

International

Relations with neighbors depend on security and trust, says India's PM

Modi addresses scaled-down Independence ceremony

NEW DELHI: India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi issued a new warning to China over deadly border tensions yesterday, using his most important speech of the year to promise to build a stronger military. With talks on easing a military build-up in their Himalayan border region at a stalemate, Modi told an Independence Day ceremony that India's sovereignty was "supreme" and that relations with neighbors depended on security and trust.

Attendance at the historic Red Fort in New Delhi for the speech was cut by more than half to 4,000 people, all of whom sat two meters (six feet) apart because of the coronavirus pandemic. The Hindu nationalist prime minister mentioned confrontations with Pakistan and China on their disputed borders, but without naming either country.

"Anyone who has cast an eye on the country's sovereignty, the country's army has answered them in their own language," he said. "India's integrity is supreme for us. What we can do, what our soldiers can do—everyone saw that in Ladakh," referring to a border clash with Chinese troops in the Ladakh region of the Himalayas on June 15.

Twenty Indian soldiers were killed in the clash, which saw the two sides fighting with batons, stones and bare fists. China has also acknowledged that it suffered casualties but without giving numbers. The two sides have blamed each other for the fighting and tens of thousands of Indian and Chinese troops, who also fought a border war in 1962, have since been sent to the region.

Modi has insisted that no land was lost in the battle but military experts have used satellite

images to counter that Chinese troops occupy frontier territory that India had claimed for decades. India has in turn used economic weapons against China. It has banned at least 59 apps, including the



PM promises to build a stronger military

major video-sharing platform TikTok, and taken other measures to freeze Chinese firms out of contracts and block its imports.

Modi said that relations with neighbours are now linked to "security, progress and trust".

"A neighbor isn't just someone who shares our geography but those who share our hearts. Where the relationship is respected, it becomes warmer," he said. The 1.4-million-strong military would be built up, he added. "India is just as committed to its security and strengthening its army as the attempts it has made for peace and harmony," he said, stressing efforts to make India "self-reliant" in defense production. Modi also said that his priority was getting India out of the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. India is expected to pass 50,000



NEW DELHI: India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivers a speech to the nation during a ceremony to celebrate India's 74th Independence Day, which marks the end of British colonial rule, at the Red Fort in New Delhi yesterday. — AFP

deaths in the coming days and three million cases within a week. It has the fastest-growing caseload in the world and is now only behind Brazil and the United States in terms of total case numbers. With

the economy expected to shrink this year, Modi reaffirmed an election promise to spend 1.3 trillion dollars on 7,000 infrastructure projects "to get us out of the pandemic situation". —AFP

Philippine security forces on 'alert' after militant held

MANILA: Philippine security forces were on alert yesterday for possible reprisal attacks after arresting a key leader of an Islamic State-linked militant group accused of kidnapping and beheading several foreigners. Abduljihad Susukan, a member of Abu Sayyaf, was detained in the southern city of Davao and flown to the capital Manila on Friday, where he was being held at the national police headquarters.

He has been charged with 23 murders, five kidnappings and six attempted murders, a police statement said. Listed by the United States as a terrorist organization, Abu Sayyaf is a loose network of Islamic militants blamed for the country's worst terror attacks as well as kidnappings of foreign tourists and Christian missionaries. "The Philippine National Police along with the Armed Forces of the Philippines remain alert and vigilant to prevent and respond to any reprisal attack," police spokesman Brigadier-General Bernard Banac said.

The Philippine military said Susukan was behind the April 2016 beheadings of Canadian tourists Robert Hall and John Ridsdel, after Manila and Ottawa rejected the kidnappers' ransom demands. In 2017 Susukan's group also beheaded Jurgen Kantner, who was abducted from his yacht off the southern Philippines the previous year, said military spokesman Brigadier-General Edgard Arevalo.

