

JAPAN URGES CHINA NOT TO ESCALATE TENSION

TOKYO: Japan said yesterday it would respond firmly after Chinese government vessels had intruded into what Tokyo considers its territorial waters near disputed islands in the East China Sea 14 times at the weekend, stoking bilateral tensions. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said Tokyo would continue to urge China not to escalate the East China Sea dispute, while also responding firmly and calmly. Suga told a news conference that a total of 14 Chinese government vessels had entered

"contiguous waters", which can be policed for customs and immigration violations, in recent days and intruded into what Japan considers its territorial waters 14 times.

Twelve Chinese vessels remained in the area early yesterday, he said. Agencies including the coast guard would act together closely to deal with the situation, Suga said. A Japanese government source, who asked not to be identified, said the Japan Coast Guard had stepped up its patrols in the region at the weekend but

declined to give further details. Chinese activity near the islands, known as the Senkaku in Japan and the Diaoyu in China, has heated up since Friday, prompting repeated Japanese protests, including three on Sunday alone. Some 230 Chinese fishing vessels were also in the area on Saturday, Japan's foreign ministry said.

The incidents come amid heightened tensions after an arbitration court in The Hague invalidated China's sweeping claims in the disputed South China Sea less than a

month ago, in a case brought by the Philippines. China has refused to recognize that ruling. Japan called on China to adhere to the verdict, which it said was binding. This prompted warnings from Beijing to Tokyo not to interfere. On Saturday, China's foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said in a statement on the ministry's website China had indisputable sovereignty over the islands and nearby waters. China accused Japan's new defense minister, Tomomi Inada, on Friday of reck-

lessly misrepresenting history after she declined to say whether Japanese troops had massacred civilians in China during World War Two. Inada echoed Suga's comments and said yesterday Japan's military would conduct air patrols to provide information to the coast guard. Ties between China and Japan, the world's second and third largest economies, have been plagued by the territorial row, the legacy of Japan's wartime occupation of parts of China and regional rivalry. — Reuters



MANILA: Philippine boxing icon-turned-senator Manny Pacquiao delivers his privilege speech on restoration of the death penalty during a session at the senate in Manila yesterday. — AFP

PHILIPPINES' BOXING ICON PREACHES DEATH PENALTY

PACQUIAO BACKS DUTERTE'S CONTROVERSIAL PROPOSAL

MANILA: Philippine boxing icon-turned-senator Manny Pacquiao used the Bible to defend restoring the death penalty for drug traffickers as "approved by God", backing a controversial proposal of President Rodrigo Duterte. The eight-division champion and devout evangelical Christian used his first senate speech to argue for capital punishment, calling it lawful and moral "especially in the eyes of God". "When the government punishes, it's not an individual act. That's approved by God. That's what the Bible says," Pacquiao said. "Having read the Bible on a regular basis, I am convinced that God is not just a God of mercy but he is also a God of justice."

Pacquiao was elected to the senate in May on the back of his popularity as a sports star among Filipinos, who consider him a national hero. He and Duterte are political allies and both hail from the southern Philippines. Duterte has declared a bloody crackdown on crime, especially illegal drugs, telling police to shoot drug suspects. Since Duterte assumed office on June 30, police have reported killing over 400 drug suspects while the country's largest broadcaster ABS-CBN put the death toll at 852 to include reported summary executions.

The Philippines abolished the death penalty in 2006 following staunch opposition from the Catholic Church, the religion of 80 percent of Filipinos. But Duterte has vowed to introduce executions by hanging for "retribution". Pacquiao said yesterday he also preferred death by hanging or firing squad to reduce drug-related crimes. Asked by a colleague if this was because hanging was cheaper than lethal injection, Pacquiao said

in jest: "You'll just kick the chair. We can also say the chair was just knocked down."

Pacquiao said he filed several bills on the death penalty including for drug crimes, rape and murder because Philippine laws "lacked teeth". But he did not answer questions on whether there were any studies showing that the death penalty led to lower crime rates. In his 20-minute speech, Pacquiao repeatedly quoted Bible passages, prompting another colleague to refer to him as a "pastor". He said he saw no contradiction between his beliefs and his support for the death penalty. Addressing critics of the proposal, Pacquiao said: "God allows the death penalty to discipline the people and to punish those wrongdoers."

Officials surrender

Meanwhile, dozens of Philippine government and police officials turned themselves in yesterday, a day after President Rodrigo Duterte linked them to the drugs trade, stepping up a war on narcotics that has killed hundreds since he took office in June. More than 400 suspected drug dealers have been killed by police across the Philippines since Duterte took over, officials say. Broadcaster ABS-CNN put the number at over 800, though this includes executions by anonymous vigilantes.

Yesterday, 27 mayors and 31 police officers, including a colonel, went to the national police office in the capital, Manila, to clear their names, fearing the president's order to hunt them down if they failed to surrender within 24 hours. Several local officials reported to regional police

offices to beat the deadline set by Duterte, who won the elections in May on a single platform of fighting crime and drugs. On Sunday, he identified about 160 officials in a name-and-shame campaign. "I want to change," a Cebu-based businessman tagged as a top-level drug trafficker told reporters after he met national police chief Ronald dela Rosa.

