

International

US VP Harris accuses China of 'intimidation' in disputed seas

China hits back at Harris, says US 'selfish' over Afghanistan

SINGAPORE: Vice President Kamala Harris accused China yesterday of intimidation in disputed Asian waters, seeking to rally regional allies as the United States' superpower status takes a hit over Afghanistan. Her comments in Singapore came as Washington seeks to reset relations in Asia after the turbulent Donald Trump era and build a bulwark against the rising might of Beijing. But her trip to the region, which also includes a stop in Vietnam, comes as Washington faces

the embassy statement said. "Beijing's actions continue to undermine the rules-based order and threaten the sovereignty of nations." But Beijing hit back, holding up the Afghan debacle as an example of the United States' "selfish" foreign policy, and accusing Washington of "bullying, hegemonic behavior". "The current events in Afghanistan clearly tell us what the rules and order the US speaks of are," China's foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said. China claims

ties with both of the world's top economies to choose sides. "Our engagement in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific is not against any one country, nor is it designed to make anyone choose between countries," she said. Harris is the latest top official from President Joe Biden's administration to visit the region. On a trip to Singapore last month, Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin also strongly criticized China's maritime claims. But the Afghan crisis and doubts about US credibility are



SINGAPORE: US Vice President Kamala Harris (center left) speaks with US personnel as she departs Singapore yesterday as she travels next to Vietnam. — AFP

fresh questions over its dependability amid the US pullout from Afghanistan and Taliban takeover.

In a speech laying out her administration's foreign policy goals, Harris reiterated that Washington had "enduring commitments" in Asia and took aim at China. "Beijing continues to coerce, to intimidate and to make claims to the vast majority of the South China Sea," she said.

Meanwhile, Harris' flight from Singapore to Vietnam was delayed by three hours yesterday after an "anomalous health incident" took place in Hanoi, the US embassy said. Harris was due in Vietnam after a two-day stop in Singapore as part of a regional trip.

"The Vice President's travelling delegation was delayed from departing Singapore because the Vice President's office was made aware of a report of a recent possible anomalous health incident in Hanoi,"

almost all of the resource-rich South China Sea, through which trillions of dollars in shipping trade passes annually, with competing claims from four Southeast Asian states as well as Taiwan.

Beijing has been accused of deploying a range of military hardware including anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles there, and ignored a 2016 international tribunal decision that declared its historical claim over most of the waters to be without basis. Tensions have escalated recently between Beijing and rival claimants, with Manila angered after hundreds of Chinese boats were spotted at a contested reef while Malaysia scrambled jets to intercept Chinese military aircraft.

'Right, courageous'

Harris also sought to allay fears that growing US-China tensions could force countries that have strong

resulted in steadily falling yakuza memberships. Nomura was found guilty of ordering the fatal 1998 shooting of an ex-boss of a fisheries cooperative who exerted influence over port construction projects, major media outlets said. He was also behind a 2014 attack on a relative of the murder victim, and a 2013 knife attack against a nurse at a clinic where Nomura was seeking treatment, the court reportedly said. The 2012 shooting of a former police official who had investigated the Kudo-kai was also deemed Nomura's responsibility. The official survived with serious injuries to his waist and legs, media said.

Prosecutors reportedly argued that Nomura had exerted absolute control over the syndicate. His number two Fumio Tanoue was jailed for life yesterday, the court said. The yakuza grew from the chaos of post-war Japan into multi-billion-dollar criminal organizations, involved in everything from drugs and prostitution to protection rackets and white-collar crime.

Unlike the Italian Mafia or Chinese triads, yakuza have long occupied a grey area in Japanese society—they are not illegal, and each group has its own headquarters in full view of police. With more than 100 inmates on death row, Japan is one of few developed nations to retain the death penalty. Public support for capital punishment remains high despite international criticism, including from rights groups. — AFP

Japanese crime boss sentenced to death for ordering murder

TOKYO: A Japanese court said it had sentenced a yakuza mafia boss to death yesterday after he ordered a murder and attacks on three other citizens. Satoru Nomura, the 74-year-old head of the "Kudo-kai" crime syndicate in southwest Japan, denied accusations he had masterminded the violent assaults on ordinary people.

