

Duterte to quit ICC over drug inquiry

AFP, Manila

President Rodrigo Duterte said yesterday he was pulling the Philippines out of the treaty underpinning the International Criminal Court, which is examining his deadly drug war.

The outspoken leader, who is accused of stoking the killing of drug suspects with inflammatory statements, has fiercely pushed back since the Philippines became the first southeast Asian nation put under "preliminary examination" by the court's prosecutors.

The ICC announced last month it was launching a study of the killings, which Philippine police put at 4,000 but rights groups say is actually triple that number.

Officially quitting the court requires a year's notice and experts say pulling out does not preclude an investigation of the deaths, which have drawn international concern.

"It is apparent that the ICC is being utilised as a political tool against the Philippines," Duterte said in



German Chancellor Angela Merkel receives flowers after being re-elected as chancellor during a session of the German lower house of parliament Bundestag in Berlin, Germany yesterday. For the veteran leader, the ceremony marked the end of a painful stretch of post-election paralysis, the deepest crisis of her 12-year career.

PHOTO: REUTERS

ROW OVER EX-RUSSIAN SPY POISONING

Britain to expel 23 Russian diplomats

REUTERS, London

Britain will expel 23 Russian diplomats in response to a nerve toxin attack on a Russian former double agent in southern England, Prime Minister Theresa May said yesterday, adding it was the biggest single expulsion in over 30 years.

May said Britain would also introduce new measures to strengthen defences against hostile state activities, freeze Russian state assets wherever there was evidence of a threat and downgrade its attendance at the soccer World Cup in Russia this summer.

Russia, which has repeatedly denied any involvement in the nerve agent attack, said Britain should expect retaliation for its actions.

Former spy Sergei Skripal, 66, and his daughter Yulia, 33, were found unconscious on a bench in the city of Salisbury on March 4 and remain in hospital in critical condition. A police officer was also harmed and remains in a serious condition.

May has said the Skripals were attacked with Novichok, a Soviet-era military-grade nerve agent. She had asked Moscow to explain whether it was responsible for the attack or had lost control of stocks of the highly dangerous substance.

"Their response demonstrated complete disdain for the gravity of these events," May said in a statement to parliament.

"They have treated the use of a military grade nerve agent in Europe with sarcasm, contempt and defiance," she said.

India-Pak trade charges on envoy harassment

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Pakistan's foreign office has accused India of harassing and intimidating its diplomats and their families posted in New Delhi, in the latest escalation of tensions between the South Asian neighbours.

In a statement released late on Tuesday, the foreign office said Pakistani officials and their families were facing "intense harassment, intimidation and outright violence from the Indian state agencies".

India said it would investigate the allegations. Indian diplomats posted in Islamabad, the Pakistani capital, alleged to Al Jazeera yesterday that they had been facing similar harassment for months.

Pakistan said at least three of its diplomats, and several of their children, had been harassed in recent days.

"This deliberate bullying is not confined to a single isolated event, but continues unabated in a series of incidents, especially targeting the children of our officers and staff," said the Pakistani statement, listing a series of alleged incidents.

On Tuesday, Pakistan alleges that vehicles carrying the children of Pakistani diplomats were stopped and threatened by unidentified men on their way back from school.

The men allegedly took photographs of the children and filmed their exchange with them. This followed similar incidents on March 7 and 8, the statement said.

India, however, said that its diplomats posted to Islamabad have been facing similar harassment.

Diplomats, their families from both nations complain of sustained intimidation by unidentified men

"Cases of harassment and intimidation are normal for Indian diplomats in Islamabad. We have noticed a surge in the last one year," said an Indian foreign ministry official, speaking on

condition of anonymity.

The official alleged that members of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) spy agency entered the Indian residential compound in Islamabad last month, "crossing a red line".

"Aggressive surveillance, violation of physical space and tailing of officers in close and dangerous proximity is a perennial issue," said the official.

