

Indonesia calls for an end to Rohingya crisis

AFP, Singapore

Myanmar should take significant steps to achieve peace in Rakhine state, Indonesia's foreign minister said yesterday, warning that the bloody crackdown on the country's Muslim Rohingya minority could lead to instability across South East Asia.

Hundreds of Rohingya are thought to have been killed during a brutal campaign by Myanmar security forces in Rakhine to find militants accused of carrying out deadly raids on police border posts.

Almost 70,000 have fled to Bangladesh since "clearance operations" began four months ago, bringing horrific stories of mass rape, murder, torture and arson. Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, joined a chorus of concern yesterday calling for an end to the crisis.

"I would like to once again reiterate the importance for the government of Myanmar to take significant steps to create an enabling environment for peace and reconciliation to take place," said foreign minister Retno Marsudi on a visit to Singapore.

"Indonesia shares the concern of the international community on the humanitarian and security situation in Rakhine state."

The plight of the Rohingya, a stateless group denied citizenship in Buddhist-majority Myanmar and reviled as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, has become a lightning rod for anger across the Muslim world. Myanmar also drew criticism from Malaysia on the issue last month, in a rare spat between Southeast Asian neighbours.

Prime Minister Najib Razak said Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya was a "stain" on the 10-member Southeast Asian regional bloc Asean, and warned that Islamist extremists may exploit the crisis.

Marsudi made clear that Indonesia wanted to provide constructive assistance.

'Unsafe encounter'

Chinese, US aircrafts come close in contested Scarborough Shoal in South China Sea

CNN ONLINE

Two US defense officials told CNN that there was an "unsafe" close encounter between a US Navy P-3 Orion aircraft and a Chinese surveillance aircraft Wednesday.

One official said the Chinese plane was a People's Liberation Army Air Force KJ-200.

The two planes flew within 1,000 feet of each other in the general vicinity of the contested Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.

A spokesperson for US Pacific Command, which oversees US troops in the region confirmed, the incident, calling it "unsafe" in a statement provided to CNN.

"The US Navy P-3C was on a routine mission operating in accordance with international law," Maj Rob Shuford said.

"The Department of Defense and US Pacific Command are always concerned about unsafe interactions with Chinese military forces," he added. "We will address the issue in appropriate diplomatic and military channels."

A second official said that the American P-3 had to alter course to ensure that there

wasn't an aerial collision.

While the Navy considers the encounter to be "unsafe," it does not assess that any malign intent was behind the incident, though the event was considered serious enough to be raised up the chain of command.

The official called encounters between US and Chinese aircraft like the one that took place Wednesday "extremely rare," noting that there were zero such incidents in 2015 and two in 2016. It was the first such instance of 2017.

China claims almost all of the South China Sea, including islands more than 800 miles from the mainland, despite objections from neighbors including the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Vietnam. Beijing has also created artificial islands in the area, outfitting some of them with military features.

The area around the Scarborough Shoal, which lies 130 miles west from the Philippine island of Luzon, has been at the epicenter of the China-Philippines dispute over territorial claims in the South China Sea, with Chinese Coast Guard ships frequently operating in the area.



Security officials exchange punches with opposition lawmakers during President Jacob Zuma's State of the Nation Address, inset, to a joint sitting of the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces in Cape Town, South Africa on Thursday night.

PHOTO: AFP

Yemen children at risk

Warns UN as humanitarian 'catastrophe' looms

AFP, Rome

Three UN agencies yesterday launched an appeal for emergency food aid to conflict-torn Yemen to avoid a humanitarian "catastrophe" that will hit children hardest.

An assessment by the UN's agencies for food and for children, FAO and Unicef, and the World Food Programme, found "unprecedented" levels of hunger with the number of people who could not be sure of having enough to eat up by three million in seven months.

A total of 17.1 million people are now struggling to feed themselves with 7.3 million of those in need of emergency assistance. Yemen has a population of 27.4 million.

The joint study was the first of its kind since the conflict dramatically escalated in March 2015 with a Saudi-led international coalition backing government forces against rebels backed by Iran.

One fallout of the fighting has been a slump in agricultural production across the country, contributing to soaring malnutrition.

"We are witnessing some of the highest numbers of malnutrition amongst children in Yemen in recent times," said Meritxell Relano, Unicef's representative in the country.

"Children who are severely and acutely malnourished are 11 times more at risk of death as compared to their healthy peers, if not treated in time."

Stephen Anderson, WFP Country Director in Yemen, said: "The current level of hunger in Yemen is unprecedented."

"Tragically, we see more and more families skipping meals or going to bed hungry." The conflict has left more than 7,400 people dead and 40,000 injured, but UN-led peace efforts and seven ceasefires have all ended in failure.



US general seeks more troops in Afghanistan

Trump, Ghani discuss security in phone call

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump and his Afghan counterpart discussed security in a phone call on Thursday, officials said, hours after the top US commander in Afghanistan said thousands more troops were needed to break a stalemate with the Taliban.

