

International

Vatican, China sign landmark accord on appointing bishops

Historic deal will give pope final say in naming bishops

VILNIUS: The Vatican yesterday signed a landmark agreement giving it a long-desired say in the appointment of bishops in China, though critics labeled the deal a sell-out to the Communist government. The provisional agreement, signed in Beijing by deputy foreign ministers from both sides, was announced as Pope Francis visited Lithuania on a four-day trip to the Baltic countries. It gives the Holy See a decisive role in the appointment of all bishops in a country whose around 12 million Catholics have been split between an underground Church swearing loyalty to the Vatican and the state-supervised Catholic Patriotic Association.

The Vatican said the accord, a breakthrough after years of negotiations, was "not political but pastoral." A Holy See statement did not mention Taiwan, which the Vatican recognizes diplomatically and which China sees as a renegade province. However, diplomats have said the accord was a possible precursor to a resumption in diplomatic relations with Beijing after 70 years. Beijing does not allow countries to have diplomatic relations with both China and Taiwan.

Taiwan now has formal relations with only 17 states and the Vatican is the only one in Europe. The Vatican said the pope hoped "a new process may begin that will allow the wounds of the past to be overcome, leading to the full communion of all Chinese Catholics." But prospects of such an agreement had divided communities of Catholics across China, some of whom fear greater suppression should the Vatican cede more control to Beijing. Others want to see rapprochement and avoid a potential schism.

"They're giving the flock into the mouths of the wolves. It's an incredible betrayal," said Cardinal Joseph Zen, the feisty, 76-year-old former archbishop of Hong Kong who has led the opposition to the deal. "The consequences will be tragic and long lasting, not only for the Church in China

but for the whole Church because it damages the credibility. Maybe that's why they might keep the agreement secret," Zen told Reuters in an interview on Thursday. Vatican sources have said the deal will not be published and can be reviewed and fine-tuned in the future.

Readmitted

The Vatican said that as part of the deal, Pope Francis had recognized the legitimacy of the seven remaining



Ex-Hong Kong archbishop says deal a 'betrayal'

state-appointed Chinese bishops who had been named without papal approval and had re-admitted them into the Church. "Today, for the first time all the bishops in China are in communion with the Bishop of Rome (the pope)," Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican Secretary of State and one of the chief architects of the deal, said in a statement. Vatican sources have said that a few bishops appointed by Rome will cede their places to bishops who had been appointed by Beijing. In future, new bishops first will be proposed by members of local Catholic communities together with Chinese authorities. The names of candidates will be sent to the Vatican and the pope will make a final decision, the sources said. — Reuters



BEIJING: Christian devotees attend a mass at the South Cathedral in Beijing. The Vatican announced yesterday a historic accord with China on the appointment of bishops in the Communist country as Pope Francis recognized seven Beijing-appointed bishops in a move that could pave the way for a rapprochement between the Catholic Church and the world's most populous country. — AFP

Washington criticizes treatment of Uighurs in latest China row

WASHINGTON: The United States yesterday denounced China's treatment of its Uighur Muslims in unusually strong terms, adding to a growing list of disputes in increasingly turbulent relations between the two powers. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo voiced alarm after a United Nations report described the mass internment of Uighurs under the pretext of preventing extremism in the western Xinjiang region where the minority group is concentrated. "Hundreds of thousands and possibly millions of Uighurs are held against their will in so-called re-education camps where they're forced to endure severe political indoctrination and other awful abuses," Pompeo said in a speech on the state of religious freedom around the world.

"Their religious beliefs are decimated," Pompeo said. In a letter to Pompeo and Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, both Republican and Democratic members of Congress late last month called for sanctions on Chinese officials implicated in the internment of Uighurs. Pompeo did not say whether the United States would take punitive measures. Even so, the remarks were striking for their tone, with President Donald Trump's administration putting human rights on the back seat in relations with allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The Trump administration itself has faced criticism at home and abroad for its stance on Muslims, with the president as a candidate calling for a complete ban on Muslims entering the United States and, soon after taking office, barring entry to citizens of several Muslim-majority countries. Pompeo also expressed concern about the fate of Christians in China, who he said had been targeted in a government crackdown. The government, he said, has been "closing churches, burning Bibles and ordering followers to sign papers renouncing their faith."

