

TAIWAN TO TEST-FIRE MISSILES IN US AS CHINA TENSIONS RISE

TAIPEI: Taiwan plans to test-fire its newest anti-missile system for the first time in the United States next month as relations with rival China deteriorate, a defense source and media reports said yesterday. Relations between China and Taiwan have cooled rapidly under the island's new Beijing-skeptical president Tsai Ing-wen, who took office in May, ending an eight-year rapprochement. The test of the US-made Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) system will be launched at the White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico, in early July, a

defense ministry source told AFP, in a move likely to irk Beijing even though it was arranged before Tsai took the helm.

According to the source, the test will be conducted in the US to avoid China collecting information about it, and due to space restrictions in Taiwan. The American Institute in Taiwan, the de facto US embassy, would not comment on the test, which was also reported in Taiwan's Liberty Times newspaper.

Despite having no official diplomatic ties with Taipei after recognizing Beijing in 1979, the US is still Taiwan's greatest

ally and main arms supplier. The missile system was purchased in 2008, well before Tsai's leadership, and the test was approved by the US last year, according to the Liberty Times. Taiwan bought three earlier model PAC-2 systems in the 1990s and also tested them in the US. They were deployed in the densely populated greater Taipei area.

It then bought the new PAC-3 — a system designed to intercept incoming ballistic missiles near the end of their trajectory — as part of a \$6.5 billion arms sale by the US in 2008, which infuriated

Beijing at the time. The system is already partly operational and will shield Taipei, as well as central Taichung and southern Kaohsiung from any Chinese missile attacks, according to the defense ministry. The Taiwanese missile unit involved in the July drill will fire two missiles to intercept a missile launched by the US military, which simulates an incoming Chinese ballistic missile, the Liberty Times reported. Japan has also tested the PAC-3 on US soil.

In the latest setback for cross-strait ties, China said Sunday that communica-

tions with Taiwan had been suspended after the island's new government failed to acknowledge the concept that there is only "one China". China still insists self-ruling Taiwan is part of its territory awaiting reunification, by force if necessary, even though the two sides split in 1949 after a civil war. According to Taiwan's defense ministry there are 1,500 Chinese missiles aimed at the island. China launched ballistic missiles into waters off Taiwan in 1995 and 1996 in an attempt to deter voters in the island's first democratic presidential elections. —AFP

CHINA AGREES TO TALKS WITH HK OVER BOOKSELLER CASE

FEARS GROW OF BEIJING TIGHTENING ITS GRIP

HONG KONG: China agreed yesterday to talks with Hong Kong in the wake of explosive revelations by a city bookseller who said he was detained for eight months on the mainland, as fears grow that Beijing is tightening its grip. Lam Wing-kee was one of five employees of a Hong Kong firm — which published gossipy books about leading Chinese politicians — to go mysteriously missing last year. All later emerged in mainland China.

Lam, 61, has said he was seized after crossing the border into the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, taken away blindfolded and then kept in a cell, under interrogation and without access to his family or a lawyer, for alleged involvement in bringing banned books into the mainland. Hong Kong's Beijing-backed chief executive Leung Chun-ying, who has been accused of dragging his feet over the case, said last week

he had written to Beijing relaying local concerns, amid growing anxiety that the semi-autonomous city's freedoms are disappearing.

In a short statement yesterday, Leung said he had received a reply from Beijing "to start discussion on the existing notification mechanism between the two places". Under that system, authorities on the mainland are required to give clear details about arrests and detentions of Hong Kong citizens

over the border, which some procedure critics say went disastrously wrong in the booksellers' case.

'Positive response'

Beijing's public security ministry confirmed the discussions should take place as soon as possible. "The existing notification mechanism has been in operation for more than a decade and it is necessary to be improved," the ministry said in a statement, inviting the Hong Kong government to send a delegation to Beijing.

During the talks, authorities in the mainland would also brief Hong Kong about Lam's case, the statement said. Leung expressed gratitude for what he described as a "positive response". He said last week that he had asked Beijing to clarify how relevant mainland departments handle cases in which Hong Kong people have broken mainland laws, and whether or not mainland personnel had carried out cross-border law enforcement in the city.

