

GROUNDING WARSHIP

China, Philippines' dispute heats up

AFP, Manila

President Ferdinand Marcos said yesterday he was “not aware” of any agreement with China to remove a Philippine Navy vessel grounded on a reef in the disputed South China Sea.

Marcos’ remarks were in response to Beijing’s insistence in recent days that Manila had “repeatedly” promised to tow away the crumbling BRP Sierra Madre from Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratly Islands.

The BRP Sierra Madre, which the Philippines deliberately grounded in 1999 in an effort to check China’s advance in the hotly contested waters, has long been a flashpoint between Manila and Beijing.

Tensions flared at the weekend when the Philippines accused Chinese Coast Guard vessels of blocking and firing water cannon at boats on a resupply mission to a handful of Filipino marines stationed on the World War II-vintage ship.

“I’m not aware of any agreement that the Philippines should remove from its own territory its own ship, the BRP Sierra Madre, from the Ayungin Shoal,” Marcos said in a video posted on the Presidential



Communications Office’s Facebook page, using the Philippine name for Second Thomas Shoal.

“And let me go further, if there does exist such an agreement, I rescind that agreement as of now,” he said.

The Chinese embassy in Manila did not respond to a request for comment about Marcos’s remarks.

The Philippine military and coast guard said six Chinese coast guard vessels and two Chinese “militia” boats were involved in Saturday’s incident.

One of the Philippine charter boats carrying supplies was prevented from reaching the shoal. Another charter boat unloaded its cargo successfully.

The Philippine marines deployed on the run-down vessel depend upon resupply missions to survive their remote posting.

Beijing has defended its actions as “professional” and accused Manila of “illegal delivery of construction materials” to the grounded ship.

“The Philippine side has repeatedly made clear promises to tow away the warship illegally ‘stranded’ on the reef,” a spokesperson for China’s foreign ministry said Tuesday.



Members of United Naga Council take part in a rally to demand a solution to the Indo-Naga political issue in the spirit of the Indo-Naga Framework Agreement in Senapati, in India’s northeastern Manipur state yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Lawmakers in India pass data protection law

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian lawmakers yesterday passed a data protection law that will dictate how tech companies process users’ data amid criticism that it will likely lead to increased surveillance by the government.

The law will allow companies to transfer some users’ data abroad while giving the government power to seek information from firms and issue directions to block content on the advice of a data protection board appointed by the federal government.

The Digital Personal Data Protection Bill, 2023 gives the government powers to exempt state agencies from the law and gives users the right to correct or erase their personal data.

The new legislation comes after India withdrew a 2019 privacy bill that had alarmed tech companies like Facebook and Google with its proposals for stringent restrictions on cross-border data flows.

The law proposes penalties of up to 2.5 billion rupees for violations and non-compliance.

However, it has drawn criticism from opposition lawmakers and rights groups over the scope of exemptions.

The Internet Freedom Foundation has said that the law does not contain any meaningful safeguards against “over-broad surveillance”, while the Editors Guild of India has said it affects press freedom and dilutes the Right to Information law.

Deputy minister for information technology Rajeev Chandrasekhar has said that the law will protect the rights of all citizens.

Ukrainian drones shot down near Moscow

Says Russia; EU country buys dozens of second-hand Leopard tanks from Belgian trader for Kyiv

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia said it had shot down two Ukrainian drones near Moscow yesterday, one near a major airport to the south of the city and one to the west of the capital.

“An attempt by the Kyiv regime to carry out a terrorist attack with unmanned aerial vehicles was prevented over the territory of the Moscow region,” the defence ministry said. “Two UAVs were destroyed by air defences.”

One was shot down near Domodedovo, where one of Russia’s biggest international airports is located, and another near the Minsk motorway, Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyanin said.



Drone air strikes deep inside Russia have increased since a drone was destroyed over the Kremlin in early May. Civilian areas of the capital were hit later in May and a Moscow business district was targeted twice in three days earlier this month.

In recent days, Ukrainian remotely piloted boats, also referred to as drones, have attacked a Russian fuel tanker and a navy base at Russia’s Novorossiysk port on the Black Sea.

In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Tuesday that the revival of a deal with Russia to allow Ukrainian grain exports, brokered by Ankara and the UN, “depends on Western countries which

must keep their promises”.

“I think a solution can be found,” Erdogan added, referring to a recent telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who refused to extend the accord.

Meanwhile, dozens of second-hand Leopard 1 tanks that once belonged to Belgium have been bought by another European country for Ukrainian forces fighting Russia’s invasion, the arms trader who did the deal said Tuesday.