Fukuoka District Court confirmed it had sentenced Nomura to death, while Japanese media said the verdict came despite a lack of evidence directly linking him to the crimes. "I asked for a fair decision... You will regret this for the rest of your life," Nomura told the judge after his sentencing, according to the Nishinippon Shimbun. The yakuza mafia were long tolerated in Japan as a necessary evil for ensuring order on the streets and getting things done quickly, however dubious the means.

But in recent decades, stiffer anti-gang regulations, waning social tolerance and a weak economy have



TOKYO: A Japanese court said it had sentenced a yakuza mafia boss to death yesterday after he ordered a murder and attacks on three other citizens. — AFP

Spain may have to leave people behind in Afghanistan

MADRID: Spain will not be able to rescue all Afghans who served Spanish missions in Afghanistan because of the "dramatic" situation on the ground, Defense Minister Margarita Robles said yesterday.

Robles said Taliban checkpoints and violence were making it difficult for people to reach Kabul airport to catch one of the daily flights on a Spanish military plane out of the country. "We will evacuate as many people as possible but there are people who will stay behind for reasons that do not depend on us, but on the situation there," Robles said during an interview with news radio Cadena Ser. "It is a very frustrating situation for everyone, because even those who reach Kabul, access to the airport is very complicated," she added. "The Taliban are becoming more aggressive, there is gunfire, violence is more obvious," she said.

"The situation is frankly dramatic and besides with each passing day it is worse because people are conscious that time is running out." Spain has been evacuating its nationals and local contractors from

Afghanistan via Dubai since the Taliban swept to power ten days ago. Madrid has so far evacuated just over 700 people from Afghanistan but Robles said there were still "many people" who feared Taliban reprisal who needed to leave. "We will keep trying until the end," she added.

More evacuees due

The Spanish government has consistently declined to give a figure for the total number of people it planned to take out of Afghanistan. US President Joe Biden has set an August 31 deadline to finish the chaotic airlift organized by thousands of temporarily deployed US and UK troops, but has left the door open to an extension if needed.

However, a spokesman for the Taliban warned Monday the hardline Islamist group would not agree to any extension. Asked if Biden should extend the deadline for US troops to leave Kabul, Robles declined to comment, saying only that she was focused on Spain's evacuation operation.

But during an interview with private television La Sexta on Monday, she said Spain could only carry out its evacuation flights as long as Kabul airport is "controlled" by US troops. Another 420 people are expected to arrive in Spain yesterday, the minister said. They include 290 people who are already in Dubai and 130 who are expected to leave on a Spanish military plane from Kabul, she added.—AFP



Harris' flight to Hanoi delayed

casting a long shadow over Harris's visit.

In yesterday's speech, she defended Biden's decision to push ahead with the US pullout from Afghanistan as "courageous and right" and reiterated US officials were "laser-focused" on the chaotic evacuation from Kabul airport. "The United States has been focused on safely evacuating American citizens, international partners, Afghans who worked side by side with us, and other Afghans at risk," she said. Harris also announced that Washington was offering to host the annual meetings of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in 2023, a grouping that includes Beijing and the US.

The US-China relationship has deteriorated over a range of issues from cybersecurity and tech supremacy to human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Biden has largely continued Trump's hawkish stance on China, describing the Asian power as the pre-eminent challenge to the United States, but has lowered the temperature.

The vice president also called for greater international cooperation to strengthen supply chains during talks with Singapore officials and business executives, as the US seeks to tackle a global microchip shortage. — AFP



GENEVA: United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet (right) speaks with an assistant during a special session of the UN Human Rights Council on Afghanistan in Geneva yesterday. — AFP

Taliban's treatment of women a 'red line': UN rights chief

GENEVA: The UN rights chief voiced grave concern yesterday at the situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban swept into power, saying their treatment of women is a "fundamental red line". Speaking at the opening of an emergency session on Afghanistan, Michelle Bachelet urged the Taliban to honor commitments to respect the rights of women and girls, and of ethnic and religious minorities, and refrain from reprisals.

"The onus is now fully on the Taliban to translate these commitments into reality," she said. The High Commissioner for Human Rights stressed that indulging in rights violations would undermine the legitimacy of the Taliban, both with the Afghan people and internationally. "A fundamental red line will be the Taliban's treatment of women and girls," she said, urging "respect for their rights to liberty, freedom of movement, education, self-expression and employment."

