Portsmouth concluded weeks of negotiations between the two camps as Sanders pressed for concessions from Clinton on his liberal policy agenda. It came after Clinton last week adopted elements of Sanders' plans for free in-state college tuition and expanded affordable healthcare coverage. Sanders also successfully pushed to include an array of liberal policy positions in the Democratic platform, which a committee approved on Saturday.



Open call for coup in Pakistan!

Posters begging for military takeover raise eyebrows

AFP, Islamabad

Posters begging Pakistan's powerful army chief to launch a coup appeared in major cities including the capital Islamabad overnight, raising eyebrows in a country that has been ruled by the military for more than half its history.

The posters, which also appeared in Lahore, Karachi and the garrison city of Rawalpindi as well as several army-run cantonment areas, were placed there by "Move on Pakistan", a largely-unknown political party founded in 2013.

"Talk of leaving has become old, for God's sake come now," scream the posters, referring to General Raheel Sharif's decision to step down at the end of his tenure this year. They feature a large photograph of the mustachioed general.

AFP yesterday. "The way General Raheel Sharif has dealt with terrorism and corruption, there is no guarantee that the next man would be as effective as him," he said.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is said to be preparing to name a successor to the wildly popular general whose three-year tenure expires in November.

He is widely credited with Pakistan's improved security situation.

The prime minister and his government, in contrast, have been plagued by accusations of corruption and inefficiency.

But, despite his popularity, the army chief's announcement in January that he would step down at the end of his tenure won him praise for respecting democratic institutions -- unlike three of his predecessors.

There was no immediate reaction to the posters from the military or the federal government.



Ceasefire holding in S Sudan

UN says at least 36,000 people displaced by violence since Friday

AFP, Juba

A fragile ceasefire appeared to be holding in South Sudan's capital Juba after four days of gun battles that have left hundreds of people dead and sent at least 36,000 fleeing.

It was too early to tell yesterday whether the ceasefire called by both President Salva Kiir, and his longtime opponent Vice President Riek Machar, would last, but the lull allowed civilians to leave their homes.

There were no helicopter gunships in the sky, no tanks on the streets, no artillery barrages and soldiers in their machine gun-mounted pick-up trucks appeared to have stayed in their barracks.

The calm was welcomed by Juba residents who have stayed mostly indoors for days as fighting intensified between Kiir's government forces and former rebels loyal to Machar.

"The situation is quiet near the airport," said August Mayai, a local resident. "There are people in the streets." At least 36,000 have fled their homes in Juba since Friday, according to UN figures, with many heading for the

presumed refuge of United Nations' bases. "The United States condemns in the strongest terms the return to violence in South Sudan. It must stop," National Security Advisor Susan Rice said in a statement hours after the ceasefire took effect.

Traders returning to once-busy markets found their shops and stalls looted. Volunteers and officials from South Sudan's Red Cross set about the grim task of collecting bodies of the dead.

There has been no estimate so far of civilian or military casualties from the heavy clashes Sunday and Monday but Adama Dieng, the United Nations' Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide, said some civilians, "were reportedly targeted based on their ethnicity."

Kiir is from the Dinka tribe and Machar a Nuer. South Sudan's civil war has been characterised by ethnic massacres between the two groups -- including in Juba -- as well as rape, sexual slavery, murder and the use of child soldiers.

The violence has raised fears of a return to civil war that broke out in December 2013.

