



HONG KONG: Albert Ho (centre right) and other lawmakers and activists bow in silence at a vigil in Hong Kong yesterday, during the commemoration of the bloody Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. —AFP

CHINA POLICE DETAIN ACTIVISTS ON TIANANMEN ANNIVERSARY

YOUNG HONGKONGERS BOYCOTT TIANANMEN VIGIL

BEIJING: Chinese police have detained several activists while others were placed under surveillance for the anniversary of the bloody 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square, which was heavily policed yesterday. On June 4 1989 military tanks rolled into the square in the centre of Beijing to crush pro-democracy protests, killing hundreds of unarmed civilians by some estimates thousands.

Nearly three decades after the crackdown, the communist regime continues to forbid any debate on the subject, mention of which is banned from textbooks and the media, and censored on the Internet. Six human rights activists, including the poet Liang Taiping, have been held by Beijing police since Thursday after holding a private ceremony commemorating June 4, the Chinese NGO Weiquanwang said.

The detained activists were suspected of "provoking quarrels and fomenting unrest", the group said, adding another activist had "disappeared" in recent days in the capital. As in previous years, the "Tiananmen Mothers", an association of parents who lost children during the violence, were placed under heavy surveillance in the lead up to the anniversary. Tiananmen square in the centre of Beijing was also under tight security yesterday, with guards at the entry points into the iconic tourist spot checking the IDs and passports of visitors more closely than usual, an AFP photographer at the scene said.

Around a dozen parents from the Tiananmen Mothers visited a Beijing cemetery yesterday where many of those killed in the

crackdown are buried. They said they were outnumbered by security forces as they paid their respects at the graves of their children. "We have been under surveillance since last week... 30 (plainclothes policemen) were at the cemetery," said Zhang Xianling, whose 19-year-old son was killed in 1989. A resident of Sichuan was also arrested this week for selling alcohol with labels that read "89-4 June" and images of tanks, according to Hong Kong-based media.

'27 years of white terror'

The Tiananmen Mothers penned an open letter slamming the "27 years of white terror and suffocation" they have been subjected to by the authorities. "We the victims' families are eavesdropped upon and surveilled by the police; we are followed or even detained, and our computers searched and confiscated," read the letter signed by the group's members and released the NGO Human Rights in China. The letter also said they had been warned that all visits to the home of the group's founder Ding Zilin, who is now 79-years-old and in poor health, would be restricted from April 22 to June 4.

Ding was under increased surveillance at her home and the police had cut the household telephone line, Hong Kong-based media reported. Calls to Ding's telephone number yesterday were met with a recorded message: "The user you have contacted does not have the right to receive calls." Meanwhile, the state-run Global Times newspaper ran an editorial in its print edition describing June 4 as "a normal day". "This does not mean Chinese people have

all forgotten about the turmoil. It is simply that most Chinese people tend to agree that no more debate is necessary over that incident," the editorial read.

The piece pointed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the unrest in the Middle East that followed the Arab Spring as evidence that China is "lucky that the rioters did not succeed at that time". In Hong Kong, a planned vigil for those killed in the 1989 crackdown-which is held annually and usually draws tens of thousands of people-has exposed a rift within the city's own pro-democracy camp. Young activists from the new "localist" movement, which grew out of failed pro-democracy rallies in 2014, boycotted the vigil, saying Hong Kong should push for its own autonomy, even independence, rather than the democratization of the mainland, which is part of the event's main message.

The Hong Kong Federation of Students-a founding member of the alliance that organizes the vigil-also stayed away this year, saying the event had "lost touch" with Hong Kongers. Taiwan's new Beijing-sceptic president Tsai Ing-wen used the anniversary to urge China to "heal the past wounds and pain of the Chinese people". "Do not let June 4 forever be unspoken between the two sides," Tsai said on her Facebook page, in her first public comments on Tiananmen as Taiwan's leader. There were mass rallies in Taiwan in 1989 to support the pro-democracy movement in China, and Taiwanese civil groups will commemorate the 27th anniversary with a candlelight vigil in downtown Taipei later. —AFP

US FLEXES MUSCLES; ASIA WORRIES ABOUT SEA ROW

SINGAPORE: The United States stepped up pressure on China yesterday to rein in its actions in the South China Sea, with top defense officials underlining Washington's military superiority and vowing to remain the main guarantor of Asian security for decades to come. Defense Secretary Ash Carter said the US approach to the Asia-Pacific remained "one of commitment, strength and inclusion", but he also warned China against provocative behavior in the South China Sea. Any action by China to reclaim land in the Scarborough Shoal, an outcrop in the disputed sea, would have consequences, Carter said.

