

## FORMER TOP CHINESE MILITARY LEADER CONFESSES TO GRAFT

**BEIJING:** Former top Chinese military leader Guo Boxiong has confessed to bribe-taking, the official Xinhua news agency reported yesterday, citing military prosecutors who described the sums as "extremely huge".

Guo was for a decade one of the two vice chairmen of the Central Military Commission, second only to the Chinese president in the top body of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). He retired in 2012 and was expelled from the ruling Communist Party last year.

His fall came as President Xi Jinping seeks to consolidate his power and enhance his control over the PLA, the world's largest military and technically the armed force of the ruling party rather than

the Chinese state. Guo was found to have taken advantage of his position "to assist the promotion and relocation of other people, accepting an extremely huge amount of bribe personally and through his family", Xinhua cited military prosecutors as saying in a statement.

The 73-year-old had been formally charged and the procedure to prosecute him had begun, it added. In China criminal charges normally follow expulsion from the ruling party. Trial, conviction and a jail term is effectively guaranteed to follow in a court system controlled by the Communist Party. Since coming to power Xi has sought to impose his authority on the military, one of the targets of his wide-ranging anti-corruption drive. As well as

being the world's largest active military, a vast network of businesses are linked to the armed forces-so extensive that academics have dubbed it "PLA Inc". Officials have said it will be fully barred from providing "paid services" in three years' time.

Graft is endemic in China and critics say that without systemic reforms Xi's campaign is open to being used for political infighting. The hugely powerful former security chief Zhou Yongkang, who was sentenced to life in prison last year, is its most high-profile scalp, while another former Central Military Commission vice chairman, Xu Caihou, died of cancer while under investigation.

Along with Bo Xilai, whose fall predates Xi's ascension to the highest office, Guo is

the fourth former member of the ruling party's 25-strong Politburo to fall.

### 'Anti-corruption sword'

Guo "confessed to his suspected crime of bribery", Xinhua quoted an official of the military procuratorate as saying. Prosecutors had taken a "highly responsible attitude to the law and to history", the official said, and seized money and properties involved "in accordance with the law". Others involved who had committed crimes would be punished "without tolerance". Guo read and signed each interrogation transcript, the official said, adding his legal rights had been "earnestly guaranteed". Military prosecutors could not be reached for comment. Chinese media

poured scorn on Guo after he was expelled from the ruling party last year.

"One demon killed, all demons deterred," declared a commentary in the People's Daily, the party's official mouthpiece. "We must raise high and wield the sharp anti-corruption sword, so that the idea of going corrupt will be nipped in the bud and the corrupt will pay a price."

Guo's family built up an enormous fortune after he ascended to the highest echelons of power, news portal Netease.com reported at the time of his expulsion. His wife He Xiulan acted as a broker between him and senior military officers, taking bribes for promotions and refunding the money if the post did not materialise, it said. — AFP



**KUTAI:** This picture released on yesterday shows Indonesian environmental activist tending to an ill Sumatran Rhino (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) after it was found in a pit trap. — AFP

## SUMATRAN RHINO DIES WEEKS AFTER LANDMARK DISCOVERY

**JAKARTA:** A critically endangered Sumatran rhino has died weeks after its chance discovery on the Indonesian part of Borneo island was hailed as a landmark conservation success, an official said yesterday.

The rare rhino was caught in a pit trap last month in East Kalimantan province in an area close to mining operations and plantations, where it was struggling to survive. It was the first physical contact environmentalists had made with a Sumatran rhino on Indonesian Borneo in more than 40 years, after it was assumed the animal was long extinct.

However Najaq, as the female rhino was known, succumbed to a leg infection after her health deteriorated in recent days, Indonesia's environment ministry confirmed. "The death of this Sumatran rhino proves they exist on Borneo, so we will continue protecting them," Tachrir Fathoni, a senior official at the environment ministry, told AFP. A post-mortem examination is being con-

ducted to determine the official cause of death, he added. Environmentalists discovered in 2013 that the Sumatran rhino was not extinct on Indonesian Borneo-as had long been thought-when hidden cameras captured images of the animals.

Conservationists had heralded the capture of the rhino in March as an exciting discovery, and expressed disappointment at the tragic turn of events. "This is a very valuable lesson that shows saving a rhino can be very difficult, and needs the support of experts," said WWF Indonesia head Efransjah, who like many Indonesians goes by one name.

There were once Sumatran rhinos all over Borneo but their numbers have dwindled dramatically, with poaching and the expansion of mining and plantation operations considered the main reasons for the decline.

The Sumatran rhino is the only Asian rhino with two horns, and are covered with long hair. It's estimated there are less than 100 left in the wild. — AFP

## DIAMOND AND SCROLL BREAK AUCTION RECORDS IN HONG KONG

**HONG KONG:** A rare blue diamond set a new record at Sotheby's in Hong Kong yesterday after fetching HK\$248.29 million (\$31.8 million), despite a slowdown in China's economy which has affected the auction market.

