

MARITIME SECURITY IN ASIA-PACIFIC

India kicks off naval drills with US, Japan

India began holding naval exercises with the United States and Japan off its south coast yesterday, seeking to forge closer military ties to counter growing Chinese influence in the region.

The exercises come as Indian and Chinese troops face off in a remote and strategically sensitive part of the Himalayas where India, China and Bhutan meet.

India has a longstanding territorial dispute with its northern neighbour, which is also expanding its naval presence in the region.

It is the fourth consecutive year Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF) has taken part in the Malabar Exercise, conducted annually by the US and India in the Bay of Bengal since 1992.

In a statement, the US said the exercises had "grown in scope and complexity over the years to address the variety of shared threats to maritime security in the Indo-Asia Pacific".

The US navy is fielding the USS Nimitz, the world's largest aircraft carrier, for the drills which go on till July 17.

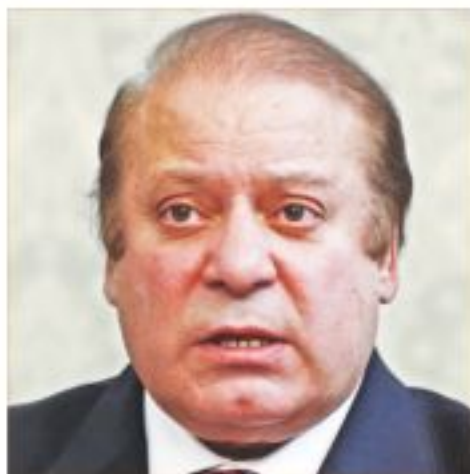
China has stepped up its activities in the Indian Ocean in recent years, building ports in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The area also features heavily in Beijing's new One Belt One Road initiative to revive ancient trade routes from Asia, which has caused concerns in New Delhi.

Troops from the two nuclear-armed neighbours have for weeks been engaged in a stand-off on a disputed section of land high near what is known as the trijunction, where Tibet, India and Bhutan meet.



Camden Market is seen ablaze in London, Britain, in the early hours of yesterday. The emergency service said it had sent 10 fire engines to the scene and the fire was extinguished within around three hours with no casualties reported.



PANAMA PAPERS
Pak probe panel submits final report to SC

A joint investigation team probing the Panamagate graft case against Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his family yesterday submitted its final report to the Supreme Court.

Members of the JIT arrived at the apex court amid tight security provided by the Islamabad Capital Territory Police and large cardboard boxes labelled 'evidence' were carted into the court.

Besides other evidence, the report consists of the statements of Prime Minister Sharif, his brother and Punjab chief minister Shahbaz Sharif; his children Hussain, Hassan and Maryam Sharif and son-in-law retired captain Mohammad Safdar.

A three-judge bench comprising Justice Sheikh Azmat Saeed, Justice Ijazul Ahsan and Justice Ejaz Afzal is hearing the JIT.

The six-member joint investigation team (JIT) was set up in May by the Supreme Court with the mandate to probe the Sharif family for allegedly failing to provide the trail of money used to buy properties in London in 1990s.

The JIT has also probed several serving and former officials in connection with the case.

Last year, the Panama papers revealed that three of Prime Minister Sharif's children owned offshore companies and assets not shown on his family's wealth statement. The assets in question include four expensive flats in Park Lane, London.

The top court took up the case in October last year on petitions filed by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, Awami Muslim League and Jamaat-e-Islami and reserved the verdict in February after conducting hearings on a daily basis.

Syria peace talks resume

Govt, opposition meet in Geneva after ceasefire takes effect in south

SYRIA'S government and opposition met yesterday for a seventh round of UN-sponsored peace talks with little expectation of a breakthrough to end the six-year conflict.

The talks in Geneva open after a ceasefire took effect in three provinces in southern Syria on Sunday, with a monitor reporting that the region was mostly quiet despite scattered violations.

The ceasefire was brokered by the United States, Russia and Jordan, the latest agreement reached outside the Geneva framework.

The peace process in the Swiss city has been increasingly overshadowed by a separate track organised by regime allies Russia and Iran, and rebel backer Turkey.

In principle, the new round of Geneva negotiations will focus on four so-called "baskets": a new constitution, governance, elections and combating "terrorism".

As he arrived for the talks yesterday, UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura told reporters: "We will work very hard."

The last talks ended in May with little progress towards ending a war that has killed more than 320,000 people since it began in March 2011.

De Mistura said after that round that "important gaps remain... on major issues," and that time constraints had stymied progress.