Trump vs Tillerson

Key diplomatic issues on which the two had a different mindset

President Donald Trump on Tuesday fired US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, saying the two had a "different mindset" on key diplomatic issues and "we disagreed on things" including the international nuclear accord with Iran. Here are some issues on which Tillerson, former chief executive officer at Exxon Mobil Corp, differed with Trump.

IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL

Tillerson encouraged Trump to maintain the international nuclear deal with Iran reached during Democratic former President Barack Obama's administration. The 2015 deal gave Iran billions of dollars in sanctions relief in return for curbs on its nuclear program. Trump on Tuesday told reporters, "When you look at the Iran deal, I think it's terrible. I guess he thinks it was OK. I wanted to break it or do something, and he felt a little bit differently. So we were not thinking the same."

NORTH KOREA DIPLOMACY

Trump last year used bellicose rhetoric toward North Korea and threatened "fire and fury," ratcheting up tensions with the reclusive nuclear-armed country. At that time, Tillerson championed diplomacy, a path the president publicly derided. The confrontation centred on US concerns over North Korea's nuclear arms and missile programs. A day after Tillerson said "lines of communications" remained with Pyongyang, Trump mocked him.

RUSSIAN DOUBLE AGENT

After British Prime Minister Theresa May said on Monday it was "highly likely" that Moscow was responsible for the poisoning in England of Russian former double agent Sergei Skripal, White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders pointedly declined during a news briefing to blame Russia for the incident. Hours



later, Tillerson issued a statement saying the United States had "full confidence" in Britain's assessment about Russia's culpability. On Tuesday, Trump equivocated on Russia's role.

TENSIONS OVER QATAR

In June 2017, Tillerson called on Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt to ease their blockade against Qatar, a US ally that hosts an American military air base that those countries accused of backing Iran and Islamist extremists. Tillerson was undercut by Trump, who called Qatar "a funder of terrorism at a very high level."

PARIS CLIMATE ACCORD

Tillerson supported staying in the international accord reached in Paris in 2015, a deal in which Obama had played a key role. Trump in June 2017 announced he would take the United States out of the pact, following his nationalist "America First" instincts and siding with skeptics of climate change.

THE 'MORON' CONTROVERSY

A media report in October that Tillerson had openly criticized Trump and referred to him as a "moron" during a session with the president's national security team and Cabinet officials at the Pentagon further alienated Tillerson from Trump.

SOURCE: REUTERS

SYRIA'S WAR ENTERS ITS EIGHTH YEAR

From the bloody repression of peaceful protests against President Bashar al-Assad's regime to foreign intervention, below are key dates in Syria's civil war as it enters its eighth year. The complex conflict has left more than 350,000 people dead, according to the Syrian Britain-based Observatory for Human Rights, while millions have been displaced and the country lies in ruins.

REVOLT AND REPRESSION

On March 15, 2011, unprecedented protests demand civil liberties and the release of political prisoners after 40 years of repressive rule by the Assad family. Denouncing "an armed rebellion by Salafist groups", the regime represses demonstrations in Damascus and the southern city of Daraa but protests continue.

In July, defecting army colonel Riad al-Assad sets up the Turkey-based rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA). Islamist groups join the revolt.

AIR STRIKES, HEZBOLLAH, IRAN

In March 2012, regime forces take control of the rebel stronghold in third city Homs after a month of bombardment. Other bloody operations are carried out, notably in the central city of Hama, after massive anti-regime protests.

In July, FSA fighters launch a battle for Damascus but the government holds firm. From 2013, regime helicopters and planes unleash crude barrel bombs on rebel zones.

The same year, Iran-backed Lebanese Shia militant group Hezbollah says it is fighting alongside Syrian government forces.

CHEMICAL WEAPONS

In August 2013, Washington accuses the regime of killing more than 1,400

Nepal CJ sacked for faked date of birth

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's divisive Chief Justice Gopal Parajuli was sacked yesterday for faking his date of birth in order to remain in office longer.

The controversy over Parajuli's date of birth has been brewing for months after he charged a prominent activist and Nepal's largest newspaper with contempt of court for raising concerns about his multiple birthdays.

