

INDONESIA WANTS MILITARY ESCORTS TO HALT ABDUCTIONS

JAKARTA: Indonesia's defense minister yesterday proposed military escorts for boats sailing perilous routes to the Philippines where dozens of sailors have been kidnapped by Islamist militants in recent months. Twenty-four Indonesian crew members and a handful of Malaysians have been abducted this year travelling in the vital waterway between the three countries. The latest abduction was at the weekend when three Indonesian sailors were snatched from their vessel in Malaysian waters by gun-toting men on a speedboat and taken towards the strife-torn southern Philippines.

Philippine Islamist extremist outfit Abu Sayyaf, notorious for carrying out kidnappings-for-ransom, has been blamed for the abductions. The transport ministry last month banned Indonesian-flagged vessels from sailing to the Philippines following the kidnappings, but Defense Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu said that he planned to make their journeys safe, once they were allowed to sail again. The boats heading from Indonesia should follow an appointed route in groups, be accompanied by military personnel and escorted by an Indonesian navy vessel, he said. The minister said that once they reach the

Philippines maritime border, the Philippine navy should take over and escort them on to their destination. "I will tell the barge businessmen, if you want to go, you must report and then go 10 barges all at once, and they will have military personnel in every barge," he said. "This cannot happen again in the future," he added, referring to abductions. After the latest kidnappings, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi urged the Philippines and Malaysia to step up maritime security.

Vice President Jusuf Kalla has also sought to discourage boat owners and businesses from paying

ransoms for the release of hostages, something he said the government never did. In May, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines agreed to launch coordinated patrols of the waters, although the countries are still working out the details. Of the Indonesians abducted this year, fourteen were released after being held in Abu Sayyaf's stronghold in the southern Philippines but the others remain in captivity. Abu Sayyaf is a loose network of a few hundred Islamist militants, formed in the 1990s with seed money from Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network. — Reuters

NATO, RUSSIA MEET AFTER TROOP BOOST

BRUSSELS: NATO and Russia yesterday held their first talks since the alliance agreed at a summit in Warsaw to beef up its presence in eastern Europe because of fears over the Kremlin's expansionism. The meeting between ambassadors from the 28-nation alliance and Russia is the first since April and just the second since 2014, when the Ukraine conflict plunged relations into a deep freeze.

The alliance said it would brief Moscow on last week's decision to send four battalions totaling around 4,000 soldiers to Poland and the Baltic states, which have been nervous ever since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. Moscow said it would raise the US missile shield that NATO declared operational at the summit in the Polish capital, as well as improving airspace safety over the Baltic. "Allies and Russia will discuss three topics—the crisis in Ukraine, military transparency and the security situation in Afghanistan," NATO spokeswoman Carmen Romero said.

"In the spirit of transparency, we will brief Russia on the important decisions we took in Warsaw last week to enhance our security," Russia has been strongly critical of the NATO decision, accusing the alliance of aggression and warning that it will react to the deployment of forces in its former Soviet backyard. But NATO said it was acting purely defensively. "NATO does not pose a threat to Russia. We do not seek confrontation. We continue to aspire to a constructive relationship with Russia, when Russia's actions make that possible," Romero said. The "meeting is a sign that NATO is following through on our commitment to political dialogue with Russia."

'Looking-glass world'

The last talks in Brussels in April ended in "profound disagreements" between NATO and Russia over Ukraine and other issues, despite hopes they could ease years of ten-

sions. NATO leaders meeting in the Polish capital last week said they had agreed on a twin-track policy of "deterrence and dialogue" with Russia, insisting they would not back down until Moscow abided by the Minsk peace deal for Ukraine. Alliance chief Jens Stoltenberg said they "stand together" despite signs from some NATO nations like France that they want to focus on a diplomatic solution with Moscow.

Moscow however slammed NATO at the weekend for focusing on a "non-existent" threat from Russia and accusing it of living in a "military-political looking-glass world". It took a more measured line on Tuesday, with foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova saying Moscow plans to raise "increasing aviation safety in the Baltic Sea region" at the Brussels talks. Russia's NATO-member Baltic neighbors have accused Moscow of regularly violating their airspace in recent months and flying with switched-off transponders, devices that allow radars to identify planes and prevent collisions. President Vladimir Putin this month backed a call for all military aircraft flying over the Baltic region to keep their transponders on.

