

'Routine operations'

US navy begins patrol in S China Sea amid growing tension with Beijing over control of disputed waterway

AFP, Washington

A US aircraft carrier strike group is patrolling in the South China Sea, the US Navy said Saturday, days after Beijing told Washington not to challenge its sovereignty in the waterway.

China asserts ownership of almost all of the resource-rich waters despite rival claims from several Southeast Asian countries. It has rapidly built reefs into artificial islands capable of hosting military planes.

The USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier group was engaging in "routine operations in the South China Sea," the navy said in a statement on its website.

It noted that the ships and aircraft had recently conducted exercises off Hawaii and Guam to "maintain and improve their readiness and develop cohesion as a strike group."

"We are looking forward to demonstrating those capabilities while building upon existing strong relationships with our allies, partners and friends in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region," strike group commander Rear Admiral James Kilby said in the statement.

China's foreign ministry said ships and aircraft were allowed to operate in the area according to international law.

But Beijing "firmly opposes any country's attempt to undermine China's sovereignty and security in the name of the freedom of navigation and overflight," spokesman Geng Shuang told journalists Wednesday, responding to reports that the Vinson was headed to the South China Sea.

"We also urge the US to refrain from challenging China's sovereignty and security and to respect regional countries' efforts to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea," he said.

The Vinson has deployed to the South China Sea 16 times in its 35-year history, the US Navy said.

Washington says it does not take sides in the territorial disputes but has several times sent warships and planes to assert freedom of navigation in the Sea, sparking protests from Beijing.



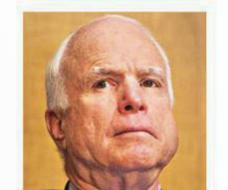
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Smoke rises after a rocket landed in the middle of the Iraqi rapid response forces' position during a battle against Islamic State militants in the south of Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. Inset, Sunni Arab fighters carry pots that are being made into improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to demolish homes belonging to the militants in Rifaia village. Story on Page 16. PHOTO: REUTERS



McCain defends media against Trump attack

REUTERS, Munich

US Senator John McCain, defending the media against the latest attack by President Donald Trump, warned that suppressing the free press was "how dictators get started".

The Arizona Republican, a frequent critic of Trump, was responding to a tweet in which Trump accused the media of being "the enemy of the American people".

The international order established after World War Two was built in part on a free press, McCain said in an excerpt of an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press".

"I hate the press. I hate you especially," he told interviewer Chuck Todd from an international security conference in Munich.

"But the fact is we need you. We need a free press. We must have it. It's vital."

"If you want to preserve - I'm very serious now - if you want to preserve democracy as we know it, you have to have a free and many times adversarial press. And without it, I am afraid that we would lose so much of our individual liberties over time. That's how dictators get started," he continued.

"They get started by suppressing free press. In other words, a consolidation of power. When you look at history, the first thing that dictators do is shut down the press. And I'm not saying that President Trump is trying to be a dictator. I'm just saying we need to learn the lessons of history," McCain said.

US Senator Jeanne Shaheen, a Democrat from New Hampshire, told the conference yesterday she was also concerned about Trump's comments.

'All's well in White House'

Trump reassures enthralled supporters in fiery campaign-style speech in Florida, launches another attack at media

AFP, Melbourne

President Donald Trump turned back the clock Saturday with a bold and aggressive Florida speech straight out of his 2016 campaign playbook, enthralled fans while insisting all is well in the White House despite weeks of turbulence.

He also took aim at his favorite foil, the "dishonest" news media that he said has become "part of the corrupt system."

At the end of a stormy first month in office, the billionaire took the power of the presidency on the road, revisiting the style and substance of the campaign trail.

After stepping down from Air Force One to a deafening cheer, he was drawn into the collective bosom of several thousand of his dearest followers -- mostly white, mostly male middle-class Americans who feel they have been left behind by the country's shifting economy.

"I'm here because I want to be among my friends and among the people," he said.

Trump employed a loud and muscular delivery -- one which won over millions of voters on the campaign trail last year -- to assure Americans he is fulfilling promises to shrink government, rebuild the military, restrict immigration, and tear up health care reforms enacted by predecessor Barack Obama.