China defends treatment

In an interview earlier in the week, Pompeo had described China as a greater threat to the United States than Russia, saying that Beijing was a "non-transparent government." "It treats our intellectual property horribly, it treats its religious minorities horribly," he told Fox News. China has rejected the findings of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said last month that the report was "based on so-called information that is yet to be verified and has no factual basis."

Hua added that China was doing what was needed to combat extremism and terrorism on its western frontier. Uighurs have long complained of systematic discrimination in the region, which activists call East Turkestan, with tensions especially rife in areas that have seen large-scale migration from China's dominant Han ethnicity. The Uyghur Human Rights Project, an advocacy group that uses an alternative spelling for the minority group's name, has estimated that an entire 10 percent of the population has been detained as part of an indoctrination campaign.

Rising disputes

The fresh focus on human rights comes as trade disputes mount between the world's two largest economies. The two countries will launch new tariffs on Monday, with Washington targeting \$200 billion in Chinese exports and Beijing hitting \$60 billion worth of American products. The two sides have already imposed tariffs on \$50 billion in goods from each country. Trump in his first year appeared to relish a chummy rapport with Chinese President Xi Jinping, whom he invited to his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida.

But relations have wobbled as Trump takes an increasingly hard line to protect domestic industry. Moving a step further, the United States said Thursday it was placing financial sanctions on the Equipment Development Department of China's defense ministry as well as its top administrator for violating sanctions on Russia by buying Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets and S-400 surface-to-air missiles. — AFP

Russia, Turkey agree on the demilitarized zone borders

SARAJEVO: Russia and Turkey have agreed on borders of a demilitarized zone in northern Syria, Russia's top diplomat said yesterday, part of a deal that could check an assault on the last rebel enclave in Idlib. "Just yesterday or the day before, the militaries of Russia and Turkey agreed the concrete frontiers of the demilitarized zone," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said after talks with his Bosnian counterpart Igor Crnadak.

Moscow says the demilitarized zone would help stop attacks from Idlib on Syrian army positions and Russia's military bases in the region. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan agreed the establishment of the 15 to 20 kilometer buffer zone on Monday after talks that lasted more than four hours. Security in the zone, which includes parts of Idlib and neighboring provinces including the city of Aleppo, will be overseen by Turkish contingents and Russian military police.

The agreement will prevent military action against the city of Idlib, Russia's defense minister said. "It's an intermediate step... but a necessary step," Lavrov said of the zone. "By mid-October, all (fighters of the Al-Nusra Front) must leave this demilitarized zone, and all heavy military equipment must be pulled out of there," he said. Russia is a key ally of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's regime, helping the Syrian government establish control over most of the country's territory after intervening in the multi-front conflict in 2015.

Turkey, however, backs opposition fighters seeking to oust the Syrian leader. It has said a large-scale offensive against the rebels could trigger a mass exodus towards its border. Turkey has asked France to help "consolidate" the agreement within the UN Security Council, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told the daily Le Monde in its edition which appeared yesterday.

Le Drian said that international pressure and warnings of a looming humanitarian crisis in Idlib had proven effective in checking an all-out assault by the Syrian regime. The Russian-Turkish accord could be validated by a reso-

Yemenis face starvation, aid agencies warn

UNITED NATIONS: International aid agencies are losing the fight against famine in Yemen, where 3.5 million people may soon be added to the eight million Yemenis already facing starvation, the UN aid chief warned yesterday. A sharp drop in the value of Yemen's currency that has sent fuel prices spiraling compounded with renewed fighting has led to a worsening of what the United Nations already considers the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

"We are losing the fight against famine," Mark Lowcock, the under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs, told the Security Council. "We are already seeing pockets of famine-like-conditions-including cases where people are eating leaves because they have no other form of sustenance," he said. The council was meeting at Britain's request to discuss the worsening crisis in Yemen, where a Saudi-led coalition is fighting Iran-aligned rebels who control the capital Sanaa.

Lowcock said the situation had deteriorated "in an alarming way in recent weeks" and that the crisis may be approaching "a tipping point, beyond which it will be impossible to prevent massive loss of life." The stark warning came ahead of next week's gathering of world leaders at the United Nations for the annual debate on global issues that will feature meetings on Yemen.

