

## International

# Triads arrested in Hong Kong speedboat smuggling raids

## Gangs using high-powered speedboats to smuggle contraband

**HONG KONG:** Dozens of Hong Kong triad members have been arrested in a series of operations targeting gangs using high-powered speedboats to smuggle contraband to the Chinese mainland, police said yesterday. Smuggling has been a mainstay of the triad organized crime gangs operating on both sides of the border for years but the phenomenon has surged during the coronavirus pandemic.

Police embarked on a crackdown after a marine officer was killed last month when her vessel was rammed by smugglers during a high-speed chase. Yesterday, Hong Kong police said 365 people had been arrested in a series of joint raids over the last two weeks, including 35 men with triad backgrounds suspected of running the sea smuggling operations.

Chinese mainland police also arrested two men suspected of being involved in the collision that killed the officer, senior superintendent Ho Chung-tung, from Hong Kong's Organized Crime and Triad

Bureau, told reporters. More than 50 speedboats have been seized along with 1,700 tons of frozen meat worth HK\$500 million (\$64 million). Frozen



**365 arrested in a series of joint raids**

meat is just one part of a cornucopia of in-demand goods that gangs smuggle into China. Recent speedboat smuggling busts have netted everything from luxury watches, handbags and shoes to

endangered animal parts, cosmetics, wines, whisky and cigars.

Police said so far this year they have seized HK\$730 million worth of contraband goods from speedboat smuggling gangs compared to HK\$490 million in the whole of last year. Hong Kong has no sales tax, something that makes successful smuggling hugely lucrative. Mainland China is also awash with fake brands while regular food health scares have reinforced the demand for international goods. Until the crackdown sparked by the marine officer's death, smugglers often relied on sheer force of numbers. Each day, dozens of Chinese mainland vessels would wait just outside Hong Kong's waters near the city's airport.

Speedboats stuffed with goods, some of them fitted with as many as six engines to outrun police, would then emerge en masse and rush to the waiting mainland boats. Some of these dramatic recent smuggling runs were captured on camera by mem-

bers of the public using phones. Three customs officers were killed in January last year when their boat capsized during a chase with speedboat gangs in waters off the airport. While Hong Kong has long been one of the safest cities in the world in terms of street crime, triad organized crime gangs have a long presence in the city.

The gangs trace their origins to 19th century Chinese fraternal organizations. Most fled to Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan when the communists took power in mainland China in 1949. But in recent decades, most triad gangs switched ideological allegiance and embraced Beijing. Since Hong Kong's 1997 handover from Britain, some of Beijing's most ardent critics have found themselves at the wrong end of a triad assault. Major gangs like Wo Shing Wo, 14K and Sun Yee On have a presence in both Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland as well as links to international organized crime. — AFP

## Militants kill five troops in Kashmir

**SRINAGAR:** Militants shot dead five soldiers in Indian-administered Kashmir yesterday, the army said, stoking tensions in the restive territory following a string of civilian murders. Separately two suspected rebels were shot dead in different incidents, authorities said. Colonel Devendar Anand told AFP that one officer and four soldiers "were killed during a search operation probably by infiltrators" in a mountain pass near the Line of Control (LoC) dividing the area from Pakistan-administered Kashmir. "The operation is ongoing," he added. The shootings were the deadliest attack on military forces in the area since a ceasefire along the LoC announced in February.

### Divided

Kashmir has been split between India and Pakistan since their independence in 1947, with both claiming

the Himalayan region in full. For over three decades, rebel groups have been fighting Indian soldiers and demanding independence for Kashmir or its merger with Pakistan. Tens of thousands of civilians, soldiers and rebels have died in the fighting. India accuses Pakistan of supporting the militants. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government angered many Kashmiris in 2019 by scrapping the Muslim-majority region's semi-autonomous status. This was accompanied by a huge security operation and communications blackout with tens of thousands of extra soldiers joining the estimated half a million already on the ground.

