

China Angry as U.S. Paper Calls It ‘Sick Man of Asia’



Geng Shuang, a spokesman for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on a television screen in Hong Kong in December.

BEIJING (AP) — China on Wednesday said it has revoked the press credentials of three reporters for the U.S. newspaper Wall Street Journal over a headline for an opinion column deemed racist by the government.

The expulsions come after the Trump administration on Tuesday designated five state-run Chinese news outlets that operate in the United States as “foreign missions,” requiring them to register their properties and employees in the U.S. China said it reserves the right to respond to what it called a mistaken policy.

The headline on the Journal's opinion column referred to the current virus outbreak in China and called the country the “Real Sick Man of Asia.”

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said the Feb. 3 op-ed by Bard College Professor Walter Russel Mead “smears the efforts of the Chinese government and people on fighting (the virus) epidemic.”

“The editors used such a racially discriminatory title, triggering indignation and condemnation among the Chinese people and the international community,” he said in a statement.

He said the expulsions came after the Journal refused demands to “make an official apology and hold the persons involved accountable.”

The term “sick man of Asia” was originally used to describe China more than a century ago when it suffered internal di-

visions and was forced to accept unequal treaties with Western powers.

President and Communist Party leader Xi Jinping has repeatedly stated that China will make no concessions when it comes to national territory, sovereignty or dignity.

In one recent case, China cut commercial ties with the U.S. National Basketball Association after an official with the Houston Rockets team tweeted support for Hong Kong protesters whom China has derided as separatists.

The Journal identified the three journalists as Deputy Bureau Chief Josh Chin, reporter Chao Deng — both U.S. citizens — and reporter Philip Wen, an Australian. They have been given five days to leave the country, according to Jonathan Cheng, the Journal's China bureau chief.

Following the publication of Mead's opinion column this month, a foreign ministry spokeswoman lashed out at him, saying he should be “ashamed of your words, your arrogance, your prejudice and your ignorance.”

In an opinion piece on its website, the Global Times newspaper published by the ruling Communist Party said the expulsions and Washington's actions against the five Chinese media outlets were “not entirely coincidental” and implied a strong connection between the two.

“Taken together, they reflect that the ideological clash between the U.S. and China is intensifying,” the newspaper said.

Japan Under Fire for Debacle as Passengers Leave Ship



An unidentified passenger is surrounded by the media after he disembarked from the quarantined Diamond Princess cruise ship, Feb. 19, 2020, in Yokohama, near Tokyo.

YOKOHAMA, Japan (AP) — About 500 passengers left the cruise ship Diamond Princess on Wednesday at the end of a much-criticized two-week quarantine aboard the vessel, docked in Japan, that failed to stop the spread of the new virus among passengers and crew.

The quarantine's flop was underlined as authorities announced 79 more cases, bringing the total on the ship to 621. Results were still pending for some other passengers and crew among the original 3,711 people on board.

Japan's government has been questioned over its decision to keep

people on the ship, which some experts have called a perfect virus incubator. The Diamond Princess is the site of the most infections outside of China, where the illness named COVID-19 emerged late last year.

Many foreign governments say they won't let passengers from the ship return unless they go through another quarantine period, so it was striking to see passengers disembark, get into taxis and disappear into Yokohama, where the ship is docked.

Japanese soldiers helped escort some passengers, including an elderly man in a wheelchair who wore a mask and held a cane. Some passen-

gers got on buses to be transported to train stations. Some people still in their cabins waved farewell from their balconies to those who had already been processed.

“I'm a bit concerned if I'm OK to get off the ship, but it was getting very difficult physically,” a 77-year-old man from Saitama, near Tokyo, who got off with his wife, told Kyodo News. “For now, we just want to celebrate.”

Those disembarking with negative virus tests have fulfilled the Japanese quarantine requirement and are free to walk out and go home on public transportation, Health Minister Katsunobu Kato said Wednesday.

He said the plan was approved by experts at the National Institute of Infectious Diseases. Passengers are only asked to watch their health carefully for a few days and notify local health authorities if they have any symptoms or worries, he said.

Some passengers said on Twitter they received health forms earlier in the morning asking if they had symptoms such as a headache, fever or coughing. Passengers who tested negative and had no symptoms still had to get their body temperature checked before leaving.

Passengers were provided with a certificate stating their negative test results and completion of the quarantine.

Ex-Malaysia PM: Suicide by MH370 Pilot Likely

KUALA LUMPUR (Reuters) -- Malaysia has never ruled out the possibility that missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 could have been downed by a suicidal pilot, the country's former prime minister Najib Razak said on Wednesday.

Najib, who was premier when MH370 vanished with 239 people on board nearly six years ago, was responding to remarks by former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott that Malaysian leaders had considered from the outset that flight captain Zaharie Ahmad Shah may have committed mass murder.

“My very clear understanding from the very top levels of the Malaysian government is that from very, very early on here, they thought it was a murder-suicide by the pilot,” Abbott said in a clip from a Sky News documentary on the tragedy airing Wednesday.

Najib told online news portal Free Malaysia Today that Malaysian officials had considered such a scenario during their investigation but had chosen not to make their views public.

