

SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW

Beijing slams US warships' provocation

AFP, Beijing

China has voiced "strong dissatisfaction" after two US warships sailed by an island claimed by Beijing in the disputed South China Sea, adding to simmering tensions in the strategic waterway.

The foreign ministry issued a statement expressing "resolute opposition" to the US sail-by of the territory in the disputed Parcel Island chain on Sunday.

The US military conducts what it calls "freedom of navigation" voyages in the South China Sea to contest Beijing's assertion of territorial rights in the area, although the US has no claims of its own in the disputed region.

The US Navy's Higgins and Antietam warships, a destroyer and cruiser respectively, entered China's territorial waters without permission and were met by the Chinese Navy, which "conducted verification and identification of US ships according to law and warned them to leave," the ministry said.

The operation was conducted just over a week after Beijing flew nuclear-capable bombers to a disputed island in a bold powerplay to show its military might and boost its territorial claims in the area.

The move prompted immediate criticism from the US, which last week pulled its invitation to China to join maritime exercises in the Pacific because of Beijing's "continued militarisation" of the South China Sea.

Beijing has been building artificial islands to reinforce its claim over most of the resource-rich South China Sea despite protests from Southeast Asian countries.

Its neighbours, particularly some of those involved in maritime disputes over the waters, have expressed fears China could eventually restrict freedom of navigation and over-flight.



This picture taken yesterday shows an installation set up by a global civic organization Avaaz ahead of the EU council meeting in Brussels. 4500 shoes representing every life lost in the Israel-Palestine conflict since 2009 have been displayed ahead of the EU Foreign ministers meeting.

Mahathir axes high-speed rail link with S'pore

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad yesterday said he was scrapping a project to build a high-speed railway to Singapore, in an ominous sign for the neighbours' famously fractious relationship.

Mahathir, who won a surprise election victory this month against Najib Razak's long-ruling coalition, is seeking to repair the country's finances which he says deteriorated dramatically after the former government became embroiled in a huge financial scandal.

The leader said it was a "final decision" to scrap plans for the bullet-train line between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, which had been agreed on several years ago and was expected to cut travel times to 90 minutes from five hours by road today.

"It's not beneficial. It's going to cost us a huge sum of money, we'll make no money at all from this operation," the 92-year-old said.



Mahathir said he was not sure how long his decision would take to implement, adding: "Of course we have to talk to Singapore, we have an agreement with them."

Asked if Singapore had been informed of his decision, he said: "I don't know," Malaysia, he said, may have to pay as much as 500 million ringgit (\$125.7 million) in compensation.

Singapore's transport ministry did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The development will alarm the Singapore government, which is watching to see whether the return of Mahathir -- whose relationship with the city-state was famously prickly during his first stint as premier from 1981-2003 -- might cause ties to worsen.

US, N Korea gear up for talks

Trump sees 'brilliant potential' for North Korea as summit prep continues

AGENCIES

South Korea's President Moon Jae-in yesterday said there could be more impromptu talks and summits with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, as US officials prepare for a historic meeting between President Donald Trump and Kim.

Meanwhile, President Donald Trump, days after scrapping the summit, suggested that the talks' success could help the North realize its "brilliant potential."

"I truly believe North Korea has brilliant potential and will be a great economic and financial Nation one day," Trump said on Twitter.

US, N Korean officials to meet in Korea, Singapore

S Korea's Moon says more informal meetings can boost relations

Analysts welcome working-level talks as positive sign

"Kim Jong Un agrees with me on this. It will happen!," the president said, confirming that a US team "has arrived in North Korea to make arrangements for the summit".

Moon and Kim Jong Un held a surprise meeting on Saturday at the border village of Panmunjom, during which they agreed that a North Korea-US summit must be held.

"What's more important than anything from the latest inter-Korean summit was that the leaders easily got in contact, easily made an appointment and easily met to discuss urgent matters, without complicated procedures and formalities, just like a casual meeting," Moon told a meeting with senior secretaries.

Trump last week pulled out of the meeting with Kim, planned for June 12 in Singapore, before announcing he had reconsidered and American and North Korean officials were meeting to work out details.

On Sunday, the US State Department said US and North Korean officials had met at Panmunjom, a village in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that runs along the heavily armed border between North and South Korea.



A "pre-advance" team of US officials was also travelling to Singapore to meet with North Koreans there, the White House said.

A US official told Reuters that Sung Kim, the former US ambassador to South Korea, was leading the

American delegation to meet North Korean officials at the border.

"It's a good thing to have him onboard," said a former senior South Korean official who worked with Sung Kim in past. "He's capable, level-headed, cautious, and has solid grasp of the issues and knows

North Koreans well. But at the same time he has healthy scepticism."

Pentagon official Randall Schriver was also part of the US team, the US official said. The Washington Post first reported the team met with Choe Son Hui, the North Korean vice foreign minister.

EU proposes ban on straws, other single-use plastics

AFP, Brussels

The European Union yesterday proposed a bloc-wide ban on single-use plastics such as straws, cutlery and cotton buds while urging the collection of most plastic drinks bottles by 2025.

The set of proposals are part of a growing EU drive to rid the environment of plastic waste which has begun showing up in the food chain.

"Plastic waste is undeniably a big issue and Europeans need to act together to tackle this problem," EU First Vice President Frans Timmermans said.

"Today's proposals will reduce single-use plastics on our supermarket shelves through a range of measures," Timmermans added.

The proposals call for banning plastic cotton buds, cutlery, plates, straws, drink stirrers and balloon sticks, but it did not set a deadline.

These items must all be made from sustainable materials instead, according to the plan which must be approved by

the 28 EU member countries and the European Parliament.

