

## International

# China probes two Canadians on suspected national security threat

## Kovrig, Spavor put under compulsory measures

**BEIJING:** China confirmed yesterday two Canadians are under investigation on suspicion of endangering the country's national security, fuelling tensions after Canada's arrest of a top Chinese telecom executive on a US request. Former Canadian diplomat Michael Kovrig and business consultant Michael Spavor were put under "compulsory measures" on Monday, foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang said, using a term which would usually mean they are in custody.

The two Canadians are "suspected of engaging in activities that threatened China's national security," Lu said at a regular press conference, without explaining if the two cases are related. Kovrig, who works for the International Crisis Group (ICG) think tank, was being investigated by the Beijing bureau of state security, while the agency's office in northeast Liaoning province was handling the probe into Spavor, Lu said.

Spavor is a China-based business consultant who facilitates trips to North Korea, met with its leader Kim Jong Un and arranged some of retired NBA star Dennis Rodman's trips to the country. Their cases will fuel suspicions China is retaliating against Canada's arrest of Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Chinese telecom giant Huawei, at Washington's request on allegations related to breaking Iran sanctions. Meng was released on Can\$10 million bail by a court in Vancouver on Tuesday pending a US extradition hearing.

Her case has infuriated Beijing and shaken Canada's relations with China, which is itself embroiled in a trade war with the United States. Kovrig's employer, ICG, had reported his arrest earlier this week while Canada's government said on Wednesday that it had not heard from Spavor since he was questioned. Lu said China provided "relevant information" to the Canadian consulate "without delay".

### Kim and Rodman

Spavor is based in northeast China, where he runs the Paektu Cultural Exchange program, an organization that facilitates sport, cultural, tourism and business trips to North Korea. He earned recognition after helping facilitate visits by former Chicago Bulls player Rodman in 2013 and 2014. Spavor is one of only a few Westerners to have met with Kim in recent years. AFP's attempts to call his two mobile telephone numbers were met with messages saying "powered off" or "invalid" and calls to the Paektu Cultural Exchange office went unanswered.

"We have been unable to make contact since he let us know he was being questioned by Chinese authorities," Canadian foreign ministry spokesman Guillaume Berube said. Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland said the Canadian government had raised his case with Chinese authorities. Canadian officials said they were officially informed of Kovrig's detention via fax early



BEIJING: Chinese police patrol in front of the Canadian embassy in Beijing. — AFP

Wednesday. ICG has said that it has not received any information about Kovrig since his arrest.

China's foreign ministry said ICG was not registered in China and its employees would be "in violation" of the law if they engage in activities in the country. "Canada is deeply concerned about the detention of Mr. Kovrig and Canada has raised the case directly with Chinese officials," Freeland said. Kovrig was based in Hong Kong for

ICG, working on foreign policy and security issues in the region, particularly on the Korean Peninsula. ICG closed its office in the Chinese capital after Beijing passed a law on NGOs, which came into force in 2017, to better control the activities on its soil of foreign organizations. Friends and experts say Kovrig may have become a "hostage" and "pawn" in the feud between China, the US and Canada. —AFP

## Five foreigners arrested in Bali drug sweep

**DENPASAR:** Five foreigners have been arrested in Bali for drug trafficking, authorities said yesterday, with a German and Peruvian possibly facing execution if convicted under Indonesia's strict drug laws. The accused smugglers—also including a Chinese, a Malaysian and a Briton—were arrested separately over the past two weeks, Bali police said. The arrests come less than a month after the first member of the Bali Nine heroin-trafficking gang was released from a prison on the holiday island after serving 13 years.

The Australian gang's accused ringleaders—Myuran Sukumaran and Andrew Chan—were executed by firing squad in 2015, sparking a diplomatic row between Australia and Indonesia, which has some of the world's stiffest drug laws. Bali police said Thursday they ar-

rested 44-year-old Peruvian Jorge Rafael Albornoz Gammara after he arrived at Ngurah Rai international airport from Dubai last week. "Officers found 4.08 kilograms of cocaine that he was hiding inside the interior of his luggage," head of local immigration office Untung Basuki told a press conference yesterday.

German Frank Zeidler, 56, en route from Bangkok, was later arrested after officers said they found 2.1 kilos of hashish inside his luggage—an amount that could also make it a death penalty case. Meanwhile, a 45-year-old British designer, who was not identified, was detained after he received a package from Thailand with some 31 grams of liquid marijuana poured into essential oil bottles.

On Saturday, 29-year-old Chinese national Cui Bao Lin was arrested at the airport with more than 200 ecstasy pills and over 160 grams of ketamine found in his bag, police said. Malaysian Hamdi Izham Hakimi was also arrested the same day with a bag containing nearly 15 grams of marijuana and 11 ecstasy pills, according to authorities. Foreigners are regularly caught trying to bring drugs into Bali, which draws millions of visitors annually. —AFP

## Floods kill 13 in central Vietnam

**HANOI:** Floods caused by heavy downpours have killed 13 people in central Vietnam, officials said yesterday, as farmers scrambled to save crops and livestock ahead of more bad weather forecast for this week. Torrential rains have lashed six provinces in the centre of the country since Saturday, killing thousands of cows and chickens and flooding several cities—including the coastal resort town of Danang.

More than 50 centimeters of rain hit some areas, with more downpours expected in the coming days, the disaster management office said yesterday. "Thirteen people were killed, while one remains missing in Quang Ngai province," the office said. Around 12,000 hectares of crops were destroyed, and some 160,000 livestock killed, it added. One farmer in Quang Nam province said he lost all his chickens in the flooding, costing him tens of thousands of dollars.

"The water receded but thousands of our chickens were dead. We had to collect them for burial as the smell was so bad," Nguyen Thanh said, quoted by state-run Tuoi Tre newspaper. Several areas in Quang Nam and Quang Ngai provinces were still inundated on Thursday after hydropower plants discharged reservoir waters. Vietnam is frequently hit by heavy downpours during the typhoon season from May to October, but forecasters said the rains arrived late this year. More than 200 people have been killed in weather-related disasters in 2018, down from 389 last year. —AFP

## Singapore editor charged with defaming govt

**SINGAPORE:** The editor of a Singaporean website was charged with defamation yesterday for publishing a letter alleging corruption among the city-state's leaders, with rights groups criticizing the "heavy-handed" response from authorities. Singapore has long been criticized for restricting free speech and other political rights, as well as slapping critics with financially ruinous libel suits. The affluent financial hub is regularly ranked among the world's least corrupt countries and its leaders are sensitive about accusations of graft.

Terry Xu was charged in court with defaming government

ministers after his independent media website, The Online Citizen, published a letter stating there was "corruption at the highest echelons" of Singapore's government, according to court documents. Police seized computers and other devices used to operate the website from Xu's residence after receiving a complaint. The website ceased publication temporarily but is now up and running again. Xu faces a maximum jail term of two years and a fine, or both.

The letter's author, Daniel De Costa Augustin, was also charged with defamation and breaking computer crime laws for allegedly sending the piece from another person's email account without their consent. Augustin's letter was published in September under the name "Willy Sum", and did not mention the names of any allegedly corrupt officials or provide any evidence of graft. —AFP