The German-made Leopards were at the centre of a public spat earlier this year after Belgian Defence Minister Ludivine Dedonder said the government had explored buying back tanks to send to Ukraine but had been quoted unreasonable prices.

The clash highlighted a predicament faced by Western governments trying find weapons for Ukraine after more than a year of intense warfare – arms they discarded as obsolete are now in high demand, and often owned by private companies.

Freddy Versluys, CEO of defence company OIP Land Systems, bought the tanks from the Belgian government more than five years ago.

He told Reuters he had now sold all 50 tanks to another European government, which he could not name due to a confidentiality clause. He said he also could not disclose the price.

In Russia, a blast rocked an optical-mechanical factory in the town of Sergiev Posad, 50 km (30 miles) northeast of Moscow, yesterday, injuring at least 52 people, TASS cited emergency services as saying.

It said the blast appeared to have occurred in a warehouse containing pyrotechnic equipment. The popular online news channel Mash said the warehouse had been rented by a pyrotechnics firm.

Unverified footage on social media showed a huge column of smoke, and high-rise buildings with windows blown out. The facility was being evacuated, TASS said.

In Donetsk, a child was killed and two people were injured when a Ukrainian artillery shell hit a two-storey building, the Russian-appointed head of the region, Denis Pushilin, said yesterday on his Telegram channel.

The Donetsk region in eastern Ukraine had been partly under the control of pro-Russian separatists since 2014 until Moscow announced last year that it was annexing the province.

Russia, which early last year launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine that it calls a “special military operation”, says Ukrainian forces shell the Russian-controlled parts of the Donetsk region on a daily basis.

Separately, the Interfax news agency cited Russian-appointed officials in Ukraine’s southerly Zaporizhzhia region as saying four civilians had been killed and two wounded by Ukrainian shelling in the village of Trudove, about 15 km (9 miles) east of the town of Tokmak.

AMAZON RAINFOREST

8 nations launch alliance to fight deforestation

AFP, Belém

Eight South American countries agreed Tuesday to launch an alliance to fight deforestation in the Amazon, vowing at a summit in Brazil to stop the world’s biggest rainforest from reaching “a point of no return.” The closely watched summit of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) adopted what host country Brazil called a “new and ambitious shared agenda” to save the rainforest, a crucial buffer against climate change that experts warn is being pushed to the brink of collapse. The group’s members – Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela – signed a joint declaration in Belém, at the mouth of the Amazon River, laying out a nearly 10,000-word roadmap to promote sustainable development and end deforestation.

NIGER CRISIS

Ex-rebel leader launches anti-coup movement

REUTERS, Niamey

A former rebel leader and politician in Niger has launched a movement opposing the junta that took power in a July 26 coup, a first sign of internal resistance to army rule in the Sahel country. Rhissa Ag Boula said in a statement seen yesterday that his new Council of Resistance for the Republic (CRR) aimed to reinstate ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, who has been in detention at his residence since the takeover. “Niger is the victim of a tragedy orchestrated by people charged with protecting it,” the statement said. The launch comes as diplomatic efforts to reverse the coup appeared stalled.

S Alam Group’s rejoinder, our reply

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publication is to defame the government and unfairly undermine the contribution of key players in the country’s economy. Thereby creating a national crisis and destabilising the financial, essential commodity, power and food sector of the country.

It is also on record that on 6 December 2022 the Daily Star published an article under the heading: “Probe S Alam Group Assets”. This article made a false reference of the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) referring to the principal secretary and the DC Chattogram. As a result of a protest by the PMO, there was a retraction made by the Daily Star on 7 December. It is obvious that the Daily Star wanted to create a fake story by making false allegations, propaganda, misquoting Government authorities and the PMO. When challenged, the Daily Star could do nothing other than make the retraction and publish the correction.

The allegation on Mr. Alam begins with the statements that there is no record of Mr. Alam taking any permission from Bangladesh Bank leading the readers to an inference that Mr. Alam must have unlawfully transferred money from Bangladesh to other countries.

It then continues by questioning the source of funds required to obtain citizenship in Cyprus. The Daily Star with the malicious intention

seeks its readers to conclude that Mr. and Mrs. Alam must have transferred money from Bangladesh to obtain such citizenship. It is highly presumptuous of the journalist to make an assumption that Mr. and Mrs. Alam did not have any access to funds abroad or that they had to resort to illegal means for obtaining citizenship.

There are many ways high net worth individuals are given nationality by other countries without having to transfer funds from a territory with exchange control regulations.