Member states must reduce the use of plastic food containers and drinks cups, by promoting alternatives for sale or ensuring they are not offered free.

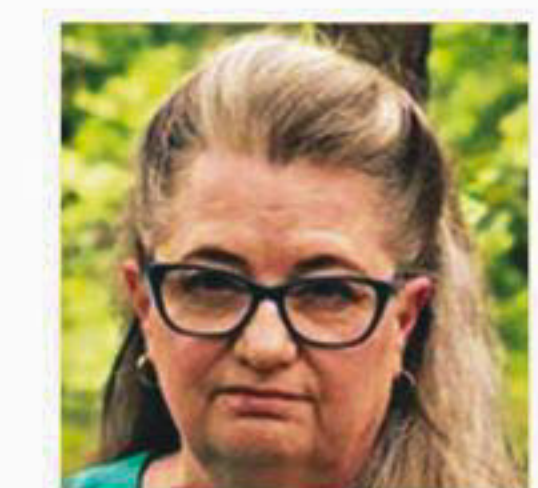
Under the plan, producers must contribute to the costs of waste management and will be offered incentives to develop less polluting alternatives.

For example, it calls for producers of plastic fishing gear to cover the cost of waste collection from port reception facilities.

Under the plan, member countries must collect 90 percent of single-use plastic drinks bottles by 2025, through deposit refund schemes, for example.

The plan calls for producers to clearly label products and inform consumers how the waste should be disposed of.

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, said businesses will benefit from one set of rules for an EU market of around 500 million people.



I'd give it a 'D'

Teacher corrects mistakes of Trump letter and sends it back

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A retired secondary school English teacher has corrected a letter she received from US president Donald Trump and sent it back to the White House.

Yvonne Mason, who lives in Atlanta and was a teacher for 17 years, said the letter would have barely passed and corrected its numerous grammatical errors.

This included 11 examples of incorrect capitalisation of words such as "president" and "state".

"If it had been written in middle school, I'd give it a C or C-plus. If it had been written in high school, I'd give it a D," said Mason.

She chose not to attach a grade to the corrected letter, which included Trump's signature, and posted back to the White House.

Mason argued the note -- which was a reply to a note she had written about the Valentine's Day school shooting in Florida which left 17 dead -- was "stylistically appalling".

She acknowledged the letter was likely to have been penned by a staff member rather than the president himself.

In her original letter, she urged Trump to individually meet with the families who lost loved ones at the Stoneman Douglas High School massacre.

Mason said the White House response did not address her request specifically.



Anti-bullfighting protesters throw red flair representing bull's blood during a demonstration as a part of the campaign "Bullfighting is Violence" in Madrid on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Italy on path to fresh polls

President appoints ex-IMF official as interim PM after stalemate

REUTERS, Rome

Italy's president set the country on a path back to fresh elections yesterday, appointing a former International Monetary Fund official as interim prime minister with the task of planning for snap polls and passing the next budget.

The decision to appoint Carlo Cottarelli to form a stopgap administration sets the stage for elections that are likely to be fought over Italy's role in the European Union and the euro zone, a prospect that is rattling global financial markets.

The euro zone's third-largest economy has been seeking a new government since inconclusive March elections, with anti-establishment forces abandoning their efforts to form a ruling coalition at the weekend after a standoff with the president.

President Sergio Mattarella vetoed

the parties' choice of a eurosceptic as economy minister, prompting the 5-Star Movement and far-right League party to accuse him of betraying voters and to drop their plan to take power.

Cottarelli told reporters after his appointment that elections would be



held in the autumn or early next year. He also tried to reassure investors on the Italian economy.

The prospect of fresh elections raised fears among investors that the vote could become a de facto referendum on Italy's euro membership. The

euro hit a fresh six-month low and yields on Italian debt climbed, increasing the extra borrowing costs or spread that Italy pays in comparison with Germany.

Already Italian politicians are back in campaign mode.

A 5-Star source said it was considering an election alliance with the League. In March, 5-Star ran its own campaign while the League campaigned as part of a right-wing coalition, including with the party of former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi.

"This is not a democracy, this doesn't respect the popular vote," League chief Matteo Salvini said in a statement after Cottarelli accepted his appointment by the president.

Salvini characterised the move as the political establishment lashing out in its death throes, intent on keeping Italy enslaved and afraid of the reaction of financial markets.

Germany's Merkel laments fraying of multilateral order

REUTERS, Berlin

Germany is worried by signs of weakening in the network of multilateral organisations and agreements designed to foster international cooperation, Chancellor Angela Merkel said yesterday.

Merkel blamed the fraying of the multilateral order on a "double transition" - the gradual fading of the direct memory of searing global conflict and the sheer pace and scale of technological change.

"The people who experienced World War Two, the last true global catastrophe, are dying out and are no longer there as eyewitnesses," she told a conference in Berlin.

"They learned from that terrible experience not to embed enmity but that you had to try and build friendships with each other," said Merkel, Europe's longest serving leader.

At the same time, emerging digital technologies are transforming the global economy in a way comparable only to the inven-

tion of the printed book centuries ago, creating disruption that no individual state could hope to manage on its own.

"International agreements and institutions are being weakened. This is worrying, since our multilateral global order comes from the lessons we learned from the terrible world wars of the last century," she said.

The same went for global trade, where she warned against protectionist instincts that might endanger open markets.

Regretting the failure to seal a deal on the trans-Atlantic TTIP trade partnership, Merkel stressed Europe's continued willingness to discuss the trade relationship with the United States, but warned against a confrontational approach.

"We are happy to negotiate, but it mustn't be under a sword of Damocles," she said, in an apparent reference to US President Donald Trump's more belligerent stance on world trade.