A judicial council concluded that Parajuli should have retired seven months ago when he turned 65, the age of retirement for official positions in Nepal.

"He has been removed from the post after the age of retirement was found to have been crossed last August in our investigation," the council's secretary Nripdhoj Niraula told AFP.

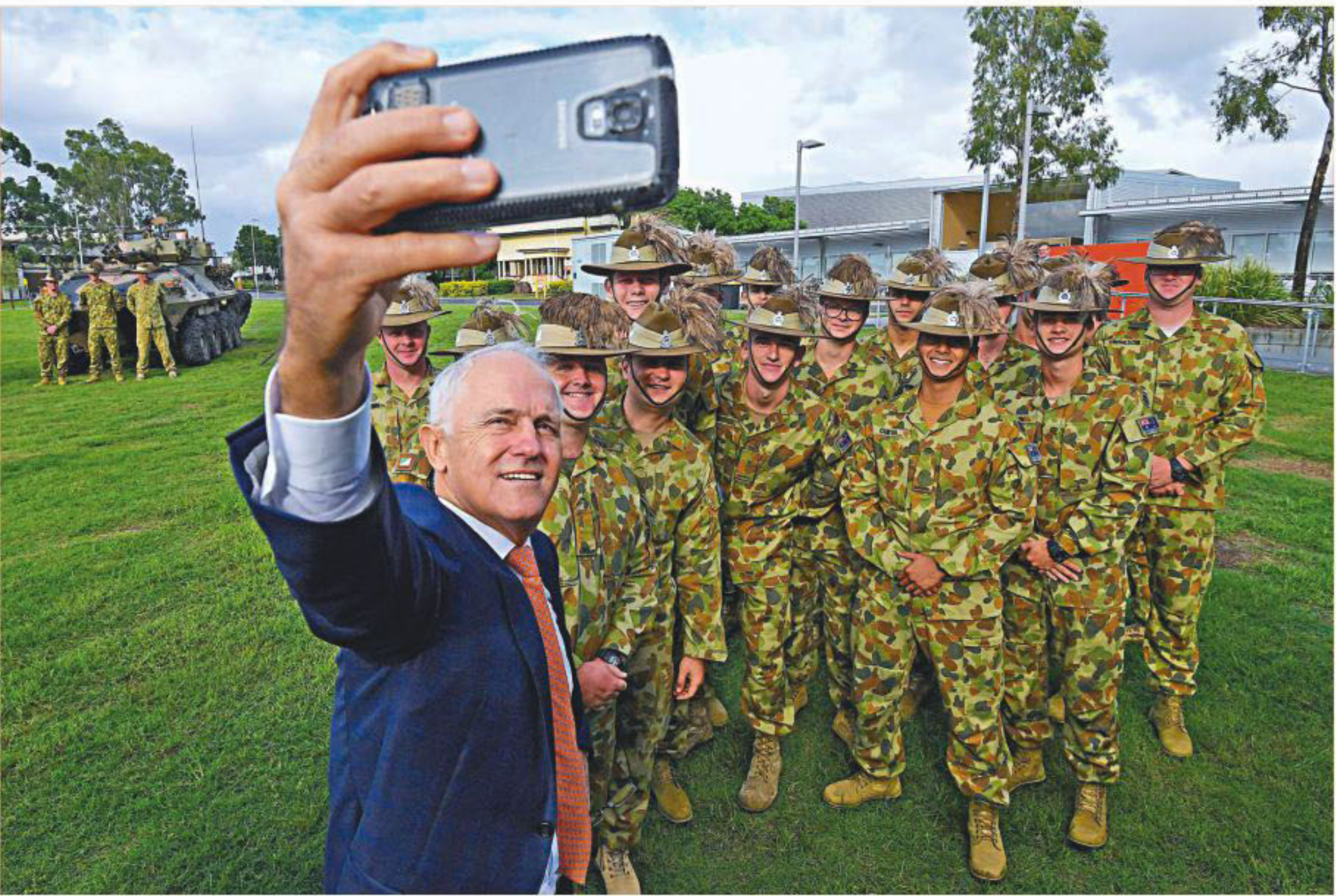
The decision came just moments before Parajuli administered the oath of office to Nepal's President Bidya Bhandari, who was reelected for a second term on Tuesday.

