

U.S. Moves to Sell Sophisticated Arms to Taiwan



An airman guides a U.S. Air Force MQ-9 Reaper drone as it taxis to the runway at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan, March 9, 2016.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- The White House is moving forward with more sales of sophisticated military equipment to Taiwan, telling Congress on Tuesday that it will seek to sell Taipei MQ-9 drones and a coastal defensive missile system, sources familiar with the situation said.

One of the eight sources said that in total the sales were valued at around \$5 billion. Very often figures for U.S. foreign military sales include costs for training, spares and fees making the values difficult to pinpoint.

Reuters broke the news in September that as many as seven major weapons systems were making their way through the U.S. export process.

The pre-notification to Congress for the General Atomics-made MQ-9 drones is the first after President Donald Trump's administration moved

the State Department sends its formal notification to the legislative branch.

Leaders of the committees were notified that the planned weapons sales had been approved by the U.S. State Department which oversees foreign military sales, said the sources, who are familiar with the situation but declined to be identified.

Reuters reported on Monday that informal notifications had already been sent to Congress for a truck-based rocket launcher made by Lockheed Martin Corp called a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), long-range air-to-ground missiles made by Boeing called SLAM-ER, and external sensor pods for F-16 jets that allow the real-time transmission of imagery and data from the aircraft back to ground stations.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said U.S. arms sales to Taiwan severely damaged China's sovereignty and security interests. He urged Washington to clearly recognize the harm they caused and immediately cancel them, adding: "China will make a legitimate and necessary response according to how the situation develops."

China considers Taiwan a wayward province that it has vowed to reunite with the mainland, by force if necessary.

Speaking last week, the U.S. national security adviser, Robert O'Brien, said Taiwan needed to turn itself into a porcupine to make to make clear to China the risks of attempting to invade.

ahead with its plan to sell more drones to more countries by reinterpreting an international arms control agreement called the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR).

Tuesday's other congressional notification was for land-based Harpoon anti-ship missiles, made by Boeing Co, to serve as coastal defense cruise missiles. One of the sources said the approximately 100 cruise missiles that were notified to Capitol Hill would have a cost of about \$2 billion.

A Taiwan government source acknowledged that "Taiwan has five weapon systems that are moving through the process."

The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations and House of Representatives Foreign Affairs committees have the right to review, and block, weapons sales under an informal review process before

Supercomputer Shows Humidity Affects Coronavirus Spread



A schoolgirl walks among residents along the Kenya-Uganda railway line during the partial reopening of schools in Kibera slums of Nairobi, Kenya October 12, 2020.

TOKYO (Reuters) -- A Japanese supercomputer showed that humidity can have a large effect on the dispersion of virus particles, pointing to heightened coronavirus contagion risks in dry, indoor conditions during the winter months.

The finding suggests that the use of humidifiers may help limit infections during times when window ventilation is not possible, according to a study released on Tuesday by re-

search giant Riken and Kobe University.

The researchers used the Fugaku supercomputer to model the emission and flow of virus-like particles from infected people in a variety of indoor environments.

Air humidity of lower than 30% resulted in more than double the amount of aerosolized particles compared to levels of 60% or higher, the simulations showed.

The study also indicated that clear face shields are not as effective as masks in preventing the spread of aerosols. Other findings showed that diners are more at risk from people to their side compared to across the table, and the number of singers in choruses should be limited and spaced out.

There has been a growing consensus among health experts that the COVID-19 virus can be spread through the air. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revised its guidance this month to say the pathogen can linger in the air for hours.

The Riken research team led by Makoto Tsubokura has previously used the Fugaku supercomputer to model contagion conditions in trains, work spaces, and class rooms.

Notably, the simulations showed that opening windows on commuter trains can increase the ventilation by two to three times, lowering the concentration of ambient microbes.

"People's blind fear or unfounded confidence against the infection of COVID-19 is simply because it is invisible," Tsubokura said.

Tata Pulls Muslim Ad After Attack by Hindu Extremists

NEW DELHI (AFP) -- One of India's top jewelry retailers has withdrawn an advert featuring an interfaith baby shower after a vicious backlash on social media by Hindu hardliners who said it glorified "love jihad".

Critics of the withdrawal said it exemplified the atmosphere of religious intolerance towards minorities that has grown since Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power six years ago.

The advert by Tanishq -- whose owners are from the Parsi minority who follow the Zoroastrian religion -- showed a Muslim family organizing a traditional baby shower for their Hindu daughter-in-law.

The company said the idea behind the "Ekatvam" (unity and oneness) collection was to "celebrate the coming together of people from different walks of life".

"We are deeply saddened with the inadvertent stirring of emotions and withdraw this film keeping in mind the hurt sentiments and well being of our employees, partners and store staff," a statement said late Tuesday.

The NDTV channel reported Wednesday that a Tanishq store was attacked in Gujarat and the manager forced to write an apology note.

Despite the advert's withdrawal, #BoycottTanishq was trending on Twitter, with one user saying it was meant to showcase the "love jihad collection".

