

US WARNS KYRGYZSTAN THAT STRAINED TIES THREATEN AID

BISHKEK: The United States warned Kyrgyzstan yesterday that escalating tension in their relations could threaten a wide range of US-funded aid programmes in the Central Asian nation.

Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Ministry on Friday handed a protest note to US Charge d'Affaires Richard Miles over the granting of a human rights award to a dissident serving a life sentence for "inciting inter-ethnic hatred" in the ex-Soviet republic.

The Kyrgyz government said the 2014

Human Rights Defender Award conferred by the US Department of State on Azimjon Askarov, a journalist and activist, was "creating a threat to civil peace and stability in society".

The Kyrgyz government also said it might renounce the 1993 Bilateral Agreement between the two nations.

"We are studying the technical impact of such a decision, which could put assistance programs that benefit the Kyrgyzstani people in jeopardy," the US government said in a statement published

by the US embassy in Bishkek.

The worsening of relations with the US is taking place as the impoverished and mainly Muslim nation of 5.5 million is being drawn deeper into the orbit of its former imperial master, Russia.

Kyrgyzstan has just joined the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union, which critics see as Russia's attempt to restore as much as possible of the former Soviet Union. Russia already has a military airbase near the Kyrgyz capital and has undertaken several large-scale

economic projects with the country. Hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz migrants work in Russia.

Kyrgyzstan, which borders China and lies on a drug-trafficking route out of Afghanistan, saw two presidents deposed by popular revolts in 2005 and 2010, and remains unstable.

Askarov, an ethnic Uzbek, was convicted of "organizing mass disturbances" and stirring up ethnic hatred leading to the killing of a policeman during inter-ethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan in

June 2010 when over 400 people were killed.

International and local human rights bodies have demanded his release from jail. Askarov alleged the police had tortured him, New York-based Human Rights Watch said. Visiting Kyrgyzstan last month, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged the authorities to hold an impartial investigation into the ethnic clashes and retry those convicted after the bloodshed, irrespective of their ethnicity. — Reuters

MANILA TO BASE JETS, FRIGATES NEAR CHINA-CLAIMED WATERS

MANILA: The Philippines plans to station fighter jets and frigates on a former US naval base facing the South China Sea, where it is engaged in a maritime row with China, a defence official said yesterday.

They will be located in Subic Bay, some 200 kilometres (125 miles) from a shoal off the northern Philippines controlled by Chinese forces, said Arsenio Andolong, the defence department's public affairs chief.

The Armed Forces of the Philippines "will use portions of Subic for the new assets coming in like the FA-50 (jets) and the new vessels that are arriving," Andolong told AFP.

"They (the Subic facilities) are ideal: it has a deep-water port, the runways are perfect for the FA-50," he added.

Manila said last week it would reopen Subic Bay—one of the US's largest overseas bases until it was shut down more than two decades ago—and station Filipino military assets there for the first time.

Andolong said the military has leased part of Subic Bay for 15 years and plans to use it as a base for new equipment that will be bought over the next few years as part of a modernisation programme.

The first pair of a dozen FA-50 fighter jets are scheduled to be delivered this year and the other 10 will arrive within two years, he added. The military is still evaluat-

ing from where to acquire two new frigates.

Subic Bay currently serves as a commercial port and tourist site facing onto the South China Sea where China is locked in a dispute with the Philippines as well as Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam and Taiwan over conflicting territorial claims.

