

## PHILIPPINES TO SHOP FOR CHINESE, RUSSIAN ARMS DUE TO US CONDITIONS

**MANILA:** The Philippines has been forced to turn to China and Russia for arms supplies because of conditions imposed by its long-time ally and former colonial ruler the United States, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said yesterday. The United States has provided its defense treaty ally with most of its major hardware, like ships, fighters, helicopters and small arms, but the Philippines was now looking to China and Russia for drones, planes, fast boats and rifles to fight Maoist-led rebels and Islamist militants behind an unrelenting spree of piracy and kidnapping, he said.

Lorenzana said acquiring weapons and equip-

ment from the United States had become difficult because the process was slow and there were conditions tied to sales. "That's why we are discouraged from getting from them because of these conditions," Lorenzana told reporters in Beijing. "We need airplanes, we need drones, we need fast boats," he said. "We need them in the south so that we can deter kidnappings and bring about development."

Weapons procurements could also be complicated by bipartisan attempts by some US lawmakers to ban the transfer of arms to the Philippines that could be used in a war on drugs that has killed

thousands of Filipinos, and has been condemned by Western governments. At the sidelines of a Belt and Road summit in Beijing, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte on Sunday met several Chinese state-owned corporations, including a defense contractor blacklisted by Washington for selling to Iran items that were banned under US laws.

Duterte, who is working hard to strengthen ties with China, has admitted he has a grudge against the United States and complained at what he says is useless US. "hand-me-down" merchandise. Lorenzana confirmed China's Poly Group Corporation and Poly Technologies were among

companies which called on the firebrand leader, and the defense ministry would send a technical team to look at the Chinese equipment.

China has offered to donate \$14 million worth of military hardware to the Philippines, plus a soft loan for \$500 million in Chinese arms. He said the Philippines had only planned to use China's money if the military's five-year 100 billion peso (\$2 billion) budget for modernization was insufficient. He is due to sign a defense agreement with his Russian counterpart next week for possible purchases of weapons and drones. The Philippines is also acquiring drones from Israel. —Reuters

## PHILIPPINE LAWMAKERS REJECT DUTERTE'S IMPEACHMENT COMMITTEE DISMISSES COMPLAINT ON FIRST HEARING

**MANILA:** Philippine lawmakers yesterday rejected an impeachment complaint against President Rodrigo Duterte that accused him of a crime against humanity over the deaths of thousands of people killed in his war on drugs. The complaint alleged Duterte had adopted a state policy of extrajudicial killings that led to more than 8,000 deaths in his first eight months as president, and was involved in mass murder as well as widespread corruption in his previous stint as a mayor of a southern city.

The congressional justice committee quickly dismissed the complaint in its first day of hear-

ing and had little chance of prospering with the president enjoying a commanding majority in the lower house of congress.

A plenary of the lower house still needs to endorse the committee's decision, although political observers and lawmakers said there was zero chance of yesterday's vote being overturned. "We have nowhere to go (but) we will find a way to get justice," opposition lawmaker Gary Alejano, who filed the impeachment case, told reporters. Duterte, 72, won presidential elections last year after promising to launch an unprecedented crackdown on crime in which

he repeatedly promised to pardon police if they are found guilty of murder while prosecuting his drug war.

But Duterte also insists that he is not breaking any laws with his rhetoric, and that police are only allowed to kill in self-defense. He has said he does not encourage or endorse extrajudicial killings. The United Nations, the European Union and the US government have criticized the drug war, while rights groups have warned Duterte may be orchestrating a crime against humanity. However surveys show Duterte remains a popular president at home and that many Filipinos support the drug war, believing tough tactics are needed to tackle crime. Duterte has also won some support internationally, including from China.

### Trumped-up charges

Duterte's spokesman Ernesto Abella welcomed Monday's rejection of the impeachment complaint. "We maintained that it was from reshaped, trumped-up charges aimed at undermining the duly constituted government," Abella said. Yesterday's vote showed that Duterte still enjoyed the overwhelming backing of lawmakers, according to Gladstone Cuarteros, a political analyst at Manila's De La Salle University. "They are sending the message that from the first instance they will dismiss it and they are showing the president has large support. 'We are the super-majority,'" Cuarteros said.

A Filipino lawyer last month filed a complaint at the International Criminal Court (ICC) accusing Duterte of mass murder in relation to the drug war. However many observers saw that complaint as premature, arguing all legal remedies had yet to be exhausted in the Philippines, which is an ICC requirement. The ICC has not given any indication as to whether it will pursue that complaint.

