

ASEAN MINISTERS SEEK WAYS TO EASE SOUTH CHINA SEA TENSION

TERROR THREATS TO SOUTHEAST ASIA GROWING: SINGAPORE

PEARL HARBOR, Hawaii: Countries need to look for practical ways to defuse incidents in the South China Sea, where China is pitted against smaller neighbors in multiple disputes over islands, Singapore's defense minister said. Ng Eng Hen told reporters Friday on the sidelines of a meeting in Hawaii that incidents may not necessarily involve military ships. He noted navies have established protocols for when they encounter each other at sea.

Instead, confrontations may develop between fishing vessels or other civilian ships, the defense minister said. Defense ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and US Defense Secretary Ash Carter talked at their Hawaii meeting about ways to prevent such incidents from escalating, Ng said.

Singapore doesn't have any claims to disputed islands, but Ng said it's interested in the issue because the South China Sea is a major shipping route and many economies depend on it.

China claims virtually the entire South China Sea as its own, citing historical reasons. That has pitted it against the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei, all members of ASEAN. China has recently developed shoals and coral reefs into seven islands with massive land-reclamation work. Some of the islands have airstrips capable of handling military aircraft.

In July, an international arbitration tribunal ruled against China's claims, saying they were illegal. Beijing has rejected the ruling and continued its activities. Ng said the tribunal's ruling is law, but there are "practical concerns" to consider. "For Singapore, a non-claimant state, our main interest is, either with or without a ruling, how do you make sure the region is still stable and to make sure you actually have mechanisms to prevent any escalations?" he said.

Carter told reporters he and his counterparts

discussed improving coordination and cooperation between their militaries to keep the region's waterways open. He said he asked the heads of the US Navy and US Coast Guard to hold a meeting with ASEAN partners next year to share their best practices for maritime security.

Terror threats

The threat that violent extremist groups pose to Southeast Asia is growing each year as they become more organized and focused in



HONOLULU: Singapore's Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Defense, speaks at a press conference at Joint Base Pearl Harbor Hickam on Friday in Honolulu. — AP

their aims, Eng Hen said. Over 1,000 Southeast Asians have flocked to join Islamic State's self-declared "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria, Ng said. "Every year we meet, the situation and threat from extremist terrorism rises," Ng said. "Compared to, say, a year or even two years ago, they're more organized...they're more networked, they're more clear in their articulation of what they want to achieve."

Security officials said in June that Southeast Asian militants who claim to be fighting for Islamic State said they had chosen one of the most wanted men in the Philippines to head a regional faction of the group. Authorities in the region have been on heightened alert since Islamic State claimed an attack in the Indonesian capital Jakarta in January in which eight people were killed, including four of the attackers. Ng cited a recent plot in which an Indonesian cell coordinated by an Islamic State member in Syria had planned to shoot up hotels in Singapore's Marina Bay area. The plot was foiled by Indonesian authorities, he said. "They have gone beyond networks to push the flow of funds, weapons. They are already plotting," Ng said. US defense officials believe that hundreds of citizens from Southeast Asia have returned to their home countries after joining Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, raising concerns that they may try to launch a wave of attacks. Ng said Southeast Asian defense chiefs believe that if Islamic State were destroyed in its base in Iraq and Syria, that would actually increase the risk to their region in the short-term, because seasoned Islamic State fighters would likely return home. The United States is leading an air campaign to dislodge Islamic State from Iraq and Syria. "They would decide to come back, some reenergized, some trained and the networks would still be existing," Ng said. — Agencies

HONG KONG LEADER CALLS FOR UNITY WITH CHINA

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's leader called on the city to unite behind its current political system yesterday in the face of increasing calls for independence from China, as protesters were bundled from the auditorium where he was speaking. Leung Chun-ying was giving an annual address as part of National Day celebrations which mark the founding of the People's Republic of China by Mao Zedong in 1949, after communist forces won a civil war on the mainland.

Hong Kong is governed under a semi-autonomous "one country, two systems" arrangement a deal made when the city was handed back to China by Britain in 1997. The agreement protects Hong Kong's freedoms for 50 years, but there are growing fears those liberties are being eroded by Beijing, leading to increasing tensions. Leung described the system as the "most beneficial and most practical" for Hong Kong. "One country, two systems needs each and every Hong Kong resident to defend it to their utmost," Leung said.

