

INDIA-CHINA BORDER STANDOFF

Beijing to 'step up' troop deployment

AFP, Beijing

China warned yesterday that it will step up its troop deployment in a border dispute with India, vowing to defend its sovereignty at "whatever cost".

The standoff started more than a month ago after Chinese troops started building a road on a remote plateau, which is disputed by China and Bhutan.

Indian troops moved in to the flashpoint zone to halt the work, with China accusing them of violating its territorial sovereignty and calling for their immediate withdrawal.

"The crossing of the mutually recognised national borders on the part of India... is a serious violation of China's territory and runs against the international law," Chinese defence ministry spokesman Wu Qian told a press conference.

"The determination and the willingness and the resolve of China to defend its sovereignty is indomitable, and it will safeguard its sovereignty and security interests at whatever cost," he added.

Chinese "border troops have taken emergency response measures in the area and will further step up deployment and trainings in response to the situation," he said.

The spokesman did not give any details about the deployment.

India and China have both said they have foreign support for their positions on the conflict.

Bhutan has said construction of the road is "a direct violation" of agreements with China. Bhutan and China do not have diplomatic relations.

India, which fought a war with China in 1962 over a separate part of the disputed Himalayan border, supports Bhutan's claim.



An Afghan man looks outside through a broken window at the site of a suicide attack claimed by Taliban in Kabul, Afghanistan, yesterday. Inset, Afghan women mourn inside a hospital compound after the suicide attack that left 35 people dead. PHOTO: REUTERS

Crisis over Jerusalem holy site intensifies

AGENCIES

A deadly shooting at Israel's Embassy in Jordan further complicated Israeli government efforts yesterday to find a way out of an escalating crisis over a major Jerusalem shrine, including mass Muslim prayer protests and Israeli-Palestinian violence.

The shooting, in which an Israeli security guard killed two Jordanians after being attacked by one of them with a screwdriver, led to a diplomatic standoff between the two countries at a time when Jordan is heavily involved in efforts to defuse the crisis over the Jerusalem holy site.

Jordan is the Muslim custodian of the shrine, which is also holy to Jews.

Jordanian officials said yesterday that the guard could only leave after an investigation, according to a news site linked to Jordan's military. Israel insisted the guard has diplomatic immunity.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he spoke to the guard and assured him that Israel has experience in

dealing with such a situation and would bring him home. He said Jordan's ambassador to Israel came to the Foreign Ministry earlier yesterday "to help solve the crisis."

The drama played out as President Donald Trump's Mideast envoy, Jason Greenblatt, headed to the Holy Land yesterday. It was the first sign of a high-level, on-the-ground attempt by the Trump administration to end the standoff between Israel and the Muslim world, reported AP.

Israel's ambassador to the United Nations said yesterday Israel is working to calm the situation in Jerusalem following a flare-up of violence, but it will do whatever is necessary to maintain security at a holy site.

The escalation began earlier this month when Arab gunmen fired from the holy site, killing two Israeli policemen. In response, Israel installed metal detectors at the site, a move that incensed the Muslim world.

Israeli authorities say the metal detectors are needed because the July 14 attackers smuggled guns into the site and emerged from it to shoot the officers, reported AFP.

Rising Chinese politician faces graft probe

AFP, Beijing

The Chinese Communist Party's anti-graft watchdog has launched an investigation into a Politburo member who was once seen as a contender for a top leadership post, state media reported yesterday.

The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection is investigating Sun Zhengcai, who until a week ago was party chief in the major city of Chongqing, for "serious discipline violation", Xinhua news agency said.

Sun is the first serving member of the 25-person Politburo to be placed under investigation since Bo Xilai, who was jailed for life in 2013 in the wake of President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign.

Xinhua's brief report did not say whether Sun would remain a member of the Politburo. His replacement as party chief in Chongqing was announced on July 15.

Trump son-in-law denies any collusion with Russia

Says he had four meetings with Moscow officials

AFP, Washington

Senior White House advisor Jared Kushner said yesterday he had contacts with Russian officials four times but denied any collusion to help his father-in-law Donald Trump win the presidency, US media reported.

Kushner described contacts made during the 2016 campaign with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak and other Russians as routine, in a statement published by the New York Times.

It came hours before Kushner will testify before the Senate intelligence committee as part of the probe into alleged Russian meddling in last year's US presidential vote.

The sprawling investigation has plagued the White House since the president took office, with many influential members of Trump's team having failed to report their contacts with Russian officials.

"I did not collude, nor know of anyone else in the campaign who colluded, with any foreign government," Kushner wrote.

"I had no improper contacts. I have not relied on Russian funds to finance my business activities in the private sector," Kushner said in the 11-page statement to be submitted for the record.