Syria's opposition insists that President Bashar al-Assad must step down as part of any political solution to the war, but the government says Assad's fate is not up for discussion.

SEVENTH ROUND OF TALKS WILL FOCUS ON FOUR CALLED 'BASKETS'

IRAN: CEASEFIRE DEAL SHOULD BE EXPANDED TO COVER ALL OF SYRIA

REGIME FORCES LAUNCH ATTACK ON IS IN SOUTH

Still, both sides are expected to participate once again, with Yehya al-Aridi, a spokesman for the opposition High Negotiations Committee, telling AFP he had "modest expectations".

Meanwhile, Iran's foreign ministry spokesman said yesterday a partial ceasefire in southwestern Syria agreed between the United States and Russia should be expanded to all of Syria if it is to be successful.

The United States, Russia and Jordan announced a ceasefire and "de-escalation agreement" for the southwest on Friday and starting on Sunday after a meeting between US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin at the G20 summit in Hamburg, reported Reuters.

"The agreement can be fruitful if it is expanded to all of Syria and includes all the area that we discussed in Astana talks for de-escalating the tension," spokesman Bahram Qasemi was quoted as saying by Tasnim news agency.

Syrian government forces launched an attack on rebels in a southern province despite the ceasefire, a monitor said, but state media said the assault was against the Islamic State group.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor, said the assault in Sweida province began yesterday morning, almost 24 hours into an internationally brokered ceasefire.

"The regime started an attack on the area northeast of Sweida city, backed by air strikes," the monitor said, reporting clashes between government troops and rebels on the ground.

May reaches out to rivals

Admits the reality of her weakened position, seeks to relaunch year-old premiership

BRITISH Prime Minister Theresa May acknowledged the "reality" of her weakened position yesterday by appealing to other parties to help implement Brexit, as she sought to relaunch her year-old premiership.

One month after losing her parliamentary majority in a snap election, the Conservative leader said she was still committed to "bold action" to fulfil her promises of change.

But as fresh rumours swirled of plans to oust her, May accepted that "the reality I now face as prime minister is rather different" than it was.

Her comments came in excerpts of a speech due to be delivered today, the anniversary of her winning the Conservative Party leadership race after last year's referendum vote to leave the EU.

"In this new context, it will be even more important to make the case for our policies and our values, and to win the battle of ideas both in parliament as well as in the country," May will say.

"So I say to the other parties in the House of Commons... come forward with your own views and ideas about how we can tackle these challenges as a country."

May has been struggling to maintain her authority since the June 8 election, which she called three years early only to lose seats, leaving her with a minority government.

The Mail on Sunday reported that former Conservative chief whip Andrew Mitchell had told a private meeting of MPs that May was "dead in the water" and must quit.

Justice Secretary David Lidington said this and other rumours were the result of politicians enjoying "too much sun and too much warm Prosecco" at summer parties.

May's de facto deputy Damian Green insisted yesterday that her call for cross-party cooperation was a "grown-up way of doing politics".



BREXIT CHALLENGE

NEWSIN brief

Britain's arms exports to Saudi 'lawful': court

Britain's High Court ruled yesterday that UK arms exports to Saudi Arabia are not unlawful, after campaigners argued the weapons were used to violate international humanitarian law in bombing Yemen.

Campaign Against Arms Trade said that they are pursuing an appeal.

Palestinian shot dead in West Bank

A Palestinian attempted a car-ramming and knife attack against Israeli soldiers in the occupied West Bank yesterday and was shot dead, Israel's army said. The incident occurred at a junction in Tekoa, south of Jerusalem. One soldier was reported lightly wounded.

China's Nobel laureate in 'critical condition'