### 650 arrested

Tensions have flared further in recent weeks with a spate of shootings of civilians in the area, with seven killed last week alone in attacks claimed by an anti-India militant group. They included two teachers gunned down at a school on Thursday, sparking public outrage in Kashmir and outside. Politicians from all sides have condemned the killings. Some 650 residents suspected to have links with banned religious and militant groups have been detained following



**SRINAGAR:** A security personnel checks the bag of a motorist along a street in Srinagar, after recent attacks by the suspected anti-India militants in Indian-administered Kashmir. — AFP

the shootings, a police source said. "No stone will be left unturned to find the killers," the senior police officer told AFP on condition of anonymity. Authorities say at least 29 civilians - including workers from pro-India political parties - have been shot dead in Kashmir this year, one of them by security forces.

A relatively new militant group The Resistance Front claimed responsibility for the seven killings last week and

accused those killed of working for "occupier mercenary forces and occupier stooges". The statements, issued only in English, were circulated in numerous WhatsApp groups and could not be independently verified by AFP. One of the two suspected rebels killed yesterday was suspected of being involved, authorities said. His family told reporters that soldiers picked him up on Sunday at then shot him while in their custody. — AFP

## US couple arrested for selling nuclear warship data

**WASHINGTON:** A US couple has been arrested in the state of West Virginia for allegedly selling information on nuclear warships to what they believed was a foreign state, the Justice Department said Sunday. Jonathan Toebbe, 42, who worked as a nuclear engineer for the US Navy, and his wife Diana, 45, were arrested by Federal Bureau of Investigation agents on Saturday and charged with violating the Atomic Energy Act in a criminal complaint, the Justice Department said in a statement.

For nearly a year, the couple "sold information known as restricted data concerning the design of nuclear powered warships to a person they believed was a representative of a foreign power," the statement said, adding that the recipient of the information was in fact an undercover FBI agent. US nuclear-powered submarines were at the center of a major diplomatic crisis between Paris and Washington last month, when Australia scrapped a large contract to buy submarines from France.

Toebbe, who was based in Annapolis, Maryland and had access to restricted data on nuclear-powered warships through his work, collaborated with his wife to exchange data on submarine nuclear reactors for around \$100,000 in cryptocurrency,



**ATLANTIC OCEAN:** In this file photo, the Virginia-class attack submarine Pre-Commissioning Unit New Mexico (SSN 779) undergoes Bravo sea trials in the Atlantic Ocean. A US couple has been arrested in the state of West Virginia for allegedly selling information on nuclear warships to what they believed was a foreign state, the Justice Department said. — AFP

the complaint affidavit alleges. When Toebbe first tried to establish contact with the foreign government - which was not identified in the affidavit - he wrote, "I apologize for this poor translation into your language."

Please forward this letter to your military intelligence agency," according to the complaint. "I believe this information will be of great value to your nation. This is not a hoax." The affidavit says Toebbe in April 2020 mailed a package to the foreign government "containing a sample of restricted

data and instructions for establishing a covert relationship," according to the statement.

According to the complaint, the FBI intercepted the package, and the undercover agent posed as a representative of the foreign government in order to establish a relationship with the couple. The agent sent Jonathan Toebbe, who used the pseudonym "Alice," an email offering him a gift as thanks for the data. But Toebbe responded with caution, asking instead to set up a "dead drop" location and to be paid in cryptocurrency. — AFP

## Thousands evacuated; coal mines shuttered as floods hit north China

**BEIJING:** More than 120,000 people have been evacuated, coal mines shut and crops destroyed after unseasonably heavy rainfall flooded north China's Shanxi province over the weekend, state media reported yesterday, with more rain forecast. The deluge comes just months after record floods hit the country's central Henan province in July - killing more than 300 people - and raises fears about ensuring the supply of energy ahead of the winter.

Many parts of Shanxi, a landlocked province that generally has dry weather, saw record-breaking rainfall over the past week, according to the provincial government, which ordered coal mines to take flood-proofing measures and make emergency plans to be "activated immediately in case of grave danger".

At least 60 coal mines in the province - one of China's top coal-

producing regions - have suspended operations due to the floods, according to a local government statement, even as the country faces a power supply crunch. Beijing recently ordered coal mines to spare no cost to increase production and ensure supply, and said it will allow higher electricity prices in a bid to boost generation. Analysts have warned the move could add to inflation concerns.