Nicknamed "the punisher" and "Duterte Harry" for his brutal fight on crime, Duterte has hit back at activists incensed by the surge in the killings of suspected drug traffickers.

Alarmed human rights groups have urged the United Nations to condemn the rise in extrajudicial killings. The Philippine Senate is to hold a legislative inquiry. Dela Rosa reprimanded the police officers on Duterte's list, threatening to kill them if they continued to protect drug traders and resell seized drugs. At one point, he challenged them to a fistfight.

"I am mad with what is happening," Dela Rosa said in a speech to local officials and police. "I am ashamed. We should be the ones arresting these people, but we are protecting them. I will kill you if you will not change."

All police officers linked to the drug trade were disarmed, investigated and could face criminal and administrative cases if there was strong evidence, said national police spokesman Dionardo Carlos.

"They will be accorded due process," he added. Besides local officials and police officers, Duterte's list included two retired police generals, soldiers, paramilitary members, judges and a former lawmaker. — Agencies

TOURIST BOOM THREATENING SRI LANKA'S GOLDEN BEACHES

MOUNT LAVINIA: Tourists have flocked back to Sri Lanka's palm-fringed beaches since a bloody civil war ended in 2009, but environmentalists warn unchecked development means some areas are now so polluted, swimming there is a health hazard. Sewage from thriving hotels and guesthouses pours, often untreated, out into the

water polluting the sea and shore. Even the country's own tourism minister says he has stopped swimming in the seas close to capital Colombo because of the dirty water.

More than two million visitors now head to the tiny Indian Ocean island every year, more than four times the number that came in 2009.



COLOMBO: Foreign tourists walk along Mount Lavinia beach on the outskirts of Colombo. — AFP

Yet there are fears it is becoming a victim of its own success. Guesthouses have sprung up to cater for soaring numbers of visitors-but often with little thought for how to deal with the waste they produce. Many simply discharge raw sewage straight into the sea, exposing bathers to potential health issues.

The problem is most acute just south of Colombo at Mount Lavinia, an upscale neighbourhood and resort known for its "Golden Mile" of beach. Environmental engineering expert Mahesh Jayaweera said the bays in Mount Lavinia were now so polluted that people should not bathe in them. "When you look at the water you won't notice it. But at certain times of the year, the water in Mount Lavinia is so filthy it is worse than taking a dip in a cess pool," he said.

Levels of faecal contamination at Mount Lavinia are 60 times higher than maximum safe limits, said Jayaweera, of Sri Lanka's University of Moratuwa. Many visitors are unaware of the dangers, but locals are more aware of potential issues. "We just come here to play," said local resident Harsha Swadesh, 26, enjoying a game of volleyball with friends. "The sea is rough and it is not very clean." Unawatuna, just south of the historic port city of Galle, is promoted as a pristine beach perfect for snorkelling and is famous for its coral reefs. But researchers say it is among the most polluted, with many guesthouses dumping their raw sewage into the ocean, especially at night. — AFP

BANNED FROM WORKING, ASYLUM SEEKERS BUILDING JAPAN'S ROADS

WARABI: Mazlum Balibay paves Japan's roads, digs its sewers and lays its water pipes - all for a country that doesn't want him. Balibay, 24, is a Kurdish asylum seeker who fled to Japan more than eight years ago after he said his family was persecuted by Turkish security forces who tortured his father. He has since been on provisional release from immigration detention, which means he is barred from working while the immigration authorities consider his application for asylum and could be detained again at any time.

But the ban hasn't stopped Balibay from providing the muscle on a slew of public works projects funded by a government that refers to people like him as "undesirable." "Japan bans us from working, but everyone knows that without foreigners this country's in trouble," said Balibay. "Construction jobs won't get done. There aren't enough workers and young Japanese can't do these jobs. The government knows that better than anyone." Two of Balibay's brothers have also worked without permits on government projects around Tokyo, laying asphalt and digging sewers. Reuters also spoke to more than 30 Kurds on provisional release who are working illegally on private sector projects, mainly in demolition.

Demographic problems

Japan's deep reluctance to take in migrant workers is now clashing with the reality of a shrinking population and the nation's worst labor shortage in more than two decades. In a country that jealously guards its cultural uniformity, politicians are loath to consider lowering the barriers to immigration even as the proportion of retirees grows and the working-age population declines. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told reporters at the United Nations in September that Japan should address its demographic problems by putting women and the elderly to work before considering immigration.

Masahiko Shibayama, a lawmaker and special adviser to Abe, told Reuters that there's "an allergy towards the word 'immigration'" in Japan. "People are worried about public security. They worry that foreign workers would eat up Japanese jobs," he said. But the combination of strict immigration laws and a shrinking work pool has spawned a black market in labor, especially in the construction sector where Balibay and his brothers work. In manufacturing, it has also created a growing dependence on asylum seekers: Reuters reported last year how the maker of Subaru cars was enjoying a boom driven in part by its reliance on cheap laborers from Asia and Africa who were seeking refugee status in Japan.