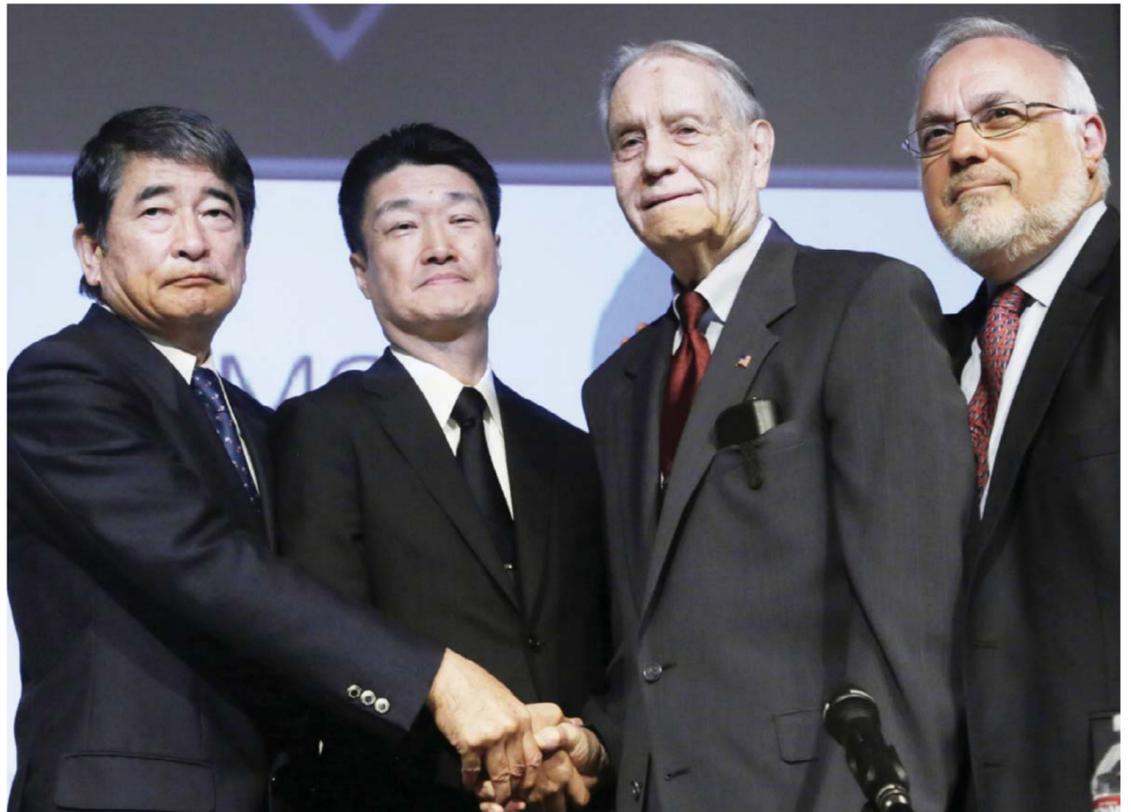
Andolong said the South China Sea dispute was "one of the considerations that was envisioned when the (lease agreement) was signed".

He also said the "proximity" to Scarborough Shoal—a rich fishing ground that was occupied by Chinese ships after a standoff with the Philippines in 2012 — was another.

The Philippines has been building up its weak military and improving defence ties with close ally the US as its territorial dispute with China has increased.

Andolong said US ships could continue to make port calls and hold military exercises there as they have been doing in recent years, but brushed aside speculation Subic would become a US base again.

Last year, Manila signed an agreement giving the United States more access to Filipino military facilities, but the deal has been postponed because of a legal challenge now being heard by the Supreme Court. —AFP



LOS ANGELES: Yukio Okamoto, Outside Board Member of Mitsubishi Materials and former Special Advisor to Japan's Prime Minister, left, and Hikaru Kimura, Senior Executive Officer Mitsubishi Materials, offer an apology as they hold hands with 94-year-old US prisoner of war, James Murphy, at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, Sunday. Some 12,000 American prisoners were shipped to Japan and forced to work at more than 50 sites to support imperial Japan's war effort. — AP

70 YEARS AFTER WWII, JAPANESE COMPANY APOLOGIZES TO US POWS

'HAPPY TO HAVE LIVED LONG ENOUGH TO HEAR APOLOGY'

LOS ANGELES: He was forced to toil in enemy mines as a prisoner of war, but James Murphy wasn't angry or bitter. He was just happy to have lived long enough to hear the Japanese apology he had sought for seven decades.

