

# Bangladesh Ships 1,600 Rohingya to Remote Island



Rohingyas board a ship as they are moving to Bhasan Char island in Chattogram, Bangladesh, December 4, 2020.

CHITTAGONG, Bangladesh (Reuters) -- Bangladesh naval vessels carried some 1,600 Rohingya refugees towards a remote island in the Bay of Bengal on Friday despite complaints by refugees and humanitarian groups that some were being coerced.

Bangladesh says it is only moving refugees who are willing to go to Bhasan Char and it will ease chronic overcrowding in camps that are home to more than 1 million Rohingya, members of a Muslim minority who have fled neighboring Myanmar.

But refugees and humanitarian workers say some of the Rohingya had been coerced into going to Bhasan Char a flood-prone island that emerged from

the sea 20 years ago.

A naval official said the Rohingya were aboard seven boats, with two more carrying supplies, that set out from the southern port of Chittagong.

Refugees were packed across the decks of the naval vessels on plastic chairs. Some brought umbrellas to shelter from the sun on a journey that takes several hours.

"The government is not taking anyone to Bhasan Char forcibly. We maintain this position," Foreign Minister Abdul Momen told reporters late on Thursday.

But two Rohingya being relocated told Reuters their names appeared on lists compiled by government-appointed local leaders without their consent,

while aid workers said officials used threats and enticements to pressure people into going.

"They have taken us here forcefully," a 31-year-old man told Reuters tearfully by phone as he boarded a bus from the camps near Cox's Bazar. "Three days ago, when I heard that my family is on the list, I ran away from the block, but yesterday I was caught and taken here," he said.

An 18-year-old woman said her husband had put their names on the list thinking it was for food rations. He fled when they were told to go to Bhasan Char, she said, adding that she is also hiding in the camp.

They were among more than 730,000 Rohingya who fled Myanmar in 2017 following a military-led crackdown that the United Nations said was executed with genocidal intent.

"Not one refugee should be moved until all human rights and humanitarian concerns have been resolved and genuine informed consent is assured," said Ismail Wolff, director of the Fortify Rights group.

Human Rights Watch said it had interviewed 12 families whose names were on the lists, but had not volunteered to go.

Two aid workers, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said refugees had come under pressure from government officials who used threats and offers of cash and other enticements to persuade them to go to the island.

## Chinese Media: Some Sino-U.S. Ties 'Beyond Repair'



Chinese and U.S. flags flutter near The Bund, before U.S. trade delegation meet their Chinese counterparts for talks in Shanghai, China July 30, 2019.

BEIJING (Dispatches) -- Some damage to Sino-U.S. ties is "beyond repair" amid a new wave of Trump administration measures to counter China, Chinese state media warned, amid growing rancor underlined by an ugly Twitter spat between a U.S. senator and Chinese journalists.

Relations between the world's two largest economies have sunk to their lowest point in decades over issues such as trade, technology, security, human rights and COVID-19.

In an editorial, the government-backed China Daily said it viewed as "worrying signs" Washington's decision to limit visitor visas for members of the Chinese Communist Party and their families and a ban on Xinjiang cotton imports.

"Even if the incoming administration has any intention of easing the tensions that have been sown, and continue being sown, some damage is simply beyond repair, as the sitting U.S. president intends," the paper added.

Relations between the two countries are being shifted to "a dangerous path", the editorial said.

The U.S. government also added Chinese chipmaker SMIC and oil giant CNOOC to a blacklist of alleged military companies, prohibiting U.S. investors from buying securities issued by the firms starting late next year.

China's ambassador to the United States became the latest of the Asian nation's senior officials to signal a desire to reset the increasingly confrontational relationship as President-elect Joe Biden prepares to take office in January.

"There are always differences between the two countries. None of them justifies confrontation and war, cold or hot," Cui Tiankai said on Twitter.

However, the top U.S. spy chief accused China of preparing for "an open-ended period of confrontation with the U.S."

Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe described China on Thursday as "the greatest threat to democracy and freedom worldwide since World War II."

"Beijing is preparing for an open-ended period of confrontation with the U.S. Washington should also be prepared. Leaders must work across partisan divides to understand the threat, speak about it openly, and take action to address it," he said in an opinion article in the Wall Street Journal.

Ratcliffe also accused China of stealing U.S. defense technology to "fuel" an aggressive military modernization plan.

"The intelligence is clear: Beijing intends to dominate the U.S. and the rest of the planet economically, militarily and technologically," he said.

An exchange of insults on Thursday between U.S. Senator Marsha Blackburn and China Daily journalist Chen Weihua underscored persistent animosity.

Blackburn, a Republican and one of the more outspoken China critics, claimed without evidence on Twitter that China "has a 5,000 year history of cheating and stealing."

In response, Chen accused Blackburn of being the most "racist and ignorant" U.S. senator he has seen and calling her a "lifetime bitch."