Japanese business leaders want the government to rethink its immigration policy. Of 259 major Japanese companies that responded to a Reuters poll in October, 76 percent said they support opening up the country to blue-collar migrants. With work getting underway for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, demand for labor is set to jump further, according to Hitoshi Ito, an executive at Kajima Corp., Japan's second largest construction firm by sales. That's why the industry "desperately wants" foreign workers, he said.

An agonizing choice

Balibay is part of a community of some 1,200 Kurds who live in Warabi and Kawaguchi, drab blue-collar suburbs north of Tokyo where cast iron foundries dot the streets and gang-related crime is prevalent. The area has been dubbed "Warabistan" by locals because of the high number of Kurdish immigrants living there, nearly all of whom are asylum seekers. They inhabit a legal twilight zone, locked in lengthy struggles with an immigration system that recognized just 27 people as refugees last year.

As of December, Japan had 13,831 asylum applications under review. That is small by the standards of Europe, where there were more than a million asylum applications pending at the end of April, as refugees sought haven from troubled lands such as Syria and Eritrea. But it's a record number for insular Japan. According to the latest available data, at the end of 2015 there were 4,701 people on provisional release in Japan. Of those, community groups estimate about 400 are Kurds living in the Warabi area. Justice Minister Mitsuhide Iwaki, who last week stepped down as part of

a cabinet reshuffle, declined to answer questions about Reuters' findings that asylum seekers on provisional release are working on government projects. Naoaki Torisu, a Justice Ministry official overseeing work permits for foreigners, told Reuters: "Regardless of whether it's a public works project or not, it's undesirable for people on provisional release to take part in prohibited activities. We want them to stop doing that."

Most Kurds on provisional release work without contracts, are paid in cash and can be laid off without warning. They don't have national health insurance, often leaving them with an agonizing choice when they or family members fall ill - go into debt or forego medical treatment. Balibay is the main breadwinner in an extended family that includes his mother, two of his four brothers, a sister and her husband, and their infant son. He earns about \$2,500 a month - not enough to cover the family's expenses. The family says its unpaid medical bills amount to several thousand dollars. Last year, Balibay's seven-year-old brother Deniz was hospitalized with pneumonia. That cost \$5,500.

'I still dream about it'

Balibay was in his early teens when he first picked up a shovel on a building site. "I wanted to go to school, but we didn't have the money," he said, speaking in fluent Japanese. "I'd be standing in a ditch and see the kids going to school. I thought it would be great to have money, to be able to have fun like them." He traces his family's decision to leave Turkey to his father's arrest in 1999 on charges of aiding members of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), including transferring funds collected in Japan to the group. (Turkey, the European Union and the United States consider the PKK to be a terrorist organization.)

Court documents reviewed by Reuters show that Mustafa Balibay and five other Kurdish men arrested along with him were acquitted in 2000. "When I was seven, soldiers tortured my father before my eyes," Mazlum told a refugee adjudicator last March, according to interview transcripts. "I still dream about it." That experience ultimately led his family to seek refuge in Japan. Over several years, Balibay's parents and five of his siblings left Turkey. A Japanese psychiatrist diagnosed Mustafa Balibay in 2008 with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression caused by torture, according to a medical opinion submitted as part of Mustafa's asylum application. For years, he took anti-depressants, sedatives and painkillers. The walls inside the family's apartment are pockmarked from where Mustafa lashed out during his frequent nightmares.

His mental state deteriorated last year as violence flared between Turkish security forces and the PKK in Turkey's southeast. On December 27, Mustafa went to a park near his home, tied a rope around his neck and hanged himself from a tree. "He'd been ill for a long time and his condition suddenly got worse," said Balibay, his voice trailing off. "I was at work and got a call. They said a man had found him." Turkey's Interior Ministry and Gendarmerie did not respond to questions from Reuters about Mustafa Balibay's case.

Election brawl

The family's asylum claims have all been rejected, and their time in Japan has been peppered with legal battles against deportation orders and detention. Balibay has submitted four asylum applications, including one in August last year. According to Japanese law, asylum seekers can't be deported while their claims are pending. Immigration activists say Japan has never granted refugee status to a Turkish Kurd. Government officials would not say if any of the 3,463 Turkish nationals who have applied for asylum since 2008 had been granted refugee status. The absence of a work permit hasn't stopped Balibay, two of his brothers and a cousin from working on taxpayer funded projects in the past few years. Balibay flicks through photos on his mobile phone, stopping at images of a road project he worked on last year in Warabi.

Interviews with the Balibays and a review of their pay slips show they worked for a company that was contracted to carry out road building, sewage works and demolition by local governments, including Kawaguchi city and Saitama prefecture. — Reuters



TOKYO: Tourists are seen in front of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP