

S CHINA SEA ROW Ready to negotiate with China Says Malaysian PM

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said yesterday that Malaysia was prepared to negotiate the South China Sea dispute with Beijing to safeguard the country's energy exploration efforts.

China claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea — a strategic waterway through which trillions of dollars in trade pass annually — despite an international court ruling that Beijing's assertion has no legal basis.

The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei all have overlapping claims in the sea, while the United States sends naval vessels through it to assert freedom of navigation in international waters.

Anwar — who was on a visit to Beijing recently — said the "sensitive" issue was raised at a meeting with President Xi Jinping.

Malaysia axes mandatory death penalty

REUTERS, KUALA LUMPUR

Malaysia's parliament yesterday passed sweeping legal reforms to remove the mandatory death penalty, trim the number of offences punishable by death, and abolish natural life prison sentences, a move cautiously welcomed by rights groups.

Malaysia has had a moratorium on executions since 2018, when it first promised to abolish capital punishment entirely.

The government, however, faced political pressure from some parties and rowed back on the pledge a year later, saying it would retain the death penalty but allow courts to replace it with other punishments at their discretion.

Under the amendments passed, alternatives to the death penalty include whipping and imprisonment of between 30 to 40 years. The new jail term will replace all previous provisions that call for imprisonment for the duration of the offender's natural life.

Life imprisonment sentences, defined by Malaysian law as a fixed term of 30 years, will be retained.

Capital punishment will also be removed as an option for some serious crimes that do not cause death, such as discharging and trafficking of a firearm and kidnapping.



Activists of All India Fishermen Congress take part in a protest against the disqualification of India's Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi from the Indian parliament after his conviction in a defamation case, in New Delhi yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

DEFAMATION CASE

Rahul Gandhi gets bail

Gujarat court pauses his two-year jail sentence

STAR REPORT

India's Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi was granted bail yesterday in a 2019 defamation case and his two-year jail sentence was paused until a decision on his appeal challenging his conviction.

The Gujarat court of Additional Sessions Judge R P Mogera said it would hear Rahul's plea for suspension of conviction on April 13 after issuing a notice to complainant Purnesh

Modi, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lawmaker in Gujarat and former Gujarat cabinet minister.

The sessions court asked the Purnesh Modi and Gujarat government to file their replies by April 10, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

On March 22, Rahul, the 52-year-old scion of the Gandhi family, was convicted by a magistrate's court in Surat and sentenced to prison for two years last month for a speech in which he reportedly said "why all thieves have Modi as surname."

While convicting Rahul, the magistrate court had granted him bail for 30 days to appeal against the verdict. A day later, he was disqualified as a member of the Lok Sabha.

The application at the sessions court seeking suspension of

Rahul's conviction is important for him to get back his membership of Lok Sabha from where he was disqualified with effect from March 23, a day after his conviction.

As per a Supreme Court order of 2013, the disqualification of membership of a lawmaker is automatic from the date of his conviction and a punishment of two or more years of imprisonment.

Unless the conviction against Congress leader Rahul is suspended, he will remain disqualified in Lok

Sabha, two lawyers defending Rahul Gandhi in the defamation case told reporters in Surat.

Rahul's lawyers said the sessions court exempted Rahul to appear before it on the next date of hearing on April 13.

Earlier in the day, Rahul, the 52-year-old Congress leader, reached Surat via a scheduled commercial flight along with his sister and Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and a galaxy of senior party leaders like Chief Ministers of Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Himachal Pradesh.

The Congress said the presence of the party leaders in Surat is not a "show of strength", but a "symbol of support" for Gandhi.

"It's not a show of strength. He

is fighting for the country. They are going with him to support him in his fight," said Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge.

The party also alleged that "illegal arrests" were being made to prevent party leaders and workers from going to Surat, reports NDTV.

"There are continuous reports of illegal arrests by the BJP government in Gujarat to prevent Congress leaders and workers from going to Surat," party leader Jairam Ramesh tweeted in Hindi.

Two more defamation cases have been filed elsewhere against Gandhi for the same comment and he is due to appear in court in one of them in the eastern city of Patna on April 12, reports Reuters.

Gandhi is at the centre of opposition politics and the main target of Modi's BJP even though Gandhi's Congress party is a shadow of its former self and the BJP looks set to dominate the next general election.

Opposition politicians say his trial and his disqualification from parliament are the latest example of the government's strong-arm tactics, following various investigations and legal troubles faced recently by some opposition members.

BJP leaders reject that and say Gandhi's case represents the Congress party's arrogance and its readiness to hurt sections of society to settle political scores with the prime minister.

Gandhi's Wayanad seat in Kerala is now vacant following his removal from the office.