Russia's ambassador to NATO, Alexander Grushko, is expected to "present technical details" to avoid any aerial incidents, a senior NATO diplomat said on condition of anonymity. "We will then see if that can serve as a base to reopen communication by military channels" which have been halted since May 2014, the diplomat said. At the meeting with NATO, Moscow will also "stress the risks to strategic stability that have appeared as a result of the ongoing construction of the US and NATO anti-missile system in Europe," Zakharova said. NATO insists the missile shield is aimed at Iran or possible rogue non-state actors, and says it poses no threat to Russia's military deterrent. — AFP



KATHMANDU: Nepali Congress president Sher Bahadur Deuba (center) leaves the Parliament Building in Kathmandu. Nepali opposition lawmakers filed a no-confidence motion yesterday against Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli after former rebel Maoists quit his coalition, triggering fresh political turmoil in the quake-hit nation. — AFP

MAOISTS, OPPOSITION JOIN FORCES AGAINST NEPAL PM

PRIME MINISTER FACES NO-CONFIDENCE VOTE

KATHMANDU: Nepal's former Maoist rebels joined forces with the largest opposition party yesterday to lodge a motion of no-confidence in the prime minister, but the impoverished Himalayan country's increasingly isolated leader vowed to fight on. Nepal has been plagued by political turmoil for years and the bid by the Maoists and the Nepali Congress Party to unseat Prime Minister KP Oli and form a new government has ushered in another phase of uncertainty.

Oli, who came to power in October, is accused by the one-time insurgents of renegeing on promises and on Tuesday they withdrew their support in parliament for his fragile coalition. "We have registered a vote of no-confidence against the prime minister," Pampha Bhusal, spokeswoman for the Maoist party said. "With our party withdrawing support for the Oli government it is in a minority and must resign." A Nepali Congress spokesman confirmed that his party had given the Maoists its backing so a no-confidence motion could be formally registered. The motion will be tabled in parliament next week before a vote is held.

Neighbors India and China compete for influence in Nepal and are both likely to be concerned by the prospect of more instability in a country struggling to rebuild after a devastating earthquake last year. Oli is Nepal's seventh prime minister since it abolished its 239-year old monarchy in 2008. The Maoists abandoned a bid to unseat him in May after they said he had agreed to work for a national consensus and address their concerns. Oli's press adviser said the prime minister would remain leader and face the no-confidence vote. "The prime minister will not resign," the adviser, Pramod Dahal, told Reuters.

Slim chance?

With the Maoists and Congress joining forces, Oli's coalition in the 595-member parliament needs the support of other smaller parties to survive. Analysts said the arithmetic was against Oli, particularly if the motion was tabled in coming days before he had time to convince other parties to back him. "I really don't see a chance for his survival. He has faced this challenge for a long time, only now does it look successful," said

Bipin Adhikari, a constitutional expert at Kathmandu University.

However, ideological differences between the centrist Congress and the Maoists may keep them far from secure, Adhikari said. Maoist leader Prachanda, who goes by the nom-de-guerre he used in the insurgency, which means "Fierce", is the favorite to replace 64-year-old Oli if he loses the vote. The Maoists accuse Oli of failing to resolve anger in the south of the country over a new constitution, and of failing to rebuild homes and roads destroyed in last year's earthquake.

Nepal adopted a new constitution in September. Its passing looked like a rare moment of political consensus but protests soon followed. Minority Madhesi, who live mostly in Nepal's lowlands near India, imposed a four-month border blockade to protest against a proposal to carve Nepal into seven federal states, which they say would divide their homeland and deprive them of a fair say. More than 50 people were killed in clashes before protesters called off the blockade in February. Nepal has seen 23 governments since 1990 when parliamentary democracy was introduced. — Reuters



BERLIN: Media officers arrange the reports ahead a press conference to present the new military roadmap, the so-called White Paper in Berlin yesterday. In its first big-picture defense paper in a decade, Germany said it would work with EU and NATO allies to tackle cross-border challenges from Islamist terrorism to climate change and migrant flows. — AFP

MAFIA BOSS BERNARDO 'THE TRACTOR' PROVENZANO DIES

ROME: Sicilian "Cosa Nostra" mafia boss Bernardo Provenzano, dubbed "the tractor" for the way he mowed down his victims, has died yesterday after a long illness. Provenzano, 83, was the Cosa Nostra crime group's "boss of bosses" until his arrest in 2006 after 40 years on the run, during which he communicated with his lieutenants by word of mouth or typewritten notes. He died at the San Paolo hospital in Milan in northern Italy, where he was being treated for bladder cancer.

He was born in the village of Corleone—the name of which became associated with the Sicilian mafia thanks to the "Godfather" novels and films and reportedly committed his first murder aged 25, when he killed a rival boss. He became second-in-command to mafia leader "Toto" Riina, who presided over a series of gangland wars and killings of top judges that were a hallmark of Italian life in the 1980s. Provenzano became the uncontested head of Cosa Nostra after Riina was clapped in cuffs in 1993 — an arrest one supergrass said Provenzano had had a hand in.

