

AUSTRALIA WON'T CHOOSE BETWEEN CHINA AND US

CANBERRA: Australia does not have to choose between the United States and China, the Australian prime minister said yesterday as he announced a new beef export deal with the Chinese. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang oversaw signing of bilateral agreements that will expand their two-year-old free trade pact.

China also agreed to remove a cap that allows only 11 Australian beef exporters to sell 400 million Australian dollars (\$300 million) in frozen meat to the burgeoning ranks of the Chinese middleclass. China will be open to all eligible Australian beef exporters. "Australia is the only country in the world with this market access," Turnbull told reporters. "This new agreement will drive significant future growth."

Turnbull later rejected arguments that Australia must choose between its most important security partner, the United States, and its most important trading partner, China, as tensions escalate between the world's two largest economies. "We have a staunch, strong ally in Washington - a good friend in Washington - and we have a very good friend in Beijing," Turnbull told reporters.

"The idea that Australia has to choose between China and the United States is not correct," he said. Li, who on Wednesday warned Australia against "taking sides, as happened during the Cold War," agreed with Turnbull. "We believe China-Australia cooperation will bring good to other countries and regions, and this cooperation will not be targeted at any third party," he said through a translator, referring to the United States.

The United States has questioned aspects of the rapidly evolving commercial relationship between the Chinese and Australians, including Australia's decision to allow a Chinese company, Landbridge, to secure a 99-year lease over the strategically important Port of Darwin. Darwin has become training hub for US Marines in northern Australia. Yesterday, the two witnessed the signing of a memorandum of understanding between China State Construction Engineering Corp. and New Zealand-owned BBI Group to build a AU\$6 billion iron ore mine in Australia. — AP



SYDNEY: Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull (R) and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang (L) attend the 6th Australia-China CEO roundtable meeting in Sydney.—AFP



An aerial view shows the salvage operation of the Sewol ferry, off the coast of South Korea's southern island of Jindo. —AFP

SOUTH KOREA'S SUNKEN SEWOL FERRY STARTS FINAL JOURNEY

JINDO: South Korea's sunken Sewol ferry was sailed away from its watery grave yesterday, beginning its final journey nearly three years after it went down with the loss of more than 300 lives. A flotilla of powerful tugs towed the wreck, lying on its side on a platform between two giant salvage barges, towards a semi-submersible that will finally bring it into port.

The 145-metre ship was brought to the surface in a complex salvage operation believed to be among the largest recoveries ever of a wreck in one piece, a key demand of the families of the dead. "The Sewol began its move towards the semi-submersible at 16:55," (0755 GMT) the maritime ministry said in a statement.

The rusted, silted hull stood high out of the water, with both its white superstructure and blue bulbous bow exposed as it was taken towards the Dockwise White Marlin, a huge vessel standing by in deeper waters to bring it to Mokpo on the mainland, for investigations and a search. Almost all the dead were schoolchildren and it is thought that nine bodies still unaccounted for may be trapped inside the sunken ship.

"Today is the last day of the neap tide and we must finish loading the Sewol to the submersible," Lee Cheol-jo, a ministry official in charge of the operation told reporters earlier, referring to when tides are at their weakest. Around 450 workers were involved

in the painstaking salvage. The Sewol has a displacement of 6,825 tons but is now estimated to weigh between 8,000-8,500 tons including the silt piled up inside.

It came as the third anniversary approached of one of the country's worst-ever maritime disasters, which dealt a crushing blow to now-ousted president Park Geun-Hye. Several relatives watched the much-anticipated operation unfolding from a boat near the site. "I had seen footage of the vessel from time to time, but there are no words to describe what I'm feeling to see it above water," said Jung Seong-Wook, a father who lost his son in the deadly accident. "I cried. I could only think about my son," he told AFP after a boat trip to the wreck site. Jung is among a handful of bereaved family members who have kept watch at a camp on a hilltop on the nearest island Donggeochado, just 1.5 kilometers away.

'My heart stops'

Other bereaved family members gathered at Paengmok harbor on the nearby larger island of Jindo, huddled in front of a small computer monitor for any updates to the salvage operation. "From time to time when the news mentions a possible obstacle, my heart stops," said Yoo Young-Hwa, who lost her daughter on the Sewol.

The vessel was lying more than 40

meters below the waves off southwestern South Korea and the operation, originally scheduled for last year, had been pushed back several times because of adverse weather. The disaster was a crippling blow to the now-ousted leader Park Geun-Hye, whose dismissal over a corruption scandal was confirmed by Seoul's top court only two weeks ago. She stayed at her residence for the first few critical hours after the disaster while officials were frantically sending updates and asking for guidance.

She has never specified what she was doing for the seven hours, sparking wild rumours including a tryst and cosmetic surgery. A permanent Sewol protest site targeting her was subsequently set up in the centre of Seoul. Investigations into the disaster, in which 304 people died, concluded it was largely man-made—the cumulative result of an illegal redesign, an overloaded cargo bay, inexperienced crew and a questionable relationship between the ship operators and state regulators.

Even though the vessel took around three hours to sink, many of those on board never heard any evacuation order, while the crew were among the first to escape to safety. Captain Lee Jun-Seok was sentenced to life in prison for "murder through wilful negligence" and 14 other crew members were given terms ranging from two to 12 years. —AFP

TAIWAN NGO WORKER 'MISSING IN CHINA'

TAIPEI: A Taiwanese NGO worker who promoted democracy in China has gone missing after entering the mainland earlier this month, authorities said. Taiwan said yesterday that Chinese authorities had not responded to their enquiries on Lee Ming-cheh's whereabouts, as his wife pleaded for help to locate him. Ties between China and Taiwan have worsened since President Tsai Ing-wen took office in May and Beijing has cut off all official communication with Taipei.

Taiwan has been self-ruling since 1949 following a civil war on the mainland, but it has never formally declared independence

and Beijing still claims it as part of its territory. Chinese authorities deeply mistrust Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which is traditionally pro-independence.

Lee, 42, works for a community college in Taipei and "lost contact" on March 19 after he entered the southeastern Chinese city of Zhuhai from Macau, said the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), Taiwan's top China policy-making body. A former DPP employee, Lee had been sharing "Taiwan's democratic experiences" with his Chinese friends online for many years and often mailed books to them, according to the Taiwan

Association for Human Rights. "It's unreasonable that a Taiwanese citizen has been unaccounted for in China for more than five days for no reason," his wife Lee Ching-yu said in a statement.

"If Lee Ming-cheh has been arrested, please tell me on what charges ... whether he is alive or dead, and where he is," she said, adding that Lee has been following human rights issues in China. Lee has long supported civil society organizations and activists in China, according to Amnesty International, which added that he went there this time to arrange for his mother-in-

law's medical treatment.

His disappearance "raises serious questions about the safety of people working with civil society in China", said Nicholas Bequelin, Amnesty International's East Asia Director. Taiwan authorities say Zhuhai police have informed Lee's family that there is no record of his arrest. However the Taiwan Association for Human Rights said the Chinese government should prove that Lee is not under arrest, citing the incident of five Hong Kong booksellers who went missing in 2015 and resurfaced in detention on the mainland. —AFP