

Philippines Defends Scrapping Military Pact With U.S.



Philippine and U.S. Marines are taking positions during a beach assault exercise facing the South China Sea in San Antonio, Zambales province.

MANILA (Dispatches) -- The Philippine military on Wednesday stood by the president's decision to scrap a security agreement with the United States, saying the country could now develop its own defense capabilities and alliances, and would do fine without it.

The military chief backed President Rodrigo Duterte's termination of the 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and said doing so would allow the Philippines to expand its modernization program and its engagement with Australia and Japan - both U.S. allies.

Armed forces commander, General Felimon Santos, said planes

and ships were being procured from countries other than the United States, such as South Korea, while Filipinos were now "doing the leg work" on intelligence gathering on Takfiri extremists.

"You know these sentiments of soldiers, we are all high morale," he told reporters. "It will make us more eager to build up our own capabilities."

Despite his defense and foreign ministers last week speaking favorably of the VFA, Duterte's decision was not a complete surprise given his disdain for the Philippines' close ties with Washington and what he sees as subservience to an abusive and hyp-

ocritical former colonial ruler.

He has been determined to build a strong relationship with China, despite a history of diplomatic friction.

Duterte's spokesman Salvador Panelo said U.S. disagreement with the president's move was motivated by its own strategic interests, and that it was time for the Philippines to be militarily independent.

"Reliance on another country for our own defenses against the enemies of the state will ultimately weaken and stagnate our defense mechanisms," Panelo said in a statement. "We must stand on our own and put a stop to being a parasite to another country in protecting our independence and sovereignty."

The VFA is the legal framework for the thousands of rotating U.S. troops involved in as many as 300 joint exercises a year in the Philippines. Some American lawmakers hope it can be saved in the 180 days before the termination takes effect, and worry that without it, two other U.S. military agreements will be irrelevant.

Pentagon chief Mark Esper on Tuesday said the decision was a move in the wrong direction. Duterte's spokesman Panelo rejected that, calling it "a move in the right direction that should have been done a long time ago".

Envoys Visit Kashmir Following Indian Crackdown



Foreign diplomats are seen in a motorboat in Dal Lake in Srinagar February 12, 2020.

SRINAGAR/NEW DELHI, India (Reuters) -- More than two dozen diplomats are visiting Indian-administered Kashmir, New Delhi said on Wednesday, as the country tries to reassure foreign allies following several months of unrest in the contested territory.

The group includes European diplomats, some of whom declined a previous invitation from New Delhi to visit the region. A proposed vote in the European Union parliament next month could chastise India for its actions in Kashmir.

The Muslim-majority Himala-

yan region is claimed by India and arch-rival Pakistan and has been in turmoil since New Delhi stripped it of special status and clamped down on communication and freedom of movement in August.

India has since eased those restrictions, and restored limited internet connectivity last month, ending one of the world's longest such shutdowns in a democracy.

But many political leaders, including three former chief ministers of Jammu & Kashmir state, are still in detention without charge six months after the crackdown, and foreign

journalists have so far been denied permission to visit the region.

Representatives from countries including Germany, Canada, France, New Zealand, Mexico, Italy, Afghanistan and Austria are on a two-day visit to "witness for themselves the progressive normalization of the situation," India's foreign ministry said in a statement on Wednesday.

Representatives from several countries, including Germany's ambassador Walter Lindner, were pictured on a traditional wooden shikara boat on Dal Lake, in Kashmir's main city of Srinagar.

"We are interacting with the traders, businesswomen and entrepreneurs in Srinagar about the status of business and tourism," Afghanistan's envoy Tahir Qadiry said in a tweet on Wednesday.

Sources familiar with the itinerary said the trip will also include meetings with the Indian army and government officials, as well as journalists and civil society groups selected by the security services.

Last month fifteen foreign envoys visited Kashmir - a trip participants characterized as tightly-choreographed with no room for independent meetings.

Southern Africa Faces Hunger Amid Climate Crisis

BUHERA, Zimbabwe (AFP) -- Just under a year ago, Alice Posha fled her home in the middle of the night and then watched as it was swept away by floods.

The torrential rain came from Cyclone Idai, one of the worst storms ever to hit Africa and the fiercest on record to strike Buhera, a district in the usually arid province of Manicaland in eastern Zimbabwe.

Today, the scene in Buhera is entirely different. But the misery remains.

The 60-year-old, who was rehoused in October, is going through the motions of weeding a field of maize that has been withered by the worst drought in 35 years.

A little rain for her corn would be more than welcome. "Seeing how the maize is wilting, we may have a very bad harvest," she said.

It is a scene that is being played out across southern Africa, where chronic lack of rain is threatening mass hunger and ruin.

Climate is being fingered as the big culprit. In the space of 10 months, Buhera and many districts like it have been hammered by extremes that scientists say are consistent with forecasts about climate change.

In March 2019, the arrival of Idai unleashed devastation on eastern Zimbabwe and its neighbors Mozambique and Malawi. Over a thousand people died and the lives of millions of others were badly affected.