"There is a strong possibility" that Susukan was also behind the 2015 beheading of Malaysian hostage Bernard Then, who was abducted in Malaysia's Sabah state, Arevalo said. The authorities said Susukan had gone to Davao, near where the Canadians were abducted, to get a prosthetic arm after losing one in a clash with security forces. Police said they found him in the home of Muslim rebel leader Nur Misuari, who is awaiting trial for an attack carried out by hundreds of his armed followers on the southern city of Zamboanga in 2013 that left more than 200 people dead.

Despite the charges, Misuari has government permission to live at his home and travel. President Rodrigo Duterte enlisted Misuari's help last year to negotiate peace with various armed groups in the country's troubled south as well as to help negotiate the release of Abu Sayyaf hostages. — AFP



In this undated handout photo received yesterday by the Philippine National Police (PNP-PIO), Abu Sayyaf leader Abduljihad Susukan has his mug shot taken after his arrest in Davao City, in southern island of Mindanao. — AFP

Taliban prisoner release re-opens wounds for families

KABUL: The decision to release hundreds of the Taliban's most dangerous prisoners has stirred painful memories for the loved ones of those killed in Afghanistan's war, with many questioning whether the move will help bring peace. About 400 inmates are expected to be set free in the coming days, after which the Taliban have said they will sit for direct peace talks with the Afghan government.

President Ashraf Ghani has said the US-backed release is a necessary development highlighting the "cost" of making peace. But for some victims' families, it is a step too far.

"I felt like being stabbed in the heart with a knife," said Juma Khan, 77, as he recalled watching Afghan leaders gather to debate and eventually approve the release.

Khan's son, Aziz Ahmad Naween, an IT specialist, was killed in a massive truck bombing near the German embassy in May 2017 while heading to work. He was 24. "We all want peace, but they never asked for our opinion, the victims," Khan said. "That was the worst day of my life. I fell unconscious on seeing the body of my young son in a coffin," he told AFP at his home in Kabul.

"I don't believe that the decision to release them will lead to any peace in this country any time soon." The Afghan government has already freed about 5,000 Taliban prisoners under a swap fleshed out in a deal between the US and the insurgents in February. While the former inmates have pledged not to pick up arms, Ghani on Thursday acknowledged some of the 400 currently being released likely "pose a danger both to us and to (America) and to the world".

'How could they do that?'

In an op-ed in the Washington Post on Friday he also said that the families of those killed by the militants had paid a heavy price. "The cost of releasing these 5,000 prisoners meant, among other things, denying justice and healing for the families of those they murdered," Ghani wrote.

Japan ministers visit Yasukuni Shrine, first since 2016

TOKYO: Four Japanese cabinet ministers paid their respects yesterday at a war shrine seen by neighboring countries as a symbol of Tokyo's past militarism, in the first such visit since 2016.

Nationalist Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sent a ritual cash offering to the Yasukuni Shrine in central Tokyo to mark yesterday's 75th anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II but was not expected to visit in person, local media said. Yasukuni honors 2.5 million war dead, mostly Japanese, who perished in the country's wars since the late 19th century.

But it also enshrines senior military and political figures convicted of war crimes by an international tribunal after the war. Education Minister Koichi Hagiuda, one of the four ministers to visit the shrine, said he did so to pay tribute to the war dead.

"I paid respects... to the souls of those who nobly sacrificed themselves during the war," Hagiuda told reporters. The three others were Environment Minister Shinjiro Koizumi, Internal Affairs Minister Sanae Takaichi, and Seiichi Eto, minister in charge of territorial issues.

Abe last visited the shrine in December 2013 to mark his first year in power, sparking fury in Beijing and Seoul and earning a rare diplomatic rebuke



Shahnaaz, 40, sits next to a picture of her husband Faiz Ali Ahmadi, 45, who died in a truck bomb attack in Kabul on May 31, 2017. — AFP

"We have paid with our lives - tens of thousands of Afghan lives, including even our tiniest, most precious and innocent lives." The truck bombing killed more than 150 people and wounded hundreds more in Kabul's highly fortified diplomatic quarter in the deadliest attack since 2001.