He also encouraged young Hong Kongers to visit China, saying there was "deep kinship" between the two sides. A group of pro-democracy lawmakers interrupted the speech shouting: "CY step down!". Security escorted them from the hall at the harbourfront convention centre, with one district councillor carried out. Veteran Democratic Party legislator James To, among the protesters, said Leung had "caused divisions in the city and has made Hong Kongers feel they can't go on (with Leung in charge)".

'Hong Kong independence'

Several new legislators who won seats in elections last month and are calling for self-determination and independence for Hong

Kong boycotted the event. Former protest leader Nathan Law, who at 23 is the youngest ever member of the Legislative Council, said he stayed away because of what he described as China's human rights violations. "As long as they don't recognize that what they are doing is wrong, we shouldn't go and celebrate this kind of holiday," Law said, listing the Cultural Revolution and the disappearance last year of five booksellers from Hong Kong as among the incidents.

The booksellers worked for a publishing house known for salacious titles about Beijing leaders. All surfaced in detention in China. Law led mass pro-democracy rallies in 2014 which failed to win concessions from Beijing. He is now calling for self-determination for the city. Since the 2014 rallies, there have been increasing demands for a break from China. Newly elected pro-independence lawmaker Yau Wai-ching also boycotted the event. "It's not the national day of the Hong Kongers," she said. Large red banners calling for Hong Kong independence were draped across several university buildings yesterday. A small group of protesters led by rebel lawmaker Leung Kwok-hung, known as "Long Hair", gathered outside the convention centre calling for the release of political prisoners in China.

They held up a makeshift coffin scrawled with the words "In memory of the people's heroes", and threw "hell money"—paper replicas of bank notes traditionally burned at funerals. Around 50 pro-Beijing supporters wearing red t-shirts marched through the city's Tsim Sha Tsui retail district Saturday afternoon waving large Chinese flags and blaring the national anthem. They also sang patriotic songs and shouted "we are Chinese" and "oppose Hong Kong independence". — AFP



HONG KONG: Protesters carry a fake coffin during a march organized by the League of Social Democrats on China's National Day of celebrations in Hong Kong yesterday. — AFP

EIGHT DEAD, 19 MISSING AFTER CHINA LANDSLIDES

BEIJING: At least eight people have died and around 19 are still missing after devastating landslides swept through two eastern Chinese villages, local authorities told the official Xinhua news agency yesterday.

Heavy wind and torrential rains brought by Typhoon Megi triggered the landslides on Wednesday, burying dozens of homes from the villages of Sucun and Baofeng in Zhejiang province's Suichang county. More than 4,000 rescue workers with 180 diggers were scrambling to find survivors but persistent rain and poor road conditions had hindered rescue efforts, the agency reported. Video footage of the landslide on social media showed torrents of water and rock pouring down a mountain towards houses in the valley below while terrified onlookers screamed.

Typhoon Megi had already claimed one life on Wednesday morning, when a flash flood tore through the home of a villager in the coastal province of Fujian, according to reports.

At least 2.09 million people from three provinces have been affected by the typhoon, which has destroyed roughly 1,200 houses, the People's Daily reported Saturday. The storm is estimated to have caused China 5.53 billion yuan (\$835 million) in damages. The typhoon smashed into Taiwan earlier in the week, leaving a trail of destruction and killing seven as it raked across the island. — AFP

PORN FILM PLAYS ON JAKARTA BILLBOARD, POLICE PROBE

JAKARTA: An explicit pornographic video was broadcast on a public billboard in broad daylight in Jakarta, with police and cybercrime specialists yesterday searching for the culprit behind the gaffe.

The offending clip of a couple engaged in a steamy tryst beamed at peak hour on Friday, shocking and amusing motorists in equal measure as they crawled along the major road in heavy traffic.

The power was quickly shut off to the "videotron"—as the giant advertising screens are locally known—but not before the whole scandalous incident was captured on motorists' phones and sent viral on social media. The hashtag "videotron" was quickly trending, with much speculation about who was responsible for the X-rated gaffe, which broadcast just a stone's throw from the South Jakarta mayor's office.

The video file-titled "Watch Tokyo Hot"—appeared to be streaming from a personal computer, prompting suggestions that someone's week was about to take a turn for the worse.

But police were still searching for a motive behind the "videotron" scandal, Jakarta metropolitan police said in a statement yesterday. A specialist cybercrime unit had joined the investigation to determine whether the broadcast was deliberate or hacking was involved, the police's head of public relations Awi Setiyono said.