The militants have repeatedly promised a different kind of rule to their brutal regime of the 1990s that saw women confined to their homes, most entertainment banned, and stoning and public executions used as punishments. But their rebranding is being treated with skepticism, and large crowds continue to mass outside Kabul airport desperately seeking evacuation, terrified of facing life under the Taliban.

'Targeted killings'

Most of the diplomats taking part virtually in yesterday's special session of the Geneva-based council voiced alarm at the situation, with particular concern for women and girls. Speaking on behalf of more than 60 countries, Spanish Ambassador Aurora Diaz-Rato called for the "immediate cessation of targeted killings of women's rights defenders".

US Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya meanwhile stressed that "hard-won advancements in respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms over the last 20 years, particularly for women and members of minority groups, must be maintained."

Even before the Taliban takeover, the UN says Afghanistan saw a sharp increase in civilian casualties in recent months. Bachelet said her office had received credible reports of serious violations in places that have been under Taliban control, including summary executions, restrictions of women's rights, blocking girls from attending school and recruitment of child soldiers. —AFP



Rodrigo Duterte

Duterte to run for vice president

MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte will run for vice president in next year's elections, his party said yesterday, after months of speculation about whether he would seek to stay in power.

Duterte, who was elected to the top job in 2016 and is barred under the constitution from seeking another term, has previously flagged the possibility of contesting the country's second-highest office. "President Rodrigo Roa Duterte agreed to make the sacrifice and heed the clamor of the people, and accepted the endorsement of the PDP Laban Party for him to run as vice president in the 2022 national elections," the party said in a statement.

The party is also expected to endorse Duterte's top aide, Senator Christopher Lawrence "Bong" Go, to be their presidential candidate. Duterte has not said publicly yet that he will run, but PDP-Laban president Alfonso Cusi told AFP: "He confirmed he is running for VP in 2022."

The vice president and president are elected separately in the Philippines, with the former assuming the top job if the latter dies, becomes incapacitated, or resigns while in office.

During his term Duterte has waged a brutal war against drug users and dealers that rights groups say has killed tens of thousands of people. International Criminal Court prosecutors are seeking to launch a full-blown investigation into the anti-narcotics crackdown, raising the stakes for next year's elections.

Duterte's daughter, Sara, is widely expected to contest the presidency and, if she were to win, could help protect her father from criminal charges. Recent polls show the Davao city mayor—the same position her father held before he took power—with the most voter support.

Duterte told a meeting of party officials last month that he was "seriously thinking of running for vice president". But he expressed concern that a political foe could win the presidency, rendering him useless for the next six years.

"The president that will win must be a friend of mine (with) whom I can work with," Duterte said. The deadline for registering as a candidate for next year's elections is October 8. A sitting president has never before made a bid for the vice presidency in the Philippines. Presidential spokesman Harry Roque told reporters that Duterte would make a televised address later where he is expected to discuss the PDP-Laban announcement. — AFP

Myanmar junta mulls raising village militias

YANGON: Myanmar's junta is considering raising village militias to combat opposition to its rule, state media said yesterday, as it struggles to assert control more than six months after seizing power. The country has been in turmoil since Aung San Suu Kyi's government was ousted in a February coup, sparking huge pro-democracy protests and a bloody military crackdown. Local "self-defense groups" have sprung up to fight the military, often using hunting rifles or weapons manufactured at makeshift jungle factories.

The groups have added to the volatile mix in Myanmar, where more than 20 ethnic rebel groups were already in various stages of conflict with the military before the coup. The State Administration Council—as the junta dubs itself—has discussed the "systematic formation of village people's militia troops," the state-backed Global New Light of Myanmar reported yesterday. It also discussed rewards for those informing of anti-junta protesters, and the "effective hindering" of established insurgent groups on Myanmar's fringes who are providing weapons and training, the paper said.

David Mathieson, an analyst formerly based in the country, told AFP it was unlikely many would voluntarily sign up for any militia, given "the widespread anger towards the military." "But also there must be a Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) dilemma in training and arming people who... may turn the training and arms back on you."

Sporadic fighting continues across the country, with locals in the northwest Sagaing region accusing the military of using artillery during clashes with one group. Earlier this month Myanmar's ambassador to the United Nations, who has refused to leave his post after the coup, alerted the world body to a "reported massacre" of 40 people in Sagaing. Clashes have largely taken place in rural areas, although in June four protesters and at least two military officers were killed in a gun battle in the country's second city of Mandalay. —AFP