"Majority of your costumers are Hindu and u are hurting their sentiments. Shame on you," wrote another user.

"Love jihad" is a recent term coined by Hindu extremists to accuse Muslim men of seducing Hindu women and making them convert -- a flashpoint issue in the officially secular country.

Inter-religious relationships are rare in still hugely traditional India, particularly in rural areas where marriages are mostly arranged.

Those who cross the boundaries of caste and religion are often ostracized and sometimes killed, ostensibly to preserve family honor.

As has been the case in other similar episodes, by Wednesday no senior member of Modi's government had commented. "Top leaders (of the ruling party) never come out and condemn these hate campaigns. Because they are totally silent, they seem to be condoning such behavior," said political analyst Parsa Venkateshwar Rao.

"This creates an atmosphere of hatred all over," he told AFP.

Accounts Falsely Claim to Be Trump's Black Supporters



The Twitter accounts sometimes claimed to belong to veterans or law enforcement.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- Twitter Inc on Tuesday said it had suspended a number of accounts that claimed to be owned by Black supporters of President Donald Trump and his re-election campaign, saying the accounts broke its rules on spam and platform manipulation.

"Our teams are working diligently to investigate this activity and will take action in line with the Twitter Rules if Tweets are found to be in violation," a spokeswoman for the social media company said.

A review by Reuters of some of the suspended accounts showed they often used images of real people that did not match their names and posted identical language in their messages, including the phrase: "YES IM BLACK AND IM VOTING FOR TRUMP!!!"

The accounts sometimes claimed to be owned by military veterans or members of law enforcement.

Darren Linvill, a social media disinformation researcher at Clemson University who said he had been tracking the accounts since Saturday, found more than two dozen accounts that collectively had 265,000 retweets or Twitter mentions. He said the accounts ranged in size but some had attracted tens of thousands of

followers.

Twitter declined to specify the number of accounts suspended or to comment beyond its statement.

Twitter's policy against platform manipulation and spam prohibits coordination among accounts to artificially influence conversation, including the use of multiple or fake accounts.

Linvill said some of the accounts used photos of Black American men that had appeared in news articles. Some used identical images of Trump as their header image.

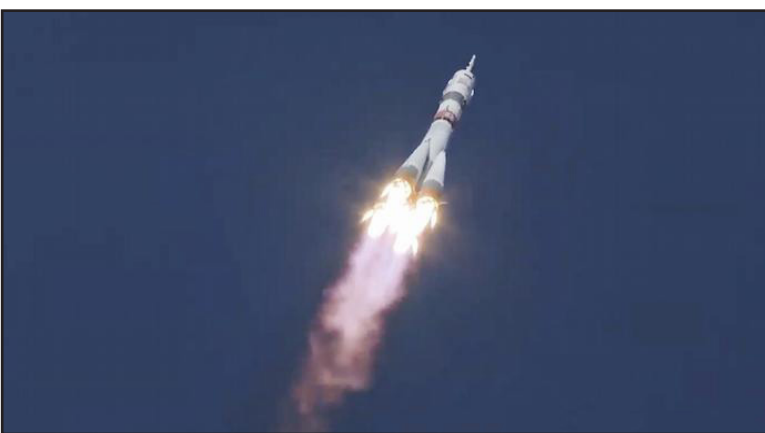
The Trump campaign did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment on the investigation, which was first reported by the Washington Post.

Linvill told Reuters that most of the accounts were created in 2017, but had become more active in the past two months. He said all the accounts he had been tracking in the group had now been suspended by Twitter, but the damage had already been done.

"It doesn't matter if Twitter's shutting you down in four days, they've already had their impact," Linvill said.

Twitter declined to answer Reuters' questions about the origin of the accounts.

Russia Launches ISS Journey, Cutting Time by Half



The Soyuz rocket is blasting off from Kazakhstan on Oct. 14, 2020.

ALMATY, Kazakhstan (AFP) -- Two cosmonauts and a NASA astronaut blasted off on a fast-track journey to the International Space Station Wednesday, in the first such launch aboard a Russian capsule since SpaceX's game-changing debut manned flight from US soil.

Sergey Ryzhikov and Sergey Kud-Sverchkov of Roscosmos and NASA's Kathleen Rubins launched from the Russian-operated Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan at 0545 GMT on Wednesday.

A NASA TV commentator said everything was normal, citing communications between Russian mission control and the crew, while Roscosmos said the capsule had successfully gone into orbit.

Their journey was the first manned flight to the ISS to last just over three hours before docking -- a new fast-track profile that takes half the time of standard trips to the orbital lab.

Only an unmanned Progress cargo space ship has previously used this profile, which requires just two orbits before docking.

Stringent precautions, including tighter quarantine and mask-wearing before launch, have been taken due to the coronavirus pandemic but the astronauts and

space officials have rejected any concerns about a risk of infection on the station.

The launch is sandwiched between two SpaceX launches -- the first manned spaceflights to the ISS under NASA's aegis since 2011.