In the case of bookseller Lee Bo, the only one of the five to disappear on Hong Kong soil, China was accused of illegally sending its security agents to operate in Hong Kong. Lam reported to Hong Kong police Monday to tell them formally about his detention and said he would be returning for further discussions. "The police will review Lam's testimony and decide if they will investigate," said pro-democracy lawmaker James To, who accompanied Lam. Hong Kong was returned by Britain to China in 1997 under a deal which allows it freedoms unseen on the mainland, but there is concern they are now being eroded. —AFP



DAVAO CITY: Philippines' president-elect Rodrigo Duterte gestures as he delivers his speech before city hall employees. —AFP

PHILIPPINE'S DUTERTE WANTS DEATH PENALTY FOR REVENGE

MANILA: Incoming Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte on Monday hit out at "stupid" human rights campaigners, as he defended his imminent war on crime and emphasized the death penalty was for retribution. Duterte gave a lengthy speech in his southern hometown of Davao to outline his vision for the nation once he takes office on Thursday, with a heavy focus on his controversial plans to fight crime.

"These human rights (groups), congressmen, how stupid you are," Duterte said, as he highlighted their criticism of his plans to impose late-night curfews on children being out on the streets and to reintroduce the death penalty. "I believe in retribution. Why? You should pay. When you kill someone, rape, you should die," he said.

Duterte, 71, won last month's presidential elections in a landslide after campaigning largely on a platform of ending rampant crime, warning that the Philippines was in danger of becoming a narco-state. He promised that tens of thousands of people would die, with security forces being given shoot to kill orders. Since winning Duterte has also promised to give bounties to police for killing drug dealers, and also encouraged ordinary citizens to kill or arrest suspects.

Duterte has been accused of links to vigilante death squads during his nearly two decades as mayor of Davao, which rights groups say have killed more than 1,000 peo-

ple. Local and foreign human rights groups have expressed deep concern about his plans as president, fearing an explosion of extrajudicial killings similar to those seen in Davao.

The United Nations' human rights chief, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, this month urged Duterte not to reintroduce the death penalty, while criticizing other elements of the planned war on crime. "The offer of bounties and other rewards for murder by vigilantes, and his encouragement of extrajudicial killings by security forces, are massive and damaging steps backwards which could lead to widespread violence and chaos," Zeid said.

With just three days before assuming the presidency, Duterte stood firm. "When they describe or characterise a human rights violator, these fools make it appear that the people you kill are saints, as if they are pitiful or innocent," he said. Duterte said European ambassadors were also among those who had expressed concern over the death penalty and extrajudicial killings. The Philippines abolished the death penalty in 2006 following fierce opposition from the Catholic Church, the religion of 80 percent of Filipinos. Duterte previously said he preferred death by hanging to a firing squad because he did not want to waste bullets, and because he believed snapping the spine with a noose was more humane. —AFP



HONG KONG: Previously missing Hong Kong bookseller Lam Wing-kee (centre R, blue cap) holds a press conference outside Wanchai police station after reporting to the police with local lawyer James To (C). —AFP

MALAYSIA PM RESHUFFLES CABINET AMID SPECULATION OF SNAP POLL

KUALA LUMPUR: Scandal-hit Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak yesterday announced a cabinet reshuffle, including promoting a trusted ally to manage the economy, in what analysts said could be preparation for a snap election. Najib, 62, who has survived a massive financial scandal linked to state investment fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), said the shake-up would bolster his administration.

"The reshuffle will boost the government's ability to pursue development programs as promised," he said in a statement. Analysts and politicians said the reshuffle showed Najib could weather the affair-related

to hundreds of millions of dollars of 1MDB money which went missing in complex overseas transactions that have never been fully explained.

