

Released tanker poised to set sail

Says Iran after Gibraltar's Supreme Court ruling

AFP, Tehran

An Iranian tanker seized by Gibraltar last month is preparing to set sail after being released, a senior Iranian shipping official said yesterday.

The ship's seizure on July 4, with the help of British Royal Marines, triggered a sharp deterioration in relations between Tehran and London and the tit-for-tat detention by Iran of the British-flagged tanker Stena Impero.

The Grace 1 will be renamed and switch to the Iranian flag for its onward journey, the deputy head of Iran's Ports and Maritime Organisation, Jalil Eslami, told state television.

"At the owner's request, the Grace 1 will depart for the Mediterranean after being reflagged under the Islamic Republic of Iran's flag and renamed as Adrian Darya for the voyage," Eslami said.

"The ship was of Russian origin and Panama-flagged and is carrying two million barrels of Iranian oil," he added.

Gibraltar's Supreme Court ordered the tanker released on Thursday after the British overseas territory said it had received assurances from Iran that the Grace 1 would not head to any country subject to European Union sanctions.

The vessel had been detained on suspicion that its cargo was destined for the Banyas oil refinery in Syria in breach of an EU embargo.

But Iran denied it had provided any assurances to secure the ship's release, saying Gibraltar was only seeking to "save face".



French urban climber Alain Robert, popularly known as the "French Spiderman", secures a peace banner, showing shaking hands below a depiction of the Chinese and Hong Kong flags, during his ascent of the Cheung Kong Center building in Hong Kong yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Man executed by electric chair in US

AFP, Washington

A man put to death in the US state of Tennessee on Thursday for murdering a woman and her daughter chose to be electrocuted rather than executed by lethal injection, prison officials said. Stephen West, who was convicted in the two killings more than 30 years ago, waited until Wednesday to choose his method of execution -- one day after Tennessee's Republican Governor Bill Lee refused his request for clemency.

Australian tourist shot dead in NZ

REUTERS, Wellington

New Zealand police launched a manhunt for an armed suspect yesterday after an Australian tourist was found shot dead in a camper van in a coastal town on the North Island. A Canadian woman who had been traveling with the victim, a 33-year-old man, escaped from the van after the attacker drove off in it, police said. The attack on the two tourists occurred at around 3:20 am in Raglan, a coastal town in the Waikato region.

17 missing in SW China landslide

AFP, Beijing

More than a dozen workers remained missing yesterday after a landslide in southwest China buried a section of railway that was under repair, according to state media. The 17 missing people were carrying out maintenance work on the track Wednesday when the hill above them gave way, China Daily reported. The landslide in Ganluo county in Sichuan province happened very quickly, a witness told the newspaper.

N Korea fires missiles

Derides South Korea's Moon as 'impudent', rejects inter-Korean peace talks after US war drills

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea launched at least two short-range ballistic missiles yesterday, South Korea's military said, shortly after Pyongyang described South Korea's president as "impudent" and vowed that inter-Korean talks are over.

The North has protested against joint US-South Korea military drills, largely computer-simulated, which kicked off last week, calling them a rehearsal for war. It has also fired several short-range missiles in recent weeks.

North Korea fired two more short-range projectiles into the sea off its east coast yesterday morning, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said in a statement.

Japan's defence ministry said it did not see any imminent security threat from the latest projectile launch.

A US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said initial information indicated at least one projectile was fired by North Korea and appeared to be similar to the short-range missiles fired in

previous weeks. Another official said the United States was consulting with South Korea and Japan.

An official at Seoul's defence ministry said the latest test involved ballistic technology and detailed analysis was under way with the United States with the possibility that the North fired the same type of missiles it used on August 10.

The South's Moon said in a Liberation Day address on Thursday it was only through his policy of Korean national peace that dialogue with the North was still possible.

"In spite of a series of worrying actions taken by North Korea recently, the momentum for dialogue remains unshaken," Moon said in a speech marking Korea's independence from Japan's 1910-45 colonial rule.

The North's spokesman described Moon as an "impudent guy" who is "overcome with fright".

He said Moon had no standing to talk about engagement with the North because of the ongoing military manoeuvres.



