

## CASTRO'S DEATH A REMINDER OF CHANGED COMMUNIST AXIS

**BEIJING:** In the shadow of east Beijing's soaring glass skyscrapers, elderly retirees still speak nostalgically about their Cuban brothers-in-arm, faraway comrades bound by communist solidarity. But in central Beijing's halls of power, Cuba is perhaps seen these days as something less romantic: a market for China's booming private-sector exports.

Viewed from the world's largest communist country, Fidel Castro's death is a reminder of how the communist axis has changed beyond recognition since the ideologically charged era when the bearded revolutionary cut a dashing figure on the world stage alongside leaders like Mao Zedong.

After establishing diplomatic relations in 1960, the countries' fortunes diverged over the ensuing decades: China began adopting free-market reforms in the 1980s and morphed into an economic powerhouse - Communist mostly in name - while Castro persisted with Marxism, Cuba's economy hobbling on.

Today, the two countries' leaders frequently nod to their shared ideological history, but bilateral relations revolve more around jointly developed beach resorts or Chinese telecoms investments. In a September visit, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang offered to support Cuba's development as a "comrade and brother," while Castro congratulated China on the

growth it has achieved and sought assistance in agricultural technology. At around \$2.2 billion a year, trade between the two countries is dwarfed by China's commerce with the rest of Latin America, which totals \$236 billion, according to Chinese state media. But China is Cuba's top creditor and second-largest trading partner after Venezuela, and ties have deepened swiftly. In December, Air China launched a direct flight from Beijing to Havana largely to serve burgeoning Chinese tourists looking to spend holidays in the island nation.

"After China deepened reform and opened up in early 1990s, the development of bilateral ties between China and Cuba did not focus too much on ideology," said Zhu Feng, dean of the Institute of International Studies at Nanjing University. "Economic development and cooperation, which were beneficial to economic and social development in both countries, became more important."

Geopolitical tectonics have realigned in other ways since Castro's prime. Cuba restored diplomatic relations with the United States last year after a half-century freeze, a rapprochement that China viewed warily. Meanwhile, Washington lifted an arms embargo against Vietnam, another erstwhile communist enemy, and has backed Hanoi in maritime disputes against neighboring China. — AP



**HAVANA:** In this July 22, 2014 file photo, Cuba's former President Fidel Castro (right) greets China's President Xi Jinping in Havana. — AP



**SEOUL:** South Korean protesters shout slogans during a rally calling for South Korean President Park Geun-hye to step down in Seoul, South Korea yesterday. — AP

## 'MILLION' RALLY IN SEOUL TO SEEK PARK'S RESIGNATION

### S KOREAN OPPN WEIGHS IMPEACHMENT MOTION

**SEOUL:** Up to 1.3 million protesters braved sleet and freezing temperatures in Seoul yesterday to demand President Park Geun-Hye resign over a corruption scandal or face impeachment, organizers said. Participants raised candles, sang and danced while chanting "Arrest Park Geun-Hye" and "Throw Park into jail," with cries from the main rally site reportedly reaching the presidential Blue House some 1.5 kilometers (0.9 miles) away.

Park's presidency has been rocked by allegations that a close friend used her ties to the leader to meddle in state affairs and wield improper influence. Prosecutors investigating the case have indicted her friend, Choi Soon-sil, and are seeking to question the president about her role in the scandal.

Organizers said 800,000 people had gathered early yesterday evening and expected a total of 1.5 million people to join by the end of the night. Police declined to give an estimate of the crowd size but said 25,000 personnel had been dispatched to police the protest.

The protests, now in their fifth week, have remained peaceful and marked by huge can-

dle-lit rallies where activists and rock bands have entertained a diverse crowd of students, office workers, and young families. "I was watching the news and thought this cannot go on - people really want her to step down but she hasn't," said 45-year-old Kwak Bo-youn, one of the protesters.

"This is the second time for me to do the protests, but the first time for my husband and kids". Earlier in the day, a large group of demonstrators marched to within 200 metres of the presidential palace, where Park resides, but a court appeal to allow protesters to remain there after dark was rejected.

#### Low support

Choi Soon-sil and a former aide to Park have been indicted by prosecutors on charges of colluding with the president to pressure big business to contribute funds to two foundations controlled by Choi.

Park, whose five-year term ends in February 2018, has apologized twice over the affair but is resisting calls for her resignation. Opposition parties are canvassing for support to impeach

her. Her approval ratings slipped one percentage point on Friday after hovering at just 5 percent for three consecutive weeks. Her disapproval rating rose three percentage points to 93 percent, according to a poll by Gallup Korea, which is not affiliated with the US-based Gallup, Inc.