Swiss authorities say more than \$4 billion may have been stolen. Both 1MDB and Najib, who founded the fund, vehemently deny wrongdoing. Najib was personally plunged into the crisis last year when it was revealed that \$681 million in transfers were made to his personal bank accounts in 2013. He says the "personal donations" from the Saudi royal family were mostly returned. The reshuffle saw influential lawmaker Abdul Rahman Dahlan, 50, appointed minister in charge of the Economic Planning Unit.

Weak overseas demand

The economy expanded in the first quarter at its slowest rate since the global financial crisis, as the energy-exporting country grapples with falling oil prices and weak overseas demand. In total Najib made four new ministerial appointments and picked six deputy ministers. Johari Abdul Ghani becomes second finance minister, Noh Omar was appointed urban wellbeing minister and Mah Siew Keong was made plantation industries and commodities minister.

Analysts and lawmakers said the shake-up indicated Najib's growing confidence he could weather the 1MDB scandal, raising the prospect of a snap election before one is due in 2018. Lawmaker Mahfuz Omar of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party said the reshuffle demonstrates his strong grip on power. "Najib is in a powerful position today. I think he is looking at possible snap polls between March and May 2017 on the back of recent stunning by-election victories," he told AFP. Mahfuz said the opposition was divided and the financial scandal did not resonate with rural voters, the traditional power base of Najib's ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO).

Ibrahim Suffian, head of independent polling firm Merdeka Centre, said the appointment of Abdul Rahman and Johari to important posts showed UMNO was closing ranks around Najib. "I think Najib is strengthening his power base by putting loyalists in key positions to focus on economic growth," he told AFP. The push to oust Najib has been led by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who has said the UMNO-led ruling coalition will otherwise lose the next election. But analysts say Najib is secure within UMNO due to its deep-rooted patronage politics and the great power invested in the prime minister's office. —AFP



PUTRAJAYA: Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak addresses the media following a cabinet reshuffle at his office. —AFP

PRESSURE MOUNTS ON JUNTA OVER FAKE BOMB DETECTORS

BANGKOK: Activists yesterday urged Britain to hand over details of the multi-million-dollar sale to Thailand of fake bomb detectors that led to the detention of scores of innocent people. British fraudsters Gary Bolton and James McCormick were jailed in 2013 for making millions selling the GT200 and similar devices billed as "magic wands" able to detect tiny particles of explosives or drugs from hundreds of meters away. The GT200 was in fact a useless homemade plastic box with a radio antenna made for a few dollars but sold for between \$3,300-\$13,000 per unit to governments including Thailand, Mexico and Iraq. Yesterday Jatuporn

Prompan, the leader of Thailand's pro-democracy 'Red Shirt' street movement, handed a letter to the British embassy in Bangkok urging it to share details of contracts for the device.

British authorities should reveal "particularly the contracts of broker companies which sold them (GT200) to the Thai government and how much they cost", he said in a YouTube post. A corruption probe into why the Thai military and several other departments ordered hundreds of the devices has ground to a halt. Opponents of the junta say investigations into allegations of army graft routinely go nowhere, with courts unwilling to tarnish the image of the powerful military.

