



Asia's stability at stake

China warns US after Mattis backs Japan over disputed island

AFP, Tokyo
China yesterday warned the US it was risking instability in Asia after President Donald Trump's new defence secretary vowed to back Japan in any military clash with Beijing over a disputed island chain.

The Senkaku Islands, known in China as the Diaoyus, are at the centre of a festering row between Tokyo and Beijing, which claims they have been part of Chinese territory for centuries.

Wrapping up a visit to the region yesterday, US Defence Secretary James Mattis said in Tokyo the islands were subject to a decades-old treaty between Washington and Tokyo.

"I made clear that our long-standing policy on the Senkaku Islands stands -- the US will continue to recognise Japanese administration of the islands," Mattis told a press conference.

"And as such Article 5 of the US-Japan Security Treaty applies."

Article 5 commits the United States to defend Japan or territories it administers against any attack.

China, which is also involved in a widening dispute with several Southeast Asian countries over islands in the South China Sea, accused Washington of stirring up trouble.

Spicer's comments suggest Washington may take a harder line with Cuba, raising the possibility of new trade embargoes and the cancellation of commercial flights from the US, which were only recently introduced.

Under Barack Obama, the US ended a policy that allowed any Cuban who made it to American soil to stay and become a legal resident.

Ending the so-called 'wet foot, dry foot' rule was welcomed by Havana as "an important step in advancing relations".

Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro established full diplomatic ties and opened embassies in their capitals in 2015.

The former US president visited Havana last March.

The Cold War between the United States and Cuba officially ended on July 20, 2015 after 54 years, six months and 17 days.

But Trump has threatened to end the period of improving relations.

In November he tweeted: "If Cuba is unwilling to make a better deal for the Cuban people, the Cuban/American people and the U.S. as a whole, I will terminate deal."

"We urge the US side to take a responsible attitude, stop making wrong remarks... and avoid making the issue more complicated and bringing instability to the regional situation", Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang said, according to official news agency Xinhua.

Lu added the US-Japan treaty was a product of the Cold War, and should not affect China's territorial sovereignty, Xinhua reported.



Mattis arrived in Japan on Friday from South Korea. His visit to the region, the first overseas trip by a senior official from the Trump administration, was aimed at reassuring Washington's key East Asian allies about America's commitment to their security.

Mattis also had strong words over the South China Sea, saying Beijing "has shredded the trust of the nations in this region", though tempered that message with a call for disputes to be settled through arbitration and diplomacy.

Speaking in Seoul on Friday, he warned North Korea against any violence.

"Any attack on the United States or our allies will be defeated and any use of nuclear weapons would be met with a response that would be effective and overwhelming," he told reporters.

Iran vows to missile strike if security threatened

Pentagon chief says Tehran 'biggest state sponsor of terrorism'

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A Revolutionary Guards commander said Iran would use its missiles if its security is under threat, as the elite force defied new US sanctions on its missile programme by holding a military exercise yesterday.

Tensions between Tehran and Washington have risen since a recent Iranian ballistic missile test which prompted US President Donald Trump's administration to impose sanctions on individuals and entities linked to the Revolutionary Guards.

Trump's national security adviser Michael Flynn said the Washington was putting Iran on notice over its "destabilising activity", and Trump tweeted Tehran was "playing with fire".

Hours after the new US sanctions were announced, Pentagon chief James Mattis charged that Iran was "the single biggest state sponsor of terrorism in the world."

"We are working day and night to protect Iran's security," head of Revolutionary Guards' aerospace unit, Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh was quoted as saying by Tasnim news agency.

"If we see smallest misstep from the enemies, our roaring missiles will fall on their heads," he added.

Despite the heated words, Mattis yesterday said he was not considering raising the number of US forces in the Middle East to address Iran's "misbehavior", but warned that the world would not ignore Iranian activities.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards is holding the military exercise in Semnan province yesterday to test missile and radar systems and to "showcase the power of Iran's revolution and to dismiss the sanctions," according to the force's website.



Defying US sanctions, Iran tests defence systems in drill

Despite tensions, US not considering raising number of forces in region

Iranian state news agencies reported that home-made missile systems, radars, command and control centres, and cyber warfare systems would be tested in yesterday's drill.

Tehran confirmed on Wednesday that it had test-fired a new ballistic missile, but said the test did not breach the Islamic Republic's nuclear agreement with world powers or a UN Security Council resolution endorsing the pact.