Thai polls hopefuls register

AFP, Bangkok

Candidates yesterday began registering for Thailand's upcoming general election, in which Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha faces a tough fight against opposition parties vowing to rewrite the kingdom's army-scripted constitution.

Former army chief Prayut, who came to power in a coup in 2014, insisted the country needed an experienced leader as he accompanied prospective MPs from his United Thai Nation.

He faces a difficult challenge from a resurgent opposition fronted by Paetongtarn Shinawatra, daughter of billionaire former PM Thaksin Shinawatra.

Prayut, 69, arrived on an open-top truck with supporters and candidates in lively scenes at a Bangkok sports hall.

Thailand "needs people who know how to do the job. If they have never done it, they can't do it," Prayut told Thairath TV.

Thais go to the polls on May 14 for the first election since the kingdom was rocked by major protests in 2020. Prayut and his party are lagging in the polls behind Paetongtarn's Pheu Thai and the progressive Move Forward Party.

US MILITARY PACT

Philippines reveals sites of new bases

AFP, Manila

The Philippines yesterday announced the location of four additional military bases to be used by US troops, with one site near the hotly disputed South China Sea and another not far from Taiwan.

The longtime treaty allies agreed in February to expand cooperation in "strategic areas" of the Philippines as they seek to counter China's growing assertiveness over self-governed Taiwan and the building of Chinese bases in the South China Sea.

The 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, known as EDCA, gave US forces access to five Philippine bases.

It was expanded to nine, but the locations of the four additional bases were withheld until yesterday while the government consulted with local officials.

The four sites had been assessed by the Philippine military and deemed "suitable and mutually beneficial", the Presidential Communications Office said in a statement.

It said the bases would also be used for humanitarian and relief operations during disasters.

A US official confirmed that the locations announced by the palace were the new EDCA sites.

Three of the sites are in the northern Philippines, including a naval base and airport in Cagayan province and an army camp in the neighbouring province of Isabela, the Philippine statement said. The naval base at Cagayan's Santa Ana is about 400 kilometres (250 miles) from Taiwan. Another site will be an air base on Balabac Island, off the southern tip of Palawan Island, near the South China Sea. Cagayan governor opposed having EDCA sites in his province.

RIGHTS ABUSES

UN experts name S Sudan officials

AFP, Nairobi

A panel of UN rights experts yesterday named several high-ranking South Sudanese officials they say warrant criminal investigation and prosecution for their part in grave atrocities against civilians. Top government and military leaders were identified in a new report by the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan that details state responsibility for widespread murder, rape and sexual slavery. The commission, which conducted a year-long investigation across six states in South Sudan, and released a partial summary of its findings in March, said none of those named in the final report had faced any accountability for their crimes.

Arctic scientists race to preserve 'ice memory'

AFP, Paris

Arctic scientists are set to start drilling to save samples of ancient ice for analysis before the frozen layers melt away due to climate change, mission organisers said yesterday. Italian, French and Norwegian researchers have set up camp in Norway's Svalbard archipelago in what they called a race against time to preserve crucial ice records for analysing past environmental conditions. They will extract ice in a series of tubes from as far as 125 metres (137 yards) below the surface, containing frozen geochemical traces dating back

three centuries. Analysis of chemicals in deep "ice cores" provides scientists with valuable data about past environmental conditions. But experts warn water from melting ice is leaking down and altering geochemical records preserved in ancient ice beneath. Scientists "seeing their primary material disappear", said Jerome Chapellaz, president of Ice Memory foundation.

Man's 25-year ordeal

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except one on the day after my mother's death," said the man, now an employee at an appliance showroom in Madaripur.

Every time he came to Dhaka for a hearing, he had to spend Tk 2,000 to Tk 2,500 on fares, lawyer's fees and other expenses.

DEATH OF FELLOW WORKER

Oliar came to Dhaka in 1996 to seek his fortune as his family could barely make ends meet. Through a local acquaintance, he learned embroidery work in a factory at New Super Market.

A year later, he joined the embroidery section of a small shop named Rakib Garments, owned by trader Rana Bepari.

But within three months of his joining, he was arrested in the case filed over the death of his fellow worker Shahidul Islam Titu, who also worked in the same section.

On September 6, 1997, Titu was found hanging from a ceiling fan inside the tailoring section of Rakib Garments.

Before his death, Titu was fined Tk 7,000 for allegedly stealing some garment samples from his owner's shop in an arbitration held at the market, said Oliar.

During the arbitration, Titu's brother-in-law Mohammad Jamal beat up Titu and told the arbitrators to keep him in their custody until he returned and paid the fine.

After the arbitration, Oliar brought food for Titu. After having the food, Titu went to tailoring section to take rest, pulling down the shutters. No one was working in the section at that time.

Around 5:30pm on September 6, 1997, a boy from Titu's village named Ismail came to see Titu. As Ismail opened the shutters, he found Titu hanging from a ceiling fan.