Murphy, a POW during World War II and now 94 years old, accepted an unprecedented apology from Mitsubishi Materials Corp. on Sunday on behalf of his fellow POWs, few of whom remain alive, in a ceremony that was both solemn and joyful. "This is a glorious day," said Murphy, who stood tall and slender in a gray suit at the ceremony and looked much younger than his 94 years. "For 70 years, we wanted this."

Saying they felt a "deep sense of ethical responsibility for a past tragedy," Mitsubishi executives presented the apology privately then publicly to Murphy, of Santa Maria, California, at the Museum of Tolerance at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles.

Hikaru Kimura, senior executive officer for Mitsubishi, said through a translator that the company offered a "most remorseful apology" to the about 900 POWs who suffered "harsh, severe hardships" while forced to work in Mitsubishi mines and industrial plants.

Murphy, who worked in Mitsubishi's copper mines in the war, called the apology sincere, humble and revealing. He stood and shook hands with Kimura and others as cameras

clicked throughout the dimly lit museum theater, with giant American and Japanese flags projected side-by-side behind them.

Liberated

Other POWs subjected sat in the audience along with many members of Murphy's family. Stanley Gibson, whose late father worked alongside Murphy in the mines, overcame his fear of flight to come from Scotland to Los Angeles for the ceremony to represent his family after hearing about it in news reports just a few days earlier. On the stage was a photo of the two men being liberated from their captors.

"Considering what my father went through it was the least I could do," Gibson said. The Japanese government has twice apologized to U.S. POWs used as forced laborers during World War II. But Rabbi Abraham Cooper, an associate dean at the center whose primary focus in the past has been Holocaust education, said he and the event's other organizers believe the apology is unprecedented from a major Japanese company. Cooper, Murphy and others who spoke urged more Japanese companies to come forward to express their own remorse.

Private apology

The ceremony was preceded by a private apology that ended with a long, deep bow from

the Mitsubishi representatives. "I entered the room with a heavy heart, seeking forgiveness," said Yukio Okamoto, outside board member for Mitsubishi.

Murphy said that after 70 years it was "the first time we've heard those words. They touch the heart." Murphy was gracious and beaming throughout the ceremony, expressing little bitterness or sorrow on what he called a happy day. He stressed that the apology was not half-hearted, qualified or self-aggrandizing for Mitsubishi. He said the apology "admits to wrongdoing, makes sincere statement showing deep remorse," and offers assurances that the wrongs will never be repeated.

"I know that we can trust those words," Murphy said. Others, including one Mitsubishi representative, struck a sadder tone over how long the apology took. "We also have to apologize for not apologizing earlier," Okamoto said.

Japan's government issued a formal apology to American POWs in 2009 and again in 2010. But the dwindling ranks of POWs used as slaves at mines and industrial plants have so far had little luck in getting apologies from the corporations who used them, sometimes under brutal conditions. Murphy said that if he could talk to his fellow POWs who didn't survive long enough he'd tell them to "rest quietly, it's over. We did get our apology." — AP

MALAYSIA BLOCKS UK-BASED WHISTLE-BLOWER WEBSITE

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian authorities said they had blocked a UK-based website that had published corruption allegations against Prime Minister Najib Razak, but the portal vowed yesterday to press on with its exposes.

The Sarawak Report website has recently published reports alleging financial mismanagement involving Najib and debt-laden state investment vehicle 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB).

The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission announced on Sunday it had blocked the site for carrying "unsubstantiated content".

Without specifying which content was deemed unacceptable, the commission warned the reports could have major consequences. "Such content could disrupt peace and order, and in the bigger picture could destabilise the nation and the economy," the statement said.

The website, run by Clare Rewcastle Brown, a former BBC journalist and sister-in-law to ex-British prime minister Gordon Brown, issued a defiant statement in response to the blocking.

"This is a blatant attempt to censor our exposures of major corruption through the development fund 1MDB," said a statement posted on the Sarawak Report's Facebook page.

"Sarawak Report will not be impeded in any way by this action in bringing out future information as and when its investi-

gations deliver further evidence."

The Sarawak Report, which can still be accessed by overseas servers, carried a report early this month alleging it had evidence that Najib had received \$700 million from entities involved with 1MDB.