Trump introduces a supporter on stage to speak during a campaign rally in Florida. PHOTO: AFP

"This will be change for the ages," the president said at the event in Melbourne, a sun-bleached city on Florida's Space Coast.

But Trump was completing his first month in office under a cloud in Washington, where lawmakers pledged to further investigate his possible pre-election ties to Russia, his national security advisor was forced to resign in disgrace, and a cabinet nominee withdrew amid controversy.

"The White House is running so smoothly, so smoothly," Trump stressed, before going on an extended rant about the US media.

"I also want to speak to you without the filter of the fake news," Trump said.

"They've become a big part of the problem. They are part of the corrupt system," he said, continuing the open warfare with the media that has marked his young presidency.

Aside from the fact that Trump is now leader of the free world, the event was eerily similar in style to his campaign -- from the layout, to the recorded music, to the president's largely impromptu delivery.

About the only thing missing was attacks on his 2016 Democratic rival Hillary Clinton.

Trump acknowledged that he is always in campaign mode.

'Where is US in all this?'

UN envoy questions Washington's role in solving conflict

AFP, Munich

UN envoy Staffan de Mistura yesterday questioned US President Donald Trump's engagement in solving the Syrian conflict, just days ahead of crucial peace talks in Geneva.

"Where is the US in all this? I can't tell you because I don't know," he said, adding that the new administration was still trying to work out its priorities on the issue.

The US' top three priorities include fighting Islamic State jihadists, "how to limit the influence of some major regional players and how to not to damage one of their major allies in the region," said de Mistura.

"How you square this circle, that I understand is what they are discussing in Washington," he added.

Mistura stressed that what was ultimately key was the prospect of an inclusive political solution to end the conflict.

"Even a ceasefire with two guarantors can't hold too long if there is no political horizon," he said, referring to recent talks in Astana brokered by Russia and Turkey.

Any political solution has to be inclusive to be credible, he said, stressing that the Astana talks and the ceasefire agreed provided an opening that should be explored.

A new round of United Nations-led talks are due to be held in Geneva on February 23, involving Syrian regime and rebel representatives.

Meanwhile, sixteen people, including two women, were killed Saturday when government forces launched a barrage of rockets that hit a funeral on the edges of the Syrian capital, a monitor said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said "seven rockets and several shells hit areas on the edges of Qabun", a northeastern district of Damascus held by rebels.

"The shelling targeted a cemetery while someone was being buried there," said Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman.

Abdel Rahman had earlier given a toll of nine killed, but several people succumbed to their wounds in the hours after the attack.

"There are still some people who are critically wounded," he said.

Rebels and regime forces reached a local truce deal in Qabun in 2014, but violence steadily escalated in the neighbourhood which is now bombed regularly.

Also on Saturday, three civilians were killed in government air strikes on Waer, the last opposition-held district of the central city of Homs.

WAR IN SYRIA
REGIME FORCES PRESS ATTACK ON DAMASCUS OUTSKIRTS, 16 KILLED AT A FUNERAL



Civilians gather near the scene of a suicide bomb explosion at the Wadajir market in Madina district of Somalia's capital Mogadishu yesterday. At least 14 people were killed when a car packed with explosives blew up near a busy intersection, officials and witnesses said. PHOTO: REUTERS

INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICT

25 civilians killed in DR Congo

AFP, Goma

Militiamen from the Democratic Republic of Congo's Nande ethnic group have killed 25 civilians in the country's violence-torn east, almost all of them hacked to death with machetes, local officials and activists said Saturday.

"In total 25 people were killed, decapitated by machete by the Mai-Mai Mazembe in and around the village of Kyaghala," Francis Bakundakabo, the local representative of the governor of North Kivu province, told AFP.

"All of these people were Hutu civilians," he said, adding that the killings took place between 4:00 am and 8:00 am on Saturday morning.

Hope Kubuya, a local civil society activist whose group went to verify the attack, said 24 of the victims had been killed with machetes and one woman shot dead.

"This raid by the Mai-Mai Mazembe in the Hutu village will enflame the inter-ethnic conflict in the region," he added.

The Mai-Mai are a "self-defence" militia who count members of DR Congo's Nande, Hunde and Kobo communities among their ranks, in opposition to rivals from the Nyaturu group representing ethnic Hutus.