Police have seized a computer from the offices of a private company as part of their investigation, he added. Access to pornographic websites is blocked in Muslim-majority Indonesia, and romantic scenes in films and television programs are heavily blurred or cut altogether by state censors. — AFP



BEIJING: Visitors gather on Tiananmen Square during National Day in Beijing yesterday. China celebrates its National Day to mark the 67th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. — AFP

NORTH KOREA BUILDING NEW SUBMARINE: US THINK TANK

SEOUL: Recent satellite imagery suggests North Korea may be building a new, larger submarine for ballistic missiles, a US think tank has said, as the isolated state pushes its nuclear weapons program.

The news comes after the North in August test-fired a submarine-launched missile (SLBM) 500 kilometres (around 300 miles) towards Japan, which leader Kim Jong-Un said put the US mainland and the Pacific within striking range.

"Commercial satellite imagery strongly suggests that a naval construction program is underway at North Korea's Sinpo South Shipyard, possibly to build a new submarine," the US-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University said on its closely-watched website, 38 North. "If this activity is indeed to build a new submarine, it would appear to be larger than North Korea's GORAE-class experimental ballistic missile submarine, which has a beam of approximately 7 meters."

Analysts say that while Pyongyang has made faster progress in its SLBM system than originally expected, it is still years away from deployment. A proven SLBM system would take North Korea's nuclear strike threat to a new level, allowing deployment far beyond the Korean peninsula and a "second-strike" capability in the event of an attack on its military bases.

South Korea's military authorities believe Pyongyang is eyeing a submarine capable of carrying multiple SLBMs, to replace an existing experimental submarine used for the August test, according to Seoul's Yonhap news agency. North Korea is barred under UN resolutions from any use of ballistic missile technology, but this year alone it has test-fired more than 20 missiles and carried out two nuclear tests. Its fifth and most powerful nuclear test on September 9, when Pyongyang detonated what it said was a miniaturized atomic bomb, provoked worldwide condemnation and prompted the UN Security Council to begin work on a new sanctions resolution.

Also this month, the North claimed to have successfully ground tested a new, high-powered rocket engine, a move Seoul said was designed to showcase its progress towards being able to target the US east coast.

Call to defect

South Korean President Park Geun-Hye



GYERYONG: South Korean President Park Geun-hye, standing at bottom right on the car, waves to cadets during the 68th anniversary of Armed Forces Day at the Gyeong military headquarters in Gyeong, South Korea, yesterday. — AP

PASSPORT-FORGER 'CONFESSES' TO DISMEMBERING DEAD MAN

BANGKOK: An American accused of running a passport-forgery ring in Bangkok confessed to dismembering—but not murdering a man found in his freezer, Thai police said yesterday, as detectives continue to piece together details of the macabre crime. The 63-year-old suspect, who police initially struggled to identify because of his numerous passports, was arrested one week ago alongside two other Americans accused of producing fake travel documents from their crime den in the Thai capital.

Police also found guns, drugs and the bagged body parts of a foreigner in their freezer. Herbert La Fon, described as the gang's ringleader, allegedly opened fire on police during the raid before the trio

was handcuffed and detained.

"He admitted only that he dismembered the body but said he had no involvement in murdering the Hungarian man," Bangkok's police chief Sanit Mahathavorn told reporters yesterday. "I cannot disclose the details, but I can say that his testimony was useful. As for (his claim) that the motive of the killing was debt, police are not really convinced by this," said Sanit, adding that officers were up until 3am interrogating the American.

It was not immediately clear what La Fon's explanation for possessing or cutting up the corpse was. Police have stressed that his story keeps changing. It is also not uncommon for suspects to later retract

confessions made in Thai police custody, where many have alleged being beaten by officers.

Forensic experts are still working to identify the man found in the freezer but said they believe he was Hungarian and middle-aged. "Initially we think he was Hungarian. We don't know the time of his death because the body had been frozen for a long time," Udomsak Hunvichit, head of Chulalongkorn Hospital's forensic department, told local broadcaster Channel 3.

The gruesome case has gripped the Thai public as it provides a glimpse into Bangkok's shadowy underworld, long a haven for foreign criminals and fugitives.

Little is known about the three men other than that La Fon was wanted by the FBI in 1979 on charges of credit card fraud. A US Embassy official confirmed American law enforcement agencies are assisting with the case. Thailand is a hub for a fake documents trade that has helped shield countless criminals and migrants from local and foreign authorities.

In February Thai police arrested an Iranian man known as "The Doctor" who crafted pristine passports from his home in a Bangkok suburb and sold the documents to thousands around the globe—including gangsters, rebels, refugees and migrant workers. — AFP