He administered the oath nonetheless. It is not clear if Bhandari will have to be sworn in again.

In late February Parajuli subpoenaed the Kantipur Daily -- Nepal's largest newspaper by circulation -- on contempt of court charges for a series of articles that said he had given up to five different dates of birth on various official documents.

The charges were widely condemned as an attack on press freedom, and Parajuli attracted further outrage when he said he would preside over the case himself.

In January, Parajuli also ordered the arrest of anti-corruption activist Dr Govinda KC, an orthopedic surgeon well-loved in Nepal for his philanthropic work, for raising questions about his date of birth.



Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull takes a selfie with a group of Australian Army soldiers after inspecting armoured vehicles at the Gallipoli Barracks in Brisbane, Australia, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Taliban step up attacks

More troops sent to west Afghanistan after militants kill seven security forces; top US general calls for peace talks

AFP, Farah

Afghanistan has deployed more troops to a restive western province where a multi-billion-dollar pipeline is planned after the Taliban launched multiple attacks against security forces, causing heavy casualties, officials said yesterday.

The latest assault in Farah, which borders Iran, happened in the early hours of yesterday when Taliban militants stormed a checkpoint manned by police and intelligence officers on the outskirts of the provincial capital of the same name, killing seven security forces.

It came as the Taliban face growing pressure to take up Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's offer of peace talks to end the 16-year insurgency, but so far the group has given only a muted response.

"When commando forces were deployed they (the militants) retreated,"

Jamila Amini, a member of the Farah provincial council, told AFP.

Four members of the National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan's spy agency, and three police were killed, she added.



The incident and death toll were confirmed by fellow provincial council member Gul Ahmad Faqiri.

"We have sent more troops and commando forces to Farah to contain the situation," defence ministry spokesman Dawlat Waziri told AFP,

adding the army chief of staff had also visited the province.

"The situation will soon come under control," he said.

Meanwhile, US General John Nicholson, who leads US and Nato forces in Afghanistan, said the Taliban have taken heavy casualties since US President Donald Trump authorised ramped-up air operations last year, pointing to increasingly effective Afghan commando and regular Afghan army units.

"In the Taliban's mind, they see what is coming and these capabilities are only going to get greater," Nicholson told reporters accompanying Mattis on a visit to Bagram Airfield, America's largest air base in Afghanistan that is located north of Kabul.

"So this really is probably their best time to attempt a negotiation, because it's only going to get worse for them," he added.

'Never again!'

US students stage walkout against gun violence

AFP, Washington

Students across the United States walked out of classes yesterday in a nationwide call for action against gun violence following the shooting deaths last month at a Florida high school.

Hundreds of students from Washington area schools gathered outside the White House chanting "Never again!" and "Enough is enough!" and holding signs reading "Protect People Not Guns."

At 10:00 am, students in numerous cities held a moment of silence to honor the 14 students and three adult staff killed on Valentine's Day at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

The "National School Walkout" was intended to last for 17 minutes, one for each victim.

But it quickly became apparent that many students at schools on the East Coast decided not to go to classes at all and to demonstrate instead.

The nationwide protest is being held one month to the day after Nikolas Cruz, a troubled 19-year-old former student at Stoneman Douglas, unleashed a hail of gunfire on his former classmates.

The event to honor those slain at Stoneman Douglas is also an act of protest against the firearms violence plaguing the United States, which has more than 30,000 gun-related deaths annually.

Organizers come from the same group behind the Women's March, which saw millions of demonstrators take to the streets in cities across the country in January 2017 to protest Donald Trump's White House inauguration.

Trump had momentarily signaled support for increasing restrictions on guns, but now stands accused of bowing to the powerful US gun lobby.