The "De Beers Millennium Jewel 4", a 10.10 carat vivid blue diamond, broke the record for the most expensive piece of jewelry sold at auction in Asia, but at the lower end of estimates which predicted it would

hours after a scroll painting by Chinese master Zhang Daqian sold for a record-breaking HK\$270.68 million (\$35.93 million), also at Sotheby's.

It was snapped up by Chinese collector Liu Yiqian's Shanghai museum-the latest in a string of massive buys associated with the former taxi driver turned tycoon. Zhang's splashed ink and color scroll outstripped the top-end pre-sale estimate of HK\$65 million, breaking the record for the artist's work at auction.

A buyer from Liu's Long Museum ended hour-long bidding for the work, entitled "Peach Blossom Spring", with more than 100 bids cast. The sales comes despite a slowdown in the Chinese economy which expanded 6.9 percent in 2015, the worst performance in a quarter of a century and a far cry from years of double-digit increases.

There are fears that the combination of the Chinese economic slowdown and an anti-corruption drive by President Xi Jinping could hit the Asia market-both Sotheby's and Christie's posted lower totals at their autumn sales last year in Hong Kong compared with the two preceding years.

Liu, who has been making record-setting purchases at auctions in the past few years, stunned the art world when he bought a famed nude by Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani costing more than \$170 million in November.

He set a record for Chinese porcelain in 2014 by paying over \$36 million for a tiny Ming Dynasty cup depicting a rooster and hen tending to their chicks, known as the "chicken cup". Liu made world headlines by drinking from the cup after he bought it.

Auctioneers say despite China's economic downturn, there is still demand for top quality collectibles, and demand stretches across Asia.

The "Seal of the Mandate of Heaven" which belonged to the Kangxi Emperor, the longest reigning Chinese monarch, is to be auctioned today at Sotheby's as part of its spring sales season, with a starting at a price of HK\$50 million. — AFP



**HONG KONG:** The 10.10 carat rare vivid blue diamond that new record at Sotheby's yesterday after fetching 248.29 million HKD. — AFP

fetch between \$30 and \$35 million.

Slightly larger than an almond, it is described by Sotheby's as the largest oval blue diamond ever to appear at auction and "internally flawless". It was sold to an anonymous phone bidder. "It was a very successful sale," Sotheby's international jewelry division worldwide chairman David Bennett said.

"The fact that it's a record price for jewelry in Asia I think speaks well about the Asian market... I think it's alive and well and very healthy," Bennett said. The sale came

## NORTH KOREA CAN PUT NUCLEAR WARHEAD ON MID-RANGE MISSILE

'THEY WILL FIRE IT LIKE THAT IS A POLITICAL DECISION'

**SEOUL:** North Korea can mount a nuclear warhead on a medium-range missile, a South Korean official said on Tuesday in a new assessment of the capability of a country that conducted its fourth nuclear test this year.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said last month his country had miniaturized nuclear warheads to mount on ballistic missiles. It was his first direct statement of a claim often made in state media though never independently verified. "We believe they have accomplished miniaturization of a nuclear warhead to mount it on a Rodong missile," the South Korean official, with knowledge of South Korea's assessment of the North's nuclear program, told a small group of reporters on condition of anonymity.

The Rodong missile can fire a 1 ton warhead a distance of up to 2,000 km, the official said. That would put all of South Korea, most of Japan and parts of Russia and China in range. "We believe they have the ability to mount a nuclear warhead on a Rodong. Whether they will fire it like that is a political decision," said the official.

There was no direct evidence that the North has successfully mounted a warhead on such a missile, the South Korean official said. He declined to discuss the basis for the change in assessment. Staunch US ally South Korea has been facing off against its rival to the north for decades.

### The South's reaction

The South's conservative president, Park Geun-hye, has reversed a policy of trying to engage the North in dialogue and has instead adopted a hard line against it, particularly since the North conducted its fourth nuclear test on Jan. 6 and a month later launched a long-range rocket putting an object into space orbit.

The test and launch prompted the U.N.



**UNKNOWN LOCATION:** North Korean leader Kim Jong-un (C) inspecting the test of a new-type anti-air guided weapon system. — AFP

Security Council to impose new sanctions. South Korea has previously said North Korea had made progress in its efforts to miniaturise a nuclear warhead but the capability was incomplete. South Korea's Defence Ministry said on Tuesday that assessment remained the military's position. Rodong missiles, developed from Soviet-era Scud missiles, make up the bulk of the North's short- and medium-range missile arsenal with an estimated stockpile of 200.

Experts have predicted that the delivery vehicle for the North's first nuclear warhead would be the medium-range Rodong missile, rather

than an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), which the North has yet to test. Despite threats to strike the mainland United States, the North is seen as several years away from building an ICBM that can carry a nuclear warhead.