Alejandro said yesterday he was also considering filing a case with the ICC. Cuarteros said Alejandro's failed impeachment effort could have been part of a strategy to pave the way for an ICC probe. "He wants to show people that (Philippine) institutions are compromised because of strong support for Duterte and by extension perhaps external institutions, international organizations can step in," Cuarteros said. —AFP



**MANILA:** Magdalo Representative Gary Alejano, left, gestures as he explains the impeachment complaint against Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte at the House of Representatives in Manila. — AFP

ings on the issue, overwhelmingly voting that it was "insufficient in substance." "The complaint filed was frivolous. How can you proceed if the complaint has no basis," committee chairman Reynaldo Umali, who is a member of Duterte's ruling party, told reporters afterwards. The committee vote effectively ends the impeachment case, which even Duterte's opponents conceded

of thousands of people would die.

Police have reported killing about 2,700 people since Duterte took office at the end of June and immediately launched his war on drugs. Unknown assailants have killed more than 1,800 others, while about 5,700 other violent deaths are under investigation, according to police data. Duterte has called for addicts to be slaugh-

## HONG KONG REJECTS ASYLUM FOR REFUGEES WHO SHELTERED SNOWDEN

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong authorities have rejected asylum requests from a group of refugees who sheltered Edward Snowden four years ago, in what their lawyer said is retaliation for helping the former NSA contractor. Immigration officials in the southern Chinese city denied the applications by the four adults and three children from Sri Lanka and the Philippines, Robert Tibbo said yesterday. Snowden hid out in Hong Kong for two weeks in June 2013 after he leaked documents revealing extensive US government surveillance.

His whereabouts were a mystery during that time and it was not until last year that the role Tibbo and his clients played in sheltering Snowden was revealed. Tibbo said his clients will appeal the ruling, which leaves them at risk of being detained or deported to their home countries. They have also applied for refugee status in Canada. He said he represents 50 to 60 other clients who are applying for asylum in Hong Kong, where cases typically

take years to be processed. But so far only these cases have received a speedy decision from immigration officials - issued last Thursday - in a sign they have been targeted by authorities, Tibbo said.

The Hong Kong government "has repeatedly tried to question the four adults about their involvement with Mr Snowden. For example, about how long had Mr. Snowden been staying with them, what was Mr Snowden's movement in the territory, which is irrelevant to the (asylum) claims," he said. Tibbo said that when they refused to answer the questions, their social assistance payments for rent and food were cut off. The group includes Ajith Pushpakumara, a former Sri Lankan soldier; Vanessa Mae Rodel, who is from the Philippines and has a 5-year-old daughter; and a Sri Lankan couple, Supun Thilina Kellapatha and Nadeeka Dilrukshi Nonis, and their two children.

Tibbo decided to go public with their iden-

tities last year after learning that movie director Oliver Stone had found out about them and would incorporate their role into his film on Snowden, released in October. The three families, who didn't realize they were harboring one of the world's most wanted figures at the time, said they feared being sent back. "I'm an army deserter person," said Ajith, adding that if he returned to Sri Lanka, "I will be tortured again. I don't want to be tortured."

The Hong Kong government said in a statement that asylum claims are handled in a "fair, impartial and efficient manner," and that it found "no substantial grounds for believing that the claimants, if returned to their country of origin, will be subject to real and substantial risk of danger." Rodel said she had no regrets helping Snowden, who gave her a hug when he left her tiny apartment four years ago. "This guy is the most wanted man in the world and he had a big hug with me," Rodel said. "I am very proud of that." —AP



**HONG KONG:** Sri Lankan refugee Ajith Puspa, back left, Filipino refugee Vanessa Rodel, back 2nd left, her daughter Keana, front left, Sri Lankan refugee Nadeeka, back 3rd left, her partner Supun Thilina Kellapatha and their children, son Danath, front center, and daughter Sethumdi, front right, pose for the press outside the Immigration Tower in Hong Kong. — AFP



**CARACAS:** Venezuelan opposition activists carry out a protest against the government of President Nicolas Maduro, in Caracas. — AFP

## VENEZUELAN BLOCK ROADS IN SEVENTH WEEK OF UNREST

**CARACAS:** Venezuelans launched a seventh week of anti-government demonstrations by blocking roads yesterday, vowing not to budge all day in protest at a deadly political and economic crisis. Dozens of people sat down on the main highway into Caracas in the early morning and similar rallies were called around the country. Rallies over recent weeks have drawn thousands.