Seriously ill Iran baby allowed to enter US

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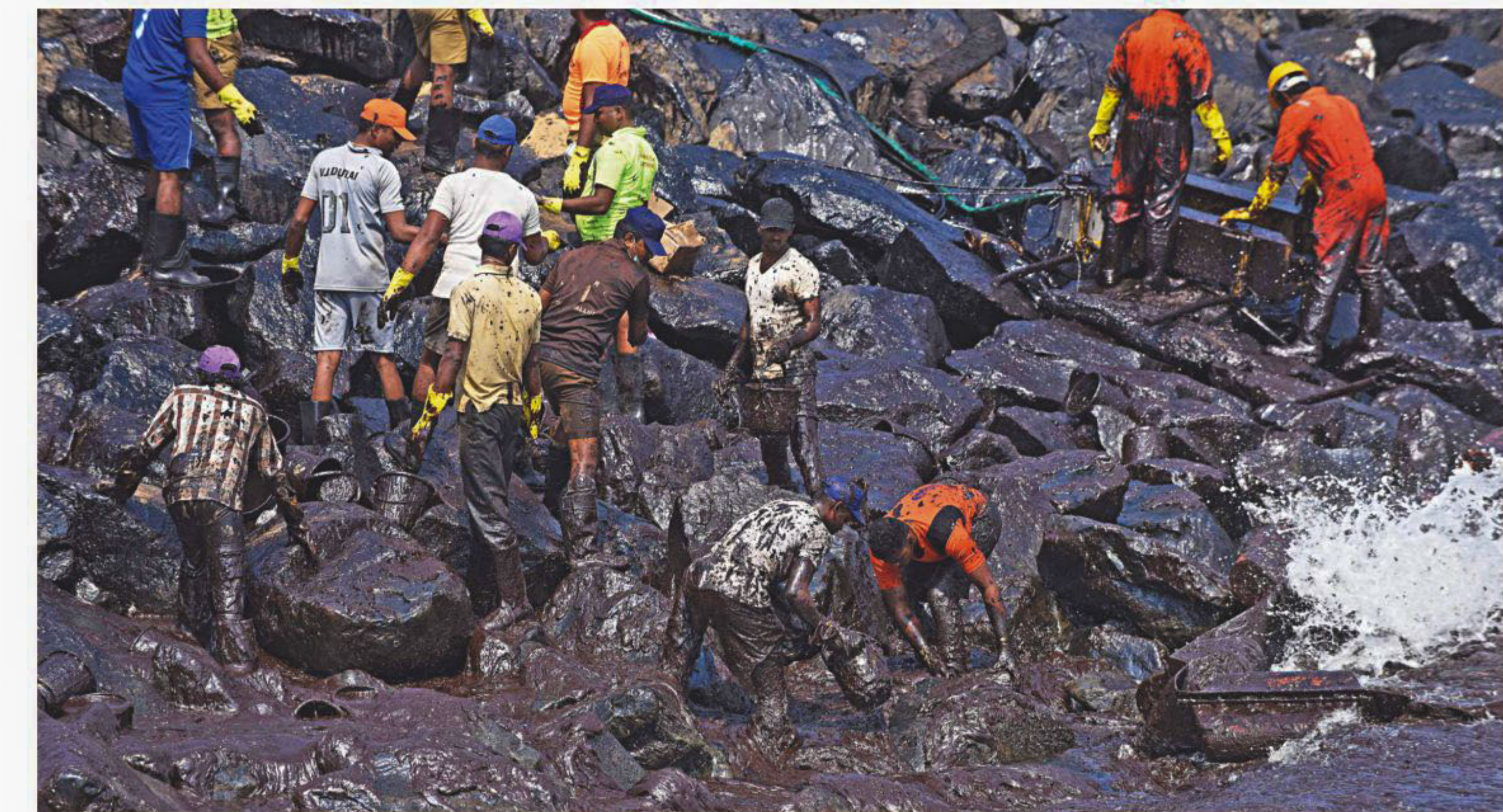
A four-month-old girl with a serious heart condition was granted an emergency waiver late Friday after she was denied a flight to the United States thanks to Donald Trump's travel ban on seven majority-Muslim countries.

"This evening we were pleased to learn that the federal government has now granted Fatemeh Reshad and her family boarding documents to come to the United States," New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said in a statement Friday, adding that a law firm will fund the family's travel to the states and doctors at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital will perform the surgery pro-bono.

"Bizarrely, the federal ban would prevent this child from receiving medical care and literally endanger her life," he continued.

Prior to the announcement, Fatemeh's parents were scheduled to meet with paramedics in Portland, Oregon but were prohibited from entering the country from Tehran.

In response to her story, congressional Democrats sent a letter to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson requesting the waiver for the infant and her parents. The four-month-old has two holes in her heart and a twisted artery which requires immediate surgery. The family's attorney told the Guardian that there's a 20-30 percent chance of success with surgery in Iran and there's a 97 percent chance of success in the states.



Indian firefighters and volunteers try to clean up oil that has washed ashore in Chennai yesterday, after an oil tanker and an LPG tanker collided off Kamarajar Port in Ennore. Hundreds of students and fishermen were working to clean up an oil spill on India's southern coast that campaigners say threatens the turtles that nest there every year.

PHOTO: AFP



Adult swaddling therapy fad hits Tokyo

Wrapped up from head to toe in a white bag and gently rocking from side to side, five Japanese mothers are hopeful Tokyo's latest health trend can cure their post-pregnancy aches and pains. According to its exponents, Otonamaki, which translates as "adult wrapping", was devised by a Kyoto midwife who thought replicating how children are swaddled at birth could help mothers overcome post labor shoulder and hip pain.

Machine beats humans for first time in poker

Artificial intelligence has made history by beating humans in poker for the first time, the last remaining game in which humans had managed to maintain the upper hand. Libratus, an AI built by Carnegie Mellon University racked up over \$1.7 million worth of chips against four of the top professional poker players in the world in a 20-day marathon poker tournament that ended on Tuesday in Philadelphia.



Refugees heading to Europe to be resettled in Asia, LatAm

Proposes UK PM at EU summit, unveils £30m aid plan; Germany offers asylum seekers money to voluntarily return to their home countries

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Refugees heading to Europe will be urged to settle in Asia and Latin America instead, under a new £30m British aid package.

Meanwhile, the German government has budgeted more than 40 million (£35 million) to pay asylum seekers to voluntarily return to their home countries.

Theresa May announced the scheme at an EU summit in Malta, arguing it showed the government is "stepping up its support for the most vulnerable refugees".

The package will see Britain provide lifesaving supplies for people facing freezing conditions across Eastern Europe and Greece, including warm clothing, shelter and medical care.

However, it will also pay for better infrastructure in far-flung countries willing to take refugees who had hoped to settle in Europe.

The move builds on an existing scheme run by The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), but it is the first time Britain's aid budget has been used to bolster it.

Only a few thousand Syrian refugees have been resettled in Britain - and the government has refused to take part in an EU-wide programme to co-ordinate the continent's response to the crisis.

Government sources stressed that people would only be diverted to countries in Asia and Latin America if they were willing to be resettled there.

The Department for International Development is expected to release a list of interested countries later.

In Germany, migrants will be offered financial incentives of up to €1,200 (£1,000) each to leave the country and withdraw their application for protection, with a lower amount of €800 (£700) if they choose to depart after being refused asylum.

Germany is the latest European country to boost "voluntary return" programmes amid growing anti-immigration sentiment across the continent.

Denmark's initiative, also run with the IOM, caused 532 asylum seekers to voluntarily leave the country last year - a record number.



Indian voters queue to cast their ballots in the Punjab Legislative Assembly and Amritsar Lok Sabha elections at a polling booth in a village on the outskirts of Amritsar, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Indians go to the polls in test for Modi's cash ban

AFP, New Delhi

Millions of Indians began voting yesterday in regional elections seen as the first major test of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party after his controversial move to ban all high-value notes last year.

Five Indian states will elect new governments over the next five weeks in a multi-phased election, with voting kicking off in northern Punjab and coastal Goa in the west.

Modi's bold move to ban the notes that made up 86 percent of the currency was aimed at curbing widespread tax evasion, but has also dented growth and caused widespread pain to the millions of Indians who lack access to formal banking.

His personal popularity has remained high well into his first term, but the elections are being seen as a test of its endurance.

Residents were seen queuing outside polling booths across both states, where more than 40 million voters are eligible to cast their ballots to elect a total of 157 legislators.

Modi's party is likely to lose out in

Punjab, where it has been in power alongside its regional alliance partner since 2007, but also where a turnaround for the centre-left opposition Congress Party is possible.

Rahul Gandhi, the 44-year-old Nehru-Gandhi family scion who is seen as the party's next head, has pulled out all the stops to revive its fortunes, facing criticism after a series of state election defeats.

"It is the most important election for the Congress party which needs a victory on its own," said Nistula Hebbur, political editor with The Hindu newspaper.

But the biggest test for Modi will be in India's most populous state Uttar Pradesh (UP), where the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won big in the 2014 general election.

The state is important because it sends the highest number of MPs to the upper house of the national parliament, where the BJP currently lacks a majority.

The northern state of Uttarakhand and Manipur in the northeast will also elect new governments, with results for all five states due on March 11.

NEWSIN brief

Louvre Attack: Suspect identified as Egyptian

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A man who attacked soldiers with a machete near the Louvre art gallery in Paris has been identified as Egyptian national Abdullah Reda al-Hamamy. The 29-year-old was shot and wounded by police after he launched an attack on a soldier. In a press conference on Friday evening, Paris prosecutor Francois Molins said the man was an Egyptian national who had entered the country on a one-month tourist visa issued in Dubai on 26 January.

Indian cops kill two 'militants' in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Two suspected rebels were killed yesterday in Indian-administered Kashmir in a firefight that broke out when government forces intercepted a vehicle they were travelling in, police said. Two police officers, including member of a special anti-militancy group, were injured.

JuD rebrands under new name in Pakistan

PTI, Islamabad

Jamaat-ud-Dawa has rebranded under the new name of 'Tehreek Azadi Jammu and Kashmir', just days after its chief Hafiz Saeed was put under house arrest and a crackdown launched on the organisation's activities. The Mumbai attack mastermind had indicated about a week before his arrest that he might launch TAJK to "expedite the freedom of Kashmir".