

U.S. Urges Taiwan to Build Up Military Against China



Taiwan's military police perform during the National Day in front of the Presidential Office in Taipei on Oct. 10, 2020.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- A top White House official on Friday urged Taiwan to build up its military capabilities to protect against what it called a possible invasion by China, claiming Beijing would have that ability in 10 to 15 years.

President Donald Trump's National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien told the Aspen Security Forum that an alleged missile attack by China, which regards Taiwan as a rebel province, would be much too destructive.

An amphibious attack, he claimed, is a possibility, though at the moment allegedly beyond China's capability.

But China could combine that threat with "grey zone" operations, embargos, harassment and other actions to intimidate the island if Taipei does not build up its defense, O'Brien claimed.

"What we told our Taiwanese friends is knowing all this, whether there's an amphibious landing, a missile attack, a grey zone-type operation, they really need to fortify themselves."

"Taiwan needs to start looking at some asymmetric and anti-access area denial strategies... and really fortify itself in a manner that would deter the Chinese from any sort of

amphibious invasion or even a grey zone operation against them," said O'Brien.

China has sent attack and surveillance aircraft into Taiwan airspace and ships near its waters over the past year amid provocative moves by the island which has hosted a number of U.S. officials.

Earlier this week Beijing released video of a military exercise simulating an invasion featuring missiles and amphibious landings.

At the same time, news reports said Taiwan was close to buying missile systems from the United States.

For decades, Taiwan's security has relied in part on close relations with the United States. But there is always ambiguity over whether Washington would intervene if China moves to retake Taiwan.

While China has a large number of missiles pointed at Taiwan, O'Brien said he didn't think Beijing currently wants to attack the island.

Noting China's massive naval buildup, though, he claimed: "Maybe in 10 or 15 years, they'd be in better shape to do it."

Defense News reported this week that the United States is planning to sell several arms systems, including missiles and Reaper drones, to Taiwan.

Sarkozy Under Probe for Receiving Money From Gaddafi



France's President Nicolas Sarkozy (L) greets Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in the courtyard of the Elysee Palace in Paris as he arrives for a five day official visit December 10, 2007.

PARIS (Dispatches) -- French prosecutors said Friday that they had slapped criminal conspiracy charges on former president Nicolas Sarkozy over claims he used Libyan cash for his 2007 election campaign.

The charge for "membership in a criminal conspiracy" was brought on Monday, the prosecutors told AFP.

It adds to charges lodged in 2018 of "passive corruption," "benefitting from embezzled public funds" and "illegal campaign financing" for which Sarkozy already faces trial.

The latest charge, which can be appealed under French law, came after prosecutors interviewed the rightwing conservative for more than 40 hours over four days.

Prosecutors suspect that Sarkozy and his associates received dozens of

millions of euros from the regime of former strongman Muammar Gaddafi to help finance his election bid.

Last month, a Paris appeals court threw out Sarkozy's bid to have the investigation dismissed, making a trial more likely.

Sarkozy, 65, denies the charges that were sparked by investigative website Mediapart in 2012, when it published a document purporting to show that Gaddafi agreed to give Sarkozy up to 50 million euros (\$59 million at current rates).

In his defense Sarkozy -- who is himself a trained lawyer -- has claimed presidential immunity, and said there is no legal basis in France for prosecuting someone for misusing funds from a foreign country.

Judges are also investigating claims

by a French-Lebanese businessman, Ziad Takieddine, who said he delivered suitcases carrying a total of five million euros from the Libyan regime to Sarkozy's chief of staff in 2006 and 2007.

Sarkozy's former ministers Claude Gueant and Eric Woerth are also charged in the case, which is not the only legal headache for the former rightwing president, who is no longer active in politics.

He has also been charged in two other cases, one relating to fake invoices devised to mask overspending on his failed 2012 re-election campaign, and another for alleged influence peddling.

Having already stepped back from a front-line public role in 2016 after he failed with a bid to run again for president, Sarkozy said after being charged in 2018 that for him "politics is finished".

During their time in power, Sarkozy and Gaddafi enjoyed surprisingly cordial ties, with the French president allowing the Libyan strongman pitch his Bedouin tent opposite the Elysee Palace on a state visit to France just months after his election.

However, four years later in 2011 Sarkozy joined the West-led military campaign that carpet-bombed Libyan capital of Tripoli and other key installations to force Gaddafi's downfall, leaving oil-rich country in total disarray -- a situation that still persists today.

Johnson Tells Brits to Prepare for No-Deal With EU

LONDON (AFP) -- Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Friday kept the door open to more Brexit talks but insisted Britain was ready to slam it shut unless the EU offers "fundamental change" in its tactics, as the clock ticks down to a potentially messy divorce.

Johnson was responding after the European Union at summit talks Thursday demanded he give ground on key stumbling blocks while also proposing a fresh round of talks next week in London.