Regarding the assets in other jurisdictions, the Article itself acknowledges the fact that loans were taken for these purchases as they are reflected in the reports submitted to the relevant authorities.

A person is entitled to carry on business in any way chooses according to law and to protect his intellectual proprietary right relating to the businesses. Business laws vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction with various restrictions on business. Tax laws can be quite harsh, and businesses choose countries with low or no taxation to do business there. It is common knowledge that most of the major companies of the world choose jurisdictions to carry on their businesses to maximise returns. There is nothing unlawful in Mr. Alam choosing to run his companies in the way that best suits his commercial objectives.

The Daily Star wrote letters on 6 and 23 July addressed to Mr. Alam. These were responded on behalf of Mr. Alam by Mr. Ajmalul Hossain KC, Senior Advocate on 13 and 27 July. The Article cursorily states that he declined to comment but ignores the points made on behalf of Mr. Alam, namely:

1. The Daily Star had no right to seek this private information.
2. Mr. Alam has the fundamental right to have protection of the law against defamation and maintain privacy of his personal affairs including his business.
3. The freedom of press is not unrestricted but is expressly limited by the laws of defamation.

Mr. Alam’s decision not to comment on inquiries from the Daily Star, without having access to the complete reports or, at the very least, the findings and allegations made against him, was based on his rights. Striking a delicate balance between the entirety of accessible evidence while taking care to handle confidential information, including proprietary trade strategies, is of paramount importance.

In view of the above, it appears that the Article was crafted intentionally relying on subjective interpretations, statements from sources of questionable legitimacy, with unverified and facts not based on evidence which are acceptable. Mr. S Alam vehemently objects to the

dissemination of the Article in the Daily Star.

It cannot be disputed that allegations are deliberately made and innuendos of serious criminal acts on the part of Mr. Alam are made in the Article. It gives a totally false picture of Mr. Alam and his wife and adversely affects their reputation. The Daily Star ignored the constitutional rights of Mr. Alam and have intentionally defamed him.

Accordingly, he is entitled to an apology and a correction of the facts and a retraction of the allegations and innuendos in the Article identified above. All the rights of Mr. S Alam and his wife and his companies are expressly reserved.”

Our reply

S Alam Group’s two-page rejoinder does not address or counter-proves a single point that we have raised in our report, detailing his offshore business operations in three continents, with hard evidence presented in the newspaper and in hyperlinks in the online version. Although the rejoinder claims that our report “contains untrue facts and statements,” it does not challenge any specific fact(s) that we gathered through painstaking investigation over the past six months. Furthermore, our report does not “rely on unnamed sources” as the rejoinder falsely claims; it rather relies on documentary evidence obtained from government authorities in

Bangladesh, Singapore, Cyprus and British Virgin Islands.

It is true that we did not name the three highly-placed officials of Bangladesh Bank who confirmed our findings that S Alam did not take permission from BB to invest abroad. It is a journalistic practice worldwide to protect sources so as not to put them in harm’s way. Then again, we did not rely solely on their verbal confirmations, we have the authenticated Bangladesh Bank document and we have published that document in our online version of the report.

The rejoinder also raised some extraneous issues that were not mentioned in our report. For example, it states how Alam and his Group is “unwavering in their commitment to upholding the highest standards of legality and regulatory compliance” in their business undertakings. The rejoinder also terms S Alam “a valuable national asset” who “ranks among the highest contributor to the country’s tax revenue.” None of these statements is related to our story, and more importantly nowhere in our report did we discuss his other businesses or his contribution to the country’s economy.

The rejoinder makes a deliberate attempt to politicise the issue by saying that our report was meant to embarrass the government. It is not clear to us as to why should that

happen as S Alam does not hold any position in the government or the ruling party, and our report did not link him with the government or Awami League, even remotely. In our opinion, it is he who has embarrassed the government by mentioning that in the rejoinder.

In the rejoinder, S Alam Group mentioned an unrelated incident from 2022 that has nothing to do with our story. Clearly, it is an attempt to confuse the readers and link himself with the powers that be. The 2022 story was based on multiple sources at different levels both in Dhaka and Chattogram. Still, after receiving a rejoinder from the Prime Minister’s Office, we stood corrected in relation to only a portion of that story. Bringing that episode anew is likely intended to create confusion.

When a rejoinder does not address the points published in a report, the journalistic practice is not to publish the rejoinder. In this case, however, we are publishing it in full to put S Alam’s version on record for the readers, given he did not comment on our findings before publication of our story, although we contacted him in writing twice during the course of our investigation.

We repeat that none of the facts mentioned in our report was contradicted in the above rejoinder.

Thus, we stand by our report.