'Won't repeat' Tiananmen

Says Chinese state media as HK protesters face crucial weekend test after airport setback

AFP, Beijing

Chinese state media yesterday vowed there "won't be a repeat" of the Tiananmen Square crackdown if Beijing moves to quash Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests.

In a rare reference to the bloody incident -- which is usually taboo in mainland China -- the Global Times newspaper insisted the country had more sophisticated methods than those it employed 30 years ago to crush protests in the capital.

"The incident in Hong Kong won't be a repeat of the June 4th political incident in 1989," it wrote in an editorial.

"China is much stronger and more mature, and its ability to manage complex situations has been greatly enhanced."

Hong Kong has endured 10 weeks of civil unrest, which have morphed from opposition to a hated extradition bill into a wider, and sometimes violent, call for democratic rights.

An intensifying drumbeat of

propaganda and strident warnings have sparked fears that Beijing might look to intervene -- possibly militarily -- in the semi-autonomous city.

Images of flag-waving military personnel and armoured vehicles in the border city of Shenzhen this week added to those fears, with international commentators invoking



spectre of the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen crackdown.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement faces a major test this weekend as it tries to muster another huge crowd following criticism over a recent violent airport protest and as concerns mount over Beijing's next move.

Protests were sparked by opposition to a plan to allow extraditions to the mainland, but have since morphed into a wider call for democratic rights in the semi-autonomous city.

Millions of people have hit the streets while clashes have broken out between police and small groups of hardcore protesters for 10 consecutive weekends.

For most of that time, US President Donald Trump has taken a hands-off approach to the unrest but began speaking up this week, suggesting any potential trade deal with Beijing could be upended by a violent response from the mainland.

Speaking on Thursday, Trump urged his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping to meet protesters and solve the crisis "humanely".

Activists are now planning to hold a major rally on Sunday, which is being billed as a "rational, non-violent" protest designed to show the movement still maintains broad public support after suffering a setback earlier in the week.

NIGERIAN PIRATES

17 seamen kidnapped off Cameroon

AFP, Yaounde

Nine Chinese and eight Ukrainian seamen were abducted on Thursday when two merchant vessels came under attack in Cameroonian waters, sources said yesterday.

"Seventeen Chinese and Ukrainians were kidnapped... (of whom) nine (are) Chinese who were abducted on one of the ships," an official in the port of Douala told AFP.

A Cameroonian security official, likewise speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed the account.

The abduction was reported on Thursday by sources in the Cameroonian navy and the country's port service, but their number and nationality were not then known.

The navy source had said the kidnapers "are probably Nigerian pirates," adding that Cameroon's security forces had launched a search for them.

The Gulf of Guinea, whose coastline stretches in a huge arc from Liberia to Gabon, is notorious for piracy as well as oil theft, illegal fishing and human and drugs trafficking.

In Malaysia, Noel Choong, who heads the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), a watchdog agency, said the 17 seamen were seized from two ships that were attacked within hours of each other while they were anchored off Douala. Choong said one of the ships was a multipurpose German-owned ship that flew the flag of Antigua and Barbuda.

"Eight crew were kidnapped from the ship consisting of a total of 12 Asian and European sailors," he said. The other vessel was a Liberian-flagged bulk carrier managed in Greece with a Greek owner.



A policeman walks past a woman injured during clashes after police banned planned protests over austerity and rising living costs called by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party in Harare, Zimbabwe, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

President Widodo proposes to move capital to Borneo

AFP, Jakarta

Time is running out for Jakarta. One of the fastest-sinking cities on earth, environmental experts warn that one third of it could be submerged by 2050 if current rates continue.

Decades of uncontrolled and excessive depletion of groundwater reserves, rising sea-levels, and increasingly volatile weather patterns mean swathes of it have already started to disappear.

Existing environmental measures have had little impact, so authorities are taking drastic action: the nation will have a new capital.

Its location could be announced imminently, according to local reports.

President Joko Widodo suggested a new capital in Kalimantan, on the Indonesian side of the island shared with Malaysia and Brunei, in a speech to parliament, a day before the country's independence day holiday.

"I hereby request your permission to move our national capital to Kalimantan,"

said Widodo, who will be sworn in for a second term in October after winning an election in April.

Relocating the country's administrative and political heart may be an act of national preservation, but it effectively sounds the death-knell for Jakarta where many of the city's 10 million residents have little means of escape.

"When the floods came I used to tremble," food stall owner Rasdi told AFP.

"I nearly drowned back in 2007 -- all my belongings were swept away and I had to start over again," said from his home close to Jakarta's northern port, one of the worst affected by sinking

ground.

Built in an earthquake zone, on swamplands, near the confluence of 13 rivers, the city's foundations have been further stressed by unchecked development, heavy traffic, and poor urban planning.

Jakarta doesn't have a piped water system in its northern reaches, so local industry and millions of residents tap into its aquifers.



US lawmaker Tlaib scraps West Bank trip over Israeli demands

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian-American lawmaker Rashida Tlaib yesterday turned down Israel's offer to let her visit her grandmother in the occupied West Bank, owing to restrictions she termed oppressive.

It was the latest twist in a saga hinging on Israel's war against those who would boycott it over its treatment of the Palestinians.

On Thursday, Israel barred from entry the US Congress' first Muslim women lawmakers, Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, on the grounds that they support the boycott movement, and after President Donald Trump urged the Jewish state to block the two Democrats.

But it held out the carrot of allowing Tlaib to make a private visit to her elderly grandmother, if she agreed to abide by conditions including a pledge not to advocate boycotting Israel.

"This could be my last opportunity to see her. I will respect any restrictions and will not promote boycotts against Israel during my visit," she initially wrote.

Deri announced that she would be permitted a "humanitarian visit", but a few hours later Tlaib announced a change of heart.

"I have decided that visiting my grandmother under these oppressive conditions stands against everything I believe in -- fighting against racism, oppression & injustice," she wrote in a series of tweets.

"When I won, it gave the Palestinian people hope that someone will finally speak the truth about the inhumane conditions," added the 43-year-old freshman congresswoman, elected in January.

"I can't allow the State of Israel to take away that light by humiliating me & use my love for my city to bow down to their oppressive & racist policies," she said, referring to her grandmother.

Meanwhile, two Israelis were wounded yesterday in what the Israeli army called a "terrorist" car-ramming attack near a Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank, while the suspected assailant was shot dead.



Boost for UK PM Johnson

Trump touts 'fantastic' trade deal with post-Brexit Britain

AFP, Morristown

President Donald Trump on Thursday again signalled his desire for close trading ties with Britain once it leaves the European Union, saying a "fantastic" deal was in the works.

"I think we'll have a fantastic and big trade deal with the UK. We should do much more business than we're doing," Trump told reporters, repeating his personal support for fellow right-leaning Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who is leading the Brexit process.

Trump will meet the new British leader at the G7 in Biarritz, France, later this month, but they have already talked numerous times by phone, the White House says.

Trump said the most recent occasion was just Wednesday.

Once Britain leaves the European Union, a giant trading bloc, it will have to strike bilateral deals on free trade with separate countries. Pro-Brexit leaders are relying heavily on the traditionally close relationship

with the United States, and Trump has sought to raise expectations.

Critics of Brexit caution that Trump's aggressive trade negotiating posture has seen him take on China and allies such as Canada or the European Union alike, with hardball tactics including sweeping tariffs on imports, to force better conditions for



US products.

On Monday, Trump's hawkish foreign policy advisor John Bolton said in London that he wanted to see trade talks "move very quickly" after Brexit.

The White House is also hoping to bind London closer on foreign policy as it takes on other European

powerhouses, especially France and Germany, over Iran and other areas where trans-Atlantic alliances have frayed since Trump came to office.

In Britain, the political crisis centering Brexit took a new turn on Wednesday as opposition Labour Party has vowed to call a vote of no-confidence in Johnson's government as soon as it believes it can win it and seeks to form a temporary government under leader Jeremy Corbyn to delay Brexit.

Johnson has promised to take Britain out of the European Union by October 31, with or without a deal, setting the scene for a showdown in parliament where lawmakers are opposed to a divorce without a transition agreement.

In a letter to party leaders and other senior politicians, Corbyn said his "strictly time-limited temporary government" would delay Britain's departure from the EU beyond October 31 and hold a general election.