Oliar and a man named Babu brought the body down and started rubbing Titu to revive him before they took him to Dhaka Medical College Hospital. Around 10:00pm, Oliar came to know that Titu had died.

On that very night, Mohammad Jamal filed a murder case with Dhanmondi Police Station, accusing the factory owner, Rana Bepari, his three trader friends — Mohammad Ali, Sultan Khan, and Shariful Islam Sharif — and Oliar.

Oliar was picked up by two to three plainclothes men the next day and taken to Dhanmondi Police Station where he found Sultan and Shariful in the lockup.

The three were produced before the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court of Dhaka on September 8 in the murder case.

Oliar was placed on five-day remand in two phases.

On March 31, 2002, AK Yakub Ali, then inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department, filed the charge sheet with the Chief

Metropolitan Magistrate's Court against the five.

In the charge sheet, the investigator brought murder charges against the accused.

However, the autopsy report prepared by Dhaka Medical College, said Titu died of asphyxia (a condition when body is deprived of oxygen) as a result of hanging which is suicidal in nature.

The investigator, who later retired as an assistant superintendent of police, didn't mention any accused's age in the charge sheet, although Oliar was a teenager at the time of his arrest.

In 2003, the Additional Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court-2 of Dhaka framed charges against the accused. The court recorded statements of two witnesses till October 25, 2015. It held a total of 46 hearings.

On January 5, 2016, the case was transferred to the Additional Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court-8 of Dhaka. Another five witnesses testified before this court till March 27 last year. The court held around 40 hearings.

The case was again transferred to the Speedy Trial Tribunal-3 on June 11 last year.

Asked why he chargesheeted a child showing him as an adult, IO Yakub yesterday said he won't comment on the issue as the court already delivered a verdict in the case.

Concern rising over fate of WB fund

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Amin Ullah Nuri said the project proposal is now with the Planning Commission and its approval is expected soon.

In reply to a query, he told The Daily Star last night, "There is no risk over getting the fund. The project will be approved within the timeline."

THE PROJECT

The World Bank, in its appraisal report prepared for financing a road safety project in Bangladesh in 2021, said different bodies exist in Bangladesh to ensure road safety, but they are not empowered and lack effective coordination to get expected outcomes.

These organisations are also not held accountable. Besides, the fund allocated for road safety action plans is insufficient, not prioritised, and has never been institutionalised, it said.

The multi-lateral financier carried out several studies before taking the final decision regarding the loan.

Meanwhile, in September 2021, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader at an event alleged that the WB was delaying its decision to finance Bangladesh's road safety project, despite repeatedly expressing interest.

The WB on August 28 last year approved \$358 million loan to help Bangladesh improve road safety, and reduce fatalities and injuries from road accidents in selected high-risk highways and district roads.

The project will have several

components and will be implemented by the RHD, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority, Directorate General of Health Services and Bangladesh Police.

It will pilot comprehensive road safety measures, including improved engineering designs, road signs and markings, pedestrian facilities, speed enforcement, and emergency care from Gazipur to Elenga and Natore-Nawabganj highways. These measures will help reduce road traffic deaths by more than 30 percent on these two highways, the WB hoped.

The project will also undertake road safety pilots in selected urban areas and district roads. It will improve post-crash care, which is critical in saving lives, and will also set up an ambulance service via a toll-free number and upgraded emergency care services in selected district hospitals, and upazila health complexes along the two national highway corridors.

DELAY IN PROJECT APPROVAL
Upon receiving the DPP, the Planning Commission in February 2022 asked project implementation agencies to recast it with the answer of more than 20 queries, said RHD sources.

In December last year, the DPP was re-submitted with an estimated cost of Tk 4,951.52 crore.

But the Planning Commission in March this year asked answers for 14 more queries. RHD submitted the DPP to the Road Transport and Highways Division again late last

month.

But the division raised some queries and the DPP was resent with all answers on Sunday, they said.

The project cost stood at Tk 4,988.14 crore now following an increase in US dollar rate. The WB is supposed to give Tk 3,759.82 crore in the project and the government is to provide Tk 1,228.32 crore, they added.

Involvement of three other agencies and the delay in getting necessary information to answer the queries are one of the major reasons for the delay, said a top RHD official.

Dry spell leads to wildfires across South Korea

AFP, Seoul

Firefighters were scrambling yesterday to contain wildfires across South Korea as a dry spell led to blazes in multiple regions, including on a mountain popular with hikers in central Seoul.

A fire broke out Sunday morning on Mount Inwang, a popular outdoor destination in Seoul's Jongno district, and spread rapidly due to strong winds, the city government said in a statement.

About 120 households were forced to evacuate, but no deaths or injuries were reported, it added.