China has been hit by widespread power cuts amid record coal prices, state electricity price controls and tough emissions targets that have squeezed the power supply. More than 1.75 million residents have so far been affected by the floods in Shanxi, which state news agency Xinhua reported had received more than three times the average monthly rainfall for October in just five days last week. An estimated 190,000 hectares of crops were destroyed and 17,000



**JINZHONG:** This aerial photo shows a flooded area after heavy rainfalls in Jinxiu, in Jinzhong city, China's northern Shanxi province. — AFP

buildings were reduced to rubble, the local Communist Party newspaper Shanxi Evening News reported.

Shanxi's meteorological bureau said Sunday there would be more rain in the coming days, urging farmers to "rush to harvest when the weather is clear". Authorities have not yet published a death toll. Video footage

published by the Shanxi Evening News showed rescuers wading through murky waters and floating on rafts down flooded urban streets. Meanwhile, state broadcaster CCTV showed workers repairing a broken dam and railway tracks left suspended over water after part of the bridge they were on collapsed. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Iraq arrests IS finance chief

**BAGHDAD:** Iraq has captured the alleged finance chief of the Islamic State group, Sami Jasim Al-Jaburi, who was sought by the United States, in an operation abroad, Iraqi authorities said yesterday. Jaburi, also the suspected former deputy to the late IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, was arrested "in Turkey", a senior Iraqi military source told AFP without elaborating. Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi had earlier announced on Twitter that Jaburi was arrested by the intelligence services "outside the borders" of Iraq, in a "complex external operation," without naming the location. It was not immediately clear if Turkish authorities were involved and there was no immediate reaction from Ankara. The US had offered a reward of up to \$5 million for the capture of Jaburi. — AFP

#### Car bomb kills six in Syria

**BEIRUT:** A car bombing in the northern Syrian city of Afrin yesterday killed six people, including at least one Turkey-backed rebel fighter, a war monitor said. Afrin, like all areas held by pro-Turkish rebels, is the scene of regular targeted killings, bombings and shootings that largely remain unclaimed. Yesterday, an explosive-laden vehicle detonated in "an area crowded with civilians" in the centre of the rebel-held city, said the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The explosion hit near a market and military outpost for the hardline Jaysh Al-Islam rebel group, according to the monitor which relies on a network of sources inside Syria. At least two civilians and one Jaysh fighter were among those killed, while 12 other people were wounded, the Observatory said. "Hospitals in Afrin received charred corpses of unidentified persons," the monitor added. — AFP

#### Bouteflika's brother on trial

**ALGIERS:** Algerian prosecutors have sought a seven-year jail term for Said Bouteflika, the brother of late president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, on corruption charges, one of his lawyers said yesterday. President Bouteflika was forced to resign in the face of mass protests against his bid for a fifth term in office in 2019, and died in September aged 84. His departure was followed by a string of prosecutions against senior members of his inner circle, most prominently his brother Said who had been seen as the real power behind the scenes after the longtime ruler suffered a stroke in 2013. Said Bouteflika's defense lawyer Salim Hadjouti told AFP that "there is nothing in the case file. It's empty, a political file, not a legal one." He said the prosecution had also sought at least 10 years behind bars for ex-justice minister Tayeb Louh and seven for tycoon Ali Haddad, both close to the former president, as well as jail terms for other defendants. — AFP

#### China and India lash out

**BEIJING:** China and India yesterday blamed each other for the failure of high-level talks to ease tensions along a disputed Himalayan border between the nuclear-armed neighbors. The strategically important Galwan river valley between Tibet and India's Ladakh region became a high-altitude flashpoint last year after one of the deadliest troop clashes in decades. Senior military officials from the two countries held their first round of talks in two months, but it ended without any progress. India made "unreasonable and unrealistic demands", Chinese military spokesman Long Shao-hua said in a statement issued by the People's Liberation Army's western theatre command. The statement did not say what the demands were. In response, India's defense ministry said China was "not agreeable" to discussing "constructive suggestions... (and) could not provide any forward-looking proposals". India said both sides have agreed to maintain communications and stability. — AFP