The area around Kyaghala is majority-Hutu.

The last major attack to strike the volatile region came in December when at least 35 civilians were killed in clashes between fighters from the two groups.

NEWS IN brief

Avalanche kills seven in northern Pakistan

AFP, Chitral

An avalanche killed at least seven labourers in northern Pakistan yesterday, with up to four more trapped beneath the snow. The accident, which also injured seven, happened near the Lowari Tunnel which connects the districts of Dir and Chitral in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, senior local administration official Shahab Hameed told AFP.

Putin critic leaves Russia for treatment

AFP, Moscow

A Russian opposition politician who fell into a coma due to poisoning this month has left the country for treatment abroad after his condition improved, his lawyer said yesterday. "This morning Vladimir Kara-Murza flew out of the country... to go through rehabilitation treatment after his second acute poisoning," lawyer Vadim Prokhorov wrote on his Facebook page.

Zimbabwe's Mugabe rules out retirement

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, who turns 93 on Tuesday, has no plans to give up power, saying he has no "acceptable" successor in place. "The call to step down must come from my party, my party at congress, my party at central committee," Mugabe said in excerpts from a radio broadcast that will air this week and that were printed in the state-owned Sunday Mail newspaper.

Israel-US team to discuss settlements: Netanyahu

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and the US will set up a joint team to discuss Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said yesterday, days after talks with President Donald Trump.

During their talks on Wednesday in Washington, Netanyahu and Trump had "agreed to create joint teams to upgrade relations between Israel and the US in all of the main areas," the premier said.

They will cover "security, intelligence, cyber, technology, economics and many others", he told ministers and media at the start of yesterday's weekly cabinet meeting.

"We also agreed to create a team in an area that we have not previously agreed on: I mean, of course, on settlement in Judea and Samaria," he said, using a term Israel applies to the West Bank.

Hundreds of thousands of Jewish settlers live in the territory, which Israel has occupied since the Six-Day War of 1967.

The international community sees settlements as a major obstacle to peace, as they are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state.

At the White House meeting, their first since Trump took office, the president asked Netanyahu to "hold back on settlements for a little bit. We'll work something out."

During their joint White House news conference, Netanyahu said he believes that "the issue of the settlements is not the core of the conflict, nor does it really drive the conflict."

"I think it's an issue, it has to be resolved in the context of peace negotiations," he said.

The administration of previous US president Barack Obama strongly opposed the expansion of Jewish settlements, arguing that they hurt the longer-term search for a two-state solution.



KIM JONG-NAM KILLING

Malaysia seeks North Korean fugitives

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian police said yesterday they believe five North Koreans were involved in the murder of the half-brother of leader Kim Jong-Un, with four having fled the country on the day of the killing.

Seoul said the announcement proved Pyongyang was behind the murder of Kim Jong-Nam, who died after being squirted in the face with an unidentified liquid at Kuala Lumpur International Airport last Monday.

Four North Korean men were being sought over the killing, Deputy Inspector-General of Police Noor Rashid Ibrahim said, in addition to their compatriot who was arrested in Kuala Lumpur Saturday.

Scientists find 'super life' forms in Mexican caves

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Ancient life forms that could be up to 50,000 years old have been found trapped inside crystals in tremendously hot Mexican caves, some as high as cathedrals.

The bizarre microbes were found dormant in Naica, Mexico, were able to exist by living on minerals such as iron and manganese, said Penelope Boston, head of Nasa's Astrobiology Institute which made the discovery.

"It's super life" she said as she presented the discovery at the American Association for the Advancement of Science conference in Boston.

"It's simply another illustration of just how completely tough earth life is," she said.

Boston, who revived the microbes both on the site and in a lab, said she is planning on doing more tests.

The findings are the results of nine years of work and have not yet been published in a scientific journal or been reviewed by peers.

The scientific team found there were 40 different strains of microbes and some viruses.

Some are 10 percent different genetically about as far as humans are from mushrooms, Boston said.

The Naica caves, in the northern state of Chihuahua, Mexico, are abandoned lead and zinc mines and are half a mile deep. Before drilling started by mining companies, the mines had been completely cut off from the outside world.