## U.S. Congress Defies Trump on Germany Withdrawal



A U.S. soldier in Grafenwoehr, Bavaria

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- U.S. lawmakers unveiled the final version of a massive annual defense policy bill on Thursday that defies President Donald Trump's plans to withdraw troops from Germany and keep the names of Confederate generals on military bases, setting the stage for a veto fight in the last weeks before he leaves office.

The \$740 billion, 4500-page National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA, is the result of months of negotiations between Republicans and Democrats in the Senate and House of Representatives. Passed every year since 1961, it addresses everything from pay increases for U.S. troops to how many ships

or aircraft can be purchased to how to address China and Russia.

Among other things, the bill expresses support for the continued presence of U.S. forces in Germany and limits the ability of the Department of Defense to reduce the number of active-duty service members there below 34,500 without an assessment of its impact.

This defies the Pentagon's announcement in July that it would withdraw about 12,000 of the 36,000 troops from Germany, a fallout from Trump's long-simmering feud with Berlin over military spending.

If the bill is approved by Trump before the Jan. 15 deadline to withdraw troops, it also would appear to freeze his plan to slash troop

levels in Afghanistan to 2,500 from 4,500. Trump's withdrawal could then only go ahead after a risk assessment, a lengthy, labor-intensive process.

Committee aides said they expected the House would pass the bill early next week, sending it to the Senate. After that, it would go to the White House, for Trump to sign or veto.

Trump has vowed to veto because of a provision to strip the names of Confederate military leaders from U.S. bases, which was passed by both the Republican-led Senate and Democratic-led House with bipartisan support.

He also has insisted he will veto if the NDAA does not include a provision repealing legal protections - known as Section 230 - for social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter, which he has accused of stifling conservative voices during his unsuccessful 2020 re-election campaign.

The final NDAA did not include such a provision. Members of Congress said it has nothing to do with the military and should not be used to stop an important defense bill.

Committee staff said it will be difficult to override a veto with Congress in session only until year-end. If Trump garners enough support in Congress to carry out his threat, it would end the streak of passing the NDAA after 59 consecutive years.

## Azerbaijan: 2,783 Soldiers Killed in Karabakh War

BAKU (Dispatches) -- Azerbaijan said on Thursday it has lost nearly 2,800 of its soldiers in the recent war with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, the first details Baku has released about its military losses during the weeks-long clashes.

Azerbaijan's defense ministry announced that "2,783 servicemen of the Azerbaijani armed forces were killed in the patriotic war", adding that the identity of 103 of its fallen soldiers was yet to be determined via DNA tests.

The ministry added that one hundred more Azerbaijani troops were also missing.

Karabakh is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, but it has been occupied by ethnic Armenian separatists backed by Armenia since 1992 when they broke from Azerbaijan in a war that killed some 30,000 people.

The conflict re-erupted in late September, becoming the worst fighting in the region in decades.

After six weeks of deadly fighting in and around Karabakh, Yerevan and Baku eventually agreed on November 9 to end hostilities under a Moscow-brokered deal that secured territorial advances for Azerbaijan in Karabakh and seven surrounding districts.

The agreement was signed after the Azerbaijani army overwhelmed Armenian forces and threatened to advance on Karabakh's main city of Khankendi which Armenians call Stepanakert after a 19th-century Bolshevik militant.

Elsewhere in its statement, Azerbaijan's defense ministry praised the country's military, saying Azerbaijani soldiers "showed courage and heroism in the Great Patriotic War and inflicted crushing blows on the Armenian armed forces."

Armenia had earlier announced that 2,317 of its soldiers were killed during the war which also killed at least 93 Azerbaijani and 50 Armenian civilians, but the true death toll is said to be much higher.

As part of the ceasefire, nearly 2,000 Russian peacekeepers have stationed along the Lachin corridor in Azerbaijan, a 60-kilometer-long route that links Khankendi to Armenia.

With the handover of the occupied territories being complete, the next phase of the ceasefire includes the withdrawal of Armenian forces and separatists from Karabakh and the return of refugees to their homes, where Azerbaijanis and Armenians are about to live together under the suzerainty of Baku.

## Tigray Officials: Thousands Killed in Ethiopia Conflict



Tigray refugees arrive on the banks of the Tekeze River on the Sudan-Ethiopia border, in Hamdayet, eastern Sudan, Dec. 2, 2020.

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) -- Several thousand combatants have been killed in Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region, an official with the fugitive regional government is asserting, although claims remain difficult to verify a month after the fighting erupted between Ethiopian and regional forces.

Getachew Reda, a senior adviser to the Tigray leader, in an interview with Tigray TV aired Thursday urged young people and others in the region to "rise and deploy to battle in tens of thousands" days after Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed over the weekend declared victory.

With the leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front on the run in rugged territory, fears of a draw-out conflict continue. But with communications and transport links still largely severed to the region of 6 million people, it's difficult to know the situation on the ground, including the extent of popular support for the TPLF and the number of people killed.

"Our capacity to resist ultimately depends on the support we get from our people," Getachew said. "It is possible to have the scenario where we stop everything and turn all the people into soldiers."