The police sting, which came a year after bomb attacks killed anti-Mafia judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, was considered a major victory in the struggle against the organized crime group. Provenzano is said to have struck a deal with the authorities, persuading them that he was the only one who could forge a new strategy for Cosa Nostra and stop the attacks. The violence did largely abate, with the new boss ushering in an era in which the group focused on infiltrating the police force.

'God-like' shotgun skills

Provenzano later gained a second nickname, "the accountant", because of his mastery of his crime empire's finances. However, one predecessor, Luciano Leggio—dubbed "the professor" for his habit of correcting his henchmen's grammatical mistakes—said that while Provenzano fired weapons "like a

God", he had "the brain of a chicken". During the mid 1990s, when he was being actively sought by the authorities, the price on Provenzano's head was said to be some three billion lira, or around 1.5 million euros. By 2003 the bounty had risen to 2.5 million euros, but he still remained elusive. In the absence of photos of Provenzano—the most recent one reportedly dated from 1959 — police were reduced to making computer enhancements of old pictures, to try and guess what he now looked like.

Police got a lucky break in 2002 when they

received a tip-off that he had undergone an operation for prostate cancer in Marseille, leaving behind a copy of an identity card which bore a false name but real photograph. Top of Italy's most-wanted list for decades, Provenzano was finally arrested in a farmhouse in his hideout in Corleone near Palermo. Sentenced to several consecutive life sentences, he was transferred in 2014 to hospital in Milan suffering from neurological problems. Italy's supreme court rejected a plea from his lawyers to release him on the grounds of ill health. — AFP



BAGHERIA, Italy: File photo shows women looking at posters bearing pictures of 'Cosa Nostra' mafia boss Bernardo Provenzano. Sicilian 'Cosa Nostra' mafia boss Bernardo Provenzano, dubbed 'the tractor' for the way he mowed his victims down, has died after a long illness, Italian media said. — AFP

HARDLINE MYANMAR MONK BLASTS 'DICTATOR' SUU KYI

YANGON: A firebrand monk slammed Aung San Suu Kyi as a "dictator" yesterday, accusing Myanmar's civilian-led government of trying to destroy an ultra-nationalist Buddhist group blamed for a surge in sectarian violence across the country. The attack came after the body representing Myanmar's top monks distanced itself from the hardline Ma Ba Tha movement, a blow to its clerical legitimacy.

The Ma Ba Tha is a noisy, monk-led group at the forefront of virulently anti-Muslim protests in Myanmar in the three years since it was founded. Wirathu, the movement's most prominent figure, posted his scathing remarks on Facebook. "I have seen that the ruling party and the new civilian government is stepping forward to target me as 'Enemy Number One' to destroy the whole Ma Ba Tha group to the end," he wrote.

He also described the administration as "a woman dictator's government which is going to put me in prison". Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won a landslide victory at last November's elections. Wirathu's comments came after the Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, which represents the upper echelons of the clergy in the overwhelmingly Buddhist country, issued a statement late Tuesday saying it had never endorsed Ma Ba Tha. The ultra-nationalist group recently said it was established under the committee's rules, a claim refuted by the country's top monks, putting clear water between the mainstream Buddhist clergy and the hardline group for the first time.

Under pressure

The statement came hours ahead of a two-day gathering of around 50 of

Myanmar's top monks inside a man-made cave on the outskirts of Yangon at which Ma Ba Tha is expected to be discussed. In his Facebook post Wirathu suggested the Sangha was being controlled by the government because it was "part of the state's religious ministry" and "has to carry out the will of the government." The Ma Ba Tha emerged as a potent political force under the former military-backed government, successfully lobbying for a series of laws that rights groups say discriminate against women and religious minorities.

Scores of people have been killed in sectarian riots that have billowed out in step with their protests. But the organization lost out in the November elections that saw their allies in the ruling party trounced by Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). It has since been trying to claw back ground, in recent weeks reviving its vitriolic rhetoric that portrays Islam as a threat to Buddhism. Last month two mosques were destroyed by Buddhist mobs in the centre and north of the country.

Much of the anti-Muslim invective in Myanmar has targeted the Rohingya—a minority denied citizenship and relegated to apartheid-like conditions ever since deadly riots tore through western Rakhine state in 2012. Their very name invokes strong emotions in Myanmar, with the Ma Ba Tha leading protests for the Rohingya to be known only as "Bengalis"—shorthand for illegal migrants from neighboring Bangladesh. De facto premier and Nobel laureate Suu Kyi has faced widespread censure from rights groups for failing to speak up for the group—who the United Nations has labeled one of the world's most persecuted people. — AFP