

US should stop N Korea threats

Says China's ambassador to Washington

REUTERS, Washington

China's ambassador to Washington on Friday called on the United States to refrain from making threats over North Korea, which a day earlier launched another missile over Japan into the Pacific Ocean.

Ambassador Cui Tiankai told reporters at an embassy event: "Honestly, I think the United States should be doing ... much more than now, so that there's real effective international cooperation on this issue."

"They should refrain from issuing more threats. They should do more to find effective ways to resume dialogue and negotiation," he said.

President Donald Trump and others in the United States and beyond have urged China to increase diplomatic and economic pressure on its Communist ally to help resolve the standoff over North Korea's weapons programmes.

China fought alongside North Korea during the 1950-53 Korean War, in which Chinese leader Mao Zedong lost his eldest son, and Beijing has long been Pyongyang's chief ally and primary trade partner.

But the Chinese government has pushed back against the notion that it has any control over Pyongyang, and says it is the United States that should be doing more.

Trump tweeted earlier this month that the United States was considering halting trade with countries doing business with North Korea.

Cui on Friday cautioned against putting China-US trade on the table. "Efforts to undermine Sino-US trade, or even slapping sanctions on China, I think would be off-target," the Chinese state news agency Xinhua quoted Cui as saying on Friday at a Chinese National Day reception.



A small boy walks with his mother in front of French artist JR's image of an inquisitive baby looking into the United States over the US-Mexico border wall towards Tecate, California, US, on Friday. PHOTO: REUTERS

FIGHT OVER 'SANCTUARY CITIES'

US judge sides against Trump

REUTERS, Chicago

A federal judge on Friday barred the US Justice Department from denying public-safety grants to so-called sanctuary cities in retaliation for limiting cooperation with the Trump administration's crackdown on illegal immigration.

The preliminary injunction issued by US District Judge Harry Leinenweber was in response to a legal challenge brought by Chicago, the third-largest city in the United States, but the judge ruled that his order would be applied on a nationwide basis.

Chicago sued in August after US Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced he would cut off cities from certain Justice Department grants unless they allowed federal immigration authorities unlimited access to local jails and provided 48 hours' notice before releasing anyone wanted for immigration violations.

The lawsuit contended that Sessions exceeded his authority by imposing new conditions beyond those Congress prescribed when it established the grant program. In his injunction, Leinenweber found the city likely to prevail on the merits of its argument once the case is considered in its entirety.

President Donald Trump has made tougher immigration enforcement a centerpiece of his campaign and presidency, along with a pledge to build a wall on the US-Mexican border.

ODDLY Enough

IG NOBEL PRIZES

Scientists taking on the deep questions of whether cats are liquid or solid, how holding a crocodile influences gambling and whether playing the didgeridoo can help cure snoring were honored Thursday at the Ig Nobel Prize spoof awards. The prizes are the brainchild of Marc Abraham, editor of the Annals of Improbable Research, and are intended not to honor the best or worst in science, but rather to highlight research that encourages people to think in unusual ways.

SOCK HORROR!

It was seven inches long, two inches wide, pink, stripy and the English family who discovered it hiding under a bed thought it could be a dangerous lizard. But after the terrified family called an animal welfare charity to apprehend the "creature" at their home in Coventry, central England, it was revealed that it was something far less sinister - a dirty sock.

RABBIT PLAN

Venezuela's government this week urged citizens to see rabbits as more than "cute pets" as it defended a plan to breed and eat them even as the opposition says this would do nothing to end chronic food shortages. The "Rabbit Plan" is an effort by the government of President Nicolas Maduro to boost food availability. Authorities have also taught citizens to plant food on roofs and balconies.

MANHUNT FOR LONDON TRAIN BOMBERS

18-year-old arrested

REUTERS, London

British police arrested an 18-year-old man in the southern port of Dover yesterday in a "significant" development in the hunt for the people behind a London commuter train bombing that injured 30 people a day earlier.

Prime Minister Theresa May put Britain on the highest security level of "critical" late on Friday, meaning an attack may be imminent, and soldiers and armed police deployed to secure strategic sites and hunt down the perpetrators.

The home-made bomb shot flames through a packed commuter train during the Friday morning rush hour in west London but apparently failed to detonate fully.

"We have made a significant arrest in our investigation this morning," said Neil Basu, Senior National Co-ordinator for Counter Terrorism Policing.

"Although we are pleased with the progress made, this investigation continues and the threat level remains at critical."