"I hope that this development doesn't occur, because it will result in actions being taken by the both United States and ... by others in the region which would have the effect of not only increasing tensions but isolating China," Carter told the Shangri-La Dialogue, a regional security forum in Singapore. "The United States will remain the most powerful military and main underwriter of security in the region for decades to come - and there should be no doubt about that." The South China Sea has become a flashpoint between the United States, which increased its focus on the Asia-Pacific under President Barack Obama's "pivot", and China, which is projecting ever greater economic, political and military power in the region.

Carter however said he would welcome China's participation in a "principled security network" for Asia. "Forward thinking statesmen and leaders must ... come together to ensure a positive principled future," he said, adding that the network he envisaged could also help protect against "Russia's worrying actions" and the growing strategic impact of climate change. The deputy head of China's delegation to the forum said the United States should reduce its provocative exercises and patrols in the region and said any attempts to isolate China would fail. "This is a time of cooperation and common security," Rear Admiral Guan Youfei told reporters. "The US action to take sides is not agreed by many countries. We hope the US will also listen to the other countries."

Regional worries

Other Asian leaders said the situation in the South China Sea was viewed with concern across the region. "All countries in the region need to recognize that our shared prosperities and the enviable rate of growth that this region enjoys over past decades will be put at risk by aggressive behavior or actions by any one of us," Indian Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar told the forum.

Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani said his country would help Southeast Asian nations build their security capabilities to deal with what he called unilateral, dangerous and coercive actions in the South China Sea. "In the South China Sea, we have been witnessing large-scale and rapid land reclamation, building of outposts and utilization of them for military purposes," Nakatani said. "No country can be an outsider of this issue."

A Chinese official responded by saying Japan should be careful "not to interfere and stir up problems" in the waterway, while China's foreign ministry also weighed in regarding the US and Japanese comments. "Countries outside the region should stick to their promises and not make thoughtless remarks about issues of territorial sovereignty," the ministry said in a statement. Trillions of dollars of trade a year passes through the South China Sea, which is home to rich oil, gas and fishing resources. Besides China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan have claims in the area, and rising tensions have been fuelling increasing security spending in the region.

"The uncertainty of China's future trajectory is arguably the main driving concern about possible military competition now and in the future," Malaysian Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein said. Carter said that for decades some critics had been predicting an impending US withdrawal from the region, but this would not happen. "That's because this region, which is home to nearly half the world's population and nearly half the global economy, remains the most consequential for America's own security and prosperity."

Trump counter

In an apparent counter to "America-first" policies expounded by prospective Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, including suggestions that US troops should be withdrawn from Asia, Carter stressed bipartisan support for continued engagement. The Shangri-La Dialogue is being held ahead of a significant ruling expected in coming weeks on a case filed by the Philippines in the International Court of Arbitration challenging China's South China Sea claims, which Beijing has vowed to ignore. The United States has been lobbying Asian and other countries to back the judges' statement that their ruling must be binding, a call echoed by Japan yesterday. China has lobbied on the other side for support for its position that the court lacks jurisdiction in the case. —Reuters



SINGAPORE: Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani (left), US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter (center) and South Korean Defense Minister Han Min-koo shake hands during a trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the 15th International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore yesterday. —AFP

MYANMAR'S HARDLINE BUDDHISTS REGROUP AFTER POLITICAL CHANGE

YANGON: Over a thousand hardline Buddhists gathered on the outskirts of Yangon for the annual summit of their ultra-nationalist group yesterday, as the anti-Muslim network looks to stay relevant under Myanmar's new civilian leadership. Maroon-robed monks, nuns and other followers filled the monastery in northern Yangon to mark the third anniversary of the founding of Ma Ba Tha,

which has been at the forefront of anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar in recent years.