Clashes have left 38 people dead in protests against moves to strengthen President Nicolas Maduro's hold on power and his refusal to hold early elections.

The center-right opposition blames Maduro for an economic crisis that has caused severe shortages of food and medicine. A senior opposition lawmaker, Freddy Guevara, told reporters Monday's rally would go on for 12 hours until 2300 GMT.

He said 50 other similar "sit-ins" were planned on roads across the country with the aim of generating a state of "ungovernability" to pressure Maduro. "This is a day of resistance, of endurance, of showing that we are organized and firm," Guevara said at the rally. He repeated the opposition's claim that Maduro was installing a "dictatorship." Maduro has vowed general elections will take place as scheduled in late 2018 but not before.

He has accused the opposition of mounting an "armed insurgency" with US backing to remove him from power. He has set no date for postponed regional polls and for mayoral elections that are due this year. The opposition has called on the armed forces to stop backing Maduro but so far he still has the public backing of the high command. —AFP

## PAPUA NEW GUINEA TO SHUT PARTS OF MANUS ASYLUM SEEKER CAMP: REFUGEES

**SYDNEY:** Papua New Guinea will close some parts of an Australian-run detention centre within weeks, refugees said yesterday, stepping up pressure on asylum seekers hoping to start a new life. Human rights groups and the United Nations have criticized the Manus Island detention complex, one of two South Pacific island asylum-seeker centers funded by Australia, for cramped conditions, inadequate medical facilities and violence.

At a meeting, Papua New Guinea immigration officials told refugees that an area of the Manus camp would close on May 28, with the rest of the compound to shut on June 30. An unspecified number of asylum-seekers will be relocated to a transit centre; one refugee quoted the officials as having said, "Immigration is telling people that their plan is to remove those people who were interviewed for America to East Lorengau camp, which is close to

Lorengau town," said Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish Iranian detained on Manus for nearly four years, referring to the island's major town.

Papua New Guinea officials could not immediately be reached for comment by Reuters. The move to close the centre also increases pressure on those whose applications for asylum have been rejected. Asylum seekers said the move was creating panic and signaled Papua New Guinea's readiness to deport those who had so far rejected Australia's financial offer to return home voluntarily.

Papua New Guinea's Supreme Court ruled in 2016 that the camp was illegal and should close, forcing Australia to confirm it would shut the facility by the end of 2017. Australia struck a deal with former U.S. President Barack Obama to take some detainees who were deemed refugees, a pact President Donald Trump characterized as a "dumb deal" when he took office in January. —Reuters

## AUSTRALIAN'S SENTENCE FOR BALI COP KILLING RAISED TO 5 YEARS

**DENPASAR:** An Indonesian court yesterday increased the jail term of an Australian woman convicted of killing a policeman on the resort island of Bali to five years after prosecutors appealed her original sentence. Sara Connor, 46, was handed a four-year jail term in March after being found guilty along with her British DJ boyfriend of killing officer Wayan Sudarsa, who was beaten to death on a popular beach on the island.

The Briton, 34-year-old David Taylor, was jailed for six years. Traffic policeman Sudarsa's blood-soaked body was found in August covered with dozens of wounds on his neck, chest and head. Taylor, whose stage name is DJ Nutzo, admitted getting into a fight with Sudarsa on the beach after accusing the officer of stealing Connor's handbag. Mother of two, Connor had maintained her innocence but judges found her guilty, ruling she had held the victim down during the fight.

Prosecutors appealed the four-year sentence for Connor, which was lower than the eight years they had recommended to the judges, arguing it would not have enough of a deterrent effect. Bali High Court yesterday increased the term by one year. The judges said the reasons were that her actions could impact the tourism industry



**DENPASAR:** This file photo shows Sara Connor of Australia attending her trial at a court in Denpasar on Indonesia's resort island of Bali. — AFP

and she had left the victim to die when he was lying face down on the beach.

"The defendant has damaged the image of Indonesian tourism, especially tourism on Bali," said judge Sutoyo, who like many Indonesians goes by one name. Connor did not attend the appeal hearing at the court in the Balinese capital Denpasar. Bali, a pocket of Hinduism in Muslim-majority Indonesia, is a popular tourist destination known for its tropical climate and palm-fringed beaches. Minor crime is common but murders are rare. —AFP