No group claimed the attack, but the government blamed the Taliban-allied Haqqani Network.

An official list of the 400 prisoners seen by AFP includes a militant involved in that attack, and the release has triggered international condemnation. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said earlier this week he had lobbied for a former Afghan army soldier, who went rogue and killed three Australian colleagues, to stay in jail. The family of French woman Bettina Goislar, a United Nations refugee worker who was shot dead by Taliban militants in 2003, has opposed the release of her killers.

"Such a decision to free (them) made on the basis of horse-trading would be, to us, her family, inconceivable," Bettina's family told AFP. The decision also shocked Shahnaaz Ahmadi, 42, whose 45-year-old husband Faiz Ali Ahmadi was killed in the same truck bombing.

"It was unbelievable... and hard to watch what was happening," said Shahnaaz, who watched thousands of Afghan elders and stakeholders debate the release at last week's "loya jirga" meeting.

"How could they do that? We all cried that day," the mother of seven said.

Shahnaaz's husband was a security guard at a telecommunications company. Her teenage daughter, Gulbahar, still mourns his death. — AFP

'Destroyed': Virus ravages Peruvian family

LIMA: The coronavirus pandemic has been cruel to the Diaz family in Peru, killing five members of the tight-knit clan and leaving another four still hospitalized. But because Peru's healthcare system collapsed under the strain of the virus, the family has been hit by an additional tragedy: financial ruin.

Like many Peruvians, they had to raid their savings and take out loans from friends in order to cover the expense of mounting medical bills from private health clinics. "We've been completely destroyed. Now we need to rebuild the family with what we have left," Juan Diaz, a 58-year-old professor, told AFP.

"What's befallen us is like a nightmare, the truth is I wouldn't wish it on anyone," he said, tightly hugging a picture of his parents while lamenting the fact he was unable to attend his mother's funeral due to virus restrictions. Peru is one of worst hit countries in coronavirus-epicenter Latin America after Brazil and Mexico, with more than 25,000 reported deaths and over half a million cases.

Infections in Peru have been on the rise since a national lockdown was lifted on July 1, prompting the government on Wednesday to reinstate a Sunday curfew, ban social gatherings and enforce mandatory lockdown in more provinces.

Before the devastating pandemic struck, 17 members of the middle-class Diaz family shared a single four-storey brick house in the Chorrillos district of Lima. But on May 24 that happy life started to unravel with the death of Juan's brother Ernesto, a local tax collector.

"We don't know how the virus got into my house, but the first to fall victim to it was my father," said Ernesto's 32-year-old son, also called Ernesto.

Since then Juan has also lost his 80-year-old father Cecilio, his 77-year-old mother Edith Leyva, and siblings Willy, 42, and 53-year-old Maribel. "We were seven siblings, like the days of the week, but now we've lost three," said Juan, who also fell ill with coronavirus alongside his wife and daughter. — AFP



TOKYO: Japan's Emperor Naruhito (left) and Empress Masako (right) wearing face masks, depart after attending a memorial service marking the 75th anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II at the Nippon Budokan hall in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

from close ally the United States. This year's visits come with tensions still high between Japan and South Korea—one of the countries that suffered most from Japan's wartime military atrocities. The two countries have issued reciprocal trade sanctions and threats as they battle over issues including wartime forced labour and sex slavery.

Seoul is "ready to sit face to face at any time" with Tokyo to discuss historical disputes. South Korean President Moon Jae-in said in an address commemorating the country's liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945. The issue of forced labor has been a thorny issue between the two

neighbors, with Tokyo saying all reparation claims were settled in a 1965 treaty that normalized relations with financial contributions.

But the South Korean Supreme Court ruled in 2018 that victims had a right to seek compensation. Moon's government has said it respects the ruling and will seek a "smooth resolution" with Japan.

"The door for consultations is still wide open," Moon said in his Saturday speech.

Later in the day, Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako attended a national ceremony to mark the anniversary, which had been scaled back because of the coronavirus. — AFP