He didn't say how many people are actively fighting but said "our army is doing amazing things with limited numbers," and he claimed there had been tens of thousands of deaths among Ethiopian forces and those from neighboring Eritrea, which the TPLF insists is also involved. Ethiopia's government denies that.

Getachew also acknowledged casualties on the TPLF side but didn't say how many.

Ethiopian forces over the weekend announced they had "full control" of the Tigray capital, Mekele, a city of a half-million people. Getachew said their side had made a "strategic withdrawal" from the city to minimize destruction.

It is not clear how many people were killed as Ethiopian forces moved in on Mekele, but the International Committee of the Red Cross over the weekend said the city's largest hospital had run out of body bags and staff suspended other services to focus on the wounded.

Among the dead are at least five humanitarian workers, but few details have been released. And the UN says more than 100 aid workers are reportedly still unaccounted for.



MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Authorities in Moscow arrested a physicist on suspicion of state treason for allegedly passing classified information about Russia's aviation industry abroad, news agencies reported late on Thursday. A Moscow court ruled that Anatoly Gubanov, who works for the Central Aerohydrodynamic Institute, would be held in custody for two months pending trial. Gubanov could be jailed for up to 20 years if found guilty of state treason, though details of the accusations are unlikely to come to light as treason cases are usually classified. Russia sentenced a man to 13 years in prison for trying to pass military secrets to the United States last month, and in October detained a serviceman and his brother for allegedly passing state secrets to Estonia.

LONDON (AP) -- America's top infectious disease expert has apologized for suggesting UK authorities rushed their authorization of a COVID-19 vaccine, saying he has "great faith" in the country's regulators. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, had sparked controversy with an earlier interview in which he said UK regulators hadn't acted "as carefully" as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Fauci said late Thursday that he meant to say U.S. authorities do things differently than their British counterparts, not better, but his comments weren't phrased properly. Britain on Wednesday became the first Western nation to authorize widespread use of a COVID-19 vaccine when regulators gave emergency approval to a product made by U.S. drugmaker Pfizer and Germany-based BioNTech. Critics have suggested that UK regulators emphasized speed over thoroughness when they reviewed data on the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine.

NEW DELHI (Reuters) -- India summoned Canada's ambassador on Friday and said comments made by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau over protests by farmers near Delhi were an interference in its domestic affairs and would seriously hurt bilateral ties. Trudeau, speaking to the Indian community in Canada, said this week that he was concerned about the farmers, most of them from the Sikh-dominated state of Punjab, camped out on the outskirts of Delhi in a protest against farm reforms. The Indian foreign ministry said in a statement that comments on "issues relating to Indian farmers constitute an unacceptable interference in our internal affairs." India and Canada have warm ties, but in recent years there has been concern in India that some Sikh leaders in Canada have ties to separatist groups hostile to India. Canada is home to an influential Sikh community and Indian leaders say there are some fringe groups there that are still sympathetic to the cause of an independent Sikh state called Khalistan, carved out of India.

LONDON/BRUSSELS (Reuters) -- The European Union told Britain on Friday that it was time to make a decision on a Brexit trade deal after a last-minute problem in talks prompted London to say chances of a breakthrough were receding. With less than four weeks left until the United Kingdom finally exits the EU's orbit on Dec. 31, both sides are asking each other to compromise on fishing, state aid and how to resolve any future disputes. Ultimately, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the face of the 2016 Brexit campaign who is now grappling with Europe's highest official COVID-19 death toll, will have to decide whether he and Britain would be better off making compromises or walking away.

BEIJING (AP) -- A Chinese spacecraft lifted off from the moon Thursday night with a load of lunar rocks, the first stage of its return to Earth, the government space agency reported. Chang'e 5, the third Chinese spacecraft to land on the moon and the first to take off from it again, is the latest in a series of increasingly ambitious missions for Beijing's space program, which also has an orbiter and rover headed to Mars. The Chang'e 5 touched down Tuesday on the Sea of Storms on the moon's near side. Its mission: collect about 2 kilograms (4 pounds) of lunar rocks and bring them back to Earth, the first return of samples since Soviet spacecraft did so in the 1970s. Earlier, the U.S. Apollo astronauts brought back hundreds of pounds of moon rocks. The landing site is near a formation called the Mons Rumker and may contain rocks billions of years younger than those retrieved earlier.

LOS ANGELES (AP) -- Powerful gusts pushed flames from a wildfire through Southern California canyons on Thursday, one of several blazes that burned near homes and forced residents to flee amid elevated fire risk for most of the region that prompted utilities to cut off power to hundreds of thousands. The biggest blaze began late Wednesday as a house fire in Orange County's Silverado Canyon, where gusts topped 70 mph (113 kph). The fire grew to more than 11 square miles (29 square kilometers) and blanketed a wide area with smoke and ash. Crews struggled in steep terrain amid unpredictable Santa Ana winds that sent flames racing across major roads. Two firefighters were hospitalized after being treated on scene for injuries, said Fire Chief Brian Fennessy. He said their condition was not immediately known.