

International

S Korean constitutional court orders abortion ban be lifted

Law banning abortion to be scrapped after 2020

SEOUL: South Korea's constitutional court yesterday ordered the country's decades-old abortion ban to be lifted in a landmark ruling over a law that campaigners say puts women at risk. South Korea remains one of the few industrialized nations that criminalizes abortion, except for instances of rape, incest and when the mother's health is in jeopardy. But the nine-member bench ruled by seven to two that the 1953 statute aimed at protecting lives and traditional values "goes against the constitution" and ordered the law to be revised by the end of next year.

"The abortion ban limits women's rights to pursue their own destinies, and violates their rights to health by limiting their access to safe and timely procedures," the court said in a statement. "Embryos completely depend on the mother's body for their survival and development, so it cannot be concluded that they are separate, independent living beings entitled to rights to life." Bursting into tears of joy and celebrating, hundreds of women-including teenagers and females with disabilities-cheered wildly in front of the Constitutional Court in central Seoul, where the official ruling was announced.

"Women deserve to be happy as much as we want to be today," activist Bae Bok-ju told AFP. "Today's decision was made because countless women ceaselessly fought for their rights for so many years. We deserve the world's attention

and we deserve its recognition," Bae added. Under the ban, women who undergo the procedure can face up to a year in jail and a fine, while doctors who performed the procedure are given two years in prison.

The 1953 law had been widely flouted and rarely resulted in prosecutions, but activists had claimed it left women facing being unable to pay for terminations, unsafe procedures and social ostracisation. Under yesterday's ruling, the ban will be automatically lifted on January 1 2021 unless new legislation is introduced sooner by parliament to follow the court order.

'Proof' of rape

Calls to repeal the law had gained traction as the country's growing feminist movement gathered momentum, but support for the ban had also been staunch in a country that remains conservative towards female sexuality and highly influenced by evangelical Christianity. The constitutional court last upheld the law in 2012, saying that abortion would "end up running rampant" if not punished. Seven years later and an opinion poll on Wednesday showed 58 percent of the public are in favor of abolishing the law.

Yesterday's ruling was made after a woman doctor who was prosecuted for performing almost 70 abortions filed a challenge in 2017. According to campaigners, the procedure has been commonplace in South Korea and it has unfairly



SEOUL: South Korean women's rights activists react after the constitutional court's ruling on decriminalization of abortion during a rally against the abortion ban outside the court in Seoul. —AFP

targeted mostly young, unwed women—who are most vulnerable to abortion-related stigma in the country. Teens who fall pregnant are often forced to discontinue their studies, or transfer to remotely-located educational institutions, according to youth rights groups.

Women with disabilities, on the other hand, are often forced to undergo abortion against

their will by family members—which, according to disability rights campaigners, demonstrates the country's selective views about which lives matter. Also under the ban, rape victims need "proof" that they were raped, or—in the case of their health at jeopardy—are required to get permission from their partners, often causing lengthy and risky delays. —AFP

US warship cruises disputed sea in Philippine war games

MANILA: A US warship laden with hi-tech fighter planes took centre stage at key war games in the Philippines yesterday, brandishing military might as fresh tensions bubble in the contentious South China Sea. The amphibious assault ship USS Wasp, with at least 10 F-35B stealth jets on deck, stood guard as amphibious tanks rolled onto a Philippine beach located a short sail from islands also claimed by China.

The vessel was in the area for long-running US-Philippine military drills, which come as Manila pushes back against the recent presence of hundreds of Chinese ships near its Pag-asa (Thitu) island. "We can't disclose the official movements of the USS Wasp for security reasons, but they have been operating in the South China Sea region... as part of the exercise," US spokeswoman Second Lieutenant Tori Sharpe told reporters.

President Rodrigo Duterte had largely set aside the on-tense dispute over China's expansive claims to the resource-rich waterway, but told Beijing last week to back off over the "swarming" Chinese boats. The Philippines called the boats' presence "illegal" and Duterte threatened China with possible military action if it touches the island. China claims most of the sea, including waters and islands close to the shores of its neighbors. It has built artificial islands and military installations that the US warned could curtail right of passage by non-Chinese vessels.

The Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam have also all staked claims to various islands and reefs in the sea that is thought to have rich petroleum reserves deep beneath its waters. The Wasp's participation in the exercises represents "an increase in military capability committed to a free and open



MANILA: Anti-China protesters raise clenched fists and national flags as they shout slogans during a protest in front of the consular office of China, in the financial district of Manila. — AFP

Indo-Pacific region," the US navy said in a press release on its arrival last week.

The two-week Balikatan (Shoulder-to-shoulder) exercises, which opened April 1, include some 4,000 Philippine, 3,500 American, and 50 Australian troops. Duterte had threatened to quit the drills as part of his pivot away from former colonial master the US and toward China, but they have carried on after being toned down for a few years. As Duterte has adopted a friendlier stance with China, the US has moved to shore up its ties with Manila and assert its presence in the South China Sea.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pledged in March to come to the Philippines' defence in case of an "armed attack" in the sea, a clear assurance Philippines leaders had long sought. Duterte has been criticized at home as being too eager to grow ties with Beijing, and giving up too much leverage on the South China Sea issue. —AFP

China defends exit ban on human rights lawyer

BEIJING: China yesterday defended an exit ban imposed on a human rights lawyer as lawful after the United States urged Beijing to let him travel to receive a US fellowship. Chen Jiangang was selected to study English as part of the Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship, a program named for the late vice president that provides a year of US education for emerging leaders from around the world. But the lawyer said he was pulled aside by customs at Beijing Capital airport as he prepared to board a flight to Seattle on April 1 and told he was banned from leaving China.

"This persecution of lawyers and disregard for the rule of law once again shows to the world that the Chinese government is openly and unceasingly depriving people of their human rights," he said in a statement. "Nothing stops the Chinese government from doing whatever it wants to, disregarding any law or commitment it makes," he said. The US State Department said it was "disturbed" by the move and urged China to "respect Chen's freedom of movement and to view lawyers and rights defenders as partners in strengthening Chinese society through development of rule of law."

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang said Thursday the exit ban was "in accordance with China's own laws." "China's relevant departments are... handling the exit-entry affairs of the relevant Chinese national in accordance with the law," Lu said at a regular press briefing. —AFP