Park Geun-hye's popularity and election as president in 2012 stemmed in part from the symbolic connection to her father who ruled South Korea for 18 years until he was assassinated by his spy chief in 1979. Many, especially the elderly, credit Park's father with the rapid development of Korea.

However, only 9 percent of people aged over 60 said Park was doing well, according to the Gallup Korea survey. Her support is lowest amongst young people. Ninety-nine percent of 19-29 year-olds and 98 percent of people in their thirties disapproved of Park, according to Gallup Korea.

Fears of policy-making paralysis prompted by the political crisis has also dealt a blow to consumer confidence, which fell to its lowest in more than seven years in November, South Korea's central bank said. — Agencies

## UN CLOSE TO SANCTIONS DEAL TO SLASH N KOREA EXPORT EARNINGS

**PYONGYANG:** The UN Security Council's five veto powers are close to approving new sanctions on North Korea to cut the isolated state's earnings from exports by more than a quarter, principally by targeting its coal exports to China, diplomats said on Friday.

The US-drafted resolution, in response to North Korea's fifth nuclear test in September, would set a UN cap on North Korean coal exports with the aim of cutting hard currency revenues by at least \$700 million. The resolution would also restrict North Korea's maritime and financial sectors. If successful, it could cut the country's \$3 billion in annual export earnings by at least \$800 million, UN Security Council diplomats said. The diplomats did not want to be identified as discussions were still under way. The new resolution would also target other North Koreans individuals and entities, they said.

Exports of coal from the North would be capped at \$400.9 million or 7.5 million metric tons per year, whichever is lower, starting on Jan. 1, according to the draft resolution obtained by Reuters. As soon as the resolution is adopted, North's coal exports to the end of this year will be capped at \$53.5 million or 1 million metric tons, whichever is lower, the draft showed.

Over the first 10 months of the year, China has imported 18.6 million tons of coal from North Korea, up almost 13 percent from a year ago. The restrictions on coal would bar exports connected to individuals and entities involved in North Korea's weapons programs, the draft resolution said.

The resolution added 11 individuals, including people who have served as ambassadors to Egypt and Myanmar, and 10 entities as targets for travel ban and asset freeze for their role in the North's nuclear

and ballistic missile programs. The resolution would also ban the North's export of helicopters, vessels and statues, banning contracts similar to the ones worth millions of dollars that the North had signed to build large statues in some African countries.

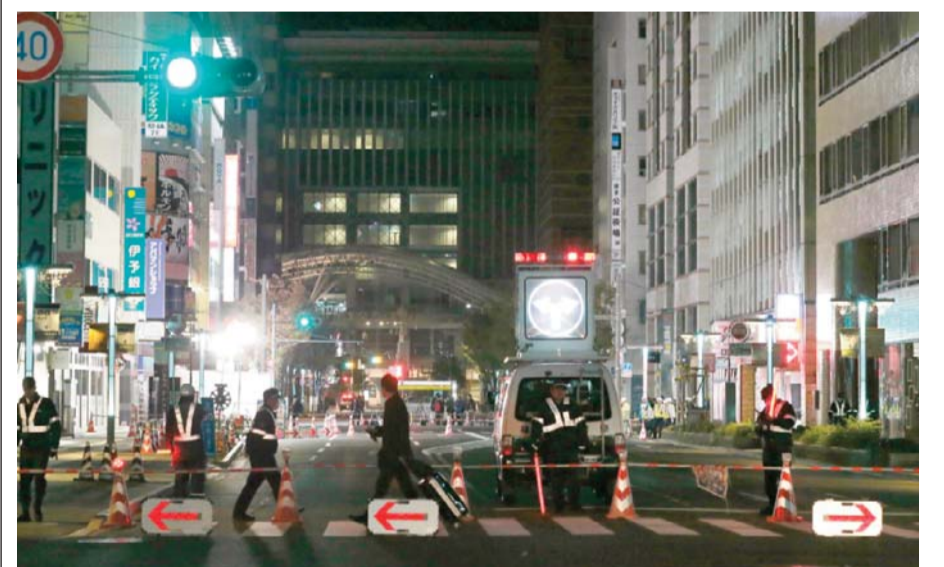
It called on UN states to reduce the number of staff at North Korea's foreign missions and limit the number of bank accounts to one per North Korean diplomatic mission and one per diplomat at banks in their territory, highlighting concerns that the North had used its diplomats and foreign missions to engage in illicit activities.

#### China on board

Diplomats said on Wednesday that the United States and China had agreed on new UN sanctions to impose on North Korea, but Russia was delaying action on a draft resolution. A senior UN Security Council diplomat who spoke on Wednesday believed China could persuade Russia to agree to the new sanctions and that the 15-member Security Council could vote on the draft resolution as early as next week.