The arrest was made in the port area of Dover, where passenger ferries sail to France. The blast on the London tube train at

the Parsons Green underground station was the fifth major terrorism attack in Britain this year and was claimed by Islamic State.

Britain deployed hundreds of soldiers at strategic sites such as nuclear power plants and ministry of defence sites yesterday to free up armed police to help in the hunt for those behind the bombing.

The last time Britain was put on "critical" alert was after a man killed 22 people at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester in May. Prior to that it had not been triggered since 2007.

The Islamic State militant group have claimed other attacks in Britain this year, including two in London and the pop concert in Manchester.

It was not immediately possible to verify the claim about Parsons Green, for which Islamic State's news agency Amaq offered no evidence.

Western intelligence officials have questioned similar claims in the past, saying that while Islamic State's jihadist ideology may have inspired some attackers, there is scant evidence that it has orchestrated attacks.

Call off independence vote

Urges US as Iraqi Kurd lawmakers approve referendum

AFP, Washington

Washington put to one side its longstanding sympathy for its allies in Iraqi Kurdistan on Friday and sternly urged the region to call off its independence referendum.

Earlier, Iraqi Kurdish lawmakers had voted to approve the September 25 vote that was set in motion by regional president Massud Barzani, a Washington ally who has publicly kept open the option of postponing it.

Washington has long supported Kurdish autonomy and has relied on the region's forces in the war against the Islamic State group.

US officials fear the vote, while not legally binding, will hurt Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's re-election chances; complicate ties with Turkey; and disrupt the war against IS.

"The United States has repeatedly emphasized to the leaders of the Kurdistan Regional Government that the referendum is distracting from efforts to defeat ISIS and stabilize the liberated areas," President Donald Trump's White House said, in a statement.

"Holding the referendum in disputed areas is particularly provocative and destabilizing," it warned. While Baghdad recognizes Kurdistan's autonomy, the precise boundary between the region and the rest of Iraq is unclear.

Washington has repeatedly offered to help negotiate a long-term settlement between Arbil and Baghdad, but regional leaders -- including Barzani -- have been increasingly frustrated that warm words have not led to a precise diplomatic timetable.

This week, top US envoy Brett McGurk was again in Arbil and attempted to persuade the Kurdish leader to call off the highly-charged popular vote in exchange for a new diplomatic initiative.

Under this plan, a well-placed source told AFP, the international community will oversee negotiations on revenue sharing in Iraq's oil budget and payment for Kurdish militia fighters.

Borders and military forces would remain in their current positions, and Baghdad would authorize Kurdistan to continue exporting the oil that it currently ships through Turkey in breach of the federal constitution. Finally, Kurdish parties would take part in the Iraqi government and the 2018 elections.

Analysts, however, told AFP that this would not be enough at this stage to convince Barzani to hold off on an independence vote in which he has invested much of his domestic political capital.



36 refugees shot dead in DR Congo

AFP, Bukavu

Soldiers shot dead 36 Burundian refugees in clashes in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, officials said yesterday, prompting shock, outrage and a demand for answers from the United Nations.

A Burundian refugee said that more than 30 had been killed and at least 100 wounded in the violence in Kamanyola, in the eastern province of South Kivu, on Friday.

Maman Sidikou, the head of MONUSCO, the UN's peacekeeping mission in the country, said in a statement Saturday that at least 36 refugees had been reported killed.

He also stressed that defence and security forces could resort to force "only as a last resort" and in accordance with international norms, and urged "the authorities to promptly open criminal investigations".

Interior ministry official Josue Boji said the clashes began after a group of refugees overran a jail run by the country's domestic intelligence agency to demand the release of four Burundians who had been arrested for expulsion on Wednesday night.

Boji, who had put the toll at 34 dead earlier -- including a Congolese soldier -- said troops tried to disperse the refugees by "firing in the air but were overwhelmed" when the group responded by throwing stones.

At least 124 refugees were also wounded.



Fighters from Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) walk together along a damaged street in Raqqa, Syria, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Ousted Pak PM faces key by-poll test today

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Ousted Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's PML-N party is facing its first major political challenge in a by-election widely seen to be a barometre for whether he has managed to maintain support in his political heartland following his dismissal from office.

Sharif's wife Kulsoom will be running for the seat vacated by the former prime minister after his disqualification by the Supreme Court in July over an omission in his parliamentary wealth declaration.

On Friday, the Supreme Court dismissed petitions seeking a review of its decision to disqualify Sharif, although a separate bench is still deliberating on whether the ban on holding public office is permanent.