Kushner, married to Trump's eldest daughter Ivanka, was set to testify in closed-door meetings before the Senate intelligence committee yesterday, according to his lawyer, and the House panel today.

The 36-year-old, working in his first political position, was to be asked about meetings with Russia's ambassador to Washington, the head of a major Russian bank and a Russian lawyer -- the latter along with Trump's son Donald Jr.

In his statement Kushner said the meeting -- which Donald Jr had taken hoping to get dirt on his father's rival Hillary Clinton -- was a "waste of time."

Special counsel and former FBI director Robert Mueller is leading the investigation into possible collusion. The House and Senate, however, have organized separate probes.



EU MIGRANT CRISIS

Libya rescues nearly 300 off the coast

REUTERS, Tripoli

Libya's coastguard rescued an estimated 278 migrants including women and children yesterday off the shores of two different towns west of the capital Tripoli, a spokesman said.

The coastal towns to the west of Tripoli - Zawiya, Sabratha, and Zuwarah - are common departure points for migrants trying to reach Europe, often sent out by smugglers in flimsy vessels.

The coastguard near Zawiya refinery rescued 128 people about 23 km (14 miles) off the coast and another 150 were rescued off Sabratha, the spokesman of Libyan naval forces Ayoub Qaseed told Reuters.

The migrants were mostly from sub-Saharan African countries, though there was also one from Bangladesh and two from Egypt.

Thousands of migrants trying to cross to Europe by sea use the central Mediterranean route between Libya and Italy. The vast majority of migrants set off from the coastal towns of western Libya.

Italy and the European Union are trying to work with Libyan authorities to fight smugglers, but the current chaos in Libya has allowed armed groups and criminal gangs to flourish and is hampering efforts to combat trafficking.

Meanwhile, protesters in a town in southwest France have built a nearly-two-metre-high wall around the entrance to a disused hotel to try to prevent it being turned into a migrant shelter.

Working under cover of darkness, a few dozen residents of Semeac in the Pyrenees mountains erected a wall 18 metres (60 feet) long and 1.8 metres high barring access to the Formule 1 hotel, a spokesman for the group confirmed.



A Malaysian Muslim girl (L) from the Little Caliphs kindergarten, clad in white hijab which is the traditional attire for Muslim women performing the Hajj pilgrimage, high-fives her teacher after completing an educational simulation of the Hajj pilgrimage in Shah Alam, outside Kuala Lumpur yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

MALICIOUS AL-BAGHDADI STORY

NYT demands apology from Fox News

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The New York Times is asking Fox News' morning show Fox & Friends to apologise for what the newspaper calls a "malicious and inaccurate segment" about the newspaper, intelligence leaks and ISIS that aired on Saturday.

New York Times spokeswoman Danielle Rhoades Ha said Sunday that she requested an "on-air apology and tweet." The paper, she wrote, took issue with a Fox host on the segment saying that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi "was able to sneak away under the cover of darkness after a New York Times story" in 2015 and a host's comment that the US government "would have had al-Baghdadi based on the intelligence that we had except someone leaked information to the failing New York Times."

The segment referred to comments by a top military official noted in a Friday Fox story. In the Fox story, General Tony Thomas, the head of US Special Operations Command, said his team was "close" to al-Baghdadi after a 2015 raid but the "lead went dead" after it "was leaked in a prominent national newspaper." The Fox story connected Thomas with the Times, saying that Thomas "appeared to be referring to a New York Times report in June 2015 that detailed how American intelligence agencies had 'extracted valuable information.'"

Swiss chainsaw attack injures five people

AFP, Schaffhausen

A man armed with a chainsaw injured at least five people in Switzerland yesterday and was on the run after a rampage that police said was not "a terrorist act".

The assailant entered an office building in the northern town of Schaffhausen shortly after 10:30 am, police said in a statement cited by multiple local media outlets.

Minutes later, authorities were alerted that an attack was under way, and rushed officers, ambulances and helicopters to the scene.

The town's historic old quarter has been sealed off by a large deployment of officers who have set up barricades and evacuated all businesses and pedestrians from the area.

IMPEACHMENT VOTE

Maldives president shuts parliament

AFP, Colombo

Maldives lawmakers were locked out of parliament yesterday after President Abdulla Yameen ordered it shut to prevent a vote to impeach his speaker, the opposition said, in the latest turmoil to grip the troubled honeymoon islands.

Parliament had been expected to hear a no-confidence motion against the speaker, Abdulla Masheeh, but MPs found their way blocked, the Maldivian Democratic Party said.