Experts have previously said a functioning mid-range nuclear missile would need the technology to overcome the stress of launch and re-entry and to strike the target with precision, which requires repeated testing. The North fired a Rodong missile in March. It flew about 800 km the sea, in the first such launch since two Rodongs were fired in 2014. — Reuters

## TRAIN BLAST, A ROOF COLLAPSE AND FLOOD DEATHS TOLL RISE IN PAKISTAN

**QUETTA/MULTAN/PESHAWAR:** A bomb planted on the track killed at least one train passenger and wounded four others in Pakistan's restive southwest province of Balochistan yesterday, officials said.

The improvised explosive device exploded as the Jaffar Express from Rawalpindi passed over it 180 kilometers east of Quetta, local security official Naseer Ullah told AFP. "A passenger was killed and four others were wounded and moved to hospital," he said. A three-foot section of the track was destroyed by the bombing, which hit the second carriage. The injured were taken to hospital in the town of Sibbi 25 kilometers north of the blast site. A provincial home minister official in Quetta confirmed the details. There was no immediate claim of responsibility but Taliban militants are active in the region. Quetta is the capital of Balochistan province, which is also home to a separatist insurgency that has been raging since 2004. The province's roughly seven million people have long complained they do not receive a fair share of its gas and mineral wealth.

### Roof Collapse

A Pakistani official says a roof that was under construction at a religious school collapsed, killing five students. Local rescue official Natiq Hayyat says nine students were also injured in the incident in the central district of Dera Ghazi Khan yesterday. Hayyat says all the victims have been taken to hospital. The cause of the collapse was not clear. Pakistan has been hit by flash floods triggered by weekend rains that have killed 71 people in the country's northwest. Flash floods commonly occur during South Asia's summer monsoon season.

### Flood death toll rises

The death toll after heavy rains in Pakistan's northwest and in Kashmir rose to 71 Tuesday, officials said, as rescuers sought to evacuate dozens of people still trapped by landslides.

Ten more people were found dead in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after the weekend downpour triggered landslides and collapsed the roofs of dozens of houses.

"The number known to have died in rains so far in the northwest has now risen to 61 with over 350 houses damaged all over Khyber Pakhtunkhwa," a spokesman for the local disaster management authority said in a statement.

At least 30 people were still stranded following a heavy landslide in the area of Khoistan, he said. While in Pakistani-held Kashmir, dozens of local tourists remained marooned in the picturesque Neelum Valley as authorities attempted to evacuate them, a local official there told AFP.

At least 10 people have been confirmed killed there since the rain began Saturday. "My children are sitting under the open sky. My cattle and belongings were trapped under the debris," local resident Nasim Atakhar told AFP after her house collapsed. Poorly built homes across Pakistan, particularly in rural areas, are susceptible to collapse during the annual spring rains, which are often heavy. Severe weather in recent years has killed hundreds and destroyed huge tracts of prime farmland. During the rainy season last summer, torrential downpours and flooding killed 81 people and affected almost 300,000 people across the country. — Agencies



**QUETTA:** Pakistani passengers help an injured train blast victim as they arrive at a railway station yesterday. — AFP

## INDIA'S BIHAR BANS ALL ALCOHOL SALES

**PATNA:** The Indian state of Bihar completely banned the sale of alcohol in a surprise move yesterday, including liquor at bars and hotels. The state government had announced an end to sales of locally brewed liquor last week and said a complete ban would be phased over six months.

However Nitish Kumar, the state's top elected official, said the ban on local liquor was so popular that the government was ready to bar all sales of alcohol immediately. He said that feedback from across the state showed that the government's move had widespread support. "I feel this is the right time for social change in Bihar," Kumar told reporters.

But the government's sudden move has surprised store and bar owners. "We were taken totally by surprise," said Shankar Jha, the owner of the Liquid Bar in state capital Patna. "We are now awaiting instructions from the state excise department about how we should deal with our stocks," Jha said, adding that his bar would be

forced to fire the staff.

Liquor store salesman Nitish Pandey was also left with unsold stock and no clear order what to do with it. The move is expected to cost the state government about 40 billion rupees (\$ 600 million) in revenues from taxes on alcohol sales. Liquor manufacturers can continue making their products as long as they are sold in other parts of the country.

Three other states have complete alcohol bans, Gujarat, Nagaland and Manipur. However bootleggers do brisk business in all Indian states with prohibition laws. Political analyst Ravi Ranjan Sinha said that Bihar's move to ban all alcohol sales was sudden and poorly thought out. "We don't know how the state will make up for the loss in revenue," he said, adding that smuggling of alcohol from nearby states would become rampant. Prohibition was one of Kumar's main campaign promises to women voters in state elections last year. — AP