The real Singapore story

PM praises nation's first female president

THE STRAITS TIMES ONLINE

Halimah Jacob's father died when she was eight, and she spent her school years juggling studies with work to help her family get by.

Even so, she became the first in her family to enter university, then devoted four decades of her life to public service, speaking up for the vulnerable.

On Friday, as she was sworn in as Singapore's eighth president, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted that her life story -- from "hardship and deprivation" to success and giving back to society -- reflects the Singapore story.

"Your life story symbolises the sort of society that we aspire to be, and reminds us that the Singapore story is one of hope and opportunity," he said during a speech at the Istana. "In Singapore, no matter where we begin in life, if we work hard, we will have ample chances to do well. And when we make good, we have a responsibility in turn to help others around us."

Madam Halimah, in her speech, attributed this to meritocracy.



Halimah Jacob

Her story is not an uncommon one in Singapore, she said, and similar stories have played out all over the island.

Recounting how her mother had brought her and her four siblings up single-handedly, Madam Halimah said they experienced poverty and hardship, struggling daily to survive.

"Fortunately, I was growing up in Singapore," she said.

Her experiences are also an affirmation of Singapore's multiculturalism, she said. The foundations of multiculturalism were laid in Singapore's early years and have helped to build a diverse yet cohesive community, she added.

She noted that Singapore's founding fathers, including President Yusof Ishak, understood that multiculturalism was not about ignoring or erasing differences between ethnic groups.

"Instead, they recognised our diversity and took steps to reassure every community that they were a unique and valued part of our society," she added.

She pledged to be a president for all Singaporeans, regardless of race, language or religion.

SYRIA WAR

Russian, regime strikes hit SDF for first time

AFP, Beirut

A US-backed force battling the Islamic State group in eastern Syria yesterday accused Russian warplanes of bombing its fighters for the first time in the complex war.

But Russia's military spokesman denied targeting the Syrian Democratic Forces, an alliance of Arab and Kurdish fighters supported by Washington.

The SDF and Russian-backed Syrian government forces are conducting parallel but separate offensives against IS in the strategic and oil-rich eastern province of Deir Ezzor.

Regime troops are waging an assault for the provincial capital, Deir Ezzor city, while SDF fighters battle the jihadists further east across the Euphrates River.

Pak army pushed political role for militant-linked groups

Report said ousted PM Nawaz Sharif opposed move

REUTERS, Lahore

A new Pakistani political party controlled by an Islamist with a \$10 million US bounty on his head is backing a candidate in a by-election today, in what a former senior army officer says is a key step in a military-proposed plan to mainstream militant groups.

The Milli Muslim League party loyal to Hafiz Saeed -- who the United States and India accuse of masterminding the 2008 Mumbai attacks that killed 166 people -- has little chance of seeing its favoured candidate win the seat vacated when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was removed from office by the Supreme Court in July.

But the foray into politics by Saeed's Islamist charity is following a blueprint that Sharif himself rejected when the military proposed it last year, retired Lieutenant General Amjad Shuaib told Reuters.

Three close Sharif confidants with knowledge of the discussions confirmed that Sharif had opposed the "mainstreaming" plan,

which senior military figures and some analysts see as a way of steering ultra-religious groups away from violent jihad.

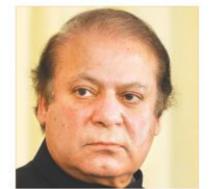
"We have to separate those elements who are peaceful from the elements who are picking up weapons," Shuaib said.

Pakistan's powerful military has long been accused of fostering militant groups as proxy fighters opposing neighbouring arch-enemy India, a charge the army denies.

Saeed's religious charity launched the Milli Muslim League party within two weeks after the court ousted Sharif over corruption allegations.

Another Islamist designated a terrorist by the United States, Fazlur Rehman Khalil, has told Reuters he too plans to soon form his own party to advocate strict Islamic law.

Saeed's charity and Khalil's Ansar ul-Umma organisation are both seen by the United States as fronts for militant groups the army has been accused of sponsoring. The military denies any policy of encouraging radical groups.



Nawaz Sharif

The by-poll is scheduled to take place today, and campaigning for it concluded late on Friday night.

The court also referred Sharif, three of his children and several aides to an anti-corruption court for trial on charges that he looted state wealth during his previous two terms as prime minister in the 1990s.

Analysts say Sunday's by-poll will be a key indicator as to whether Sharif's dismissal has led to an erosion of support. They expect Sharif to hold onto the constituency, but feels the poll is an important bellwether for upcoming national elections in mid-2018.