“It would have been deemed unfair and legally irresponsible since the black boxes and cockpit voice recorders had not been found and hence, there was no conclusive proof whether the pilot was solely or jointly responsible,” Najib was quoted as saying.

“Again I must stress that this possible scenario was never

ruled out during the search effort and investigations, where no effort was spared.”

A spokesman for Najib confirmed his remarks. Malaysia's transport ministry declined to comment. Authorities had previously said there was nothing suspicious in the captain's background, training or mental health, but did not rule out the possibility that the aircraft had been deliberately taken off course.

Najib said there were several reasons for authorities to suspect Zaharie's involvement, including his ownership of a home flight simulator and findings showing that MH370's transponders were switched off shortly after the plane left Malaysian airspace.

Flight MH370 became one of the world's greatest aviation mysteries when it disappeared on its way from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing on March 8, 2014.

Malaysia, China, and Australia, called off a two-year, A\$200 million (\$130 million) underwater search in the southern Indian Ocean in January 2017 after finding no trace of the aircraft.

A second three-month search, led by U.S. firm Ocean Infinity, ended similarly in May 2018.

Najib lost a general election that month. He is now facing dozens of corruption charges over alleged involvement in a multibillion-dollar scandal at a state fund in which he has plead not guilty.

Pompeo Fails to Court African States After Visit



U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is seen with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia in Addis Ababa on Feb. 18, 2020.

NAIROBI, Kenya (Dispatches) — U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday closed a three-nation Africa tour with a thinly-veiled swipe at China.

“Countries should be wary of authoritarian regimes with empty promises. They breed corruption, dependency,” Pompeo boasted in a speech to diplomats and business leaders at the UN's Economic Commission for Africa in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

“They run the risk that the prosperity and sovereignty and progress that Africa so needs and desperately wants won't happen.”

Pompeo in his remarks did not explicitly mention China -- Africa's largest trading partner -- but analysts predicted ahead of his trip that he would attempt to pitch the U.S. as an alternative source of investment.

On Wednesday Pompeo name-checked U.S. companies operating in all three countries on his Africa tour, the first by a U.S. cabinet-level official in 19 months: Bechtel in Senegal, Chevron in Angola and Coca-Cola in Ethiopia.

He criticized a proposed constitutional amendment in South Africa that would allow private property to be expropriated without compensation -- a plan that seeks to overcome inequalities set down in the apartheid era.

The amendment would be “disastrous for that economy and most importantly for the South African people,” Pompeo claimed before leaving later for Riyadh.

Pompeo's attempt to lay out a positive vision for U.S. cooperation with Africa has been undermined by President Donald Trump's Af-

rica policy so far, analysts say.

Critics are quick to cite Trump's widely-reported remarks in 2018 when he used a profanity to describe African and poorer Western Hemisphere nations whose citizens migrate to the United States.

Washington is currently discussing military cuts in Africa, and the U.S. recently announced tightened visa rules targeting Africa's most populous country, Nigeria, as well as Tanzania, Sudan and Eritrea.

“Pompeo is unlikely to undo the damage from the Trump administration's travel bans, the proposed budget cuts, or the president's disparaging comments about the region,” said Judd Devermont, Africa director at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think-tank in Washington.

Countries like Ethiopia have benefitted from Chinese engagement, rendering Pompeo's message less effective, said Abel Abate Demissie, an Ethiopian political analyst.

“It is undeniable that Chinese investment was quite crucial in keeping Ethiopia on track as one of the world's fastest-growing economies for many years,” Abel said.

He added that much Chinese money has gone toward tangible projects like roads and buildings, while American money is more often funneled to “less visible” fields.

“The fact that Chinese loans and sometimes grants have less bureaucracy also makes it quite convenient for Ethiopia and Africa at large,” Abel said.

China has funneled cash and loans into infrastructure projects across the continent.

EU Unveils Plan to Regulate Artificial Intelligence



President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen looks at the invention ‘Do you Speak Robot?’ at the AI Xperience Center at the VUB in Brussels, Feb. 18, 2020.

LONDON (AP) — The European Union unveiled proposals Wednesday to regulate artificial intelligence that call for strict rules and safeguards on risky applications of the rapidly developing technology.

The report is part of the bloc's wider digital strategy aimed at maintaining its position as the global pacesetter on technology standards. Technology companies seeking to tap Europe's vast and lucrative market, including those from the U.S. and China, would have to play by any new rules that eventually come into force.

The EU's executive Commission said it wants to develop a “framework for trustworthy artificial intelligence.” European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had ordered her top deputies to come up with a coordinated European approach to artificial intelligence and data strategy 100 days after she took office in December.

“We will be particularly careful where essential human rights and interests are at stake,” von der Leyen told reporters in Brussels. “Artificial intelligence must serve people, and therefore artificial intelligence must always comply with people's rights.”

Clear rules are needed to address “high-risk AI systems” such as those in health, policing or transport, which should be “transparent, traceable and guarantee human oversight,” the EU report said.

Other artificial intelligence systems could come with labels certifying that they are in line with EU standards.