The emergence of private players SpaceX and Boeing -- part of NASA's Commercial Crew Program -- has fueled talk of a new "space race" between a number of countries.

But the men and women that fly to the space station have played down talk of competition and focused instead on space travel's ability to bring rival nations together for a common cause.

Ryzhikov, 46-year-old former military pilot, has spent 173 days in space compared to Rubins' 115 while Kud-Sverchkov, 37, is flying for the first time.

On the eve of the launch, Ryzhikov expressed sadness over ongoing fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh and said he hoped the example of the ISS could help "spread love, friendship and comradeship".

The ISS, which has been permanently occupied since 2000, has been a rare example of cooperation between Moscow and Washington, but the project may be entering its final decade.

News in Brief

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan (AFP) -- Kyrgyzstan's parliament on Wednesday gave its blessing to populist Sadyr Japarov as prime minister, with the Central Asian state seeking a path out of crisis following an annulled election. Japarov, who was freed from jail by supporters last week, has made several attempts to secure the post since unrest over the parliamentary election threatened to displace the central government. His latest effort was delayed after President Sooronbay Jeenbekov said he could not sign off on the appointment unless parliament could achieve a quorum. On Wednesday, more than 80 lawmakers from the 120-member parliament attended an extraordinary session and Japarov secured the backing of the ruling coalition. Kyrgyzstan, a landlocked republic of 6.5 million people, has had two presidents overthrown by street protests since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

SEOUL (Reuters) -- North Korean leader Kim Jong Un promised to help typhoon-hit areas recover and to build at least 25,000 houses over the next five years, state media said on Wednesday. Visiting one of the worst-hit areas of North Korea, Kim expressed regret over the more than 50-year-old houses in which people have been living and urged the military to embark on a more ambitious construction plan, KCNA said. The visit came after Kim appeared to shed tears at the weekend as he thanked citizens for their sacrifices, in the most striking demonstration yet of how he is relying on his "man-of-the-people" persona to tackle his country's deepening crises. The military has reached a construction level of 60% for at least 2,300 houses in the Komdok area in South Hamgyong province, northeast of the capital, Pyongyang, the state media said.

TOKYO (Dispatches) -- Japan plans to sign an agreement with Vietnam to allow it to export defense equipment and technology to the country, part of a move to strengthen defense capabilities of Indo-Pacific nations to counter alleged Chinese maritime advances, the Nikkei newspaper reported on Wednesday. Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga on Tuesday told his ruling Liberal Democratic Party that he will visit Vietnam and Indonesia next week, the newspaper said, adding he was expected to sign the Vietnam deal during the trip. Japan ended a decades-old ban on overseas arms sales in 2014 to help beef up the nation's military and lower the unit cost of home-built military equipment but has so far struggled to strike export deals for finished products. Japan's only export deal for a finished product has been one signed with the Philippines in August for the export of a warning and control radar system developed by Mitsubishi Electric, the Nikkei said.

SHENZHEN, China (Reuters) -- Shenzhen will strengthen property rights and protection of entrepreneurs, China's President Xi Jinping said Wednesday in a speech to mark the establishment of the country's first economic zone in the southern city four decades earlier. In his speech, Xi praised the city for "achieving miracles" and said it "must carry out development with the courage to break the ground and to strive to be the first." A testing ground for the reforms that have spurred China's high-paced growth over the last four decades, Xi touted Shenzhen as symbolic of China's emergence as a global economic power. The Shenzhen government will get more leeway to pursue reforms and become a "model city for a strong socialist country," Xi said. On Sunday, the government published plans to increase foreign investment in the city, encourage foreign talent and reduce red tape in sectors including energy and telecoms. Xi also alluded to "turbulence" in the global economy from rising protectionism and unilateralism, and emphasized that China would pursue a "dual circulation" model that relies more on domestic consumption, while attracting foreign investment.

BANGKOK (Reuters) -- Thousands of Thai anti-government protesters set off on a planned march towards Government House in Bangkok on Wednesday to press their demands for the departure of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and a new constitution. The demonstration is the latest in three months of action that have put the greatest pressure in years on an establishment long dominated by the army and palace. "Down with dictatorship. Long live democracy," the marchers chanted as they moved off from Democracy Monument, where they had assembled face to face with thousands of yellow clad royalist supporters.

HANOI (Reuters) -- Vietnam deployed helicopters and soldiers on Wednesday to search for dozens of people feared dead in two catastrophic landslides near a hydropower dam, triggered by adverse weather that aid groups warned could overwhelm the most resilient communities. The first of hundreds of rescuers with boats and army vehicles battled through blocked roads to reach the dam site in the remote mountainous area of central Vietnam early on Wednesday, hoping to find survivors among at least 30 people missing after Monday's mudslides. Intense rains since early October have caused floods and mudslides that have killed at least 39 people in central Vietnam, while more heavy rainfall is expected until early next week on several fronts, including from tropical storm Nangka, which made landfall earlier on Wednesday.