"Our chickens and turkeys were swept away," said Po-

sha's sister-in-law, Josephine Ganye, who now depends on food aid.

She is among the 45 million people in southern Africa that the UN has said are threatened by famine.

Its World Food Program (WFP) sent out a stark warning last month. "This hunger crisis is on a scale we've not seen before and the evidence shows it's going to get worse," said Lola Castro, WFP's regional director in southern Africa.

For the past five years, the entire southern tip of the African continent, where average temperatures are rising twice as fast as the global mean, has suffered from a significant lack of rain.

Every farmer, big or small, has been affected as well as breeders, hoteliers and teachers.

In Zimbabwe, the drought has added to a long list of crises, from stratospheric inflation to shortages of cash, petrol, medicines, water and electricity.

For many, daily life has become a nightmare. "Almost everybody in my area is food insecure," said 68-year-old Janson Neshava, who is a headman, or senior leader, in Buhera.

"We still do the traditional rain ceremonies, but to no avail. Even the wetlands are now dry and streams that used to flow throughout the year are all dry."

The WFP says that 60 percent of Zimbabwe's 15 million people are currently food insecure.

Sanders Wins Democratic Primary in New Hampshire



U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders cemented his newly-minted frontrunner status in the Democratic presidential nomination race with a win in New Hampshire.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- Bernie Sanders won New Hampshire's high-stakes Democratic primary on Tuesday, according to U.S. network projections, leaving rivals including party stalwart Joe Biden in his wake as he staked his claim to challenge President Donald Trump in November.

Sanders, the flag-bearer for the party's progressive wing, had 26 percent of votes with most of the count complete in the northeastern state, where he routed Hillary Clinton in 2016.

"Let me take this opportunity to thank the people of New Hampshire for a great victory tonight," Sanders told cheering supporters after NBC and ABC called the result in his favor.

"This victory here is the beginning of the end for Donald Trump," the senator from neighboring Vermont added as raised the roof with his rallying cry for fairer taxes and health care reform.

Indiana ex-mayor Pete Buttigieg finished in second place at 24 percent as he headed for the more difficult battlegrounds ahead.

"Now our campaign moves on to Nevada, to South Carolina, to communities across our country. And we will welcome new allies to our movement at every step," he said.

Midwestern moderate Amy Klobuchar maintained a late surge to place third on about 20 percent, while liberal Elizabeth Warren finished in fourth at about nine percent.

Trump weighed in, tweeting: "Boot-edgeedge (Buttigieg) is doing pretty well tonight. Giving Crazy Bernie a run for his money. Very interesting!" Trump tweeted.

After months atop the pack, Biden had already conceded he expected to do badly in New Hampshire, as he did a week earlier in Iowa -- and the former vice president's worst fears were beginning to materialize as he languished in fifth with just over eight percent.

The performance will be a body blow to the 77-year-old Biden, who has failed to generate the fundraising numbers or the enthusiasm levels of his rivals for the top spot on the Democratic ticket.

White House hopefuls had been seeking clarity in the Granite State after the first-in-the-nation Iowa count devolved into chaos, with Sanders and Buttigieg eventually emerging neck-and-neck.

For tech entrepreneur Andrew Yang and Colorado Senator Michael Bennet, that meant facing reality and bowing out after they failed to make an impact on Tuesday.

"You know I am the math guy, and it is clear tonight from the numbers that we are not going to win this race," Yang said.

The 78-year-old Sanders went into the race as the newly anointed national front-runner and was expected to win New Hampshire.

Buttigieg's camp will be happy with a solid result that could provide voters on the fence with much-needed reassurance after he won narrowly in Iowa.

Ukraine Hints at Compromises in Talks With Russia



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (R) and Andriy Yermak (L), a senior presidential aide, visit the settlement of Stanytsia Luhanska, Ukraine November 20, 2019.

KIEV (Dispatches) -- The Ukrainian president's new chief of staff on Wednesday stuck to Kiev's existing positions on ending the war against Russian-backed forces in the eastern Donbass region but said there could be compromises during negotiations with Moscow.

Andriy Yermak was speaking a day after his appointment by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, which coincided with Russia installing a new point person on Ukraine who is seen as less hawkish than his predecessor.

Yermak's appointment sparked criticism from opposition lawmakers in Ukraine, who said he might be too soft on Russia, prompting Zelenskyy to issue a statement denying there would be any political shift with Yermak in charge.

Relations between Kiev and Moscow collapsed after 2014 when Crimea joined Russia in a referendum and a war broke out in the Donbass region, which killed more than 13,000 people.

There are still regular casualties despite a ceasefire struck in Minsk in 2015.

Yermak rehearsed Zelenskyy's existing positions: that ending the war was Ukraine's priority, but that there could be no elections in the Donbass if Kiev

did not control the restive region.

He signaled there could be some wiggle room in talks with Russia but did not spell out what that might be.

"There can certainly be compromises during the negotiations," Yermak said. "But we have talked about this many times, and I also want to add that I am ready and will continue to do this: speak with all patriotic, competent, reasonable forces in this country."

The leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany held a peace summit in Paris in December in the so-called Normandy format. Yermak said Ukraine was willing to carry out the agreements made there.

There have been some signs of a thaw in relations, including prisoner swaps last year that Yermak worked to bring about in his previous role as a presidential aide.

Asked about Russia's new point person on Ukraine, Dmitry Kozak, Yermak said:

"I have not spoken to Mr Kozak since his appointment and my appointment."

"But regardless of who represents the Russian Federation in the negotiations in Minsk or in the Normandy format, the principles declared by President Zelenskyy are unchanged."

News in Brief

LAHORE, Pakistan (AFP) -- The alleged mastermind of a deadly attack on India's financial capital over a decade ago has been jailed in Pakistan for nearly six years on separate terror charges, his lawyer said Wednesday. Hafiz Saeed was found guilty of "being part of a banned terrorist outfit" and for "having illegal property", his lawyer Imran Gill told AFP. He is wanted in India for allegedly planning the shocking 2008 attack in Mumbai, when 10 militants armed with assault rifles, hand grenades and other weapons killed 166 people and injured hundreds more. It took the authorities three days to regain full control of the city. The firebrand cleric -- with a \$10 million bounty on his head -- is the leader of the Jamaat-ud-Dawa charity. Its militant wing Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) is believed to be responsible for the Mumbai attacks.

CAIRO (Reuters) -- Forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar have blocked flights carrying United Nations staff to and from Libya, hampering humanitarian and mediation efforts, the UN mission said on Wednesday. Haftar's eastern-based Libya National Army (LNA) has on several occasions in recent weeks refused to grant permission for the regular UN flights to land, the UN mission in Libya (UNSMIL) said in a statement. We are not receiving security assurances from the LNA for the landing of aircraft in western Libya and it's been going on for at least three weeks," UNSMIL spokesman Jean Alam said, adding that this was affecting the mission's flights and humanitarian ones. A humanitarian source said that Haftar was imposing a "no-fly zone" for Tripoli and there were concerns that UN flights could be a possible target. The LNA has been trying since last April to capture the capital Tripoli from the internationally recognized government but has failed to breach the city's defenses.

HANOI/BANGKOK (Reuters) -- Cambodia has agreed to let a cruise ship that has been turned away by five countries over fears that someone aboard may have the coronavirus dock and disembark its passengers, the Holland America Line said on Wednesday. For nearly two weeks, the MS Westerdam, a ship of healthy passengers, had been sailing throughout Asia after being turned away by Japan, Taiwan, Guam and the Philippines over fears that someone on the cruise could have the new flu-like virus that has killed more than 1,100 people, almost all of them in China. The ship is expected to arrive in Cambodia around 7 a.m. (0000 GMT) on Thursday, he said. The latest country to shun the ship, which has 1,455 passengers and 802 crew on board, had been Thailand, where the health minister refused to grant the Westerdam permission to dock.

SYDNEY (Reuters) -- Australia is on track to meet just two of its targets aimed at improving the lives of its Indigenous people, including increasing life expectancy and improving literacy, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said on Wednesday. In 2007, Australia introduced seven targets designed to address inequalities that see the country's 700,000 Indigenous people track near the bottom of its 25 million citizens in almost every economic and social indicator. But Morrison said Australia's government is policy is failing and will be replaced. "We perpetuated an ingrained way of thinking passed down over two centuries and more, and it was the belief that we knew better than our Indigenous peoples. We don't," Morrison told Australia's Parliament. "We also thought we understood their problems better than they did. We don't. They live them. We must see the gap we wish to close, not from our viewpoints, but from the viewpoint of Indigenous Australians." Morrison said new Indigenous policies will be designed following consultation with its first people, with whom Australia has struggled to reconcile following hundreds of years of brutal segregation.

DUBLIN (Reuters) -- Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said on Wednesday it was likely he would be the next leader of the opposition after government formation talks but that his Fine Gael party would be willing to help form a government if Sinn Fein fails to. Left-wing Irish nationalists Sinn Fein surprisingly secured the most votes at the weekend's election, but its low number of candidates meant it finished marginally behind the center-right Fianna Fail and just ahead of Fine Gael by number of seats. Sinn Fein leader Mary Lou McDonald said her party "won the election" and would try to form a leftist-led government with smaller parties and independent lawmakers -- technically possible but a task even some of her senior colleagues said was highly unlikely to succeed. Fine Gael has strongly ruled out governing with Sinn Fein, citing policy differences and the nationalist party's role as the former political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- Republican lawmakers on Wednesday proposed legislation setting a goal for the United States to plant a trillion trees by 2050 to fight global warming, a plan intended to address climate change by sucking carbon out of the air instead of by cutting emissions. The proposed legislation reflects an acknowledgement in the Republican party of rising voter demand for action on climate change, even as it seeks to preserve the economic benefits of an historic drilling boom that has made the United States the world's biggest oil and gas producer. Other elements of the plan, which will be released in additional bills over the coming weeks, will focus on sequestering carbon from power plants, recycling plastics and boosting "clean" energy, including natural gas and nuclear, according to congressional staff.