Trump and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani also spoke about opportunities to strengthen ties, counterterrorism cooperation and economic development, the White House said in a statement.

It said Trump also emphasized the continuing importance of the US-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership and his support for Ghani's government, which is faced with an emboldened Taliban-led insurgency that is still gaining ground after more than 15 years of war.

The Afghan Embassy in Washington said Trump and Ghani had spoken on Dec 3, but Thursday's call was their first since Trump's inauguration on Jan 20.

Hours before the call, General John

Nicholson, the commander of US and international troops in Afghanistan, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in Washington he did not have enough troops to adequately advise Afghan forces on the ground.

Nicholson said he had enough US troops to carry out counterterrorism operations against the Taliban, al Qaeda and other insurgents but also acknowledged gains made by the Taliban over the past year.

"We have a shortfall of a few thousand," Nicholson said.

Trump has so far offered little clarity about whether he might approve more forces for Afghanistan. Nicholson said extra forces need not all come from the United States and could also be drawn from other allies.

The Afghan Defence Ministry yesterday welcomed suggestions by Nicholson that more troops were needed to train Afghan security forces.

"The Afghan defence ministry supports any decision taken between the Afghan and American governments," Afghan defence ministry spokesman Dawlat Waziri said.



ISRAEL-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Settlement growth not good for peace

Says Trump in an interview with a paper

AFP, Jerusalem

US President Donald Trump does not believe Israeli settlement growth in Palestinian territories is "good for peace", he told a paper Friday, in his most direct comments on the matter since inauguration.

In the interview published in Hebrew by the Israel Hayom newspaper, Trump also said he was thinking "seriously" about moving the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, a move fiercely opposed by the Palestinians.

Speaking to the newspaper ahead of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Washington next week, Trump was quoted as saying he was "not someone who believes that advancing settlements is good for peace".

The international community considers settlements in the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem illegal and says they risk destroying hopes for peace with the Palestinians.

Trump's administration, however, has been largely silent as Israel has announced more than 6,000 new homes in settlements in recent weeks, in stark contrast to criticism from predecessor Barack Obama.

Trump was also quoted by Israel Hayom as saying he was "studying" plans to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

He said he was thinking "very seriously" about the controversial relocation, which he committed to before taking office, stressing it was not an "easy decision".

No English transcript of the interview was published.

EXECUTIVE PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM

Erdogan approves charter reform bill

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday rubber-stamped controversial constitutional changes that will boost his own powers, paving the way for a referendum on the legislation in April.

The government says the proposals to create an executive presidency will simplify the government structure, but opponents fear they will lead to one-man rule in Turkey.

"People will have the final say," Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus said in comments carried by the Anadolu news agency, announcing that the referendum would take place on April 16.

Parliament in January approved a new 18-article constitution to create an executive presidency in the Nato member state along the lines of the system in France and the United States.

Brawls erupted between lawmakers during debates over the bill, highlighting the divisive nature of the changes, the most far-reaching constitutional shift since the creation of modern Turkey in 1923.

Erdogan approved the legislation six months after an attempted coup against him by a rogue military faction in July last year. Under the new constitution, the president will have strengthened executive powers to directly appoint top public officials including ministers.



Volunteers try to keep alive some of the hundreds of stranded pilot whales after one of the country's largest recorded mass whale strandings, in Golden Bay, at the top of New Zealand's south island, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

French farmer fined for helping migrants

AFP, Nice

A French farmer who has become a symbol of Europe's migrant crisis after helping Africans to slip into the country was given a suspended fine of 3,000 euros (\$3,200) yesterday and said he would never stop assisting those in need.

Cedric Herrou, 37, was convicted for illegally helping migrants across the French-Italian border under the noses of the French police.

The sentence is far lighter than the eight-month suspended prison term that prosecutors had requested.

Prosecutors had also wanted his vehicle to be confiscated and restrictions placed on his driving licence limiting him to using it for his work. The court rejected both requests.

Herrou was unrepentant after the verdict, saying migrants from poor countries still needed his help and that he would continue to give it.

"We will continue to act and neither the threats of officials or one or two politicians will stop us," he told a small crowd of supporters outside the court building in Nice.

"It will only be a victory when we don't have to do this anymore and I can go back to my normal life and my work," he added.

Herrou was found not guilty of putting up around 50 migrants from Eritrea in an abandoned holiday camp.

At his trial last month, he said he was compelled to help migrants "because it has to be done... Families are suffering."

His lawyer Zia Oloumi said the verdict was "fair", adding:

"This shows that the court understood that he was acting for humanitarian reasons."

Herrou also defended his decision to put up five minors -- a Sudanese youth and four Eritreans -- at his home, saying it was up to local officials "to face up to their responsibilities".