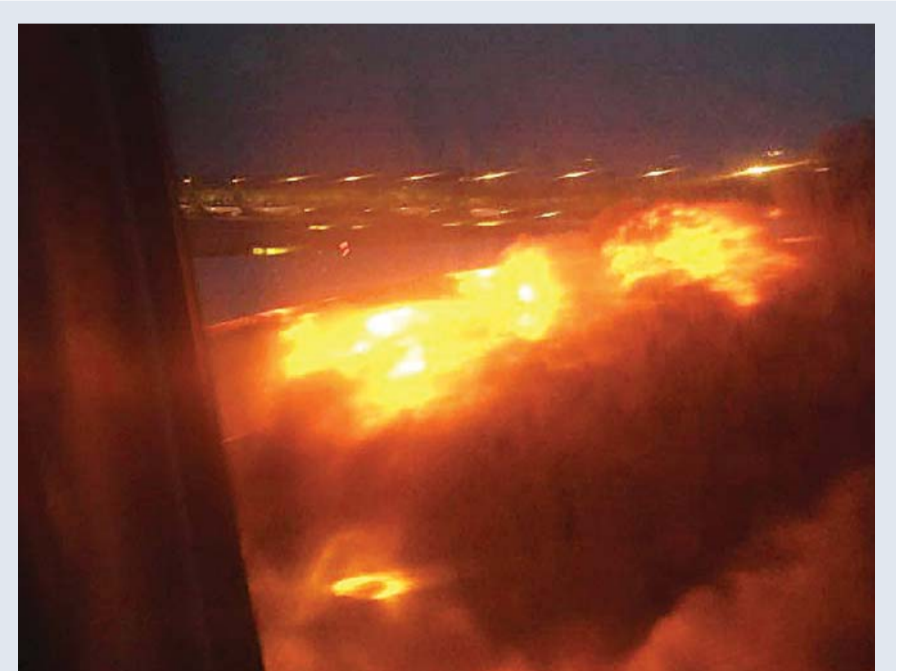
Key player

Anupong Paojinda, the current interior minister and a key player in the 2014 coup that restored the military to power, was army chief when many of the dodgy detectors were ordered around a decade ago. He repeatedly defended the use of the fake detectors even as tests cast serious doubt over its efficacy. By 2010 the detection powers of the GT200 had been debunked.

That year Anupong told reporters that "we don't have a replacement yet so we continue to use it". Last week Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-cha, a senior general during Anupong's tenure as army chief, said the device

was "useful once... but when they were proven to be useless they were not used anymore". Rights groups say hundreds of people were detained — some for several weeks — in Thailand's restive south after erroneous findings of traces of explosives by security officers using the GT200.

"Regardless of court rulings in the UK and overwhelming scientific evidence, Thai military leadership still defend the use of GT200," said Sunai Phasuk of Human Rights Watch Asia. He said the first sales took place in 2005, ultimately amounting to orders of nearly 1,400 GT200s worth \$32 million across 15 separate Thai agencies. —AFP



SINGAPORE: This image provided by Lee Bee Yee shows an engine on fire on a Singapore Airlines flight. —AP

FIRE ENGULFS PLANE'S WING AFTER EMERGENCY LANDING IN SINGAPORE

SINGAPORE: Flames engulfed the wing of a Singapore Airlines plane after it made an emergency landing at the city's main airport yesterday, with dramatic footage showing plumes of black smoke billowing from the aircraft. The carrier said the Boeing 777-300ER en route for Milan turned back about two hours into the flight from Changi Airport following an engine oil warning message.

The blaze was put out by airport emergency services and there were no injuries to the 222 passengers and 19 crew on board, SIA said in a statement. One passenger, who posted video footage of the incident apparently shot from a window seat, described the tense moments waiting for emergency crews to control the blaze as a "so close to death" experience. For several moments, the video showed the plane's right wing ablaze before the view was completely obscured by foam as firefighters battled the fire. The wing was left blackened and melted after the fire was extinguished. "After reaching Changi Airport, as the plane was landing, the engine burst into flames!!! Huge fire was burning!!" Facebook user Lee Bee Yee said in a post accompanying the video clip.

"It was a heart wrenching 5 mins! Waiting for

the fire engine and fire fighters to put out the fire! They shot foam and water into the fire and eventually it was put out!" Lee added. "I thank God I am alive! I going home to hug my kids." SIA said in a statement Flight SQ368, powered by a GE Aviation engine, was en route from Singapore to Milan when an engine oil warning message forced it to turn back to the city-state about one hour and 45 minutes into the flight. "The aircraft's right engine caught fire after the aircraft touched down at Changi Airport at around 6:50am," it said.

"Passengers disembarked through stairs and were transported to the terminal building by bus." The airline said it would "be cooperating fully with the authorities in their investigations". Passengers were transferred to another flight that left for Milan at 10:30am Singapore time, a spokesman told AFP. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong put up a Facebook post thanking Changi Airport and SIA for their quick response. "Relieved that all onboard were safely disembarked... SQ and CAAS (Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore) are investigating the cause, and will get to the bottom of the matter," he wrote. —AFP