The Wall Street Journal also ran a story alleging that a probe into 1MDB had found hundreds of millions of dollars transferred to Najib's personal bank accounts.

1MDB has denied any wrong doing and Najib has dismissed the allegations as "political sabotage" and an attempt to undermine his leadership. Both Najib and 1MDB have also said that previously leaked documents had "reportedly" been tampered with, and that the documents cited by the WSJ had not been verified. 1MDB was launched in 2009 by Najib, who still chairs its advisory board. Critics say it has been opaque in explaining its dealings.

It is reeling under an estimated \$11 billion debt, which has weighed on the ringgit currency amid allegations of mismanagement and murky overseas transactions.

The Centre for Independent Journalism, Malaysia, (CIJ), called yesterday on the country's internet regulator to "respect the right to freedom of expression and to cease its blocking of Sarawak Report".

"CIJ renews its calls for a focus on investigating the actual issues at hand, and rejects further regulation and censorship on the internet as a way to manage the issue," it said. —AFP



This March 9, 2009 US Navy photo shows the military Sealift Command ocean surveillance ship USNS Impeccable (T-AGOS-23) one of five ocean surveillance ships that are part of the 25 ships in the Military Sealift Command Special Mission Ships Program. Impeccable directly supports the Navy by using both passive and active low frequency sonar arrays to detect and track undersea threats. — AFP

CHINESE LAWYER BEING DENIED LEGAL COUNSEL

BEIJING: A prominent Chinese rights lawyer whose trial is drawing near on charges of inciting ethnic hatred and provoking trouble has been denied access to lawyers for nearly a month, his wife and one of his attorneys said yesterday.

Meng Qun, wife of Pu Zhiqiang, raised the concern in an open letter addressed to the leadership of the Beijing detention center where her husband is being held, urging authorities to honor China's own rules to allow Pu access to lawyers. One of Pu's attorneys, Shang Baojun, confirmed that Pu last met his lawyers on June 23 and verified the authenticity of Meng's letter.

Pu is widely believed to be politically persecuted amid Beijing's crackdown on civil society. The charges stem from his online posts that questioned China's ethnic policies in the wake of deadly violence involving ethnic minority Uighurs, and others that mocked several political figures.

He was taken away in May 2014 and was indicted on May 15 this year, after one year in detention. Shang said he expects a Beijing court to hold Pu's trial soon, because by law Chinese courts have three months from the indictment to hold a trial and issue a verdict, but the authorities have not yet announced a date.

In her open letter, Meng said that Pu is entitled to meet his lawyers after the indictment but that the lawyers have been asked - contrary to China's own rules - to submit a meeting request. Even after the lawyers put in a meeting request, the detention center has failed to accommodate a meeting within 48 hours, as stipulated by China's rules, Meng said.

"The lawyer put in a request on June 2, and the meeting was arranged only on June 23. It

took as long as 21 days for approval," Meng wrote.

The lawyers protested, but to no avail, and they submitted another meeting request in late June, Meng wrote: "Nearly one month has passed, but there has not been one word."

Meng said she was told by the director of the detention center that only leaders from the ruling Communist Party can decide on the matter. Beijing says it has been pushing for rule of law, but also has emphasized the party's leadership

over the court system, prompting criticism that China is still ruled by the will of the party, rather than law. Most recently, Chinese authorities have rounded up dozens of rights defense lawyers, accusing them of being ringleaders, troublemakers and fame-seeking opportunists. Foreign governments and international rights groups have condemned Beijing's crackdown on lawyers, who are known for their insistence that the letter of the law be followed and that the government be held accountable. — AP



HONG KONG: In this May 14, 2014 file photo, anti-Beijing protesters, holding pictures of human rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang, protest outside the Chinese liaison office to demand Pu's release, in Hong Kong. Pu, a prominent Chinese rights lawyer whose trial is drawing near on charges of inciting ethnic hatred and provoking trouble has been denied access to lawyers for nearly a month, his wife and one of his attorneys said yesterday. — AP