After a lull in fighting, Saudi-backed government forces this week launched a series of attacks on rebel-held Hodeida, the Red Sea port city that also serves as the entry point for humanitarian aid deliveries. The fight for Hodeida, which the Houthis seized in 2014, was put on hold



HAZZANI, Syria: A Syrian child waves a Turkish flag as he stands on a shade above other protesters during a demonstration against the Syrian government in the rebel-held town of Hazzanu. — AFP

lution or declaration by the Security Council, which includes France among its permanent members, a French diplomatic source said, adding that talks in that direction were now underway in New York.

Refugee boat sinks

In another development, a boat with 39 Syrian refugees aboard sank off the coast of Lebanon as it sailed illegally for Cyprus yesterday and most were rescued by the Lebanese army but a five-year-old boy drowned, security sources said. They said it appeared to be the first time in almost a year that a group of refugees had tried to get to Europe by boat from Lebanon, where Syrian refugees account for roughly a quarter of the population.

Cyprus is around 180 km from the coast of northern Lebanon. Three more of the people on the boat were in a serious condition in hospital, the sources said. The UN refugee agency UNHCR says there are close to 1 million

registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The Lebanese government puts the number at 1.5 million. As Syrian forces and their allies have retaken more territory in Syria, Lebanon's president and other politicians have called for refugees to go back to areas where fighting is over before a deal is reached to end the civil war.

Some refugees have trickled back to Syria in recent months in what the Lebanese authorities have described as voluntary returns coordinated with the Syrian government. But UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said during a visit to Beirut last month that refugees were concerned about issues including the lack of infrastructure and fear of retribution and military conscription. For larger numbers to decide to go back, he said, more confidence must be created by addressing these issues and UNHCR should have a presence in areas of return, according to a statement on UNHCR's website. — Agencies



ABS, Yemen: A Yemeni child suffering from malnutrition lies on a bed at a hospital in the northern district of Abs in the northwestern Hajjah province. — AFP

for 11 weeks as the United Nations struggled to bring warring parties to peace talks in Geneva. But the talks collapsed earlier this month after the northern Yemeni rebels refused to attend. Three quarters of Yemen's population-or 22 million people-are in need of humanitarian aid, including eight million who need food relief to survive, according to UN figures.

The Yemeni rial has lost 30 percent of its value over the past month, driving a sharp increase in the cost of food, almost all of which is imported. Lowcock called for council support for immediate measures to stabilize the economy, support the exchange rate and keep all ports and main roads open. "The lifeline through which the aid operation runs now hangs by a thread," he said. The Saudi-led alliance intervened in the Yemen conflict in 2015 in a bid to bolster embattled Yemeni President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi, whose government is recognized by the UN, in his war against the Houthis rebels. Nearly 10,000 people have been killed in the war. — AFP

Hezbollah financier arrested in Brazil

SAO PAULO: Brazilian police yesterday arrested a Lebanese citizen on suspicions of raising funds for Lebanon-based Shiite military group Hezbollah, which the United States considers a terrorist group. Assad Ahmad Barakat, 51, was arrested on Brazil's three-way border with Argentina and Paraguay close to the world-renowned Iguazu Falls, accused of carrying fake identity documents, federal police said. "Members of the Barakat Clan made purchases worth \$10 million, without declaring their value, at a casino in the Argentine city of Iguazu," Brazilian police said, "with the view to laundering the organization's money."

The money was allegedly destined for Hezbollah's coffers, but the funds and other assets were frozen by Argentine authorities, Brazilian police said. Barakat spent six years in a Paraguayan prison for tax evasion but was released in 2008, after which he moved to Brazil. In 1989 he had obtained Paraguayan nationality but was stripped of it in 2003 following his conviction. Yet in April he was issued a Paraguayan passport, according to Asuncion, which says it is investigating that case.

In 2006 Barakat was added to a US list of individuals and groups operating in the triple border area and financing Hezbollah, which has close links to Iran's regime. The US Treasury Department described Barakat as a "global terrorist," and said his network was a "major financial artery to Hezbollah." Around one million people live in three cities that converge on the triple border, an area US officials suspect of harboring dormant Islamic terror cells. — AFP