The summit outcome appeared to rule out a comprehensive, Canada-style free trade agreement between the EU and Britain, Johnson said, accusing the 27-nation bloc of failing "to negotiate seriously" in recent months.

"They want the continued ability to control our legislative freedom, our fisheries, in a way that is obviously unacceptable to an independent country," he said in a broadcast interview.

He said that "unless there is some fundamental change of approach" from the EU, Britain's favored approach for an all-encompassing deal was out.

"And so with high hearts and complete confidence we will prepare to embrace the alternative," Johnson said.

He said Britain should "get ready" to operate on stripped-down World Trade Organization rules from January akin to Australia's

relationship with the EU.

"And we can do it, because we always knew that there would be change on January 1 whatever type of relationship we had," he said, pointing to sector-by-sector arrangements in areas such as social security, aviation and nuclear cooperation.

"And we will prosper mightily as an independent free-trading nation, controlling our own borders, our fisheries, and setting our own laws."

The British pound slid below \$1.29 in response to Johnson's comments but pushed the London stock market up 1.3 percent, as the weak pound lifts multinationals earning in dollars.

Johnson had set the EU summit as a deadline for a deal, but is under pressure after fresh warnings that British companies are nowhere near ready for the consequences of a cliff-edge divorce when a post-Brexit transition periods ends on December 31.

Britain wants to reassert sovereignty over its waters and refuse EU legal oversight over any deal, insisting it wants an overarching trade deal of the kind the EU adopted with Canada in 2017.

Brussels in turn stresses that Britain's economy is far more integrated with the EU's than Canada's, and that its single market must be protected from British backsliding.

Nigerian Military Warns Protesters After Crackdown



Demonstrators carry banners during a protest over alleged police brutality, in Lagos, Nigeria October 14, 2020.

ABUJA (Dispatches) -- The Nigerian military has issued a warning as protests sweep across the West African country over years of recurring police brutality.

Over the past days, thousands of mainly young Nigerians have staged demonstrations to call on the government to disband the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a policing unit accused of extrajudicial killings, extortion and torture.

At least 10 people have died and dozens injured in the street protests, which have been met with force, according to Amnesty International. Police in some states fired live ammunition, teargas and used water cannons to disperse protesters.

The demonstrators have been using the hashtag #EndSars to push for their cause, which has sparked solidarity protests around the world.

Earlier this week, the authorities dissolved the SARS and replaced it with a new tactical team, known as Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT).

However, protests have continued to escalate, with many participants demanding the government commit to prosecuting SARS officers and com-

pensating victims. Some of the demonstrators are also calling for the Inspector General of Police to resign.

In a statement released on Thursday, the army warned it could step in against "all subversive elements and troublemakers."

It also expressed its readiness "to fully support the civil authority in whatever capacity to maintain law and order and deal with any situation decisively".

"All officers and men are directed never to be distracted by anti-democratic forces and agents of disunity," it added.

Nigerian police have also maintained a heavy-handed crackdown on peaceful protests by the country's Shia Muslims.

The demonstrators have been calling for the release of top cleric Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky, who has been in detention since December 2015 after his residence in the city of Zaria was raided by Nigerian forces, during which he was beaten and lost vision in his left eye.

During the brutal arrest, three of his sons were also killed, his wife sustained serious wounds, and more than 300 of his followers lost their lives.

Thousands of Thais Join Protests Against Monarchy



Pro-democracy demonstrators gather during a protest, in Bangkok, Thailand October 17, 2020.

BANGKOK (Reuters) -- Thousands of Thais joined protests that popped up across Bangkok on Saturday in defiance of a crackdown on three months of demonstrations aimed at the government and the powerful monarchy.

Police used water cannon for the first time on Friday and shut much of the city's transport system on Saturday to try to thwart protesters, but they gathered wherever they could.

Tang, a 27-year-old office worker said she joined thousands of people protesting at the Lat Phrao station on Saturday after seeing the pictures of police firing water cannon at youth-led protesters, including many school children.

Protests have drawn tens of thousands of people to the streets to demand the removal of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a former military ruler. They have also become openly critical of King Maha Vajiralongkorn despite lese majeste laws that can mean 15 years in jail for insulting the monarchy.

On Thursday, the government banned all political gatherings of five or more people. Police have arrested more than 50 people - including several protest leaders - in the past week.

"Violent or not, all gatherings are ille-

gal," police spokesman Yingyos Thep-jammong told a news conference.

But police made no immediate attempt to stop the protest at Lat Phrao.

Government spokesman Anucha Burapachaisri told Reuters: "There is no win or lose for any side. It's all damage to the country."

The Royal Palace has made no comment on the protests but the king has said Thailand needed people who love the country and the monarchy.

Protesters say Prayuth engineered last year's election to keep power he seized in a 2014 coup - an accusation he denies.

They say the monarchy has helped perpetuate years of political influence by the army and seek to curb its powers.