The United States and China, a close ally of North Korea, have been negotiating a new draft Security Council resolution to punish Pyongyang since North Korea's fifth and largest nuclear test on Sept 9. The draft text was recently given to the remaining three permanent council veto powers - Britain, France and Russia.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said this week China supported further Security Council action in response to North Korea's nuclear test, but details of the draft resolution were still being discussed. The aim of the draft resolution is to close loopholes in sanctions imposed in March, following Pyongyang's fourth nuclear test in January. — Reuters



**FUKUOKA:** Policemen stand guard on a street in Fukuoka yesterday. Police blocked a busy street yesterday as the road, which was hurriedly repaired after collapsing into a giant sinkhole earlier this month, was found to have sunken again. — AFP

## IS-LINKED MILITANTS UNDER SIEGE IN PHILIPPINE TOWN

**MANILA:** Up to 100 Islamist militants from a group behind a deadly bombing in Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's home city were yesterday under siege in a remote mountain town, officials said.

Residents of Butig, which has a population of 17,000, have fled after the IS-linked militants holed themselves up in an abandoned government building, Philippine military spokesman Brigadier-General Restituto Padilla said. "The Armed Forces of the Philippines has launched an operation to chase after the Maute leaders," Padilla told AFP, adding that artillery and military aircraft were aiding ground-based security forces.

Two soldiers had been wounded in skirmishes with the Maute group since military operations began on Thursday, he said. The group is one of several armed Islamist organizations in the southern region of Mindanao which have pledged allegiance to Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria. The stand-off follows the arrest of three members of the group last month, accused of the September bombing that left 15 people dead in Davao, Duterte's hometown and Mindanao's largest city.

Government forces have surrounded between 50-100 Maute gunmen to prevent a possible spillover of the fighting to other areas, Major Filemon Tan, the military spokesman for the southern Philippines, told ABS-CBN television.

He did not provide details of troop numbers. Butig is a mainly Muslim rural town on the lower slopes of Ragang, one of the country's tallest mountains and more than 800 kilometers (500 miles) south of Manila. Government forces captured a Maute training camp in the town in June after a 10-day gunbattle that left four soldiers and dozens of militants dead, according to an army account.

Once described by the military as a small-time extortion gang, the group attacked a remote army outpost in Butig in February, triggering a week of fighting that the military said left six soldiers and 12 militants dead. The group also beheaded two employees of a local sawmill in April, the military has said. The southern Philippines has been plagued by a Muslim separatist insurgency for more than 40 years, leaving more than 100,000 people dead according to government estimates. — AFP

## 13 DETAINED IN CHINA OVER DEADLY CONSTRUCTION CRASH

**BEIJING:** Chinese authorities detained 13 people over the collapse of scaffolding at a power plant construction site that killed 74 workers, as a preliminary investigation zeroed in on how the building company had rushed the job.

Most of the dead had been working on the interior concrete wall of a massive circular cooling tower 70 meters (230 feet) up when the scaffolding collapsed Thursday morning, resulting in one of China's most serious industrial accidents in

years. In a statement issued yesterday, the committee of the State Council, or China's cabinet, said early findings suggested that a shortened time-frame for the power plant project, hasty construction and mismanagement played a role in the disaster, without giving details.

Although authorities did not disclose details about the 13 detentions, the focus of the investigation has turned to the power plant's operator, Jiangxi Ganneng, and a major engineering firm,

Hebei Yineng, which has taken on multiple high-profile power plant projects and has a history of workplace fatalities.

Yineng has won contracts to build plants in more than a dozen provinces and in Turkey and Malaysia, according to previous interviews given by executives. In 2012, seven Yineng builders in a cooling tower in Yunnan province tumbled to their deaths after scaffolding collapsed. Three years before that, two workers died after a vehicle accidentally backed onto a scaffolding support beam at a Yineng-built cooling tower in Guangdong province.

Several of the company's publicly listed telephone lines and a mobile phone number for the company's legal representative rang unanswered on Friday. The company's websites could not be opened.

State media reports said the accident occurred during a change of work shifts, possibly accounting for the high death toll. Workers had also been toiling around-the-clock in three shifts to make progress on the project ahead of the arrival of bitter winter weather, according to local media interviews with surviving employees.

The 1,000-megawatt coal-fired plant had been designated a priority project by the province, likely adding to the pressure on workers. The deadly accident has taken on added political significance in recent days after Chinese President Xi Jinping urged local governments to hold those responsible accountable and the State Council established a special committee to investigate. — Agencies



**FENGCHENG:** Dormitories used by construction workers who were killed when a platform collapsed at a power station are seen near the power station in Fengcheng in China's Jiangxi province yesterday. — AFP