Party spokesman Hamid Abdul Ghafoor added several opposition MPs broke through the military cordon only to be pepper sprayed and evicted.

"On Monday morning the gates of the parliament were padlocked by members of the armed forces and MPs were forcibly prevented from entering the parliamentary compound," the opposition party said in a statement.

There was no immediate comment from the government. The opposition this month secured enough support from government defectors to begin impeachment proceedings against the speaker, in a bid to wrest control of parliament from Yameen before presidential elections next year.

The government has repeatedly tried to frustrate these efforts. It arrested several opposition MPs last week ahead of the vote, and scuttled a past no-confidence bid by raising the number of signatures required for a successful motion.

'TERROR' CHARGES

Anti-Erdogan journos tried in Turkey

AFP, Istanbul

Staff from one of Turkey's most respected opposition newspapers yesterday rejected as absurd "terror" charges against them on the first day of a trial which has intensified alarm over press freedom under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The 17 defendants from the Cumhuriyet daily were detained from October last year and a dozen of them have now spent more than eight months in jail without being convicted of any crime.

They have been held under a state of emergency imposed after the July 2016 failed coup aimed at ousting Erdogan that the authorities blame on US-based preacher Fethullah Gulen.

The staff -- including writers, cartoonists and executives -- were applauded by supporters crammed into the Istanbul courtroom as the trial opened, an AFP journalist said.

Supporters released dozens of multicoloured balloons outside the courthouse, chanting: "Don't be silenced! A free media is a right!"

If convicted, the defendants face varying terms of up to 43 years in jail.

In an extraordinary coincidence, the trial opened on Turkey's annual national day of the press which marks the end of official censorship in the Ottoman Empire in 1908 under Sultan Abdulhamid II.

Those appearing in court included some of the best known names in Turkish journalism including the columnist Kadri Gursel, the paper's editor-in-chief Murat Sabuncu, cartoonist Musa Kart as well as its chairman Akin Atalay.

They are charged with supporting in the newspaper's writings three groups considered by Turkey as terror outfits -- the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the ultra-left Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C) and Gulen's movement, which Ankara calls the Fethullah Terror Organisation (FETO).

NEWSIN brief

Russia deploys forces to police Syria safe zones

AFP, Moscow

Russia has deployed military police to monitor two safe zones being established in Syria, the defence ministry in Moscow said yesterday. Senior commander Sergei Rudskoi said Russian forces had set up checkpoints and observation posts around a zone in the south-west and in another one covering Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus. The two areas are part of a broader Moscow-backed plan to create four "de-escalation zones" in rebel-held parts of Syria.

Sri Lanka dengue toll nears 300

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka announced yesterday it was intensifying its war on dengue fever, with schools to shut across the island to help curb the unprecedented outbreak of the mosquito-borne virus that has claimed nearly 300 lives. The Red Cross also announced it was scaling up its emergency response as the number of dengue cases topped 100,000.

Duterte says drugs war will go on

AFP, Manila

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte yesterday vowed to press on with his drug war that has claimed thousands of lives, as he urged lawmakers to endorse "eye-for-an-eye" death penalties. Duterte devoted large chunks of his annual State of the Nation Address to pushing his law-and-order policies that have made him hugely popular with many Filipinos but have been condemned by human rights groups and other critics.

Polish president Duda blocks judiciary reforms

AFP, Warsaw

Polish President Andrzej Duda yesterday vetoed controversial judicial reforms that had prompted huge street protests and threats of unprecedented EU sanctions.

The veto came as a surprise move from Duda, a close ally of the ruling rightwing Law and Justice (PiS) party that had pushed the reforms.

Duda said he had made his decision after extensive consultations with legal experts at the weekend, when thousands of people took to the streets across Poland urging him to veto proposals that have led critics to accuse the government of threatening the rule of law.

The reforms will now pass back to parliament to be amended and would need a three-fifths majority -- which the PiS does not have -- to go through.

"I have decided to send back to parliament -- therefore, to veto -- the law on the Supreme Court, as well as the law on the

National Council of the Judiciary," Duda said in a televised announcement.

"This law would not strengthen the sense of justice" in society, he said.

His veto was immediately welcomed by the opposition.

"It's without a doubt a step in the right direction," said Kamila Pihowicz-Gasiuk, a lawmaker from the liberal Nowoczesna party.

"It's proof that pressure from citizens can work."

The reforms would have increased political control over the judiciary, sparking an outcry amongst critics who said the PiS party was seeking to reduce the independence of the courts.

"It should not be part of our tradition that the attorney general can interfere in the work of the Supreme Court," Duda said.

The role of attorney general is held by the justice minister in Poland, and the change was among reforms that had sparked concern over the rule of law.