The protesters at Lat Phrao chanted "Prayuth get out" and invective calling him "Tu", the premier's nickname.

"I condemn those who cracked down on the protesters and those who ordered it. You all have blood on your hands," protest leader Tattap Ruangprapaikitseree, said after being freed on bail following his arrest on Friday.

Human rights groups have condemned the dozens of arrests and the use of force against peaceful protesters.

News in Brief

WELLINGTON (Reuters) -- Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Labor Party was on track for a landslide victory in New Zealand's general election on Saturday, and could possibly form the first single-party government in decades. Labor had 50.5% of the votes, the Electoral Commission said, with 30% of ballots counted in the election that was largely a referendum on Ardern's aggressive handling of COVID-19. Of Ardern's current coalition partners, the nationalist New Zealand First Party had 2.3% and the Green Party 8.2%. Labor is on track to win 66 of the 120 seats in the country's unicameral parliament, the highest by any party since New Zealand adopted a proportional voting system in 1996. If Labor wins more than half the seats, Ardern could form the first single-party government under the current system. If she falls short, she is expected to continue to rely on the minor Greens while jettisoning New Zealand First.

CONFLANS-SAINTE-HONORINE, France (Reuters) -- French police were questioning nine people in custody on Saturday after a suspected Daesh sympathizer beheaded a school teacher in broad daylight on the street in a Paris suburb, police sources said. Police shot the attacker dead minutes after he murdered 47-year-old history teacher Samuel Paty on Friday. Investigators were seeking to establish whether he had acted alone or had accomplices. French media reported that he was an 18-year-old of Chechen origin. Prime Minister Jean Castex said the attack bore the hallmarks of Islamist terrorism and promised his government would respond. Four relatives of the attacker, including a minor, were detained in the immediate aftermath of the attack in the middle-class suburb of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, according to police sources. Five more were detained overnight, among them two parents of pupils at the College du Bois d'Aulne where the teacher was employed.

KUALA LUMPUR (Reuters) -- Malaysia's opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim on Friday said a police investigation into a list that purports to show lawmakers backing his bid for the premiership was a "malicious" attempt to pressure him into revealing the identities of his supporters. Police summoned Anwar to assist with a probe into the distribution of a list of 121 lawmakers who allegedly back his bid to take over as prime minister from Muhyiddin Yassin. The list has been circulated on social media. Anwar, who spent about two hours giving a statement to investigators, said only the king had the right to know the full details of lawmakers who he says are backing him to give majority support in parliament. He also told reporters that he was under investigation by the police for six cases, including an allegation of sodomy. Anwar on Tuesday met with King Al-Sultan Abdullah to present documentation in a bid to prove he has a "convincing" parliamentary majority to form a new government.

VIENNA (AFP) -- Austria's Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg is self-isolating after testing positive for Covid-19, his ministry said Saturday, as the country posted a new daily record for infections. Schallenberg could have contracted coronavirus during a meeting of European Union foreign ministers in Luxembourg on Monday, a foreign ministry spokeswoman told the AP news agency. "He has not presented any symptoms so far," he said. The minister has cancelled a trip planned for the coming days to Britain, Denmark, Greece and Cyprus. All members of the conservative government of Chancellor Sebastian Kurz will be tested as a precaution on Saturday. Austria reported a new high of 2,300 cases on Saturday. With a population of 8.8 million, Austria has also recorded 882 deaths since the start of the pandemic.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) and Dr Reddy's Laboratories Ltd have received renewed approval to conduct late-stage clinical trials in India of the Russian COVID-19 vaccine, the sovereign wealth fund said on Saturday. Large-scale trials of the Sputnik V vaccine in India were first announced and then knocked back by Indian regulators, who said the scale of Phase I and II trials conducted in Russia earlier this year was too small, requesting that they be repeated. Following a new agreement, India will now carry out an adaptive phase II and III human clinical trial involving 1,500 participants. RDIF, which is marketing the vaccine abroad, said on Saturday, Russia, the first country to grant regulatory approval for a novel coronavirus vaccine, is also conducting Phase III trials of Sputnik V in Belarus, Venezuela and the United Arab Emirates.

ISTANBUL (Reuters) -- Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan told Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that Canada's suspension of the export of some drone technology was not in line with the spirit of alliance, Erdogan's office said late on Friday. Canada suspended the export of some drone technology to Turkey earlier this month as it probes allegations the equipment was used by Azeri forces involved in fighting with Armenia. In a phone call on Friday, Erdogan and Trudeau discussed improving relations and increasing bilateral trade, the Turkish presidency said, adding that they also talked about overcoming issues regarding cooperation in the defence sector. "During the call, President Tayyip Erdogan said Canada's suspension of the export of some military goods to Turkey due to the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict... is against the spirit of alliance," the presidency said. Turkey and Canada are both members of NATO. Following Canada's announcement, Turkey's Foreign Ministry had said the suspension showed a double standard.