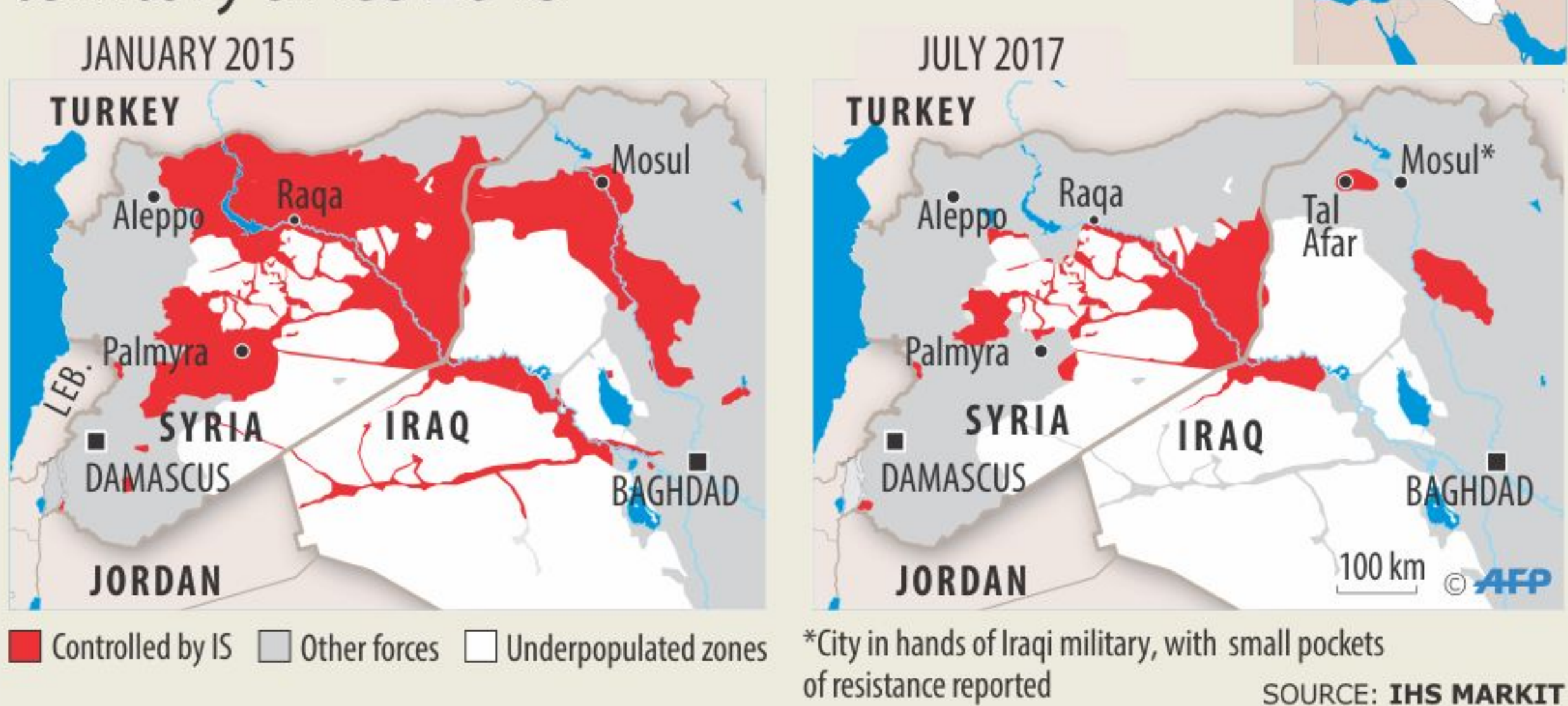
China's cancer-stricken Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo is in a critical condition, his hospital said yesterday, raising fears about his life a day after Western doctors said there was time to take him abroad. Liu's tumour has grown, his liver is bleeding and he has kidney problems, hospital sources said.

Afghanistan enacts law to control cyberspace

Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani has signed into law a cybercrime bill targeting online crime and militancy by groups such as the Taliban and Islamic State, officials said yesterday, amid concerns it could limit free speech.

ISLAMIC STATE GROUP IN RETREAT

The jihadists have lost 60% of their territory since 2015



Militants force hostages, children to fight: army

Children and hostages are being forced to fight alongside pro-Islamic State gunmen waging a seven-week battle for a Philippine city, the country's military said yesterday.

Militants seized Marawi, considered the Muslim capital of the largely Catholic Philippines, on May 23 in a bid to create an IS province, and over 100 remain holed up in the city despite intense military efforts to oust them.

Some of the extremists are teenagers who may have been recruited and trained to use guns when they were still children, said Brigadier-General Restituto Padilla, a military spokesman.

"We continuously get disturbing narratives from (escaped residents) that children as well as hostages are being employed in the firefight," Padilla told reporters in Manila.

Casualties among children and civilians forced to take up arms could not be ruled out, Padilla said.

"As disturbing as it is, our troops are doing their best to avoid any casualty among these children that are being employed," he said.

"But in the event... they bear arms and are involved in the fighting, there is nothing much that we can do. Similarly to the hostages who are being forced."

Shortly after seizing Marawi gunmen took at least a dozen hostages, including a Catholic priest. Some of the estimated 300 other civilians still trapped in the area may have also been taken captive, said Padilla.