The technology can be used to improve healthcare, making farming more efficient or combat climate change. But it also brings risks such as “opaque decision-making, gender-based or other discrimination, privacy intrusion or being used for criminal purposes, the report said.

Human-centered guidelines for AI are essential because “none of the positive things will be achieved if we distrust the technology,” said Margrethe Vestager, the executive vice president overseeing the EU's digital strategy.

Under the proposals, which are open for public consultation until May 19, EU authorities want to be able to test and certify the data used by the algorithms that power artificial intelligence in the same way they check cosmetics, cars and toys.

It's important to use unbiased data to train high-risk artificial intelligence systems so they can avoid discrimination, the commission said.

EU leaders said they also wanted to open a debate on when to allow facial recognition in remote identification systems, which are used to scan crowds to check people's faces to those on a database. It's considered the “most intrusive form” of the technology and is prohibited in the EU except in special cases.

News in Brief

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia said on Wednesday that new U.S. sanctions on a subsidiary of Russian oil giant Rosneft over Venezuela were a violation of international law and that they would not affect Moscow's ties with Caracas. The Kremlin was commenting after Washington tightened financial restrictions on Venezuela, blacklisting a Rosneft subsidiary that U.S. President Donald Trump's administration has said provides a lifeline to Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's government.

CAIRO (Reuters) -- Libya's internationally recognized Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj said on Wednesday talk about resuming peace negotiations has been overtaken by events on the ground amid ongoing shelling from eastern factions trying to take Tripoli. “There must be first a strong signal from all international players who are trying to talk to us,” he told reporters at Tripoli's sea port which got shelled by eastern forces on Tuesday. Libya's unity government announced late Tuesday it would halt its participation in UN talks aimed at brokering a lasting ceasefire in the war-torn country where a fragile truce has been repeatedly violated. The pullout came after a barrage of rocket fire hit a port in the capital Tripoli -- the target of a months-long operation by eastern military commander Khalifa Haftar to oust the Government of National Accord (GNA). “We are announcing the suspension of our participation in the military talks taking place in Geneva until firm positions are adopted against the aggressor (Haftar) and his violations” of the truce, the GNA said in a press release.

MOGADISHU (Reuters) -- Al Shabaab militants killed at least 12 Somali soldiers and briefly captured a military base southwest of the capital on Wednesday, officials said, underscoring the insurgents' ability to launch attacks despite a government offensive. A suicide bomber detonated at the El Salini base before gunmen stormed in and briefly occupied it, police said. The military recaptured the base after reinforcements arrived. “They took the base and took weapons and ammunitions, this includes anti-aircraft guns fixed on pickups,” said Nur Ahmed, a police officer from Afgoye in Lower Shabelle region. Military officer Ismail Ali said 12 soldiers were killed and the commander of the base was injured. Al Shabaab claimed responsibility. “We took the base. We took two pickups with anti-aircraft guns hooked on. We destroyed four other military vehicles,” Abdiassiu Abu Musab, al Shabaab's military operation spokesman, told Reuters. He said the attackers had killed 15 soldiers. Al Shabaab has been fighting the UN-backed Somali government for more than a decade in a bid to impose their strict version of Islamic law. The Horn of Africa nation has been in the midst of civil war since 1991, after warlords overthrew a dictator but then turned on each other.

NEW DELHI (Reuters) -- India's cabinet has approved a plan to buy U.S. naval helicopters, a government source said on Wednesday, without giving details. Reuters reported this month that India was likely to give final approval to a \$2.6 billion deal for Lockheed Martin helicopters ahead of a visit by U.S. President Donald Trump.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- U.S. Attorney General William Barr is considering resigning over President Donald Trump's tweets about Justice Department investigations, a source familiar with the situation told Reuters, while the department said he was not leaving. “The Attorney General has no plans to resign,” Justice Department spokeswoman Kerri Kupec said in a post on Twitter late Tuesday night. The Washington Post separately reported on Tuesday that Barr has told people close to Trump about his concerns, but it was not immediately clear if Barr had spoken to the president directly. “He has his limits,” the newspaper quoted one person familiar with Barr's thinking as saying. Barr may be sharing his position with people close to Trump in hopes the president gets the message and stops tweeting about the Justice Department's criminal investigations, the Post added.

UNITED NATIONS (AFP) -- The world is failing to protect children from the health dangers posed by climate change and poor diet, a landmark UN report said Wednesday, warning that every child is under “immediate threat.” According to more than 40 of the world's pre-eminent child and adolescent health experts, not one country on Earth is adequately protecting the next generation from the impacts of carbon emissions, the destruction of nature and high-calorie and processed foods. They said that excessive carbon emissions, produced overwhelmingly by wealthier nations, “threaten the future of all children” and will burden them with additional health dangers, from deadly heatwaves to the increased spread of tropical diseases. The report, commissioned by the World Health Organization and UNICEF, also highlights the threat children face from harmful marketing of fat- and sugar-laden foods, alcohol and tobacco. “The big message is that no single country is protecting children's health today and for their future,” said Anthony Costello, professor of International Child Health and Director of the Institute for Global Health at University College London.