The group proved a potent political force under the former military-backed government, who they successfully lobbied to pass a series of controversial laws that rights groups say discriminate against women and religious minorities. But the organization ultimately lost out

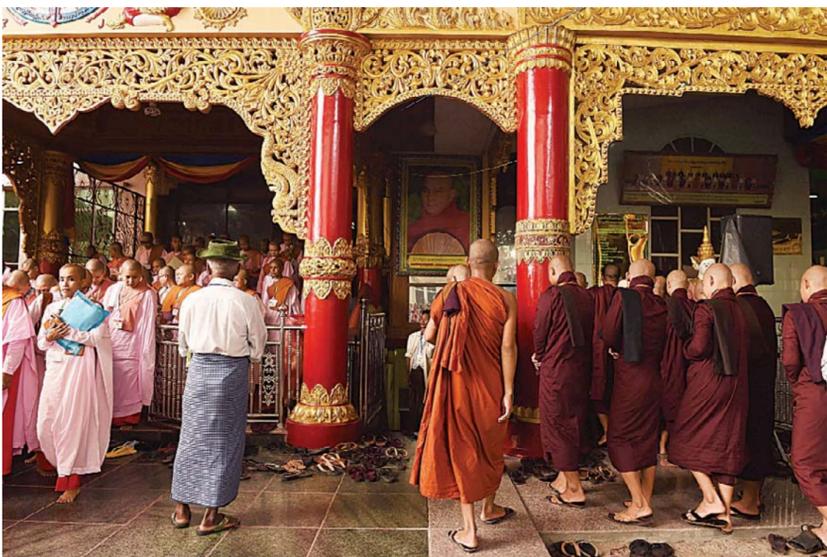
in November elections that saw their allies in the incumbent party trounced by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), which is now leading the former junta-run country's first civilian administration in half a century.

Ma Ba Tha representatives from around the country took the microphone at the start of the two-day conference to

review their achievements over the past year and outline plans for the future.

"Our principles are very simple: to protect our people and our religion," U Ottama, a monk attending the conference said. Much of the anti-Muslim rhetoric espoused by group's leaders has targeted the Rohingya-a ethnic minority denied citizenship in Myanmar and relegated to apartheid-like conditions ever since deadly riots tore through western Rakhine state in 2012. One of Suu Kyi's biggest challenges will be carving out a solution for the Rohingya-who Buddhist nationalists have branded illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, despite the fact that many have lived in Myanmar for generations.

The Nobel peace prize winner has faced international criticism for not taking a stronger stance on the Rohingya, and for failing to field any Muslim candidates in November's polls-a move observers say was a concession to groups like Ma Ba Tha. While hosting US Secretary of State John Kerry last month, Suu Kyi asked for "space" as her administration seeks to build trust and ease sectarian tensions. Some Buddhists' strident rejection of the term Rohingya has made simply uttering the word an act fraught with controversy. In recent weeks Ma Ba Tha and other nationalist groups have held a series of demonstrations to protest the US Embassy's reference to Rohingya in a press release. —AFP



YANGON: Buddhists gather at a monastery on the outskirts of Yangon yesterday, for the annual summit of their ultra-nationalist group, as the anti-Muslim network looks to bounce back from a fallout in November's polls. —AFP

PHILIPPINE TROOPS SEIZE ISLAMIC MILITANT CAMP

BUTIG: Philippine troops captured an Islamic militant training camp after a 10-day battle, officials said, as part of operations to clear insurgents from a remote jungle region. The offensive against the Maute group, one of several Filipino Muslim armed organizations which have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, left four soldiers dead and 15 others wounded, a Philippine military commander told an AFP photographer at the scene.

Surrounded by swamps and a low-land tropical rainforest in the small, Muslim-populated farming town of Butig, more than 800 kilometers (500 miles) south of Manila, the camp's structures were riddled with large bullet holes that soldiers said were caused by machine gun fire used to flush out the militants. Soldiers said they killed dozens of militants, but there was no sign of dead bodies when the military allowed journalists into the area on Friday.

Unexploded improvised explosive devices, a grenade launcher, a rebel uniform and a black Islamic State flag were all that were left in the wooden

huts and concrete-reinforced trenches, which were used by the gunmen, army Colonel Roseller Murillo said. "The Maute group is believed to be on the run and in hiding, (but) the military will fully enforce the law if they initiate other terrorist activities in the area," he said. The offensive was launched after the militants moved back into territory that the military secured during clashes in February, they said.

Once described by the military as a small-time extortion gang, the Maute group attacked a remote army outpost in Butig in February, triggering a week of fighting that the military said left six soldiers and at least 12 militants dead. The group, believed to have fewer than 100 fighters, blew up power transmission towers and abducted and beheaded two employees of a local sawmill in April. Murillo said the latest military offensive began on May 24. The fighting displaced about 2,000 residents, according to the military. The southern Philippines has been plagued by a Muslim separatist insurgency for over four decades, with the conflict leaving more than 120,000 dead. —AFP