The military earlier said civilians had been forced to help the gunmen by carrying supplies and ammunition, bearing their wounded and even helping them loot the city.

More than 500 people have been killed in the fighting, including 89 soldiers and police, 39 civilians and 379 militants, according to figures released by the government yesterday.

TAMIL AUTONOMY

Sri Lanka monks vow to resist govt deal

Sri Lanka's hardline monks yesterday broadened a growing campaign by the Buddhist clergy against the government, threatening street protests if the island's Tamil minority is granted greater autonomy.

Radical monk Maagalkande Sudaththa said hardline Buddhists were mobilising Sri Lankans from the majority Sinhalese ethnic group to resist a new power-sharing arrangement being drafted by the government.

"Monks are going from district to district to educate their followers about the dangers of the proposed constitution," Sudaththa told reporters in Colombo.

Last week the government vowed to enshrine in law a promised power-sharing agreement in Sri Lanka's Tamil-majority northern and eastern regions in exchange for a lasting peace.

President Maithripala Sirisena has stated he wants to prevent a repeat of the bloody separatist war that claimed 100,000 lives on the tiny island between 1972 and 2009.

The 225-member national parliament is currently drafting the legislation, but hardliners have vowed to take to the streets before the measures take effect.

"About 70 percent of MP's are asleep in parliament when important issues are discussed," Sudaththa said, accusing many of them of being "uneducated."

Sudaththa is an ardent supporter of firebrand monk Galagodaatte Gnanasara, who is on bail after being accused of hate speech and stoking violence against Sri Lanka's tiny Muslim population, the second largest minority after Tamils.

US rebuilding 'lost trust' with Turkey: Tillerson

The United States is starting to rebuild trust that was lost in its relationship with key Nato ally Turkey after a series of disputes, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said yesterday after meetings with Turkish leaders.

Tillerson had held several hours of talks the day earlier with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul, hoping to smooth out the two countries' ties.

He acknowledged that the United States' relationship with Turkey had "been under some stress for some time."

"I hope we are beginning to put it on the mend," he told staff members at the US consulate in Istanbul in a speech to wrap up his two-day visit.

Turkey's relations with Washington plummeted in the final months of Barack Obama's administration but Ankara has hoped for an improvement under President Donald Trump.

But ties are still being eroded by disputes ranging from Syria to the extradition of the alleged organiser of last year's failed coup to the fate of a US pastor jailed in Turkey.

Tillerson, a former Exxon Mobil chief, said he believed that each time he met Erdogan "things are getting a little better in terms of the tone between us."

"I think we're beginning to rebuild some of that trust that we lost in one another, they lost our trust to a certain extent, we lost theirs."

"So I think we are working very hard to rebuild that level of trust and that is the basis for any relationship," he said.

But Turkey is furious that Trump has continued and even expanded Obama's policy of supporting the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) as the main fighting force on the ground in Syria against Islamic State (IS) jihadists.

Ankara considers the YPG a terrorist group and the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged an insurgency inside Turkey since 1984.

But Washington is openly arming the YPG and the group is heavily involved in the US-backed operation to oust IS jihadists from their stronghold of Raqqa.



AFP, Istanbul

Indian lab develops 'beef detection kits'

A government-run laboratory in western India has developed portable "beef detection kits" that will allow police to quickly determine whether meat is that of an illegally slaughtered cow, an official said yesterday.

The slaughter of cows, which are revered by Hindus, and the possession or consumption of beef is banned in most Indian states, with some imposing life sentences for breaking the law.

"We have been working on beef detection kits for the past eight months and these will be distributed to Maharashtra and Mumbai police in August," K.Y. Kulkarni, director of the Maharashtra state government's Forensic Science Laboratories, told AFP.

Kulkarni said the new kits were based on the ELISA method, where colour changes of samples identify a substance. Police would just need to pour a sample into the kit and it would change colour to identify whether it was bovine meat or not within 30 minutes.

At present it can take several days for a laboratory to identify the source of meat through traditional DNA tests, leaving cattle traders languishing in jail, often innocently, while the outcome of tests are awaited.

Kulkarni said the kits would cost 8,000 rupees (\$123) each. A spokeswoman for police in Mumbai, the capital of Maharashtra, refused to confirm whether the force would be receiving the kits when asked by AFP.

The announcement comes as India reels from a spate of vigilante murders in recent months, especially targeting Muslims for allegedly killing cows or consuming beef.